

E. C. AMBROSE



ELISHA MAGUS

The Dark Apostle

Praise for *Elisha Barber*, first in The Dark Apostle series

"Elisha's struggle to bring relief to those in need is complicated by his own need for redemption and his innate fear of what he cannot understand. This beautifully told, painfully elegant story should appeal to fans of L.E. Modesitt's realistic fantasies as well as of the period fantasy of Guy Gavriel Kay."

~~Library Journal starred review

"*Elisha Barber* is at its heart a story of resilience, of why we strive to be better, even when that journey seems pointless. As the start of a new series, the book sets a half-dozen plates spinning, and not a one wobbles for a second."

~~ San Francisco Book Review

"Blending magic and history, strong characters and gripping action, E.C. Ambrose brings a startlingly unique voice to our genre. Part epic fantasy, part medical thriller, part historical novel, *Elisha Barber* is at once dark, powerful, redemptive, and ultimately deeply satisfying. Highly recommended!"

~~ D.B. Jackson, author of *Thieftaker*

"In a grim world of medieval warfare, witch-hunts and primitive surgery, E.C. Ambrose has crafted a shining tale of one man's humanity and courage. A gritty read for those who like realism as well as hope in their fantasy."

~~Glenda Larke, author of *Stormlord's Exile*

"*Elisha Barber* is a stunning debut from a gifted storyteller. It didn't just keep me up all night, it transported me to a vivid gritty 14th Century England, and left me feeling like I'd been touched by the wing of that dark angel. A magical first novel."

~~Steven H. Savile, bestselling author of *Silver*

Elisha Magus

Book Two of The Dark Apostle

E. C. Ambrose

“Since it is just that he who knows how to kill,
should learn how to die.”

~ Childebert

Chapter 1

The gray of the evening sky deepened as Elisha walked to the churchyard. The church itself leaned a bit to the left, its ruined steeple pointing up toward the duke's castle; accusing or beseeching, it was hard to say. Riders jangled by, talking and laughing, on their way to the grand masked ball, their chatter drifting over the walls into what should be a peaceful place. His business here would likely be brief, and he would be back at the castle in plenty of time to dodge the visitors and return to the comfort of his infirmary. He wanted to check on the scullion's new baby, not to mention that man-at-arms with the wounded leg. So far, no sign of putrefaction, but the fellow was terrified he'd have to lose his leg and his livelihood. Elisha hoped the noise of the ball wouldn't disturb them and that the flow of wine and ale wouldn't bring a flow of drunken nobles tumbling into his own domain.

The ribs of burned-out houses and barns still loomed over the streets, but a few had been dismantled, fresh stone laid for new foundations, and piles of cut saplings waited to be woven into walls. Two houses, at least, had already been built to the roofs, tiles gleaming dully with the rays of the distant sun as smoke curled from the chimneys. Elisha took careful stock of all that he saw, looking for movement, looking for new places someone might hide. Tension crept into his shoulders, much as he tried to keep it back, to focus on his duty. Nothing else caught his eye, but Elisha still stretched his awareness, allowing tendrils of his strength to move over the ground, aware of the families in each house, the sheep in each fold, the cat that slunk through a blackened barn in search of mice.

Even the graves lay unquiet after the battle, crosses askew, the handful of stone monuments broken or flattened by the bombards' blasts and the rumble of siege engines. Elisha picked his way toward the far side, where the low wall had been dismantled to expand the yard and a series of mounds, still high over the new graves, showed where the soldiers lay. A hunched figure bent over, shovel across his shoulder, examining the

shrouded remains of the latest corpse.

The figure gave a twitch and turned, straightening as much as possible, the lumpish face curling into recognition. The fellow had been here through the battle, burying the dead of the king's army and of the hospital where Elisha did his best. Now he worked for Duke Randall's village. Gravediggers didn't choose sides.

Elisha gave a nod, but noticed the flutter of the shroud as if the gravedigger had been searching beneath it, not merely measuring the corpse for a grave. He narrowed his eyes. "Which side did he fight for?"

"Who can say, now? Anything worth money's been stripped, eh? And his clothes don't tell much—been a month in the woods, ain't he?" The gravedigger grinned and shrugged, then set his shovel to the earth. "Didn't expect nobody but the priest."

Elisha moved past, facing the grave between them and the pale cloth of the shroud. The cracked bell in the crooked tower gave a thunk, then another, and a third, each with a groan of rope over pulley that suggested how hard the priest must work to get even that pitiful sound.

A week had passed since the last funeral, and he had thought it might be truly the last, until a few children found this sorry fellow half-buried in a blast pit by the trees. The first funerals he attended here included relatives of the deceased, the camp followers or nearby townsmen who still recognized their own. But time degraded the dead until their families would not have known them and most of the fallen had been already laid to rest. The gatherings dwindled to a few sympathetic townsfolk, and even then they wanted to know if the dead were of the king's army—which had set the torch to their homes—or of the duke's, as if the duke's bombards had spared them any grief. Elisha had effectively fought for both sides, impressed to the king's army before delivering the ultimate victory for the duke himself. He came as much for his brother's sake as for the soldiers', as if he could make up for that one funeral he had missed.

Father Michael crossed the yard, wringing his hands and shaking out his fingers, the lines of his face deepened by the sinking sun. He, too, nodded at Elisha. The three men stood around the grave as the priest crossed them and the corpse and spoke in Latin. Elisha's outspread awareness as much as the monotone of the priest's voice suggested that this task had moved from reverence to rote.

Father Michael led another prayer, followed by Elisha's quiet, "Amen," and the grunt of the gravedigger, then sprinkled holy water and turned away toward the church.

"Give us a hand, mate," the gravedigger muttered, waving Elisha closer with a flap of his wrist.

Pushing back his sleeves, Elisha came forward, squatting to lift the corpse's shoulders. The body gave in his hands, a softness foreign to healthy flesh, and Elisha swallowed the bile in his throat.

"Give 'im the toss." The gravedigger chuckled, but he moved carefully enough to lay his end of the body into the grave.

Still, Elisha stumbled and nearly slipped in afterward, the head and shoulders flopping heavily from his hands into the hole. A ripe odor drifted from the shroud, along with a few flies, and Elisha drew back, looking away for a breath of fresher air. Just to breathe in the stench of corpses opened one to disease. He straightened and tipped his head back, the clatter of hooves and merry voices rising from the road. The slightest thrill of interest touched him from afar and Elisha turned.

A bolt whizzed past, snagging the cloth of his shoulder with a sharp tug.

With a curse, Elisha leapt aside, tumbling into the half-filled grave as a second bolt whipped through the spot where he'd been standing and cracked against the dirt wall. His shoulder stung, and the corpse beneath him gave an exhalation of foul air. Recoiling from the stink, hand pressed over his mouth, Elisha froze. If he stuck his head up now, the archer might have a third shot. Damn it! His heart hammered loud in the narrow space. His eyes watered as the stench invaded his nostrils, but he held his stomach in check. Even without his extra senses, he heard the horses galloping off.

"Christ on the Cross, two in one grave!" The gravedigger peered down at him, a shovelful of dirt poised in his hands.

"Barber! What's happened?" Father Michael ran up. "I was checking the garden when I heard you cry out."

Elisha blinked up at the two faces silhouetted against the evening sky. "Someone shot at me," he managed. "Probably gone."

The priest paused a moment to look around then reached down. Elisha took his arm and climbed out of the

grave, brushing off dirt and shaking his head. He frowned down at his shoulder where a thin line of blood marked the rip in his tunic. The evening breeze swept over him, wiping away the reek of death.

“In a churchyard, no less!” Father Michael frowned as well, or rather his lined face fell into the expression it seemed made for, then he bent to lift the fallen bolt, short and new, with a sharp head for piercing flesh. Holding it close to his nose to examine it, he said, “No fletcher’s mark.”

Hefting his shovel, the gravedigger started to scatter dirt over the corpse. “Woulda been convenient, eh, dying in a graveyard?”

“Not tonight,” Elisha replied. He wiped his face and took the bolt. The tip gave a chill tingle, marked with the intention of his death. A small crossbow could be carried loaded, easily hidden beneath a cloak or simply dangling at a horse’s pommel, ready for use. Half the barons called for his blood, but they wanted a public execution. This wasn’t an attempt at justice but an assassination.

“Come wait in the church—Morag here will send a boy for the duke’s men to see you home.”

The gravedigger huffed as he tossed in another shovelful.

“Go on,” Father Michael prodded.

Morag gave a long look at the corpse, then put up his shovel and stumped off into the streets. A moment later, he could be heard banging on a door. Elisha kept glancing around as he followed the priest. His magical senses warned him, true enough, but they told him little else. A boy ran off in the direction of the castle, the gravedigger stumped back to his task, a pair of dogs snarled and tussled over something they’d found in a cellar hole. With a grand gesture, the priest ushered Elisha into the chilly church with its high, rectangular windows cutting bits of sky through the heavy stone. Father Michael paused to cross himself with a little bow, more like a lady’s curtsy, then raised a brow until Elisha followed suit, then he shut the door at their backs with a solid thud.

The priest busied himself lighting a few tapers from the massive spiraled candle kept burning at the Lady altar—a donation from the duke, its curled length representing the number of dead.

“So . . .” Father Michael found a cloth and began to wipe down the altar. “Have you repented yet?”

“Sorry?” Elisha turned from the windows.

“Have you repented of your regicide?” The priest met his gaze, dark eyes reflecting the thin light of candles.

Elisha gripped the bolt a little tighter. Repented of killing a tyrant? At the time, he wanted all the killing to end: the deaths of the common soldiers and of his own friends, held hostage to the tyrant’s will—not to mention saving Duke Randall, whom the king wished Elisha to kill. He had not meant to take magic into his own hands to slay the king, but the king’s death had brought an end to the battle that caused so much pain. The idea of killing, and the manner of it, still disturbed him, but to regret that the tyrant was dead? “It’s not a simple matter, Father.”

“It is to God.”

“Then I’ll take it up with Him.”

“Not if you are in Hell,” the priest said, bracing his hands on the altar and leaning forward so the flame turned his wrinkles into crevasses. “Not if you are bound there sooner than you think. Myself, I have doubted the rumor of sorcery, believing that any man so devoted to attend to funerals cannot be so. . . diabolical. But if I am mistaken, Barber, then only true repentance can save you.”

“I will repent of my actions when God repents of killing babies—or the mothers who would bear them.” Elisha turned away, blowing out a breath, but his shoulders ached, the bolt wearing a line into his palm. He had not meant to speak so harshly, and he could sense the stillness of the priest at his back.

“It is not up to you to judge the Lord.”

He could leave now—likely the archer was already in the castle, masked and dancing, camouflaged by a hundred others. If Elisha found a mask of his own, he might hide likewise and seek among the company for the one who sought his harm. He jerked at the knock on the door, then relaxed as Lord Robert, one of the duke’s staunch retainers, stuck his head in.

“Father? Elisha! What’s happened? The boy said somebody’d been shot.”

“Nearly.” Elisha held up the bolt. “One of the duke’s guests, or somebody riding with them, tried to kill me.”

“The prince’s guests—surely his Grace wouldn’t abide anyone who’d shoot his surgeons.” Robert crossed himself and ducked his head then gestured Elisha toward the door. “No matter, we’re with you now. I’ve got seven men.”

“Think on what I’ve said, Barber,” the priest called after them. “An eternity of torment awaits the sinner down below.”

Elisha said nothing as he moved into the night. Ambushed twice on holy ground—the first time for his body, and the second for his soul.

Chapter 2

An hour later, cleaned and clad in borrowed silks and a mask the duke had left for him, Elisha prowled into the ball, to look for his would-be killer. He felt awkward at events like this, which should be reserved for the nobility, worried that his low-born ways would offend some lord or other, in spite of the duke's warm welcome. A banner of the king's arms hung over the main door—a bit premature, given that Prince Alaric had not yet been crowned. Just below that hung a second banner marked with the French fleur-de-lis, a sign of welcome for the prince's foreign guests at the ball given to impress them with the king-apparent in his solidarity with the duke whose castle hosted them all.

Elisha's mask pressed against his nose and cheeks, but he tried to keep from rubbing at it. Arches supported galleries down both sides of the Great Hall and sheltered the local nobility—knights, ladies, children who took up the benches or played beneath them, leaving the center of the floor clear for dancing all the way up to the raised table where Duke Randall sat with his guests as they finished their meal. Elisha'd been invited to the feast but declined, giving the funeral as his excuse and taking a cold slice of meat pie in the kitchen on his way out. Now, the scent of roasted onions dripping with beef gravy made him regret the choice—except for the company. Likely someone at that very table had hired out for his death.

“Are you the man who killed the king?” whispered a sly voice at Elisha's elbow.

He jerked, turning away from the spectacle of the ball to squint into the murk around him. He ought to have felt anyone's approach, but the accursed itching of his leather mask had distracted him. A small figure stood nearby, shifting one foot to the other, its face concealed by a mask with a grotesque nose. He sensed no menace, but a sort of eagerness instead. Glowering into the flickering torchlight, ignoring the swirling music and laughter around them, Elisha replied, “I am Elisha Barber.” Not quite an answer, nor an evasion.

“Very good,” purred the unseen mouth. “I speak for someone who has need of you.”

“Sorry, I’ve been hired by the duke.” Elisha sent a tendril of his awareness toward the hovering figure, seeking a deeper sense of the emotions behind the mask. Aside from the nervousness clear enough in the little man’s movements, he felt little. Chances were he simply did not know enough about the man to interpret him. At least he seemed an unlikely assassin.

“Yes, well, some are prepared to offer you the sort of wealth and standing the duke has little taste for.”

Uncomfortable beneath the eerie gaze of the bulbous mask, Elisha replied, “I’ve little enough taste for it myself, sir.”

The man raised his hands in a placatory gesture. “Think about it, Barber. What do you have a taste for? Women, perhaps?”

At that, Elisha laughed. After what happened with the last woman who interested him, he was hardly looking for another go.

With a darting glance around, the figure leaned closer. “Or perhaps boys? We are open-minded.”

Shaking his head, Elisha said, “There’s nothing you could offer me—and you’ve not even told me what you want.”

“We understand you are a man of many talents.” The man’s accented voice reminded Elisha of the speech of the nobles, but his clothing was not so rich, his shoes well-worn. A garter with a little spear-like emblem hung a bit low on his leg beneath an over-sized tunic. “You would earn the gratitude of many,” the man said.

A chill shivered Elisha’s shoulders, and he crossed his arms, flimsy silk sleeves rubbing on the rich velvet doublet. “Who are you?”

“A messenger.” The man gave an eloquent shrug, then the nose suddenly swung to the side. “I should talk with you later,” he said, the words a little rushed.

Elisha felt a growing warmth to his left hand and smiled, sensing a friend’s approach through the magical link they shared. “I wouldn’t bother.”

With a tiny bob of acknowledgement, the figure slid away into the darkness as the surgeon Mordecai drew up to Elisha’s shoulder, his unmasked face looking pale and strange in contrast with the colorful masks around

them. “What’s that, Elisha?”

Frowning after the dim cloaked shape, Elisha wondered how the man had recognized him. Then he realized: the duke likely hadn’t heard yet about the attempt on his life and had no reason not to point him out. His heart sank. Not only would he never locate his target in this crowd, it was just as likely the archer already knew where he was. In which case, only the crowd kept him from striking again. “I am unused to being a wanted man—aside from those who want me dead.”

“I heard what happened in the churchyard.” The sense of Mordecai’s presence turned a shade concerned. He brushed his hand over Elisha’s, and the next words echoed through Elisha’s skin. *“As for this, you’ve worked a powerful magic, the sort that makes the lords take notice, one way and another.”*

“His master seems ready to offer me whatever I want, in exchange for unspecified services. I thought the nobles hated us.”

With a wrinkle of his graying eyebrows, Mordecai replied without sound, *“They both hate and envy us, and more than a few depend upon the power of a magus.”* He gave a nod toward the head table. Beyond the refuse of a rich meal, Randall, the Duke of Dunbury sat listening to his guest of honor. On the other side sat his wife, Duchess Allyson, a highly respected magus who had loaned her power to that impossible healing a month ago when he had stitched Mordecai’s hand back on, rejoining flesh and bone and creating the bond between himself and his mentor.

Elisha glanced away from the dark-haired duchess to the young, self-declared king, Prince Alaric, who held forth on God knew what despite the evident irritation in the duke’s posture. From the corner of his eye, he caught a glimpse of the lady who sat beside Alaric: Brigit, Alaric’s betrothed. Elisha drew a deep breath, and let it out with a quiver of pain. His right cheek warmed as if her hand rested there, atop the mark her mother had placed in that same spot when he was a boy; had placed with the infinite wonder of her outstretched wing, before the fire claimed her.

With a sigh, Mordecai shook his head. “Many cures I’ve made, but that you must heal for yourself,” he said aloud, breaking the contact of their skin.

Hoping his thoughts had not been too obvious, Elisha asked suddenly, “Do you know why they burned her mother?”

At this, Mordecai’s eyebrows rose. “You don’t know? Suppose not,” he answered his own question. “She’d been the queen’s lady in waiting. Queen died, king found her out, a witch so close to his wife.”

“King Hugh, again.”

“Really don’t know politics, do you?” asked Mordecai dryly. “Best start learning, or you’ll not last in this world.”

Breathing in the scents of gravy and good wine, Elisha admitted, “It has its attractions, but I don’t know that I want to be a part of this world.”

“Not sure you’ll have the option.” The surgeon’s dark, damp gaze settled gravely on Elisha’s face. “Take care.”

“Don’t I always?”

Elisha felt the answering ripple of laughter in the air around him. He could not feel most men this way, but since he had healed Mordecai, they shared a bond beyond even those of other magi. Not that Elisha had been one long enough to know what to expect. Still, his sensitivity extended beyond his skin, and he felt someone approaching, an unfamiliar touch. He flashed back to the little man in the bulbous mask, who had bid him a hasty farewell before Mordecai arrived. The little man was a magus—one both sensitive enough to feel the surgeon’s approach and powerful enough to conceal his own nature. Elisha had dismissed the messenger too soon in his eagerness to seek out an assassin instead. He spun away from Mordecai, scanning the crowd around them, but the little man was nowhere to be seen.

“That emissary, he was a witch,” Elisha murmured, but Mordecai cut him off with a gesture, and they turned as one to the newcomer.

Clad in a light gown of blue that neither emphasized nor concealed her ample bosom, the woman wore the mask of a bird, done in painted leather complete with exotic feathers twisting back over her dark hair.

Both men bowed, and the lady nodded in acknowledgement then held out her hand, palm down, to Elisha,

who sucked in a quick breath. He felt the stirring of Mordecai's silent chuckle, and Elisha reddened beneath his mask.

He took the lady's hand on his palm, with the lightest possible touch, and bowed over it, blowing a tiny breath across her knuckles in the acceptable substitute for a kiss he was not worthy to bestow. Through the contact, he felt curiosity, attraction, and irritation in a strange jumble. Frowning, Elisha slipped his hand from hers. "To what do we owe the honor, my lady?" he asked, using the plural despite the fact that her attention was clearly all his own.

"My father speaks so highly of you, Elisha Barber, and I have cause to wonder why. I've not been home two days now, yet I've heard more about you than the rest of the battle and all his retainers combined. Why so?"

Elisha swallowed, leaned away from her, and shot a worried glance at Mordecai. This was Lady Rosalynn, the duke's daughter, whose denunciation by Prince Alaric had brought on the battle.

"*You seem safe enough now,*" Mordecai said in a touch. "*At least from certain death.*" With the tiniest of smiles, he bowed his head. "My lady, if you'll excuse me."

When she curtsied his dismissal, Mordecai went off with a lively step and left a wake of humor in the air.

Bristling, Elisha turned back to her. In his moment of inattention, she had slipped the mask from her face, and wiped sweat from below her eyes with two careful fingers. Rather he assumed it was sweat until he caught the flash of wetness in her dark eyes. Every line of her plump features showed her broken heart. How long could he look on her without his own becoming clear?

"I saved the life of the Earl of Blackmere, my lady, during the battle, when I was still in the king's service."

With a rough gesture, she pulled her mask back into place, folding her hands together. "Yes, I heard that story, from Lord Robert, in fact. He seems vastly amused by the fact that he held a sword to your throat for mistakenly thinking you would kill the earl. Now, he acts as if you are the best of friends, despite the fact that you are a barber and he is of noble birth. It was he who told me where to find you. None of which explains why my father should take such a liking to you, unless the rumors are true? That you are responsible for King Hugh's death, and thus my father's deliverance?"

She had her father's rounded features and shape, together with her mother's taller stature and a prattling tone Elisha could blame on neither parent. Perhaps it was no wonder Alaric had determined to put her aside. Of course, Rosalynn could never compete with Brigit in any case, no more than Elisha himself could compete with Alaric for Brigit's affections.

"Some rumors are more true than others, my lady," he said, tucking the silk cord that bound his cuff back into his sleeve.

She made a sharp noise, and the beak of the bird mask lifted as if it might poke his eye out. "I see. You are awfully brash for a low-born living off a duke's sufferance. Tell me, are you not enjoying my father's generosity?"

Elisha replied, "I am grateful for my position here, my lady."

"But I didn't see you at the head table, and I've not noticed you dancing."

He could hardly explain to Rosalynn, of all people, why he couldn't bring himself to dine at a table with the royal couple, so he pounced instead on the second query. "As you say, my lady, I am low-born. This music doesn't suit me, and I don't know the dances of court."

Tilting her bird's head, Rosalynn lifted her shoulders. "I know them, but I don't care for them, either. The past few months, I've been at my brother's estate near Lincoln. They've got no proper musicians there but have to depend upon the local fiddlers."

Heavens, Elisha thought, nobles forced to dance to common music.

"If I can get them to change the tune, will you dance with me?"

"My lady, I'm not a fit partner for—"

"You are favored by my father, and that will see you through tonight, so long as you do not take advantage." As if she had crushed her sadness with sudden strength, Rosalynn thumped a fist onto her hip. "I have a mind to cause a stir for this king and all his fancy entourage."

Hiking up her flowing skirts, Rosalynn crossed the floor in rapid, manly strides, though the view he had of her was anything but masculine. She cut this way and that among the dancers, certain to be noticed although she

took care not to interrupt any of the sets. Her mother spotted her from the head table and got a familiar little frown upon her face; the young prince turned slightly more pale but did not turn his head. And there was Brigit. If he danced with Rosalynn, the stir would be more than sufficient. He considered slipping off into the shadows, perhaps even retreating to his little chamber near the castle infirmary.

Then he thought of the tears in Rosalynn's eyes. She wanted to be daring, to dance with a peasant at her father's feast and pretend the gilded presence of the prince meant as little to her as hers did to him. During the battle, Elisha had the impression that theirs had been a match of power, not of love. Still, the prince had no right to wound her. He had no right to get his father into the battle that had left King Hugh dead. The younger prince pressed his own claim over that of his elder brother, Thomas, since finding evidence that Thomas had plotted their father's death. Faced with a choice between a liar and a traitor, Duke Randall supported the liar. But how would Alaric make any better king than his father, if he would break a vow and start a war over a woman? If this was politics, Elisha wanted little part in it.

Across the hall Rosalynn spoke earnestly to the lead musician, seeking a way to assuage her grief. Elisha had not got far in the search for his attempted assassin, and the crowd, for now, meant safety. Straightening his finery, Elisha strode over to meet her.

Chapter 3

“My lady?” said Elisha, offering his hand as he had seen the lords do.

Rosalynn accepted, tightening her grip. The decorous dances of the nobility allowed only the slightest contact, never with the fingers closed about the lady’s hand. The dance she had requested—and which the lead musician ran through slowly again for her approval—required a firmer grasp.

Elisha let her turn about his hand and lead him to the now empty floor. He hadn’t danced in years and never in such company as now tittered and rumbled at the edges of the hall. He hoped it wouldn’t be a disaster. “I’m not a very good dancer, my lady,” he began, “I’ve no wish to embarrass you.”

The beak of her mask turned sharply toward him, so that he pulled back from its tip. “Embarrass me, Barber? How can I be more humiliated before this company than I have already been, to see my betrothed sitting beside that? Don’t worry over me—I’m for the nunnery after this. God is the only one left who’ll have me.”

Raw hurt flowed from her hand into his. He pushed back the foreign feelings, withdrawing his awareness until he barely felt her hand in his as she tugged him out, her steps determined and ungraceful. If the dance was a disaster, it mightn’t be all his fault.

At the head table, the duke looked on, a vague smile playing about his lips, while the prince, unable now to avoid it, watched over the rim of his upraised goblet as he drained his wine. Brigit reached out and slipped her pale, slender hand about his elbow, leaning into him, her lips close to his ear. The party of Frenchmen, come for the new king’s coronation and wedding, watched politely—not understanding what they saw.

They reached the center of the floor, and Rosalynn made an effort to draw herself up. Elisha drummed his fingers briefly on his ever-present pouch, full of emergency medical needs. Then he spun her to face him, clasping right hands to begin the dance. He grinned, and through the contact, he sent a quiet wave of resolve, and the sort of anger that lifted a chin, that made a deep breath the more enlivening. He tried to be subtle, so that she might think it was his smile that encouraged her, or the starting beat of the music that sparked her back to life. Indeed, if she were determined in her melancholy, he could not have moved her, not without her willingness to go along. But Rosalynn was willing. She wanted this little revenge, and his nudge gave her the strength to draw that breath and touch her toe to the floor, poised to begin.

A hand-drum gave the rapid beat, then the rebec player began. The dance had several forms, including lines, or circles, of couples, depending on how many joined in. Elisha and Rosalynn danced alone, forming a circle of their own.

From the moment the music started, his gaze never left her face. Would Brigit notice? Would she care? It didn't matter: he could imagine that she did.

They skipped forward, trotted backward, pulled together and apart. Rosalynn's skirts swirled about her as she spun a circle of her own.

When they came together, Elisha hesitated. For the second verse, they should take each other about the waist, repeating the series—an intimacy casually undertaken by his people and steadfastly forbidden by hers.

Rosalynn spun back to him, her arm slipping about his waist, her shoulder nestling against his own.

Again, he followed her lead, starting to pray under his breath that the duke would take it all in fun. He might have more than one enemy at the head table by the time the dance was done. His hand settled on her hip.

As they danced backward, she laughed aloud. As they pulled together, even closer, a tear trickled down past her ear.

They twirled apart, clapping with the music, and returned to the center, both hands clasped this time, arms stretched across one another in a near embrace. This time, they pivoted at each change, performing all the steps in reverse. Listening, Elisha caught the trill of music which signaled the last pattern, and he released their left hands, turning her against him and dropping down on one knee.

Startled, Rosalynn nearly lost her balance but landed neatly on his knee, her head thrown back, laughing louder now, wiping at her cheeks as she caught her breath.

Elisha, too, gasped, his heart pounding in the rhythm of the dance. Someone applauded, and others joined in. Shaking, Rosalynn clung to his hand, her fingers kneading his.

Elisha drew her to her feet, rising along with her and bowing over their hands. He led her away, knowing without probing, that if he let her go, she would collapse to the floor in a quaking puddle of grief.

Elisha brought her quickly through the crowd and shook off her hand. Rosalynn fled into the darker hall beyond. He hoped no one else had noticed her tears. Her revenge would not be so rich if it were tempered by other people's pity. Including his own.

"You dance with passion," murmured a voice nearby, and Elisha turned to find a tall man tucked into the shadowed arch. He wore a tunic that seemed stitched of rags and embellished with soil, complete to a simple mask of cloth that draped his face, holes torn out over his eyes.

"Desperation, more like," Elisha replied. "If I dance fast enough, I won't fall on my face." The stranger held one arm over his stomach as if it ached, and Elisha noted that he'd even wrapped his palms with rags. The set of his shoulders and the lift of his chin showed his noble bearing, or Elisha might have truly believed him a beggar. This garb didn't have enough layers to conceal much of a weapon, but still . . . Elisha unfurled his awareness, sensing exhaustion and fear in the stranger—at war with desire. For Rosalynn? She would be as surprised to hear it as he was surprised to find it in such a costume. "An excellent disguise, my lord."

The man drew a sharp breath, his eyes flaring, his glance darting about before returning to

Elisha's masked face. "It should be, for what I paid." It sounded like a jest but for the grim tone of his voice.

"Not so much, I hope."

The stranger let out a sound somewhere between a laugh and a cry. "By my faith, it was a princely sum."

A group of revelers, singing loudly, stumbled through the arch toward the yard beyond, and the stranger drew back from them then plunged into the darkness himself, leaving Elisha frowning after him. With his regal bearing and woeful garb, the stranger felt like Elisha's opposite, as if they had traded places, leaving the nobleman masquerading as a beggar while the barber played a lord.

A flourish of horns turned him from the arch to find the French delegation rising, filing carefully around the table. Each man of the party, and the two women, wore fixed smiles. The lords went unmasked, but their parti-colored gowns were of rich brocade with fleur-de-lis shimmering in gold on one side. The same symbol the messenger had worn, though his was woven coarse and barely recognizable. Elisha scanned their group of attendants as the lords approached from the floor—he did not see the mask or tunic, but one among them had a drooping stocking, that garter-ribbon still in want of adjustment. Elisha sucked on his teeth. The French? Just to speak of hiring out to them was dangerous. No wonder the little man tried to hide his identity. Elisha sought the source of one danger only to stumble upon another.

"My lord prince—and soon, may we hope, the proud king of our sister nation," pronounced the leader.

"They must really mean it, if they're not speaking French," muttered a young man on the other side of Elisha's pillar, only to win a cuff from his mother. He scowled but subsided.

"In token of our friendship, we bring you this." The man bowed stiffly and stuck out a hand, but the bearer hesitated and had to be waved forward. A smile from one of the women turned briefly genuine, as if she were amused by the whole affair, but Brigit's eyes narrowed at them

from her side of the high table.

The servant knelt, holding up the offering, and the lord swept off an embroidered velvet sash to reveal a miniature church complete with a tower and angels, gleaming with gold, sparkling with silver. At its heart rested a crystal vessel, though Elisha could not make out the contents at such a distance.

“A relic of the blessed Saint Louis, to guide you upon your reign.” They all bowed again.

Alaric stared down at the gaudy thing, his jaw tight. He answered in French, a fluent little speech, in which Elisha caught a reference to the sainted king Edward the Confessor. Saint Louis had been king of France only fifty years before, and now was beatified, but Edward’s cult had been venerated for hundreds of years. The rest of the high table tried to conceal their amusement, but the French ambassador’s face seemed rigid. The lady beside him gave a deep curtsy—along with a view down her low neckline no doubt—and answered with a suspicious lightness in her voice. Elisha did not need to understand her words to know what else was on offer.

“Thank you, I’m sure,” said Brigit, pushing up from her chair. “It is a lovely gift and a fine addition to our chapel.” She emphasized “our,” and the French lady rose, recoiling a little with a swish of her silken headdress.

“Another dance!” cried the duke. “Please. Our pages shall parade the relic so that all may see the generosity of our neighbors.” He urged two boys to take up the cushion and make a slow passage down the table, the bishop, as well, rose to join the procession.

Distantly Elisha heard a new tune, one of the slow and courtly dances played toward the end of an evening, and the soft shuffle of slippers as the assembled nobles resumed their fun. A gaggle of children emerged around their parents’ skirts and ankles and rushed up to view the saint’s bone in its tiny gilded hall. Alaric gazed at the French lady a moment too long before Brigit seized his hand, and Elisha chuckled. Brigit hadn’t learned from the experience of Lady Rosalynn if she were expecting faith from her prince.

The duke’s hand settled on his shoulder, with an eddy of concern.

Elisha immediately began, “Your Grace, I’m sorry, she asked me, and I didn’t—”

Much to his dismay, the duke laughed. “I’ve not come to rip you limb from limb, Elisha, you can calm yourself about that. I’m only hoping we can settle the French and the prince without anyone having to invade.” He gave a sigh, then glanced up at Elisha. “Saint Louis is the patron saint of Paris. It wasn’t a gift, it was a threat.”

“My guess was they hoped it to be a nuptial gift, but not for Brigit.”

“Some things a man doesn’t need a knowledge of French to understand.” Then his glance turned speculative. “So what do you think of our Rosalynn?”

Flushed from both the dancing and now the question, Elisha managed, “She seems pleasant enough.”

“Pleasant?” The duke looked vexed. “From the way you danced, you might’ve thought her a ravishing beauty.”

Elisha hesitated, wondering how to remove the insult.

“Don’t be so concerned, Barber, I’m not out for blood, truly.” The duke exerted a gentle pressure, prodding Elisha into motion away from the crowd into an open-air yard. “In fact, I enjoyed it. I little imagined Rosalynn would dance again, never mind with such. . . exuberance. She’s been in a black mood since . . .” His gesture completed the sentence. “I thought the time at her brother’s would help her get over it and give me time to sort out Hugh and Alaric, besides. Now look what it’s all come to.”

Elisha slipped off his mask, rubbing the sweat from his face. “I don’t follow you, Your Grace.”

He tapped his fingers together, then sighed. “Hugh and I were cousins. It’s why he advanced me during the confusion after King Edward’s death.” He crossed himself briefly at the mention of the old king. “Hugh needed those around him who’d support his claim to the throne.”

“Cousins? Good God, I am sorry.” Elisha felt he was still back in the hall, dizzy with dancing.

“Sorry you killed him? Don’t be. Someone had to cut down the treacherous bastard. I’m only sorry it was not I who did the deed.”

This time, Elisha held his tongue. The night air chilled his skin, despite the stillness of June all around them. Lately, he felt cold all the time, indoors or out. Ever since the day he had invited Death into himself, and it had not entirely left him.

“In fact,” the duke continued, “I amazed Alaric right then when I failed to take the crown for myself, by right of arms aside from the ties of blood we shared.” He shrugged. “So here comes Alaric to be sure I support his claim over Thomas’s.”

On second thought, perhaps Rosalynn had gotten her conversational style from her father—neither of them seemed to require his participation, only his attention.

“It’s all about alliances, who can summon the strongest allies.” He cocked his head to study Elisha sidelong. “Have they started in on you yet?”

Elisha had almost forgotten the small man in the ugly mask. “Someone sent a messenger, offering wealth and power.”

“Not what you want?” The duke smiled. “Someone’ll find out what you *do* want, Barber, and offer you that. All these factions will want you for themselves.”

“What for, Your Grace? As you say, I’m just a barber.”

“Not just. You killed the king, apparently by magic, though few were close enough to know the truth, and every tavern and brothel from here to the border will be abuzz with stories. Every soldier you ever healed will claim himself a miracle—or a curse. Oh, no, Elisha Barber. As far as the barons are concerned, you are the most dangerous man alive, and you’d do well to remember that. They just can’t be sure what you’ll do next.”

Duke Randall, too, wanted something from him, something more than his medical skill, and Elisha regarded him warily. “Without the talisman, I’m just a man.”

“A magus, still, and the talisman is nothing without someone who has the insight and wherewithal to use it.”

That stung. Insight had nothing to do with the desperation which brought him to kill. Elisha walked a few paces away, arms folded against the chill. The talisman—the sorry remains of a tragedy for which he was at least partially responsible—had lent him the power of Death, the power to kill the king. But when he woke from the long exhaustion which had overcome him after such a spell, the talisman was gone, stolen by the woman he loved. He meant to get it back, before the innocent life it represented could be twisted again to harm.

The duke pursued him but stopped short, a soothing note creeping into his voice. “I know you don’t like to be reminded, Elisha, but you must face the consequences of what you’ve done.”

“What,” Elisha snapped back, “will they hang me again?”

“Holy Rood, that’s not what I meant. You stand there, swathing yourself in guilt that you, the healer, have taken a life. Have done, Elisha. Men die, you know better than most, and sometimes men must be killed so that other men can live.” He closed the distance, coming to face Elisha in the moonlight. “You’ve done no more than a thousand others in your place, but the way you did it was nothing short of spectacular.”

The word took Elisha by surprise atop the other tensions of the night—as if he and the duke had never understood each other. “If you think that, then you’re no better than the man I killed,” Elisha retorted.

The duke slapped him, hard and fast, his hand drawing back as if the blow had stung his palm, then retreated two steps immediately. “Sweet Jesus, Elisha, I am sorry.”

Elisha reeled at the blow, no more than his due for speaking too freely to nobility. He’d been expecting to offend someone—just not the man who presented himself as Elisha’s protector. Elisha’s fingers trailed over the new ache. His jaw clenched. “You are all the same. Sitting at your head table, looking down on the rest of us, smiling kindly and ready to strike.”

Dropping his head, the duke revealed a bald patch that winked in the moonlight. “I am sorry, but I know that changes nothing. Before you, I had never considered that a common man could be worthy of my friendship. It’s hard to overcome the training of a lifetime.” He put up his hands,

his face drawn tight. “Please do not mistake me. Little more than an accident of birth has placed me higher than you on the chain of being. The money, the land, confer on us a chance to be educated, to think beyond our daily bread—nobility is not about blood, it’s about being at liberty to raise your eyes from the dirt at your feet and see the sky.”

Unwillingly, still stinging, Elisha understood. The first day he had come to Dunbury, he climbed the broken steeple which became his lodging and gazed out over a landscape he had never been able to see before, a place of valleys and towers, not of ditches and walls.

“We travel, we study, we take up art and music because some servant or another will provide our meals. Most of my peers think we’ve earned it by the blood of our ancestors.” He gave a harsh laugh. “You and I both know, if it’s blood that counts, then your ancestors have spent a lot more of it than mine. All I mean to say is that I don’t know how to be your friend—which makes what I would ask of you that much harder.” He ran his hands through what remained of his hair.

“And what is it you want from me?” Elisha asked, squaring his shoulders.

The duke let out another sigh, then a weary chuckle. “I want you to marry my daughter.”

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