

## THE KING IN WAITING

### PROLOGUE

*(Ballantrë, May 22, 815)*

It was bad enough that the only transport upriver he had been able to secure out of Dinant that morning was an old barge that reeked of even older fish, but when it started to rain on him, where he stood on the deck, Aidan Taaffe considered the merits of hurling himself overboard and swimming for home. The only thing which stopped him was the knowledge that he would have to face Iadon's reprobations when he returned to Dun Ogilvy empty-handed. Still, it was hard choice between that and the stink of fish which had seemed to penetrate every pore of his skin in the course of just one day.

The rain which erupted suddenly from the low clouds rolling eastward was steady and warm, and it pattered soft music on the wooden deck and the rippled green surface of the river in counterpoint to the steady bump and drip of the oars; but out on the open water, the air was chilly and a stiff breeze whipped the raindrops across his face and under his collar. Some distance behind on the far eastern bank, the Avimaine side, the white walls of Saintange were starkly beautiful in an isolated pool of bright sunshine, set against a backdrop of lush green hills and a mottled blue-grey sky beyond. He was in no mood to appreciate the view. He crouched down in the lee of the gunwhale and pulled his cloak around him. As he did so the aching muscles of his left arm rebelled, reminding him of the wound which had not yet healed entirely, and he winced. When he arrived in Louvigny he was going to find a place in front of a roaring fire and a tankard of good Ballantrene ale, before doing anything else.

In the end he might still return to Iadon with nothing to report but wasted effort. Aidan

had thought this journey a bad idea from the beginning – even when it seemed Iadon would be the one to take it – and had said so. Iadon shared his suspicions but in spite of them felt the matter was worth investigating, though not sufficiently to do so himself. The fact that Iadon had entrusted this to him was an indication that many of Iadon’s doubts about Aidan’s loyalties had been dispelled at Uist Ford. Aidan had killed many Haverford men that day, some of them wearing the livery of Prince Mark’s personal guard. He had pursued Mark when he and his cowardly allies had fled the field. He had even suffered the sharp slice of a swordpoint along the inside of his left arm, from shoulder to elbow, while battling Mark’s rearguard. The wound looked far worse than it actually was, but it illustrated that he was willing to shed his blood in Iadon’s cause. All in all he had acquitted himself adequately that day.

Adequately, but not completely, because for months he had been chief among Mark’s accomplices against Janice; some even held Aidan partly to blame for Queen Janice’s miscarriage, if indirectly, because he had initiated the council debate which had angered her. On the other hand, if the loss of the child *had* been induced by poison administered through Mark’s agency, as Iadon claimed, then Aidan was at least blameless on that score – but that was a different matter altogether. After the miscarriage he had abandoned Mark and thrown in his lot with Iadon Ogilvy, Duke of Vanavar and now Mark’s rival for the crown of Llyndrothe. In the process Aidan had rescued the queen’s lover, Jared de Clavedon, but that had carried little weight with Iadon, and then only on account of his concern for Janice’s happiness. What mattered more was that Aidan had, seemingly, betrayed his loyalty to Prince Mark; both the seeming and the betrayal were still matters of unspoken concern to Iadon. Aidan could only hope that these concerns would fade in time. The most important thing he had proved to Iadon by the battle was that he could not go back; they both knew Mark would never forgive his defection. He had no choice now but to make himself useful to the would-be king.

And so here he was, huddled in the bow of a fishing barge plowing its way south up the Yvelle River between Ballantrë and Avima, on the final leg of a week-long journey from Dun Ogilvy to the town of Louvigny, a mile or two ahead on the western bank. Had it really only been three weeks since Uist Ford? There had been no more engagements between the two factions in that time. Mark had retreated to Haverford and northern Tulion, regions firmly in the grasp of men who supported him; Iadon had likewise withdrawn, but south to Dun Ogilvy, to regroup and plan his next move. Both were busy sizing up current and potential allies, and soliciting the loyalty of men who had not yet declared for either side. Neither, it seemed, would move an inch until he could enumerate his friends and his foes, a process complicated by the proclamation of neutrality issued by Queen Janice and the remnants of her regency council

shortly after the battle. Then a week after the battle, in the midst of everything else, Iadon had received this cryptic offer of aid. Its sender was not known to him, but given the contents of the message, the offer could not be dismissed lightly. Iadon wanted anything and everything which he could use against Prince Mark, even from such an unlikely quarter as an unknown man in a small river-town in Ballantrë, and he would leave no stone unturned in the effort. Good idea, really, because from what Aidan had seen, the initial surge of support which Iadon had enjoyed on the heels of Janice's miscarriage was on the ebb.

Abruptly the rhythm of the oars changed, and the barge slowed to pull in closer to the bank. Ignoring the rain, Aidan stood up to watch as the barge slipped neatly into a channel between the western bank and a string of narrow islets just offshore. In these shallower waters divided from the main river channel, the current was slower and the barge made better time against it. The islands were wooded and uninhabited but for a few flocks of wild ducks which flapped and splashed along the rocky shores. The bluffs along the right-hand Ballantrë bank were several times a man's height, and afforded him a view of nothing but slick granite rockface. A few hundred yards on the bank curved away to the right, revealing a string of wharves and a neat procession of greystone buildings with red-tiled roofs along the embankment. Here the narrow channel widened into a sort of pool, sheltered from the swifter mid-stream currents of the river by the islands and a line of stone jetties built outwards to extend them. The wharves were crowded with boats and barges, loading and unloading baskets, crates, bales, barrels and earthenware jars. Behind the wharf-front buildings a small town unfolded in a homey jumble of stone and wood structures.

He heard footfalls on the deck behind him, and turned to see the captain of the barge striding towards him across the forecastle. He was a small wiry man of indeterminate age and nimble gait, with a brush of greying moustaches beneath dark, perpetually squinting eyes. "That's Lovenny there, friend," the boatie said in a gruff voice, giving the town its Larnêsh name, "and your passage is paid only this far. Grab your gear and don't waste no time going ashore; I've got to make Rôcheville before nightfall." He squinted over the town to where the sun would have been setting soon, were it not for the cloud-cover.

Aidan sniffed the edge of his cloak disparagingly, wondering how long it took fish-oil to dissipate. "Never fear, my good sir," he said, trying to put a twinkle of feigned good humor in his sea-blue eyes as he spoke. "I couldn't afford to continue with you a minute longer."

By the time he disembarked the rain had stopped and the settling twilight was pierced by lamps swinging from yardarms and pilings and hanging over the entrances to the waterfront warehouses. He pushed his way past fishermen and merchants and cargo to the cobbled street, and, after making a quick inquiry of a matronly woman standing in the doorway of her shop, slung his pack over his right shoulder and set off north along the embankment. He was so pleased to be off that damned barge that he found himself on the verge of whistling a jaunty tune, and suppressed the urge with a scowl. He still had work to do. When he glanced out over the river again, the barge was already well away from the wharf and angling south-east into the main channel, its angular bulk barely visible against the darkening water and illuminated only by pinpoint lights of lamplight fore and aft. The boatie wasn't going to reach Rôcheville before night, but it was only a few miles upstream. And he had been well-paid for the trouble of taking on his passenger at Dinant and letting him off here.

At the third street he turned away from the wharf and promptly got himself lost, despite the shopkeeper's directions, in a warren of lanes so narrow in places that two men could barely have walked abreast – nothing like the broad avenues of Llyndruth City or the more modest thoroughfares of Maldingford, his hometown, to which he was accustomed. Louvigny was a town designed to confound invaders, especially those who came by river, whether upstream from Larani, downstream from Llyndrothe or across the water from Avima. To varying degrees Ballantrë was currently at peace with all three lands, and had been for decades, but long-ago wars had a way of leaving their indelible marks on a place. While trying to get his bearings he wondered, idly, what sort of stamp the coming struggle in Llyndrothe would leave on the City, and on Maldingford.

He had to stop and ask for directions again, and so it was full dark when at last he stood in the blaze of torchlight outside the inn. It was a three-story structure in a good state of repair, with a brick-faced front and white-washed trim; the upper windows were tightly shuttered but a warm golden glow spilled out onto the cobbled street from the heavily glazed ground-floor windows which flanked the covered entryway. Real enough, then, and not some perverse invention of Iadon's would-be benefactor as Aidan had half-suspected it would be. The sign swinging overhead was inscribed with the name in two languages – *Lovenns Gal Béar, L'Ours Blanc Louvegnois* – and painted with the obvious picture, so there was no question that this was the place he had been instructed to find: the White Bear of Louvigny. He still wasn't entirely convinced that he hadn't been led on some dead-end hunt; that remained to be seen. But the inn was a good start. On instinct he looked up and down the street before going inside.

The main taproom was a long, low-ceilinged space with a bar running halfway along the left side and a wider area beyond, where tables and chairs were set out in front of the blazing hearth on the back wall. The wood panels on the walls and ceiling were darkened with age and smoke, but substantial and richly crafted. The furnishings were of equally fine workmanship, solid and well-made but not extravagant, and the bare wood floor was scrubbed clean. A handful of burghers dressed in simple, well-tailored clothes leaned on far end of the polished bar, talking quietly among themselves while the bartender listened. Clearly this was not the sort of place frequented by the riff-raff from the waterfront, but rather was an establishment which catered to the merchant class of the town – another promising sign.

The bartender noticed him then, and came down the length of the bar while wiping his hands on a towel. “Good evening, sir,” he said pleasantly, “and welcome to the White Bear. I’m Ebon Bresal, proprietor. How may I be of service?” He was a short, burly man with wide-spaced blue eyes and a pale, honest-looking face. He spoke to Aidan in unaccented Llyndrian, not in the Ballantrene Larnêsh or Avimaine Bloise which were the common tongues here.

“A pint of your finest ale, a hot meal and a bed for the night, Master Bresal,” Aidan replied. He fished five silver coins from his belt pouch and slid them halfway across the bar.

Bresal nodded and picked up three of the coins. “Certainly, sir,” he said briskly, turning to the tap and pulling a pint into a pewter tankard. “I’ve got a very nice room on the top floor for you, so you won’t be disturbed by the noises down here. It’s a little quiet at the moment but we’ll get busy enough as the night wears on. Would you be wanting that meal in your room, sir?”

Aidan shook his head. “I’ll eat here. In fact, I’m supposed to be meeting a friend, a man by the name of *Cennanól*. You wouldn’t know him by any chance, would you?”

His eyes widened as he came back and set Aidan’s tankard of ale on the bar. “As a matter fact, sir, I do. You must be that gentleman he told us to expect. Nobody else from away would ask for him by that name.”

“Indeed. Is he here now?” Aidan sent a casual glance down the bar, but none of the patrons seemed to have taken any notice of him.

“No, sir, but he comes in most evenings. Might do so in an hour or two.”

“An hour or two.” Aidan frowned thoughtfully. “Hmm. I’ve been travelling for some days, you see, and had hoped to see him straightaway.” He pushed the remaining two silver pieces further across the bar. “If that could be arranged.”

As he eagerly eyed the two coins, Bresal ran a thick-fingered hand over the shiny wave of his black hair and scratched at the back of his head with an affection of uncertainty. “It’s quite possible, sir. If you’ll take a seat, I’ll see to your meal and then send someone round to tell Master Cennanól you’ve arrived.” He scooped up the silver and hurried off to the kitchen door at the back of the taproom.

Aidan picked up his ale and followed at a more leisurely pace. He settled at a table tucked under the stairs from where he could watch the front door and easily access the back door if necessary. As he sat down he caught one of the burghers studying him but the man looked away as soon as their eyes met. He attributed the man’s interest to the idle curiosity reserved for foreigners and thought no more of it. Placing his pack on the chair beside him, he stretched out his booted feet towards the fire, took a long pull on his tankard of fine white ale, and waited.

Presently Bresal emerged through the kitchen door and gave him a quick nod of confirmation as he returned to his place behind the bar. Then a serving girl came out with his meal. She set the steaming plate and half-loaf of bread before him with a shy smile. He eyed her backside appraisingly, then turned his attention to the food. Whenever someone came through the front door he glanced up to assess the newcomer, even though he had no idea what sort of man to expect. He was halfway through the wine-braised rabbit and vegetables when a man in a hooded green cloak limped in. He traded a few words with Bresal, who nodded in Aidan’s direction, then crossed the long room towards him.

Because the hood concealed most of his face, Aidan could see nothing of him but an angular chin and the limping gait which favored his right leg. He stopped a few paces away from and threw back the hood. “You are the one seeking Master Cennanól?”

At first Aidan was surprised to be looking at an old man, and wondered if this was some elderly retainer rather than Cennanól himself. His face was thin with a square, cleft chin and hollow cheeks above thin lips presently set in a grim, skeptical line. A fringe of snow-white hair was pulled back over his ears and gathered in a short tail at the nape of his neck. His deep-set eyes were of indeterminate color in this light, but they scrutinized Aidan with a sharp

intelligence.

“I am. You are he?” Aidan allowed a degree of his own skepticism to color the question.

The man stepped closer to rest one gnarled hand on the back of the chair opposite Aidan. “*Vous n’êtes pas le duc*. Why has he not come?”

Aidan set down his dinner knife and gave him a frank look. “I imagine you are aware that my lord Iadon is rather pre-occupied these days, and cannot spare the better part of two weeks to travel to Louvigny and meet you. If indeed you *are* Master Cennanól.”

“I am,” the other replied testily, “and I am aware of many more things than you *could* imagine. If that fact were impressed upon Iadon Ogilvy sufficiently, he would have decided to pay me a personal visit.” He paused uncertainly; for a moment Aidan thought he would turn and depart. Then Cennanól shrugged in resignation and divested himself of his cloak. “*Alors*, I had not expected to deal with an underling, but I suppose I shall have to.” He signalled Bresal to bring him an ale, then sat down, wincing a little as he moved his legs under the table. “So who are you?”

“Let’s just say that I am one of Iadon’s allies and kinsmen,” Aidan replied carefully. In Cennanól’s fluent Llyndrian Aidan picked up traces of the Bloise accent peculiar to Ballantrë and Avima: a native, then. *So what is his connection to Iadon?* “Under the circumstances I am sure you can understand our desire to keep this quiet.”

Cennanól shook his head. “Not good enough. What I have to offer Iadon is too valuable to discuss with anonymous intermediaries. You must tell me who you are.”

While Aidan pondered the request, Bresal appeared at Cennanól’s elbow with a tankard in hand. Aidan waited until he had placed it on the table and withdrawn before responding. “Very well,” he said with a weary sigh, “we shall do this your way. I am Aidan Taaffe, Earl of Maldingford. Iadon Ogilvy is my cousin.”

“And you can prove this to me, *oui?*” Cennanól eyed him sternly over the rim of his tankard. His eyes were strange, almost the color of the pewter tankard but with a violet cast.

Absently Aidan rubbed his right forefinger where he usually wore his signet ring, but it

was bare. A month ago, when he had parted company with Lady Branwen Lennox and Jared de Clavedon near Annanbury, he had given Jared the ring to guarantee them safe passage on the road to the City. Aidan had been pleased to learn that Jared had arrived there. By now he should have recovered from the brutal treatment he had suffered at Prince Mark's hands; but he had not returned the ring to Aidan. Over the last few weeks Aidan had alternated between the desire to have his ring back, perhaps delivered to him by Jared personally, so that he might see him one more time, and a foolish wish that Jared might choose to keep it, so that a kind of connection would remain between them. He chided himself, as he always did, for such a ridiculous notion, and forced his attention back to the present. He reached inside his shirt and pulled out a small parchment packet bearing the ducal seal of Vanavar. "Here's your proof," he said, handing the letter to Cennanól.

He snatched it impatiently and peered at the waxy seal. Satisfied that it was genuine, he broke it and unfolded the single page to scan the message inside while Aidan picked up his knife and continued to eat. After a minute Cennanól nodded approvingly and re-folded the letter. "*Et bien*, this is clearly from the duke and confirms that he knows you and trusts you."

"I know," Aidan said, around a mouthful of bread and rabbit. "The question is: does he know *you*?"

"No, Iadon Ogilvy and I have never met, though he may have heard of me."

He had discussed that very possibility with Iadon before leaving Dun Ogilvy. "He didn't seem to think so."

Cennanól smiled for the first time. "That's because I haven't given you my real name."

"In spite of what you said a moment ago," Aidan replied irritably, "that strikes *me* as vaguely anonymous. Look, if the letter isn't enough to convince you that Iadon Ogilvy sent me, I haven't got anything else to convince you." Perhaps this had been a pointless journey after all.

"My lord, it's not that I do not trust *you*." He took a drink of ale and wiped away the foam from his upper lip with a bony thumb. "But until I have made arrangements with the duke, I cannot run the risk of alerting Mark by using my real name. The prince may well have spies in Iadon's household."

Aidan arched his eyebrows with interest. Now it was beginning to make some sense. He was no longer surprised by Cennanól's age; he looked to be in his sixties, about the same age as Prince Mark, though the prince himself wore his years rather better than this man. "I see."

"I doubt that you do," Cennanól said with a chuckle. "You're far too young to remember any of it. That's the real reason I had hoped to speak to the duke directly; he *would* remember, and see the value of what I have to offer."

"Remember what?" Aidan asked impatiently. "What is it you know?"

Cennanól wrapped both hands around the base of his tankard and leaned over the table. "Ask the duke what he knows about the circumstances of Prince Mark's marriage. That should help him remember who I am. Then tell him that I have certain. . . items which will could prove very damaging to Mark's reputation, because they show that certain stories were true. Again, if he thinks carefully he will understand to what I am referring. And he would find these items very useful, when the time comes."

"You're mad," Aidan said. "Prince Mark's marriage took place over forty years ago, and his wife is dead. It has nothing to do with Iadon today. I don't think you've got anything; I think you're just some old crackpot who's hoping to attract attention by throwing around innuendos. On behalf of the duke, I thank you for wasting my time in bringing me here."

The note of dismissal ought to have been unmistakable, but Cennanól sat back in his chair and slammed his palm against the table, which made both Aidan and the tankards jump. People had been filtering into the inn steadily since Cennanól's arrival, and at the noise more than a few heads at the bar and nearby tables turned sharply, and just as quickly looked away. They probably thought Aidan and Cennanól were about to come to blows – which they would, Aidan mused, if this continued for much longer. "Listen to me, young *imbécile*," Cennanól said in a low, angry voice. "I already sent Iadon a small sample of what I have. I could easily sell all of it to Mark himself, in which case it would disappear forever and your lord would lose his last chance at the crown. Is that what you want?"

Aidan was stunned into silence. At the time they hadn't known exactly what to make of that strip of fragile, yellowed parchment, apparently torn from the bottom of a page, which had been included with Cennanól's letter. Apart from its age the only intriguing thing about the fragment had been the signature scrawled across it: *Armond Stewart, Earl of Tara*. Prince

Mark's uncle – and father-in-law. It told them nothing, really, but it had been enough for Iadon to give this mysterious Cennanól serious consideration; now it hinted that Cennanól might actually have something worth looking at. . . now that Aidan had gone and angered him.

He recovered himself and said, "I'm sorry, Master Cennanól. You did indeed provide a sample, but you must understand that it meant – and still means – very little to us. My skepticism is my own, and on account of my age and unfamiliarity with this subject. If my lord were here, no doubt he would understand you better and he would not quarrel with you. Please forgive me."

Cennanól seemed somewhat mollified by Aidan's apology, but took a long pull on his tankard while he thought about it. "I know how all of this must sound to you," he said at last, "and your suspicion on behalf of your duke is a credit to your loyalty. I should not have lost my temper."

"Apology accepted." His thoughts returned to the other part of Cennanól's outburst. "What did you mean by Iadon's 'last chance'? In the end he'll prevail against Mark."

"Oh, come now," Cennanól remarked slyly, "*Je ne suis pas trompé*. We both know the duke wouldn't have sent you here if he was so certain of victory. Iadon Ogilvy is on very shaky ground at present. His entire claim to the crown rests on his allegation that Prince Mark induced your queen's miscarriage with poison; and if he has evidence to prove this accusation, he has been remarkably slow to present it. I'm not saying Mark is incapable of such a thing; in fact, I think it's quite possible. So did a number of your people – enough for Iadon to challenge Mark at Uist Ford. But 'possible' and 'proven' are two different things. Without even circumstantial evidence, the accusation of poisoning won't stick and few lords will choose to continue an apparently groundless, and therefore treasonous, opposition to Mark; Iadon's support will melt away. It's only been three weeks since the battle, and this is already happening – *n'est-ce pas?* He's got to find another basis for claiming to crown, and quickly."

Aidan suppressed the urge to scowl, and instead tapped his finger against the tabletop. Cennanól was remarkably well-informed, and he expressed almost the exact concerns which Euwan Ogilvy, Iadon's son, had voiced to his father just a week ago. It made him uneasy to realize just how transparently precarious Iadon's position was, and how desperate it might become; Aidan wasn't the only person who had burned a bridge at Uist Ford. "Is that the consensus of your fellow Louvegnois, or a strictly personal assessment?"

“It is a conclusion I have come to on my own, but I am not alone in reaching it.” A pause lengthened into a silence as they studied one another. After a minute he observed, “I see that you have a question, my lord.”

“I have many questions, Master Cennanól,” Aidan shot back, “the first of which is what, exactly, you expect me to present to Iadon when I return. So far you have not given me much.”

“*Au contraire*, I have told you exactly what you must say to your lord.”

“It isn’t enough. Iadon will want to know what these ‘items’ are, and how they will help him – especially if they will save him, as you claim.”

“You may press me for more all you like, but it will do you no good. I have every confidence that the duke will understand me, through you. If he is interested in pursuing this matter further, he can come here and we will do business.”

*Now we’re coming to it*, Aidan thought, and he gave the other a cynical smile. “And what is it you will want from Iadon, in return for your ‘help’?”

Cennanól shook his head again. “*Tous en bontemps*. We can discuss the price once your lord has made up his mind.”

“And suppose Iadon cannot meet your price? If what you have is so damaging to Mark, why not sell it to *him*, as you threatened? Surely he would be willing to pay whatever you price you asked, to protect himself.”

“It may come to that in the end,” the old man said candidly and without hesitation, “but for personal reasons I would rather see it put to use, not destroyed as Mark undoubtedly would do. I am less interested in material gain than you suppose; the duke will find my price quite reasonable.”

Clearly he had thought this through very carefully, Aidan realized, whatever his motivations. And if Cennanól was lying about his lack of greed, he saw no indication of it. The man was either telling the truth, or a consummate actor. “There is one point on which I *will* press, because my lord Iadon deserves an answer. If you will not give one, then I will go back to

Dun Ogilvy and tell him that there is nothing for him here.”

“That would be most unwise of you, if you truly wish to serve him.”

“Nevertheless, I will do as I say, unless you answer me this: *why?*”

Cennanól shifted uncomfortably on his chair and winced suddenly. “*Sacrée putaine*, this damned leg!” he exclaimed, then picked up and drained his tankard. After a moment the contorted expression faded from his face. “Forgive me, it is an old injury,” he explained, “from my days in the Richmond Guard.” Under Aidan’s inquisitive, interested gaze he was prompted to go on: “Yes, for a time I served as a member of your king’s royal guard. It was during this period of my life that Mark. . . took something which was very precious to me, and for that I have never quite forgiven him.”

Aidan noticed that he did not say which king he had served; but Carolus had been king when, forty-five years ago, his younger brother Prince Mark had married. At that time there couldn’t have been very many Bloise-speaking Ballantrenes in the Guard, and the rolls might still be available. “He injured your leg and you were forced to give up your career in the Guard.”

“No, the hurt which he did me was far worse than what happened to my leg,” Cennanól said with a rueful smile. “I think I have answered your question, and that is really all I am prepared to say. I suggest,” he said, clambering awkwardly to his feet, “that you get a good night’s rest and start for home first thing in the morning. Bresal will look after you.” When Aidan rose to help him with his cloak, he waved him aside. “It has been a pleasure to make your acquaintance, my lord. *Bon soir.*”

He limped along the bar and paused to exchange pleasantries with Bresal before going out. Aidan stared after him speculatively, wondering whether he was truly in possession of something damaging to Prince Mark, an opportunist playing an elaborate bluff, or something else entirely. For all he knew, this was a ruse laid by Mark himself.

He had barely had time for this thought to form when one of other patrons – the same man with whom Aidan had traded glances earlier – pushed back from the bar and headed for the door. He moved casually enough, but by some clue Aidan could not name – his timing, the half-surreptitious glance over his shoulder, the nervous bounce to his step, perhaps – he *knew* that the man was following Cennanól. As soon as he had disappeared through the entryway, Aidan got

up and strode across the room.

“The man who left just after my friend,” he demanded of Bresal. “Who is he?”

For a second Bresal looked affronted by his tone; then, perhaps remembering the generous application of silver which Aidan had already made, he merely shrugged. “I couldn’t say, sir. He’s been here almost every night for the past week, but not inclined to talk much. Might be a merchant who’s business is keeping him in Louvigny for a time. We get a lot like that. Why do you ask?”

But Aidan was already halfway out the door, and didn’t answer.

Luckily the narrow, torchlit streets left few shadows for slinking, and Aidan caught clear sight of his quarry just before he disappeared into an alleyway about twenty paces down from the entrance to the White Bear. Quickly he followed and peered into the alley; but it hooked immediately to the right and the other man was already past the turning. He paused only long enough to glance back towards the inn, making sure that *he* hadn’t been followed, and moved down the alley.

There were no branchings for forty yards, so either his mark was still up ahead or he had entered one of the three or four doors that Aidan passed. As he crept along he heard no sounds, no footsteps echoing back along the alley, and the man had been wearing heavy-heeled boots. Perhaps he *had* gone into one of these houses and there was nothing suspicious about him at all. Then the alley made its last turn and ahead of him, he saw a shadow separate from the wall and move across the band of dim light where the passage opened onto another torchlit street.

In that instant he was convinced that Cennanól was exactly who and what he claimed to be, and Aidan’s heart began pounding with fear, not for himself but for what was unfolding before him, and what it might mean to Iadon Ogilvy. He dashed to the end of the alley and found himself overlooking a small torch-ringed plaza formed by the intersection of two main streets, surrounded by stately stone houses with iron-barred doors and mullioned windows behind ornate grillwork. In the flickering light he saw a cloaked figure limping steadily but unhurriedly away from the plaza, and another behind him, slipping in and out of the scant shadows and drawing ever closer.

Aidan wasted no more effort on stealth. He pounded after the second man, drawing his sword even as he ran, and shouted a warning. “Cennanól, look out!”

He was almost too late. The man was already within striking distance of Cennanól, and the wink of metal in the torchlight told of a knife descending towards its target’s back. But his shout surprised Cennanól into spinning around on his good, right leg – and so momentarily out of range of his right-handed attacker, who followed through on a lunge which never connected, and stumbled heavily.

By then Aidan was in range himself. He slashed at the man’s exposed left flank and sliced not into flesh but a leather jerkin concealed beneath the fine shirt. His opponent recovered his footing and whirled around in a half-crouch, but Aidan’s rapid backhand blow cut deeply into the unprotected bicep of his right arm. The knife clattered to the stones as the man hissed and clutched at the wound with his left hand. Aidan had the satisfaction of seeing blood ooze thickly between the man’s clenching fingers before he muttered an expletive and sprinted off down the street. From somewhere behind the row of houses which lined this street, a dog began barking insistently.

The rogue was too quick for Aidan to follow, but at least the danger to Cennanól was past – for now. Aidan had not been able to catch in which language – Llyndrian, Larnêsh or Bloise – the would-be assassin had sworn. It might have been a useful clue. He turned to the old man, who was staring at him, almost frozen, with both horror and gratitude in his darkened eyes.

“How. . . ?” Cennanól’s voice wavered uncertainly on that one note.

“He followed you from the inn,” Aidan replied, wiping the stain from his sword and resheathing it. “I would have thought nothing of it, if he hadn’t taken obvious notice of me when I first arrived. Do you know who he is?”

Cennanól dropped his gaze and shook his head. “I didn’t get a good look at his face. The White Bear is frequented by travellers and no one pays much attention to outsiders; that is why I had you meet me there. He could be almost anyone.”

“Not *anyone*, since he paid specific attention to me. Based on what Bresal told me, it looks like he was waiting for me in order to find you.”

Cennanól's eyes were on the knife which glinted against the cobbles beside a small puddle of blood. "He would have killed me," he whispered. The lone barking dog was joined by another, and then a faraway third, raising an alarm. "You saved my life."

"Yes," Aidan said grimly, answering both observations. "Perhaps you have a better idea of why than I do." Now he heard shouting. It was still some distance off but quickly drawing closer.

"*Ce n'est pas possible.*" Cennanól was incredulous. "There is no way he could know."

"Recent events suggest otherwise." The sounds of men's voices and booted feet tramping on stone were coming along the other street and into the plaza. They only had a minute or two. "Let's get moving before the nightwatch finds us; I don't want to explain this. Will you be alright? Do you have somewhere safe to go?"

Cennanól had recovered some of his composure and rallied. "Yes," he said with a sudden, vigorous nod. "I shall leave this very night."

"And how will we find you again? You never did tell me your real name."

"In a way I did," he replied with a faint smile. "But I suppose now I should tell you the truth. Cennanól means 'oil-merchant' and is the Larnêsh form of my surname. My real name is Lhulier."

It meant nothing to Aidan, but there was no more time for words. Lhulier turned and quickly disappeared between two houses before Aidan realized that he had not, in the end, said where he was going or how he could be contacted – or if he even cared to be. With someone out to kill him, he might disappear for good, one way or another; but it was too late to do anything about it now. Aidan was not going to like this turn of events; it was worse than returning empty-handed. *Damn.*

Just as the nightwatch poured out of the plaza and into the street behind him, he dove into another alley and worked his way back to the White Bear. Maybe Ebon Bresal could still be of some use.