

BY THE SWORD



MERCEDES LACKEY

DAW BOOKS, INC.

DONALD A. WOLLHEIM, FOUNDER

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PUBLISHERS

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“Woman’s Need calls me, as Woman’s Need made me. Her Need will I answer as my maker bade me.”

The mage chanted furiously, in some language Kero didn’t recognize. She somehow knew that the *sword* did, though; for the first time she felt something from it—a strange, slow anger, hot as a forge, and heavy as iron.

Kero *wanted* to run, but the sword wouldn’t let her. She could only stand there, an easy target. The mage sneered, and raised his hands. They glowed for a moment, a sickly red, then the glow brightened and a spark arced between them.

The blade’s anger rose to consume her, and she shifted her grip from the hilt to the sword-blade itself. She balanced her sword for a moment that way, as if it was, impossibly, nothing more than a giant throwing knife. It didn’t seem to weigh any more than her dagger had at that moment.

Her arm came back, and she threw it, like a spear.

It flashed across the space between herself and the mage, arrow-straight and point-first...

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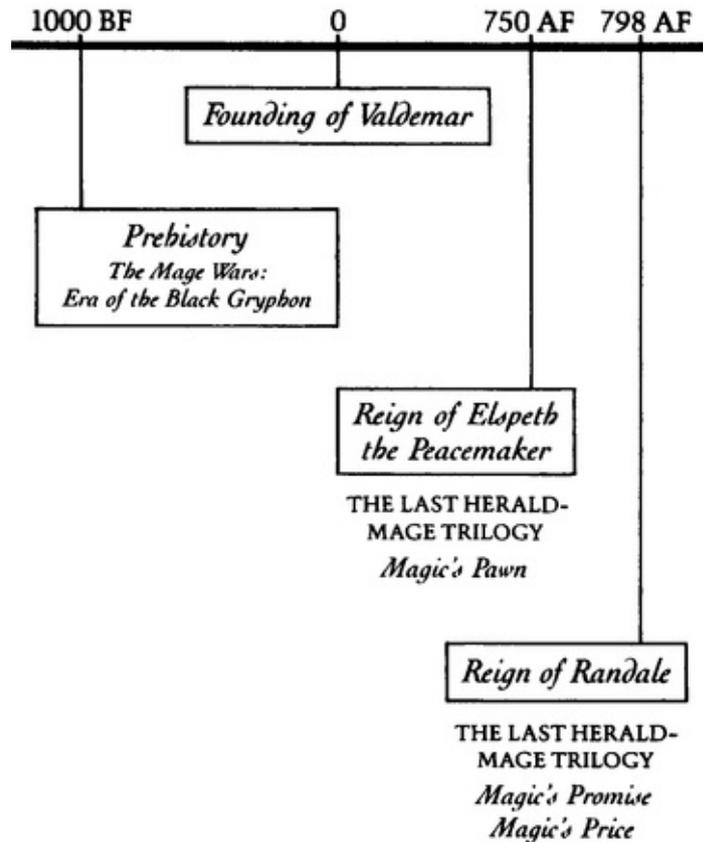
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gave me heart and courage
when I needed them most.

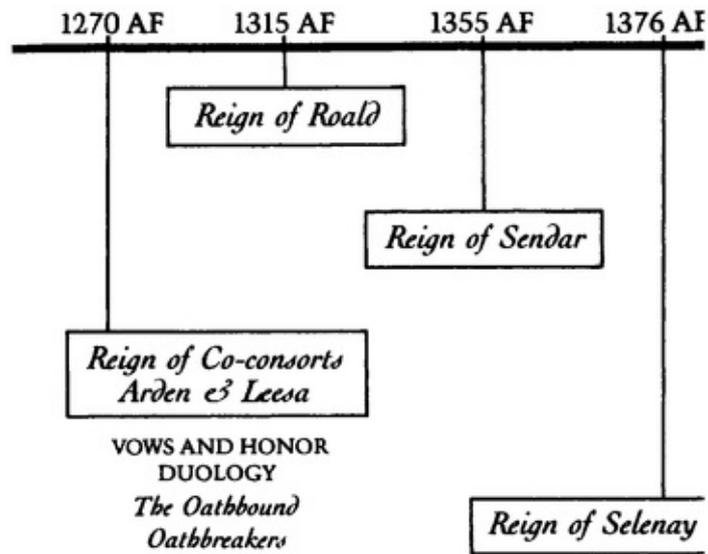
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by Mercedes Lackey



BF Before the Founding
AF After the Founding

Sequence of events by Valdemar reckoning



THE HERALDS OF
VALDEMAR TRILOGY
Arrows of the Queen
Arrow's Flight
Arrow's Fall

BY THE SWORD

THE MAGE WINDS
TRILOGY
Winds of Fate
Winds of Change
Winds of Fury

BOOK ONE

Kerowyn's Ride

One

“Blessed—look out!”

Everyone turned and stared; at Kero, and at the boy about to lose the towering platter of bread. The racket of pots and voices stopped, and Kerowyn’s voice rang out in the silence like a trumpet call, but no one answered this call to arms. They all seemed confused or frozen with indecision. The scullion staggered two more steps forward; the edible sculpture, two clumsy, obese bread-deer (a stag and a reclining doe), began sliding from the oversized serving dish he was attempting to carry alone.

Idiots! Kerowyn swore again, this time with an oath her mother would have blanched to hear, but it seemed as if she was the only one with the will or brains to act. She sprinted across the slickly damp floor of the kitchen, and caught the edge of the platter just as the enormous subtlety of sweet, egg-glazed dough started to head for the flagstones.

The lumpy mountain stopped just short of the carved display plate’s edge. She held it steady while young Derk, sweating profusely, regained his breath and his balance, and took the burden of twenty pounds of sweet, raisin studded bread back from her.

He got the thing properly settled on his shoulder and headed for the Great Hall to place it before the wedding party. Kero listened for a moment, then heard the shouts and applause from beyond the kitchen door as the bread sculpture appeared. The clamor in the kitchen resumed.

Kero licked sweat from her upper lip, and sighed. She would have *liked* to have staggered backward and leaned against the wall to catch her breath, but she didn’t dare take the time, not at this point in the serving. The moment she paused there would undoubtedly be three more near disasters; if she took her attention away from the preparations, the tightly-planned schedule would fall apart.

She knew very well she really shouldn’t be here. She probably *should* have been out there with the rest of the guests, playing Keep Lady; that was what would have been “proper.”

To the six hells with “proper.” If Father wants this feast to be a success, I have to be in here, not playing the lady.

The kitchen was as hot as any one of the six hells, and crowded with twice the number of people it was intended to hold. The cook, an immense man with the build of a wrestler, and his young helpers were all squeezed in behind one side of a huge table running the entire length of the kitchen. Normally they worked on both sides, but tonight the servers were running relay with platters and bowls on the other side, and may the gods help anyone in the way.

Kero chivvied her recruited corps of horse-grooms out the door. They were a lot more used to being served from the beer pitchers they were carrying than doing the

serving themselves. Then she spotted something out of the corner of her eye and paused long enough to snatch up a wooden spoon. She used it to reach across the expanse of scarred wooden tabletop and whack one of the pages on the knuckles. She got him to rights, too, trying to steal a fingerful of icing from the wedding cake standing in magnificent isolation on the end of the table butted up against the wall. The boy yelped and jumped back, colliding with one of the cook's helpers and earning himself a black look and another whack with a spoon.

"Leave that be, Perry!" she scolded, brandishing the spoon at him. "That's for after the ceremony, and don't you forget it! You can eat yourself sick on the scraps tomorrow for all I care, but you leave it alone tonight, or more than your knuckles will be hurting, I promise you."

The shock-haired boy whined a halfhearted apology and started to sulk; to stave off a sullen fit she shoved a handful of trencher slabs across the table at him and told him to go see that the minstrels were fed.

Some day ... spoiled brat. I wish Father'd send him back to his doting mama. A cat's more use than he is, especially when everybody's too busy to keep an eye on him.

Fortunately, all Perry had to do was show up with the slabs of trencher bread and the minstrels would see to their own feeding. Kero hadn't met a songster yet that didn't know how to help himself at a feast.

The first meat course was over; time for the vegetable pies, and the dishes straw-haired Ami had been plunging into her tub with frantic haste were done *just* in time. Kero sent the next lot in, laden with heavy pies and stacks of bowls, just as the remains of the venison and the poor, hacked up bits of the bread-deer came in.

It's a good thing that monstrosity didn't hit the ground, she reflected soberly, snagging Perry as he slouched in behind the servers and sending him back out again with towels for the wedding guests to wipe their greasy fingers. What with Dierna's family device being the red deer and all, her people would have taken that as a bad omen for sure. There was no subtlety for this course, thank all the gods and goddesses-

Not that Father didn't want one. More dough sculpture, this time a rampant stag-as a testament to my darling brother's virility, no doubt. It's a good thing Cook had a fit over all the nonsense that was already going to wind up being crammed into the oven!

There was a momentary lull, as the last of the emptied dishes arrived and the last of the servers staggered out; and everyone in the kitchen took a moment to sag over a table or against the wall, fanning overheated faces. Kero thought longingly of the cool night air just beyond the thick planks of the door at her back. But her father's Seneschal poked his nose in the doorway, and she pushed away from the worn wood with a suppressed sigh.

"Any complaints so far?" she asked him, her voice clear and carrying above the murmur of the helpers and the roar of the fire under the ovens.

"Just that the service is slow," Seneschal Wendar replied, mopping his bald head with his sleeve. "Audria's Teeth, child, how do you stand it in here? You could bake

the next course on the counters!”

Kero shrugged. *Because I don't have a choice.* “I’m used to it, I suppose, I’ve been here since before dawn. Anyway, you know I’ve supervised everything since before Mother died.” The simple words only called up a dull ache now; that priest had been right—

Damn him.

—time did make sorrow fade, at least it had for her. Time, and being too busy to breathe.

“I’m sorry I can’t do much about the service,” she continued, keeping an ear cocked for the sounds of the servers returning. “There’s only so much stableboys and hire-swords can learn about the server’s art in a couple of candlemarks.”

“I know that, my dear.” The Seneschal, a thin, tired-looking man who had been the scribe and accountant with Rathgar’s old mercenary company, laid a fatherly hand on her arm, and she resisted the urge to shrug it off. “I think you’re doing remarkably well, better than *I* would have, and I mean that sincerely. I can’t imagine how you’ve managed all this with as little help as you’ve had.”

Because Father was too tightfisted to hire extra help for me, and too full of pride to settle for anything less than a princely wedding feast. Lord Orsen Brodey consented to this marriage; Lord Orsen Brodey must be shown that we're no jumped-up barbarians... even if Rathgar's daughter has to spend the entire feast in the kitchen with the hirelings....

She felt her cheeks and ears flush with anger. It wasn’t fair, it wasn’t—not that she really wanted to be out in the Great Hall either, showing off for potential suitors and their lord-fathers. Bad enough that Rathgar never thought of her; worse that he’d think of her only in terms of being marriage bait.

Which he would, if he ever thought past Lordan’s marriage ... Lordan’s *far* more important marriage. After all, he was the male and the heir ... Kero was only a girl.

Kero set her jaw and tried to look cheerful, or at least indifferent, but something of her resentment must have penetrated the careful mask of calm and competence she was trying to cultivate. Wendar patted her arm again and looked distressed.

“I wish I could help,” he said unhappily. “I told your father three years ago, when—when—”

“When Mother died,” Kero said shortly.

He coughed. “Uh, indeed. I told him that you needed a housekeeper, but he wouldn’t hear of it. He said you were already doing very well, and you didn’t need any help.”

Kero clenched her teeth, then relaxed with an effort. “Somehow that doesn’t surprise me. Father—” She clamped her lips tight on what she was going to say; it wouldn’t do any good, it wouldn’t change anything.

But the sentence went on inside her head. *Father never really notices anything*

about me so long as I stay out of sight, his dinner arrives on time, and the Keep doesn't smell like a stable. I suppose if anyone had mentioned that a fourteen-year-old girl shouldn't be forced into the job of Keep Lady alone, he'd have said that the girls in his village were married and mothers by fourteen. Never mind that the most any of them had to manage alone was a two-room cottage and a flock of sheep, and usually didn't like even that...

She sighed, and finished her sentence in a way that wouldn't put more strain on Wendar than he was already coping with. "Father had other things to worry about. And so do you, Wendar. You've got a hall full of guests out there, and no one keeping an eye on the servitors."

Wendar swore, and hurried back toward the door into the Great Hall, just as the wave of servants returned with the dirty dishes from the last course. Wendar sidestepped the rush, and dodged between two of them and through the doorway.

Stuffed pigeons were next; a course that required nothing more than the bread trenchers. That would give the kitchen staff enough time to clean the platters now being brought in before the fish course of eel pies was served.

A full High Feast, and who was it had to figure out how our little backwoods Keep could come up with enough courses to satisfy the requirements? Me, of course. Tubs full of eel in the garden for days, the moat stocked with fish in a net-pen, crates of pigeons and hens driving us all crazy... let's not talk about the rest of the livestock. Kero rubbed her arms, and rerolled the sleeves of her flour-covered, homespun shirt a little higher. Damn these skirts. Breeches would be easier. The helpers get to wear breeches, so why can't I? She wondered if Dierna had any notion of how much work a High Feast was. She ought to; she'd been trained by the Sisters of Agnetha—in fact she'd been sent to the Sisters' cloister at the ripe age of eight, so she ought to have had time to learn the "womanly arts."

Dierna ought to have had *proper* instruction in those womanly arts too, as well as the art of being womanly, whatever that meant ... unlike Kero, as Rathgar was so prone to remind her whenever she failed to live up to his notion of "womanly."

Selective *memory*, she told herself bitterly. *He keeps forgetting that he was the one who decided he couldn't do without me.* Wheat-crowned Agnetha was Rathgar's idea of the appropriate sort of deity for a lady to worship—unlike wild, horse-taming Agnira, Kero's favorite. There was a shrine to Agnetha in the Keep chapel, though the other aspects of the LadyTrine were only represented by little bas-reliefs carved into the pedestal of Agnetha's statue. There in the heart of the chapel, Agnetha smiled with honeyed sweetness over her twin babies, her wheat sheaves at her feet, her cloak of fruit-laden vines around her, her distaff dangling from her belt of flowers, sheep gazing up at her adoringly. While on the pedestal, alternating snowflakes and hoofprints were all there was to show of the other two aspects, Agnoma and Agnira. Rathgar approved of Agnetha, occasionally waxing maudlin over his somewhat sketchy devotion when in his cups.

Well, after the feast, the wedding, and the month-long bridal moon, Kero could probably give up the keys of the Keep to Dierna. That would bring an end to the farce