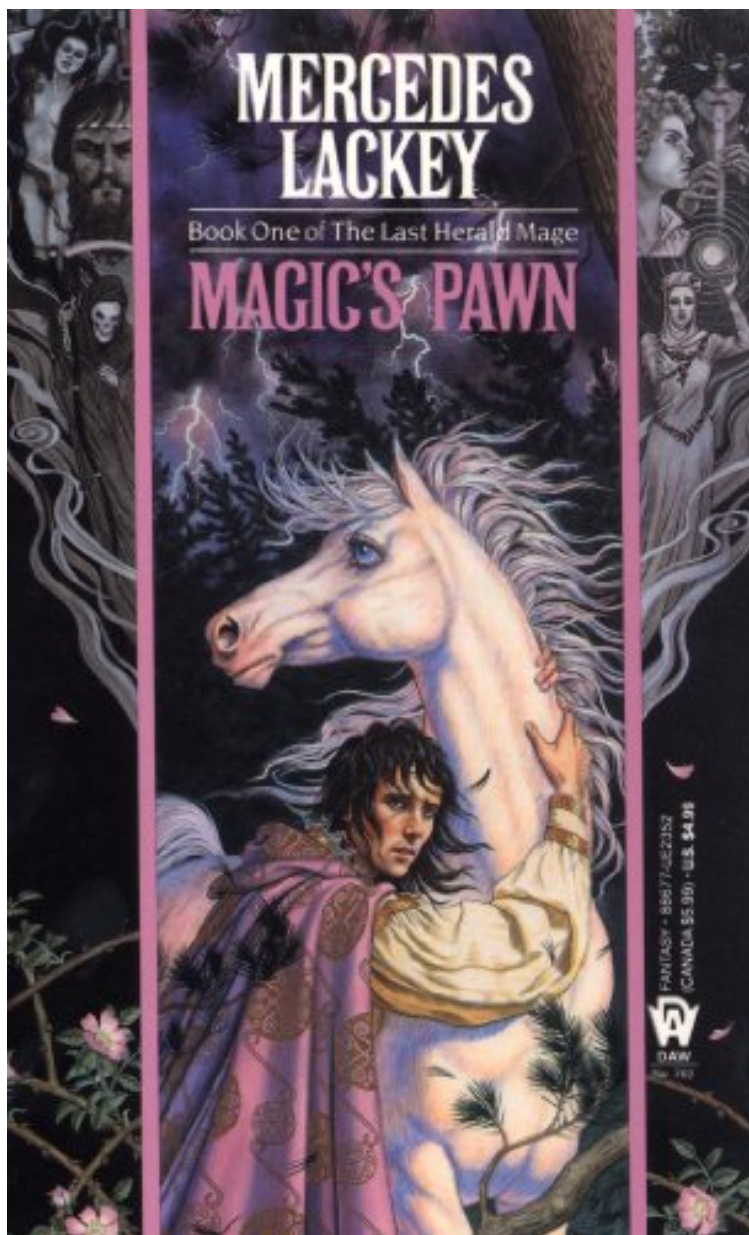


(Download ebook) File size: 60.Mb

Magic's Pawn



Par Mercedes Lackey
audiobook / *ebooks / Download PDF
/ ePub / DOC

Dtails sur le produit Rang parmi les ventes : #216487 dans eBooksPubli
le: 1989-06-06Sorti le: 1989-06-06Format: Ebook Kindle

(Download ebook) Magic's Pawn

Par Mercedes Lackey : Magic's Pawn
before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Magic's Pawn:

 Download

 Read Online

Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurGroundbreaking epic fantasy series in Mercedes Lackeys Valdemar universe Lambda-Award winning novels with heartfelt high adventure and magic Though Vanyel has been born with near-legendary abilities to work both Herald and Mage magic, he wasnt no part in such things. Nor does he seek a warriors path, wishing instead to become a Bard. Yet such talent as his, if left untrained, may prove a menace not only to Vanyel but to others as well. So he is sent to be fostered with his aunt, Savil, one of the fame Herald-Mages of Valdemar. But, strong-willed and self-centered, Vanyel is a challenge which even

Savil cannot master alone. For soon he will become the focus of frightening forces, lending his raw magic to a spell that unleashes terrifying wyr-hunters on the land. And by the time Savil seeks the assistance of a Shinain Adept, Vanyels wild talent may have already grown beyond anyones ability to contain, placing Vanyel, Savil, and Valdemar itself in desperate peril. From the Paperback edition. Extrait PLEASE LET ME DIE.... I deserve to die, Vanyel thought in anguish, closing his eyes. I want to die.: No.: The mind-voice was bright, bright as a flame, and sharp as steel, piercing his dark hope for death. :No, you must not. You must live. Chosen.: Vanyel thought bleakly back at the intruder, :Let me alone. No one wants me, nobody should want me; I kill everything I care for.: But I am here: Unable to escape the unknown mind-voice, Vanyel finally opened his eyes and met a pair of glowing sapphire eyes so full of compassion and love that he knew their owner would forgive him anything. That love reached out for him, and flowed over into him. It couldnt erase his loss, but it could share the pain and it didnt blame him for what had happened. He groped for the Companions smooth white neck and clung there, sobbing himself into exhaustion. And all the while, that bright voice murmured, like a litany, over and over, into his mind: I am here, my Chosen. I love you. I will never leave you.: NOVELS BY MERCEDES LACKEY available from DAW Books: THE HERALDS OF VALDEMAR ARROWS OF THE QUEEN ARROWS FLIGHT ARROWS FALL THE LAST HERALD- MAGE MAGICS PAWN MAGICS PROMISE MAGICS PRICE THE MAGE WINDS WINDS OF FATE WINDS OF CHANGE WINDS OF FURY THE MAGE STORMS STORM WARNING STORM RISING STORM BREAKING VOWS AND HONOR THE OATHBOUND OATHBREAKERS OATHBLOOD THE COLLEGIUM CHRONICLES FOUNDATION INTRIGUES CHANGES REDOUBT BASTION BY THE SWORD BRIGHTLY BURNING TAKE A THIEF EXILES HONOR EXILES VALOR VALDEMAR ANTHOLOGIES: SWORD OF ICE SUN IN GLORY CROSSROADS MOVING TARGETS CHANGING THE WORLD FINDING THE WAY UNDER THE VALE Written with LARRY DIXON: THE MAGE WAR THE BLACK GRYPHON THE WHITE GRYPHON THE SILVER GRYPHON DARIANS TALE OWL FLIGHT OWL SIGHT OWL KNIGHT OTHER NOVELS THE BLACK SWAN THE DRAGON JOUSTERS JOUSTAL TASA NCTUARY AERIE THE ELEMENTAL MASTER THE SERPENTS SHADOW THE GATES OF SLEEP PHOENIX AND ASH THE WIZARD OF LONDON RESERVED FOR THE CAT UNNATURAL ISSUE HOME FROM THE SEAS TEADFAST And dont miss: THE VALDEMAR COMPANION Edited by John Helfers and Denise Little Book One of The Last Herald Mage MAGICS PAWN MERCEDES LACKEY Table of Contents One Your grandfather, said Vanyels brawny, fifteen-year-old cousin Radevel, was crazy. He has a point, Vanyel thought, hoping they werent about to take an uncontrolled dive down the last of the stairs. Radevels remark had probably been prompted by this very back staircase, one that started at one end of the third-floor servants hall and emerged at the rear of a linen closet on the ground floor. The stair treads were so narrow and so slick that not even the servants used it. The manor-keep of Lord Withen Ashkevron of Forst Reach was a strange and patchworked structure. In Vanyels great-great-grandfathers day it had been a more conventional defensive keep, but by the time Vanyels grandfather had held the lands, the border had been pushed far past Forst Reach. The old reprobate had decided when hed reached late middle age that defense was going to be secondary to comfort. His comfort, primarily. Not that Vanyel entirely disagreed with Grandfather; he would have been one of the first to vote to fill in the moat and for fireplaces in all the rooms. But the old man had gotten some pretty peculiar notions about what he wanted where along with a tendency to change his mind in mid-alteration. There were good points windows everywhere, and all of them glazed and shuttered. Skylights lighting all the upper rooms and the staircases. Fireplaces in nearly every room. Heated privies, part and parcel of the bathhouse. Every inside wall lathed and plastered against cold and damp. The stables, mews, kennel, and chickenyard banished to new outbuildings. But there were bad points if you didnt know your way, you could really get lost; and there were an awful lot of places you couldnt get into unless you knew exactly how to get there. Some of those places were important like the bathhouse and privies. The old goat hadnt much considered the next generation in his alterations, either; hed cut up the nursery into servants quarters, which meant that until Lord Withens boys went into bachelors hall and the girls to the bower, they were cramped two and three to a series of very tiny attic-level rooms. He was your grandfather, too, Vanyel felt impelled to point out. The Ashkevron cousins had a tendency to act as if they had no common ancestors with Vanyel and his sibs whenever the subject of Grandfather Joserlin and his alterations came up. Huh. Radevel considered for a moment, then shrugged. He was still crazy. He hefted his own load of armor and padding a little higher on his shoulder. Vanyel held his peace and trotted down the last couple of stone stairs to hold the door open for

his cousin. Radevel was doing him a favor, even though Vanyel was certain that cousin Radevel shared everyone else's low opinion of him. Radevel was by far and away the best-natured of the cousins, and the easiest to talk round and the bribe of Vanyel's new hawking gauntlet had proved too much for him to resist. Still, it wouldn't do to get him angry by arguing with him; he might decide he had better things to do than help Vanyel out, gauntlet or no gauntlet. Oh, gods! Let this work, Vanyel thought as they emerged into the gloomy back hall. Did I practice enough with Lissa? Is this going to have a chance against a standard attack? Or am I crazy for even trying? The hallway was as cold as the staircase had been, and dark to boot. Radevel took the lead, feet slapping on the stone floor as he whistled contentedly and tunelessly. Vanyel tried not to wince at the mutilation of one of his favorite melodies and drifted silently in his wake, his thoughts as dark as the hallway. In three days Lissa will be gone and if I can't manage to get sent along, I'll be all alone. Without Lissa... If I can just prove that I need her kind of training, then maybe Father will let me go with her. That had been the half-formed notion that prompted him to work out the moves of a different style of fighting than what he was supposed to be learning, practicing them in secret with his older sister Lissa: that was what had ultimately led to this little expedition. That, and the urgent need to show Lord Withen that his eldest son wasn't the coward the armsmaster claimed he was and that he could succeed on martial ground of his own choosing. Vanyel wondered why he was the only boy to realize that there were other styles of fighting than armsmaster Jervis taught; he'd read of them, and knew that they had to be just as valid, else why send Lissa off to foster and study with Trevor Corey and his seven would-be sword-ladies? The way Vanyel had it figured, there was no way short of a miracle that he would ever succeed at the brute hack-and-bash system Jervis used and no way Lord Withen would ever believe that another style was just as good while Jervis had his ear. Unless Vanyel could show him. Then Father would have to believe his own eyes. And if I can't prove it to him, oh, gods. I can't take much more of this. With Lissa gone to Brenden Keep, his last real ally in the household would be gone, too; his only friend, and the only person who cared for him. This was the final trial of the plot he'd worked out with Lissa; Radevel would try to take him using Jervis' teachings. Vanyel would try to hold his own, wearing nothing but the padded jerkin and helm, carrying the lightest of target-shields, and trusting to speed and agility to keep him out of trouble. Radevel kicked open the unlatched door to the practice ground, leaving Vanyel to get it closed before somebody yelled about the draft. The early spring sunlight was painful after the darkness of the hallway; Vanyel squinted as he hurried to catch up with his cousin. All right, peacock, Radevel said good-naturedly, dumping his gear at the edge of the practice ground, and snagging his own gambeson from the pile. Get yourself ready, and we'll see if this nonsense of yours has any merit. It took Vanyel a lot less time than his cousin to shrug into his armor; he offered tentatively to help Radevel with his, but the older boy just snorted. Botch mine the way you botch yours? No thanks, he said, and went on methodically buckling and adjusting. Vanyel flushed, and stood uncertainly at the side of the sunken practice ground, contemplating the thick, dead grass at his feet. I never botch anything except when Jervis is watching, he thought bleakly, shivering a little as a bit of cold breeze cut through the gambeson. And then I can't do anything right. He could almost feel the windows in the keep wall behind him like eyes staring at his back. Waiting for him to fail again. What's wrong with me, anyway? Why can't I ever please Father? Why is everything I do wrong? He sighed, scuffed the ground with his toe, and wished he could be out riding instead of trying something doomed to failure. He was the best rider in Forst Reach and Star had no equals on the most breakneck of hunts, and he could, if he chose, master anything else in the stables. And just because I won't bother with those iron-mouthed brutes Father prefers, he won't even grant me the accolade there, gods. This time I have to win. Wake up, dreamer, Radevel rumbled, his voice muffled inside the helm. You wanted to have atlets get to it. Vanyel walked to the center of the practice field with nervous deliberation, waiting until the last minute to get his helm on. He hated the thing; he hated the feeling of being closed in, and most of all hated having his vision narrowed to a little slit. He waited for Radevel to come up to him, feeling the sweat already starting under his arms and down the line of his back. Radevel swung but instead of meeting the blow with his shield as Jervis would have done, Vanyel just moved out of the way of the blow, and on his way past Radevel, made a stab of his own. Jervis never cared much for point-work, but Vanyel had discovered it could be really effective if you timed things right. Radevel made a startled sound and got up his own shield, but only just in time, and left himself open to a cut. Vanyel felt his spirits rising as he saw this second opening in as many breaths, and chanced another attack of his own. This one actually managed to connect, though it was too light to call a disabling hit. Light! Vanyel shouted as he danced away, before his cousin had a chance to disqualify the blow. Almost enough, peacock, Radevel replied, reluctant admiration in his voice. You land another like that with your weight behind it and I'll be

out. Try this for size. He charged, his practice blade a blur beside his shield. Vanyel just stepped aside at the last moment, while Radevel staggered halfway to the boundary under his own momentum. It was working!

Radevel couldn't get near him and Vanyel was pecking away at him whenever he got an opportunity. He wasn't hitting even close to killing strength but that was mostly from lack of practice. If you hold, damn your eyes! Long habit froze them both in position, and the armsmaster of Forst Reach stalked onto the field, fire in his bloodshot glare. Jervis looked the two of them up and down while Vanyel sweated from more than exertion. The blond, crag-faced mercenary frowned, and Vanyel's mouth went dry. Jervis looked angry and when Jervis was angry, it was generally Vanyel who suffered. Well, the man croaked after long enough for Vanyel's dread of him to build up to full force. Learning a new discipline, are we? And whose idea was this? Mine, sir, Vanyel whispered. Might have guessed sneak-and-run would be more suited to you than an honest fight, the armsmaster sneered. Well, and how did you do, my bright young lord? He did all right, Jervis. To Vanyel's complete amazement Radevel spoke up for him. I couldn't get a blow on him. An if he'd put his weight behind it, he'd have laid me out a time or two. So you're a real hero against a half-grown boy. I'll just bet you feel like another Veth Krethen, don't you? Jervis spat. Vanyel held his temper, counting to ten, and did not protest that Radevel was nearly double his size and certainly no half-grown boy. Jervis glared at him, waiting for a retort that never came and strangely, that seemed to anger Jervis even more. All right, hero, he snarled, taking Radevel's blade away and jamming the boy's helm down over his own head. Let's see just how good you really are. Jervis charged without any warning, and Vanyel had to scramble to get out of the way of the whirling blade. He realized then that Jervis was coming for him all-out as if Vanyel was wearing full armor. Which he wasn't. He pivoted desperately as Jervis came at him again; ducked, wove, and spun and saw an opening. This time desperation gave him the strength he hadn't used against Radevel and he scored a chest-stab that actually rocked Jervis back for a moment, and followed it with a good solid blow to the head. He waited, heart in mouth, while the armsmaster staggered backward two or three steps, then shook his head to clear it. There was an awful silence. Then Jervis yanked off the helm, and there was nothing but rage on his face. Radevel, get the boys, then bring me Lordling Vanyel's arms and armor, the armsmaster said, in a voice that was deadly calm. Radevel backed off the field, then turned and ran for the keep. Jervis paced slowly to within a few feet of Vanyel, and Vanyel nearly died of fear on the spot. So you like striking from behind, hmm? he said in that same, deadly quiet voice. I think maybe I've been a bit lax in teaching you about honor, young milord. A thin smile briefly sliced across his face. But I think we can remedy that quickly enough. Radevel approached with feet dragging, his arms loaded with the rest of Vanyel's equipment. Arm up, Jervis ordered, and Vanyel did not dare to disobey. Exactly what Jervis said, then other than dressing Vanyel down in front of the whole lot of them, calling him a coward and a cheat, an assassin who wouldn't stand still to face his opponent's blade with honor Vanyel could never afterward remember. Only a haze of mingled fear and anger that made the words meaningless. But then Jervis took Vanyel on. His way, his style. It was a hopeless fight from the beginning, even if Vanyel had been good at this particular mode of combat. In moments Vanyel found himself flat on his back, trying to see around spots in front of his eyes, with his ears still ringing from a blow he hadn't even seen coming. Get up, Jervis said. Five more times Vanyel got up, each time more slowly. Each time, he tried to yield. By the fourth time he was wandering, dazed and groveling. And Jervis refused to accept his surrender even when he could barely gasp out the words. ***Radevel had gotten a really bad feeling in his stomach from the moment he saw Jervis face when Van scored on him. He'd never seen the old bastard that angry in all the time he'd been fostered here. But he'd figured that Vanyel was just going to get a bit of a thrashing. He'd never figured on being an unwilling witness to a deliberate massacre. That was all he could think to call it. Van was no match for Jervis, and Jervis was coming at him all out like he was a trained, adult fighter. Even Radevel could see that. He heaved a sigh of relief when Vanyel was knocked flat on his back, and mumbled out his surrender as soon as he could speak. The worst the poor little snot had gotten was a few bruises. But when Jervis had refused to accept that surrender when he beat at Van with the flat of his blade until the boy had to pick up sword and shield just to get the beating to stop Radevel got that bad feeling again. And it got worse. Five times more Jervis knocked him flat, and each time with what looked like an even more vicious strike. But the sixth time Vanyel was laid out, he couldn't get up. Jervis let fly with a blow that broke the wood and copper shield right in the middle and to Radevel's horror, he saw when the boy fell back that Vanyel's shield arm had been broken in half; the lower arm was bent in the middle, and that could only mean that both bones had snapped. It was pure miracle that they hadn't gone through muscle and skin. And Jervis' eyes were still not what Radevel would call sane. Radevel added up all the factors and came up with one answer: get Lissa. She

was adult-rank, she was Vans protector, and no matter what the armsmaster said in justification for beating the crud out of Van, if Jervis laid one finger in anger on Lissa, hed get thrown out of the Keep with both his arms broken. If Withen didnt do it, there were others who liked Liss a lot who would. Radevel backed off the field and took to his heels as soon as he was out of sight.***Vanyel lay flat on his back again, breath knocked out of him, in a kind of shock in which he couldnt feel much of anything except that something was wrong, somewhere. Then he tried to get up and pain shooting along his left arm sent him screaming into darkness. When he came to, Lissa was bending over him, her horsey face tight with worry.

She was pale, and the nostrils of that prominent Ashkevron nose flared like a frightened filly. Dont move Van, noboth the bones of your arm are broken. She was kneeling next to him, he realized, with one knee gently but firmly holding his left arm down so that he couldnt move it. Lady, get away from him Jervis voice dripped boredom and disgust. Its just his shield arm, nothing important. Well just strap it to a board and put some liniment on it and hell be fine. She didnt move her knees, but swung around to face Jervis so fast that her braid came loose and whipped past Vanyels nose like a lash. You have done quite enough for one day, Master Jervis, she snarled. I think you forget your place. Vanyel wished vacantly that he could see Jervis face at that moment. It must surely be a sight. But his arm began to hurt and that was more than enough to keep his attention.***There wasnt usually a Healer at Forst Reach, but Vanyels Aunt Serina was staying here with her sister during her pregnancy. Shed had three miscarriages already, and was taking no chances; she was attended by her very own Healer. And Lissa had seen to it that the Healer, not Jervis, was the one that dealt with Vanyels arm. Oh, Van Lissa folded herself inelegantly on the edge of Vanyels bed and sighed.

How did you manage to get into this mess? That beaky Ashkevron nose and her determined chin combined with her anxiety to make her look like a stubborn, mulish mare. Most people were put off by her appearance, but Vanyel knew her well enough to read the heartsick worry in her eyes. After all, shed all but raised him. Vanyel wasnt certain how clear hed be, but he tried to explain. Lissa tucked up her legs, and rested her chin on her knees, an unladylike pose that would have evoked considerable distress from Lady Treesa. When he finished, she sighed again. I think you attract bad luck, thats all I can say. You dont do anything wrong,

but somehow things seem to happen to you. Vanyel licked his dry lips and blinked at her. Liss Jervis was really angry this time, and what you told him didnt help. Hes going to go right to Father, if he isnt there already. She shook her head. I shouldnt have said that, should I? Van, all I was thinking about was getting him away from you. I know Liss, Im not blaming you, but But I made him mad. Well, Ill see if I can get to Father before Jervis does, but even if I do he probably wont listen to me. Im just a female, after all. I know. He closed his eyes as the room began to swing. Just try, Liss please. I will. She slipped off the bed, then bent over and kissed his forehead. Try and sleep, like the Healer told you, all right? He nodded. Tough-minded and independent, like the grandmother who had raised her, Lissa was about the only one in the keep willing to stand up to Lord Withen now that Grandmother Ashkevron had passed on. Not surprising, that, given Grandmother. The Ashkevrons seemed to produce about one strong-willed female in every generation, much to the bemusement of the Ashkevron males, and the more compliant Ashkevron females. Lady Treesa (anything but independent) had been far too busy with pregnancy and all the vapors she indulged in when pregnant to have anything to do with the resulting offspring. They went to the hands of others until they were old enough to be usefully added to her entourage. Lissa went to Grandmother. But Vanyel went to Liss.

And they loved each other from the moment shed taken him out of the nursery. Shed stand up to a raging lion for his sake. So Lissa went in search of their father. Unfortunately that left him alone. And unfortunately Lissa didnt return when she couldnt immediately find Lord Withen. And that, of course, left him vulnerable when his father chose to descend on him like the god of thunders. Vanyel was dizzy with pain as well as with the medicines the Healer had made him drink when Lord Withen stormed into his tiny, white-plastered room. He was lying flat on his back in his bed, trying not to move, and still the room seemed to be reeling around him. The pain was making him nauseous, and all he wanted was to be left in peace. The very last thing he wanted to see was his lord father. And Withen barely gave him enough time to register that his father was there before laying into him. Whats all this about your cheating? Withen roared, making Vanyel wince and wish he dared to cover his ears. By the gods, you whelp, I ought to break your other arm for you! I

wasnt cheating! Vanyel protested, stung, his voice breaking at just the wrong moment. He tried to sit upright which only made the room spin the more. He fell back, supporting himself on his good elbow, grinding his teeth against the pain of his throbbing arm. I was, he gasped through clenched teeth, I was just doing what Seldasen said to do! And just who might this Seldasen be? his father growled savagely, his dark brows knitting together. What manner of coward says to run about and strike behind a mans back, eh? Oh,

godsnow what have I done? Though his head was spinning, Vanyel tried to remember if Herald Seldasens treatise on warfare and tactics had been one of the books hed borrowed without leave, or one of the ones he was supposed to be studying. Well? When Lord Withen scowled, his dark hair and beard made him look positively demonic. The drugs seemed to be giving him an aura of angry red light, too. Father, why cant you ever believe I might be in the right? The book was on the approved list, Vanyel remembered with relief, as he recalled his tutor Istal assigning certain chapters to be memorized. Its Herald Seldasen, Father, he said defiantly, finding strength in rebellion. Its from a book Istal assigned me, about tactics. The words he remembered strengthened him still more, and he threw them into his fathers face. He said: Let every man that must go to battle fight within his talents, and not be forced to any one school. Let the agile man use his speed, let his armoring be light, and let him skirmish, but not close with the enemy. Let the heavy man stand shoulder to shoulder with his comrades in the shield wall, that the enemy may not break through. Let the small man of good eye make good use of the bow, aye, and let the Herald fight with his mind and not his body, let the Herald-Mage combat with magic and not the sword. And let no man be called coward for refusing the place for which he is not fit. And I didnt once hit anybody from behind! If Jervis says I didwell didnt! Lord Withen stared at his eldest son, his mouth slack with surprise. For one moment Vanyel actually thought hed gotten through to his father, who was more accustomed to hearing him quote poetry than military history. Parrot some damned book at me, will you? Lord Withen snarled, dashing Vanyels hopes. And what does some damned lowborn Herald know about fighting? You listen to me, boy you are my heir, my firstborn, and you damned well better learn what Jervis has to teach you if you want to sit in my place when Im gone! If he says you were cheating, then by damn you were cheating! But I wasnt cheating and I dont want your place Vanyel protested, the drugs destroying his self-control and making him say things hed sooner have kept behind his teeth. That stopped Lord Withen cold. His father stared at him as if hed gone mad, grown a second head, or spoken in Karsite. Great good gods, boy, he managed to splutter after several icy eternities during which Vanyel waited for the roof to cave in. What do you want? I Vanyel began. And stopped. If he told Withen that what he wanted was to be a Bard You ungrateful whelp you will learn what I tell you to learn, and do what I order you to do! Youre my heir and youll do your duty to me and to this holding if I have to see you half dead to get you to do it! And with that, he stormed out, leaving Vanyel limp with pain and anger and utter dejection, his eyes clamped tight against the tears he could feel behind them. Oh, gods, what does he expect of me? Why cant I ever please him? What do I have to do to convince him that I cant be what he wants me to be? Die? And now now my hand, oh, gods, it hurts show much damage did they do to it? Am I ever going to be able to play anything right again? Heyla, Van He opened his eyes, startled by the sound of a voice. His door was cracked partway open; Radevel peered around the edge of it, and Vanyel could hear scuffling and whispers behind him. You all right? No, Vanyel replied, suspiciously. What the hell does he want? Radevels bushy eyebrows jumped like a pair of excited caterpillars. Guess not. Bet it hurts. It hurts, Vanyel said, feeling a sick and sullen anger burning in the pit of his stomach. You watched it happen. And you didnt do anything to stop it, cousin. And you didnt bother to defend me to Father, either. None of you did. Radevel, instead of being put off, inched a little farther into the room. Hey, he said, brightening, you should have seen it! I mean, whack, an that whole shield just split an you fell down an that arm Will you go to hell? Vanyel snarled, just about ready to kill him. And you can take all those ghouls lurking out there with you! Radevel jumped, looked shocked, then looked faintly offended. Vanyel didnt care. All that mattered was that Radevel and whoever else was out there took themselves away. Left finally alone, Vanyel drifted into an uneasy slumber, filled with fragmented bits of unhappy dreams. When he woke again, his mother was supervising the removal of his younger brother Mekeal and all Mekeals belongings from the room. Well, that was a change. Lady Treesa usually didnt interest herself in any of her offspring unless she had something to gain from it. On the other hand, Vanyel had been a part of her little court since the day hed evidenced real talent at music about five years ago. She wouldnt want to lose her own private minstrel which meant shed best make certain he healed up all right. I wont have you racketing about, she was whispering to Mekeal with unconcealed annoyance on her plump, pretty face. I wont have you keeping him awake when he should be sleeping, and I wont have you getting in the Healers way. Thirteen-year-old Mekeal, a slightly shrunken copy of his father, shrugged indifferently. Bout time we went to bachelors hall anyway, milady, he replied, as Lady Treesa turned to keep an eye on him. Cant say as Ill miss the caterwauling an the plunking. Although Vanyel could only see his mothers back, he couldnt miss the frown in her voice. It wouldnt hurt you to acquire a bit of Vanyels polish, Mekeal, Lady Treesa replied. Mekeal shrugged again, quite cheerfully. Cant make silk out o wool, Lady Mother. He peered

through dancing candlelight at Vanyels side of the room. Seems mbrothers awake. Heyla, peacock, theyre movin me down t quarters; seems you get up here to yourself.Out! Treesa ordered; and Mekeal took himself off with a heartless chuckle.Vanyel spent the next candlemark with Treesa fussing and weeping over him; indulging herself in the histrionics she seemed to adore. In a way it was as hard to deal with as Withens rage.

Hed never been on the receiving end of her vapors before.Oh, gods, he kept thinking confusedly, please make her go away. Anywhere, I dont care.He had to keep assuring her that he was going to be all right when he was not at all certain of that himself, and Treesas shrill, borderline hysteria set his nerves completely on edge. It was a decided relief when the Healer arrived again and gently chased her out to give him some peace.The next few weeks were nothing but a blur of pain and potionsa blur endured with one or another of his mothers ladies constantly at his side. And they all flustered at him until he was ready to scream, including his mothers maid, Melenna, who should have known better. It was like being nursemaided by a covey of agitated doves. When they werent worrying at him, they were preening at him. Especially Melenna.Would you like me to get you a pillow? Melenna cooed.No, Vanyel replied, counting to ten. Twice.Can I get you something to drink? She edged a little closer, and leaned forward, batting her eyelashes at him.No, he said, closing his eyes. Thank you.Shall INo! he growled, not sure which was worse at this moment, the pounding of his head, or Melennas questions. At least the pounding didnt have to be accompanied by Melennas questions.Sniff.He cracked an eyelid open, just enough to see her. She sniffed again, and a fat tear rolled down one cheek.She was a rather pretty little thing, and the only one of his mothers ladies or maidservants who had managed to pick up Treesas knack of crying without going red and blotchy. Vanyel knew that both Mekeal and Radevel had tried to get into her bed more than once. He also knew that she had her heart set on him.And the thought of bedding her left him completely cold.She sniffed a little harder. A week ago he would have sighed, and apologized to her, and allowed her to do something for him. Anything, just to keep her happy.That was a week ago. Now Its just a game for her, a game she learned from Mother. Im tired of playing it. Im sick to death of all their games.He ignored her, shutting his eyes and praying for the potions to work. And finally they did, which at least gave him a rest from her company for a little while.***Van?That voice would bring him out of a sound sleep, let alone the restless drug-daze he was in now. He struggled up out of the grip of fever-dreams to force his eyes open.Lissa was sitting on the edge of his bed, dressed in riding leathers.Liss? he began, then realized what riding leathers meant. oh, godsVan, Im sorry, I didnt want to leave you, but Father said it was now or never. She was crying; not prettily like Lady Treesa, but with blotched cheeks and bloodshot eyes. Van, please say you dont mind too much!Its...all right, Liss, he managed, fighting the words out around the cold lump in his throat and the colder one in his gut. I...know. Youve got to do this. Gods, Liss, one of us has to get away!VanIll find some way to help you, I promise. Im almost eighteen; Im almost free. Father knows the Guard is the only place for me; he hasnt had a marriage offer for me for two years. He doesnt dare ruin my chances for a post, or hell be stuck with me. The gods know youre safe enough nowif anybody dared do anything before the Healer says youre fit, hed make a protest to Haven. Maybe by the time you get the splints off, Ill be able to find a way to have you with me....She looked so hopeful that Vanyel didnt have the heart to say anything to contradict her. Do that, Liss. Ill be all right.She hugged him, and kissed him, and then left him.And then he turned to the wall and cried. Lissa was the only support he had had. The only person who loved him without reservations. And now she was gone.After that, he stopped even pretending to care about anything. They didnt care enough about him to let Liss stay until he was wellso why should he care about anything or anyone, even enough to be polite?***Armor does more than protect; it conceals. Helms hide facesand your opponent becomes a mystery, an enigma.Seldasen had that right. Just like those two down there.The cruel, blank stares of the helm-slits gave no clues to the minds within. The two opponents drew their blades, flashed identical salutes, and retreated exactly twenty paces each to end at the opposite corners of the field. The sun was straight overhead, their shadows little more than pools at their feet. Twelve restive armored figures fidgeted together on one side of the square. The harsh sunshine bleached the short, dead grass to the color of light straw, and lit everything about the pair in pitiless detail.Hmm. Not such enigmas once they move.One fighter was tall, dangerously graceful, and obviously well-muscled beneath the protection of his worn padding and shabby armor. Every motion he made was precise, perilousand professional.The other was a head shorter. His equipment was new, the padding unfrayed, the metal lovingly burnished. But his movements were awkward, uncertain, perhaps fearful.Still, if he feared, he didnt lack for courage. Without waiting for his man to make a move, he shouted a tremulous defiant battle cry and charged across the sun-burnt grass toward the tall fighter. As his boots thudded on the hard, dry ground, he brought his sword around in a low-line attack.The

taller fighter didnt even bother to move out of his way; he simply swung his scarred shield to the side. The sword crunched into the shield, then slid off, metal screeching on metal. The tall fighter swept his shield back into guard position, and answered the blow with a return that rang true on the shield of his opponent, then rebounded, while he turned the momentum of the rebound into a cut at the smaller fighters head. The pale stone of the keep echoed the sound of the exchange, a racket like a madman loose in a smithy. The smaller fighter was driven back with every blow, giving ground steadily under the hammerlike onslaught until he finally lost his footing and fell over backward, his sword flying out of his hand. There was a dull thud as he hit his head on the flinty, unforgiving ground. He lay flat on his back for a moment, probably seeing stars, and scarcely moving, arms flung out on either side of him as if he meant to embrace the sun. Then he shook his head dazedly and tried to get up. Only to find the point of his opponents sword at his throat. Yield, Boy, rumbled a harsh voice from the shadowed mouth-slit of the helmet. Yield, or I run you through. The smaller fighter pulled off his own helm to reveal that he was Vanyels cousin Radevel. If you run me through, Jervis, whos going to polish your mail? The point of the sword did not waver. Oh, all right, the boy said, with a rueful grin. I yield. The sword, a pot-metal practice blade, went back into its plain leather sheath. Jervis pulled off his own battered helm with his shield hand, as easily as if the weight of wood and bronze wasnt there. He shook out his sweat-dampened, blond hair and offered the boy his right, pulling him to his feet with the same studied, precise movements as hed used when fighting. Next time, you yield immediately, Boy, the armsmaster rumbled, frowning. If your opponents in a hurry, hell take banter for refusal, and youll be a cold corpse. Jervis did not even wait to hear Radevels abashed assent. You on the end. Mekeal. He waved to Vanyels brother at the side of the practice field. Helm up. Vanyel snorted as Jervis jammed his own helm back on his head, and stalked back to his former position, dead center of the practice ground. The rest of you laggards, he growled, lets see some life there. Pair up and have at. Jervis doesnt have pupils, he has living targets, thought Vanyel, as he watched from the window. There isnt anyone except Father who could even give him a workout, yet he goes straight for the throat every damned time; he gets nastier every day. About all he does give them is that he only hits half force. Which is still enough to set Radev on his rump. Bullying bastard. Vanyel leaned back on his dusty cushions, and forced his aching hand to run through the fingering exercise yet again. Half the lute strings plunked dully instead of ringing; both strength and agility had been lost in that hand. I am never going to get this right again. How can I, when half the time I cant feel what Im doing? He bit his lip, and looked down again, blinking at the sunlight winking off Mekeals helm four stories below. Every one of them will be moaning and plastering horse liniment on his bruises tonight, and boasting in the next breath about how long he lasted against Jervis this time. Thank you, no. Not I. One broken arm was enough. I prefer to see my sixteenth birthday with the rest of my bones intact. This tiny tower room where Vanyel always hid himself when summoned to weapons practice was another legacy of Grandfather Joserlins crazy building spree. It was Vanyels favorite hiding place, and thus far, the most secure; a storage room just off the library. The only conventional access was through a tiny half-height door at the back of the library but the room had a window a window on the same side of the keep as the window of Vanyels own attic-level room. Any time he wanted, Vanyel could climb easily out of his bedroom, edge along the slanting roof, and climb into that narrow window, even in the worst weather or the blackest night. The hard part was doing it unseen. An odd wedge-shaped nook, this room was all that was left of the last landing of the staircase to the top floor an obvious change in design, since the rest of the staircase had been turned into a chimney and the hole where the roof trapdoor had been now led to the chimney pot. But that meant that although there was no fireplace in the storeroom itself, the room stayed comfortably warm in the worst weather because of the chimney wall. Not once in all the time Vanyel had taken to hiding here had anything new been added to the clutter or anything been sought for. Like many another of the old lords eccentricities, its inaccessibility made it easy to ignore. Which was fine, so far as Vanyel was concerned. He had his instruments up here two of which he wasnt even supposed to own, the harp and the gittern and any time he liked he could slip into the library to purloin a book. At the point of the room he had an old chair to sprawl in, a collection of candle ends on a chest beside it so that he could read when the light was bad. His instruments were all safe from the rough hands and pranks of his brothers, and he could practice without anyone disturbing him. He had arranged a set of old cushions by the window so that he could watch his brothers and cousins getting trounced all over the moat while he played or tried to play. It afforded a ghost of amusement, sometimes. The gods knew he had little enough to smile about. It was lonely but Vanyel was always lonely, since Lissa had gone. It was bloody awkward to get to but he couldnt hide in his room. Though he hadnt found out until hed healed up, the rest of his siblings and cousins had gone

down to bachelors hall with Mekeal while hed been recovering from that broken arm. He hadnt, even when the Healer had taken the splints off. His brothers slandered his lute playing when theyd gone, telling his father they were just as happy for Vanyel to have his own room if he wanted to stay up there. Probably Withen, recalling how near the hall was to his own quarters, had felt the same. Vanyel didnt care; it meant that the room was his, and his aloneone scant bit of comfort.His other place of refuge, his mothers solar, was no longer the retreat it had been. It was too easy for him to be found there, and there were other disadvantages lately; his mothers ladies and fosterlings had taken to flirting with him. He enjoyed that, too, up to a pointbut they kept wanting to take it beyond the range of the game of courtly love to the romantic, for which he still wasnt ready. And Lady Treesa kept encouraging them at it.Jervis drove Mekeal back, step by step. Fools, Vanyel thought scornfully, forcing his fingers through the exercise in time with Jervis blows. They must be mad, to let that sour old man make idiots out of them, day after daymaybe break their skulls, just like he broke my arm! Anger tightened his mouth, and the memory of the shuttered satisfaction hed seen in Jervis eyes the first time Vanyel had encountered him after the accident roiled in his stomach. Damn that bastard, he meant to break my arm, I know he did; hes good enough to judge any blow he deals to within a hair.At least he had a secure hiding place; secure because getting into it took nerve, and neither Jervis, nor his father, nor any of the rest of them would ever have put him and a climb across the roof together in the same thoughteven if they remembered the room existed.The ill-assorted lot below didnt look to be relatives; the Ashkevron cousins had all gone meaty when they hit adolescence; big-boned, muscled like plow horsesand about as densebut Withens sons were growing straight up as well as putting on bulk.Vanyel was the only one of the lot taking after his mother.Withen seemed to hold that to be his fault, too.Vanyel snorted as Mekeal took a blow to the helm that sent him reeling backward. That one should shake up his brains! Serves him right, too, carrying on about what a great warrior hes going to be. Clod-headed beanpole. All he can think about is hacking people to bits for the sake of honor.Glorious war, hah. Fool cant see beyond the end of his nose. For all that prating, if he ever saw a battlefield hed wet himself.Not that Vanyel had ever seen a real battlefield, but he was the possessor of a far more vivid imagination than anyone else in his family. He had no trouble in visualizing what those practice blades would be doing if they were real. And he had no difficulty at all in imagining the deadlie woundes of the ballads being inflicted on his body.Vanyel paid close attention to his lessons, if not to weapons work. He knew all of the history ballads and unlike the rest of his peers, he knew the parts about what happened after the great battles as wellthe lists of the dead, the dying, the maimed. It hadnt escaped his notice that when you added up those lists, the totals were a lot higher than the number of heroes who survived.Vanyel knew damned well which list hed be on if it ever came to armed conflict. Hed learned his lesson only too well: why even try?Except that every time he turned around Lord Withen was delivering another lecture on his duty to the hold.Gods. Im just as much a brute beast of burden as any donkey in the stables! Duty. Thats bloody all I hear, he thought, staring out the window, but no longer seeing what lay beyond the glass. Why me? Mekeal would be a thousand times better Lord Holder than me, and hed just love it! Why couldnt I have gone with Lissa?He sighed and put the lute aside, reaching inside his tunic for the scrap of parchment that Trevor Coreys page had delivered to him after hed given Lissas official letters into Treesas hands.He broke the seal on it, and smoothed out the palimpsest carefully; clever Lissa to have filched the scraped and stained piece that no one would notice was gone! Shed used a good, strong ink though; even though the letters were a bit blurred, he had no trouble reading them.Dearest Vanyel; if only you were here! I cant tell you how much I miss you. The Corey girls are quite sweet, but not terribly bright. A lot like the cousins, really. I know I should have written you before this, but I didnt have much of a chance. Your arm should be better now. If only Father wasnt so blind! What Im learning is exactly what we were working out together.Vanyel took a deep breath against the surge of anger at Withens unreasonable attitude.But we both know how he is, so dont argue with him, love. Just do what youre told. It wont be forever, really it wont. Justhold on. Ill do what I can from this end. Lord Corey is a lot more reasonable than Father ever was and maybe I can get him talked into asking for you. Maybe that will work. Just be really good, and maybe Father will be happy enough with you to do that. Love, Liss.He folded the letter and tucked it away. Oh, Liss. Not a chance. Father would never let me go there, not after the way Ive been avoiding my practices. It wont be forever, hmm? I suppose thats right. I probably wont live past the next time Jervis manages to catch up with me. Gods. Why is it that nobody ever asks me what I wantor when they do ask, why cant they mean it and listen to me?He blinked, and looked again at the little figures below, still pounding away on each other, like so many tent pegs determined to drive each other into the ground.He turned restlessly away from the window, stood up, and replaced the lute in the makeshift stand hed contrived

for it beside his other two instruments. And everywhere I turn I get the same advice. From Lissdont fight, do what Father asks. From Mothercrying, vapors, and essentially the same thing. Shes not exactly stupid; if she really cared about me, she could manage Father somehow. But she doesnt care not when backing me against Father is likely to cost her something. And when I tried to tell Father Leren about what Jervis was really likeHe shuddered. The lecture about filial duty was bad enoughbut the one about proper masculine behavior youd have thought Id been caught fornicating sheep! And all because I objected to having my bones broken. Its like Im doing something wrong somewhere, but no one will tell me what it is and why its wrong! I thought maybe Father Leren would understand since hes a priest, but gods, theres no help coming from that direction. For a moment he felt trapped up here; the secure retreat turned prison. He didnt dare go out, or hed be caught and forced into that despised armor and Jervis would lay into him with a vengeful glee to make up for all the practices hed managed to avoid. He looked wistfully beyond the practice field to the wooded land and meadows beyond. It was such a beautiful day; summer was just beginning, and the breeze blowing in his open window was heady with the aroma of the hayfields in the sun. He longed to be out walking or riding beneath those trees; he was as trapped by the things he didnt dare do as by the ones he had to. Tomorrow Ill have to go riding out with Father on his rounds, he gloomed. And no getting out of that. Hell have me as soon as I come down for breakfast. That was a new torment, added since hed recovered. It was nearly as bad as being under Jervis thumb. He shuddered, thinking of all those farmers, staring, staring like they were trying to stare into his soul. This was not going to be a pleasure jaunt, for all that he loved to ride. No, he would spend the entire day listening to his father lecture him on the duties of the Lord Holder to the tenants who farmed for him and the peasant-farmers who held their lands under his protection and governance. But that was not the worst aspect of the ordeal. It was the people themselves; the way they measured him with their eyes, opaque eyes full of murky thoughts that he could not read. Eyes that expected everything of him; that demanded things of him that he did not want to give, and didnt know how to give even if he had wanted to. I dont want them looking to me like that! I dont want to be responsible for their lives! He shuddered again. I wouldnt know what to do in a drought or an invasion, and whats more, I dont care! Gods, they make my skin crawl, all those people, eating me alive with their eyesHe turned away from the window, and knelt beside his instruments; stretched out his hand, and touched the smooth wood, the taut strings. Oh, gods if I werent me if I could just have a chance to be a BardIn the days before his arm had been hurt he had often imagined himself a Court Bard, not in some out-of-the-way corner like Forst Reach, but one of the Great Courts; Gyrefalcons Marches or Southron Keep. Or even the High Court of Valdemar at Haven. Imagined himself the center of a circle of admirers, languid ladies and jewel-bedecked lords, all of them hanging enraptured on every word of his song. He could let his imagination transport him to a different life, the life of his dreams. He could actually see himself surrounded, not by the girls of Treesas bower, but by the entire High Court of Valdemar, from Queen Elspeth down, until the visualization was more real than his true surroundings. He could see, hear, feel, all of them waiting in impatient anticipation for him to sing the bright candles, the perfume, the pregnant silenceNow even that was lost to him. Now practices were solitary, for there was no Lissa to listen to new tunes. Lissa had been a wonderful audience; she had a good ear, and knew enough about music to be trusted to tell him the truth. She had been the only person in the keep besides Treesa who didnt seem to think there was something faintly shameful about his obsession with music. And she was the only one who knew of his dream of becoming a Bard. There were no performances before his mothers ladies, either, because he refused to let them hear him fumble. And all because of the lying, bullying bastard his father had made armsmasterWithenHe froze; startled completely out of his brooding by the sound of his mothers breathless, slightly shrill voice just beyond the tiny door to the library. He knelt slowly and carefully, avoiding the slightest noise. The last thing he wanted was to have his safe hiding place discovered! Withen, what is it youve dragged me up here to tell me that you couldnt have said in my solar? she asked. Vanyel could tell by the edge in her voice that she was ruffled and not at all pleased. Vanyel held his breath, and heard the sound of the library door being closed, then his fathers heavy footsteps crossing the library floor. A long, ponderous silence. Then, Im sending Vanyel away, Withen said, brusquely. What? Treesa shrilled. You how where why? In the gods names, Withen, why? Vanyel felt as if someone had turned his heart into stone, and his body into clay. I cant do anything with the boy, Treesa, and neither can Jervis, Withen growled. Im sending him to someone who can make something of him. You cant do anything because the two of you seem to think to make something of him you have to force him to be something he can never be! Treesas voice was muffled by the intervening wall, but the note of hysteria was plain all the same. You put him out there with a man twice his weight and expect him to behave like a

man! Hes a sniveler, a whiner, Treesa. Hes more worried about damage to his pretty face and delicate little hands than damage to his honor, and you dont help matters by making him the pet of the bower. Treesa, the boys become nothing more than a popinjay, a vain little peacockand worse than that, hes a total coward. A coward! Gods, Withenonly you would say that! Lady Treesas voice was thick with scorn. Just because hes too clever to let that precious armsmaster of yours beat him insensible once a day! So what does he do instead? Run off and hide because oncejust oncehe got his poor little arm broken! Great good gods, Id broken every bone in my body at least once by the time I was his age! Is that supposed to signify virtue? she scoffed. Or stupidity? Vanyels mouth sagged open. Shesmy gods! Shes standing up to him! I dont believe this! It signifies the willingness to endure a little discomfort in order to learn, Withen replied angrily. Thanks to you and your fosterlings, all Vanyels ever learned was how to select a tunic that matches his eyes, and how to warble a love song! Hes too damned handsome for his own goodand youve spoiled him, Treesa; youve let him trade on that pretty face, get away with nonsense and arrogance youd never have permitted in Mekeal. And now he has no sense of responsibility whatsoever, he avoids even a hint of obligation. Youd prefer him to be like Mekeal, I suppose, she replied acidly. Youd like him to hang on your every word and never question you, never challenge you! Damned right! Withen roared in frustration. The boy doesnt know his damned place! Filling his head with book-learned nonsense! He doesnt know his place? Because he can think for himself? Just because he can read and write more than his bare name? Unlike certain grown men I could name gods, Withen, that priest of yours has you parroting every little nuance, doesnt he? And youre sending Van away because he doesnt measure up to his standards of propriety, arent you? Because Vanyel has the intelligence to question what hes told, and Leren doesnt like questions! Her voice reached new heights of shrillness. That priest has you so neatly tied around his ankle that you wouldnt breathe unless he declared breathing was orthodox enough! ah, Vanyel thought, a part of his mind still working, while the rest sat in stunned contemplation of the idea of being sent away. Now Treesas support had a rational explanation.

Lady Treesa did not care for Father Leren. Vanyel was just a convenient reason to try to drive a wedge between Withen and his crony. Although Vanyel could have told her that this was exactly the wrong way to go about doing so. I expected youd say something like that, Withen rumbled. You have no choice, Treesa, the boy is going, whether you like it or not. Im sending him to Savil at the High Court. Shell brook no nonsense, and once hes in surroundings where hes not the only pretty face in the place he might learn to do something besides lisp a ballad and moon at himself in the mirror. Savil? That old harridan? His mothers voice rose with each word until she was shrieking. Vanyel wanted to shriek, too. He remembered his first and last encounter with his Aunt Savil only too well. *** Vanyel had bowed low to the silver-haired stranger, a woman clad in impeccable Heraldic Whites, contriving his best imitation of courtly manner. Herald Savil who had packed herself up at the age of fourteen and hied herself off to Haven without word to anyone, and then been Chosen the moment she passed the city gates was Lissas idol. Lissa had pestered Grandmother Ashkevron for every tale about Savil that the old woman knew. Vanyel couldnt understand why but if Lissa admired this woman so much, surely there must be more to her than appeared on the surface. It was a pity that Liss was visiting cousins the one week her idol chose to make an appearance at the familial holding. But then again maybe that was exactly as Withen had planned. So this is Vanyel, the woman had said, dryly. A pretty boy, Treesa. I trust hes something more than ornamental. Vanyel went rigid at her words, then rose from his bow and fixed her with what he hoped was a cool, appraising stare. Gods, she looked like his father in the right light; like Lissa, she had that Ashkevron nose, a nose that both she and Withen thrust forward like a sharp blade to cleave all before them. Oh, dont glare at me, child, the woman said with amusement. Ive had better men than you try to freeze me with a look and fail. He flushed. She turned away from him as if he was of no interest, turning back to Vanyels mother, who was clutching a handkerchief at her throat. So, Treesa, has the boy shown any sign of Gift or Talent? He sings beautifully, Treesa fluttered. Really, hes as good as any minstrel weve ever had. The woman turned and stared at him stared through him. Potential, but nothing active, Savil said slowly. A pity; Id hoped at least one of your offspring would share my Gifts. You can certainly afford to spare one to the Queens service. But the girls dont even have potential Gifts, your four other boys are worse than this one, and this one doesnt appear to be much more than a clotheshorse for all his potential. She waved a dismissing hand at him, and Vanyels face had burned. Ive seen what I came to see, Treesa, she said, leading Vanyels mother off by the elbow. I wont stress your hospitality anymore. *** From all Vanyel had heard, Savil was, in many ways, not terribly unlike her brother; hard, cold, and unforgiving, preoccupied with what she perceived as her duty. She had never wedded; Vanyel was hardly surprised. He couldnt imagine anyone wanting to bed Savils chill arrogance. He couldnt imagine why warm, loving Lissa

wanted to be like her. Now his mother was weeping hysterically; his father was making no effort to calm her. By that, Vanyel knew there was no escaping the disastrous plan. Incoherent hysterics were his mother's court of last resort; if they were failing, there was no hope for him. Give it up, Treesa, Withen said, unmoved, his voice rock-steady. The boy goes. Tomorrow. You unfeeling monster. That was all that was understandable through Treesa's weeping. Vanyel heard the staccato beat of her slippers on the floor as she ran out the library door, then the slower, heavier sound of his father's boots. Then the sound of the door closing as leaden and final as the door on a tomb. Two Vanyel stumbled over to his old chair and collapsed into its comfortable embrace. He couldn't think. Everything had gone numb. He stared blankly at the tiny rectangle of blue sky framed by the window; just sat, and stared. He wasn't even aware of the passing of time until the sun began shining directly into his eyes. He winced away from the light; that broke his bewildered trance, and he realized dully that the afternoon was gone that someone would start looking for him to call him for supper soon, and he'd better be back in his room. He slouched dispiritedly over to the window, and peered out of it, making the automatic check to see if there was anyone below who could spot him. But even as he did so it occurred to him that it hardly mattered if they found his hideaway, considering what he'd just overheard. There was no one on the practice field now; just the empty square of turf, a chicken on the loose pecking at something in the grass. From this vantage the keep might well have been deserted. Vanyel turned around and reached over his head, grabbing the rough stone edging the window all around the exterior, and levered himself up and out onto the sill. Once balanced there in a half crouch, he stepped down onto the ledge that ran around the edge of the roof, then reached around the gable and got a good handhold on the slates of the roof itself, and began inching over to his bedroom window. Halfway between the two windows, he paused for a moment to look down. It isn't all that far if I fell just right, the worst I'd do is break a leg then they couldn't send me off, could they? It might be worth it. It just might be worth it. He thought about that and thought about the way his broken arm had hurt. Not a good idea; with my luck, Father would send me off as soon as I was patched up; just load me up in a wagon like a sack of grain. Deliver to Herald Savil, no special handling. Or worse, I'd break my arm again, or both arms. I've got a chance to make that hand work again maybe but if I break it this time there isn't a Healer around to make sure it's set right. Vanyel swung his legs into the room, balanced for a moment on the sill, then dropped onto his bed. Once there, he just lacked the spirit to even move. He slumped against the wall and stared at the sloping, whitewashed ceiling. He tried to think if there was anything he could do to get himself out of this mess. He couldn't come up with a single idea that seemed at all viable. It was too late to mend his ways even if he wanted to. Nono. I can't, absolutely can't face that sadistic bastard Jervis. Though I'm truly not sure which is the worst peril at this point in the long run, Aunt Ice-And-Iron or Jervis. I know what hell do to me. I haven't a clue to her. He sagged, and bit his lip, trying to stay in control, trying to think logically. All he knew was that Savil would have the worst possible report on him; and at Haven the irony of the name! he would have no allies, no hiding places. That was the worst of it; going off into completely foreign territory knowing that everybody there had been told how awful he was. That they would just be waiting for him to make a slip. All the time. But there was no getting out of it. For all that Treesa petted and cosseted him, Vanyel knew better than to rely on her for anything, or expect her to ever defy Withen. That brief flair during their argument had been the exception; Treesa's real efforts always lay in keeping her own life comfortable and amusing. Shed cry for Vanyel, but shed never defend him. Not like Lissa might well have. If Lissa had been here. When the page came around to call everyone to dinner, he managed to stir up enough energy to dust himself off and obey the summons, but he had no appetite at all. *Revue de presse* Praise for series: "Lackey has written another intensely wrought, finely detailed story of heroic victims struggling to do the best with their fate. Vanyel's magical strengths are countered by his very human insecurities." VOYA "Lackey's characterization, plotting, and wit are all of a high order. A real page-turner for any fantasy collection." Booklist "Emotionally tense and full of drama and magic." Locus "In Vanyel, [Lackey] has created her most empathetic male character to date, making our emotions run high as he meets his fate. And best of all, the very last plot twist is one of haunting beauty that will touch your heart." RT s "In this trilogy, Lackey reaches an intensity she had only begun to achieve.... The story of Vanyel is darker than her earlier books, and the pace is unrelenting." American Fantasy