

Valara of Eldaran

A Dance of Fire and Shadow

the prequel

Jay Aspen

1

The deep boom of the alarm drum pulsed through the grey morning mist, speeding Jaren's steps to the palisade surrounding the Great Hall. The links on his heavy mailshirt clinked dully as he scrambled up the rough steps to the upper walkway.

Garilt turned a weatherbeaten face as his commander stepped onto the spying platform of the watchtower. He raised a warning fist.

Keep silence.

Jaren gave a curt nod in response, his voice low.

"Did you see them yet?"

"No, but I heard them. Northlander raiding party for sure."

Jaren let out a soft whispered curse. Northlanders were fierce fighters and growing bolder each year. They had never yet breached the palisade but often wreaked havoc in the surrounding villages and farmsteads. It was why he had changed their system and now guarded the grain stores for the whole Vale of Eldaran safe within the keep.

He brushed dripping strands of dark hair from his eyes as he peered into the swirling mist.

"Where?"

Garilt pointed, a little off to the right where the ground lay in an open meadow, most of it still hidden in drifting white.

“There. As soon as they come out of the mist, the archers will have them.”

Jaren knew the drill. He had been forced by circumstance to take command of the fort before he even turned twenty, but he had finally accepted that the elders were right when they insisted he could plan and prepare better than any of the other warriors. He swept a cursory glance across the shielded stations he had set at intervals along the top of the palisade, the archers well supplied with arrows and standing ready. Unless the raiders came at them in overwhelming numbers, this would be over soon—

The hail of Northlander arrows hummed through the air, black stingers erupting out of the swirling mist. One caught his arm just below the shoulder and he swore, a little less quietly this time.

Careless.

Garilt gave a dismissive grunt and leaned forward to snap the shaft and pull the arrow through. In moments he had a strip of rag tied around, tight enough to stop the bleeding.

“Jaren! Get yourself back inside, find the healer. We can deal with this.”

His chieftain shrugged. “If it comes to blade-work my place is here.”

Garilt sighed. “Please yourself, but you know it rarely comes to that.”

The first line of raiders emerged out of the mist, to be greeted with a whirring scourge of arrows from the archers atop the palisade. More followed and fell, screaming, even as others ran closer to push crude ladders against the wooden bulwark. The alarm drum changed pace, beating out the call for reserves, and the swordsmen who had stayed back to give the archers space now ran forward.

Jaren waited, blade drawn, until the first Northlander leaped over the top of the palisade, his heavy axe already swinging wildly at shoulder height. Jaren crouched and ducked under the blow to lunge forward and catch the raider in the belly, following through the direction of the swing to heave the attacker over the edge, on top of those still climbing. He stepped aside as Garilt levered the forked pole onto the top of the ladder and pushed it away from the wall to crash onto the ground below.

When Jaren looked round, it was already over. A few corpses dotted along the walkway atop the palisade. Five times that number on the ground outside, mainly fur-clad Northerners spiked with arrows. The shouts of the survivors echoed in the mist as they retreated. He had lost only three of his own warriors, distinguishable by the dull metallic glint of their mailshirts. Seemed like this new addition to their defense tactics might be paying off.

He had no need to give the order for the next stage. They had done it too often already. The drums changed rhythm again and the horsemen rode out of the gate to hunt down the few raiders who had fled. Wearily, Jaren stomped down the steps to the courtyard.

Garilt followed close behind. "They made it through our lines a bit further this time, but we stopped them again!"

Jaren wished he could share in his companion's pride at their victory. "It's getting to be more than scattered mindless attacks now, though. They are learning our strategy, forcing us to deploy too many warriors to the fortress, making the outlying villages more vulnerable."

Irritably, he allowed the guard captain steer him into the small healer's room and onto the bench by the wall. Corila gave him a disapproving frown, wiping bony hands on her apron.

“Jaren, that was seriously careless.”

“I know. Too many other things to think about.”

The wrinkles on her brow deepened as she stripped off the bloody bandage and examined the wound.

“A few inches further right and you wouldn’t be thinking at all. You would be dead.” She got to work with the pot of herb paste she kept in permanent readiness now the raids were getting more frequent.

Jaren stared at the rough grey wall in front of him. That rebuild in stone had cost them dear in many hours lost from fight training or food harvesting and he had been hard put to keep the workers at it. No choice, not since Samari raiders from the lowlands had suddenly started using fire-arrows on the older wooden structure and burned one side of it to the ground.

He knew that this coming year they would have the additional chore of replacing the outer palisade with stone and there would be more complaints about long hours and blistered hands. He looked up from his introspection as his guard captain turned to leave.

“Garilt, stay. We should talk strategy while Corila fusses over me.”

The grizzled warrior dropped heavily back onto the bench. “Surely. If Corila has some of that *arak* spare for drinking when she finishes swabbing that scratch of yours.”

Corila glared at him but poured a measure of the fiery liquid into an earthenware cup and handed it over.

Garilt tossed it back in two gulps and smacked his lips.

“I always suspected she purloined the best of the brew for her ministrations.” He raised an eyebrow at his young commander. “Go ahead. What burdens your mind this time?”

Jaren let out a long slow breath of exasperation. “We are fighting rearguard the whole time. Never getting ahead of the

way things are going. We have the advantage over the other tribes of knowing how to forge better steel and weapons—but if we had the chance to use that skill for more productive farming, we would have stronger people, more wealth, richer trade...” His voice trailed off as his mind ventured into those places a warrior should not travel, lest it distract from the immediate demands of survival.

But that was the nub of it. That was where his scholar’s mind *wanted* to roam. New places, new discoveries, new ideas. So few ideas had been given a chance to fly. Not after he lost his parents and elder brother to a Samari raid and his skill with a sword had been noticed enough to find himself in demand as war-chief. After that no amount of protesting to the elders had any effect, no examples of how his talents lay elsewhere.

Jaren had resigned himself to the duties of Eldaran’s chieftain. Even so, he still felt that his main contribution to their survival had been his insights into forging weapons, protective mail, shield-guards on the palisade, reinforcing the keep.

Garilt waited in silence before replying. As always, cryptic and to the point.

“How would you trade if you could not resolve the attacks from the fisherfolk of Port Giltar? They may not advance here too often but that does not mean they would be ready to grant passage for our merchant goods. Not when they already have a trade-passage agreement with the Samari merchants—and yet still launch raids on their warehouses when the fancy takes them.”

Sensing a moment of freedom from Corila’s attention, Jaren heaved himself to his feet and wandered over to the window. Outside, the mist had cleared and he could see across the Vale of Eldaran as far as the rock pinnacle of Maratic, standing like a gnarled finger pointing to the sky.

The valley was home and it was beautiful. The natural forest lay carved here and there into farm-havens of olive trees and open flower meadows of grazing animals. Without the raids, it would be a life of ease here for generations to come.

But as always, his gaze returned to Maratic.

Home of the Elementals, the place always seemed a dangerous mix of blessing and a curse. The old stories said the Elementals were behind the destructive extremes of hailstorms and forest fires, and yet Jaren felt sure that in some strange way they were also behind his unexplained insights in how to meld the power of earth and fire to forge better weapons than their enemies had ever possessed.

Until now.

The Northlanders had acquired steel-edged swords this last year. Samari warriors had learned to make fire-arrows that could reach beyond the palisade. It was as if the Elementals had decided to spread their deadly gifts more widely. Jaren was already starting to think his people might be better off if no more new skills became available to anyone, ever.

“The raids will never stop so long as all five tribes continue to acquire something new. Something they think will give them control of the whole country.”

Garilt gave a derisive grunt. “You mean everyone is focused on riches for one lot and slavery for the other four.”

2

Valara steadied herself in the ship's bow as the coast came in sight. A distant line of white waves against a rocky shore flanked the quiet spot where lay the entrance to Port Giltar, sheltered from passing storms. Her instinct had been right. The siren song of power that had lured her here was growing stronger as they drew closer. She would find it soon, of that she was sure.

The instant the ship bumped against the mooring she leapt down onto the uneven boards of the jetty, light and agile as always even after so many swaying hours at sea. The slap of rigging against masts and the splash of water against the barnacle-encrusted hull gave way to the shouts of dockworkers and sailors as they heaved at ropes or lugged crates of fish or merchandise from ship to shore.

The ship's captain had given her directions to the most likely place to acquire a horse and she set off into the town. The wooden planks of portside quickly led onto to uneven cobblestones, still slick with fish guts and brine. Men and women toiled in the streets and yards, their grimy clothing part-covered with leather aprons, dodging and weaving between more exotic traders from the southern continent who flashed bright beads and braids as they went in search of a bargain or an alehouse. Or more likely both.

Valara noticed the cautious glances flashed in her

direction. She had expected it. That reaction had been no different in Annubia. The Fae were feared by most. Not only stronger, leaner, faster, more deadly in combat, but also a mystery, never fully understood.

The nobles could sometimes be a little more forward—if they were surrounded by bodyguards. A few would try, and sometimes succeed, in recruiting such powerful warriors as mercenaries, but even then there was always that underlying frisson of distrust. Valara had experimented with such an arrangement a couple of times.

And vowed never to try it again.

She found the livery stable on her second attempt. Inside the wooden doors the cries of seabirds sounded distant now, mixed with the dull clomp of hooves on stone and straw, the heavy breath of the dozen horses penned inside. A lone woman was working in the dim light, filling nosebags with grain. She stared at Valara, wary.

“Where’s your horse? Stabling is three silvers per week.”

“You have one for sale?” Valara held out two golds. The captain had assured her it was a good price. No need to accept an ageing animal that might drop dead on you any day.

The woman hesitated, her eyes narrowing as they skimmed from Valara’s face to the gold and back again.

“Maybe. No one has tried to claim the chestnut over there since the owner got himself stabbed in a bar fight last week. And the feed payment ran out yesterday.”

Valara ran knowing hands over the gelding’s legs and fetlocks, checked its jaw. No evident signs of disease or bad treatment.

“Can I lead him out?”

The woman slipped an old leather bridle over the beast’s head. One glance told Valara this was not the gear that had

arrived with a sleek animal like this, but no matter. She had no need of flashy decoration. She led the horse outside into the street. It moved well.

The woman followed her, a sly look on her face now.

“The saddle is particularly fine. That will cost you another gold.”

“But the horse and this old bridle of yours will go for the two I offered?” Valara held out the heavy coins.

The ostler gave slight twitch of irritation, guessing that her switching of equipment had been noticed.

“Surely. I’ll get the saddle.” The woman grabbed the money and turned to walk back inside.

“No need. We should be fine as we are.” Valara leaped light and fast onto the gelding’s back and turned its head to the outskirts of the town. She caught a brief glimpse of the woman’s disappointed face before setting heels to the animal’s flanks and leaving the noise and fish-stink of Port Giltar behind her.

A warm breeze tugged at her cloak, sweeping in from the sea. She sensed the source of the siren call would lie higher and cooler than these lowlands. She drew in a long breath of fresh air. It would be a pleasant change from the tropical heat of the southern continent.

Two days’ ride, if her instincts held true.

3

Jaren stood on the watchtower platform above the main gate. The rider approached at a casual pace, as if nothing here could be a threat in spite of the archers visible atop the palisade, bows already in their hands. A few more steps forward and Jaren could see that the rider was a woman, lean and strong-looking, with a mane of glossy dark hair flowing over her mailshirt. A slender sword hung from her belt, a quiver of arrows just visible above her shoulder.

A warrior then. But from which tribe? And was she friend or foe? He called down.

“That’s far enough. State your business here.”

She reined in, glancing up at him only briefly before her eyes strayed across the vale to the distant pinnacle of Maratic.

“Is this the welcome Eldaran gives to those who travel these roads?”

“These are trying times. Like I said, state your name and why you come here.”

A long silence. Then, “Seems you could use another blade in that case. My name is Valara.”

“A sell-sword? Not always reliable from what I’ve heard. Here, we rely on our own warriors defending their homes. No question of their loyalty.”

“That was little help to the burned-out village I passed not two hours from here.” Her voice softened and yet seemed

to gain an edge of threat. “Seems to me you are either short of warriors or you do not care.”

The words stung. To be accused of failing in his duty as chieftain through neglect, after all the work and effort...

“You can enter and we can talk. But you leave your weapons at the gate.”

“Surely.” She swung herself from the horse’s back with an ease and grace that surprised him. Maybe he had been spending too much time with warriors who clumped around the place in heavy mail and thick leather boots.

The gate opened and the guard took the stranger’s weapons and her horse in the few seconds before the solid wooden structure clunked shut again. Jaren led her into the Great Hall, dispatching a servant to bring food and drink. He waved her to take a seat at the long carved table.

It was not until he sat down opposite her that he was able to look at her more closely. And instantly tried to hide the catch in his breath.

Fae. He had not expected that. And she was beautiful. Light olive skin and a slender face, fine-sculpted. Sensuous lips, those distinctive Fae ears. Sea-green eyes that seemed to miss nothing as they explored the rough stone walls and curved beams of the hall, resting a moment on the archer platforms at each window. Yes, the whole place spoke of their besieged situation to anyone who knew what to see, to notice.

And her every tiny movement, her whole bearing, spoke of experience and skill. He could sense it in the understated power of her limbs, the way she held her head.

“You expect me to hire you for warrior duty here?”

She smiled, suddenly relaxed, almost approachable.

“Not really. I just figured it was the quickest way to get you to open the gate and let me come inside. It was getting long

and tedious waiting out there and my horse needed a drink.”

Candid, if nothing else. Jaren fought the feeling of being caught off-guard.

“So what do you really want?”

“That pinnacle at the heart of your valley. I want to go there, explore it. I’m guessing I need your permission as chieftain of this place. I would prefer to make the last part of my journey without getting harassed by your warriors.” She raised an eyebrow in his direction. “I did notice you had deployed a few of them to guard the farms and villages.”

“But it did not stop you doubting the sincerity of my efforts to protect them.” He should have let it go but her words had burned a little too far into his pride. She dismissed his protest with a curt wave.

“No matter. Do I have the chief’s permission?”

“No. You do not. You have no idea what that place represents.”

The green eyes narrowed, becoming fierce. “I think likely I know more than you do.”

He felt a clutch of uncertainty, almost fear.

Fae. Likely she did know, and any of those insights would be valuable. But could he trust anything she told him?

“I would need to hear why you have come so far just for this. And a deal more about your lineage and history before I could even start to consider if this is wise. The balance of our relationship with the Elementals of Maratic is... difficult at times.”

“I’m sure.” The green eyes didn’t blink.

4

Valara watched the young chieftain carefully. She could sense the wariness behind the steady gaze and impassive features, but the fear was well-controlled. She judged it no more than the normal heightened alertness of a seasoned warrior. And yet, in a wild place like this he was young for the kind of experience that would have given him status to be chosen as war-chieftain. How much did he really know about Maratic and its Elementals?

The servant returned with food and ale. Fresh bread and black olives, spiced meat with pieces of lemon. Valara had seen the farms and meadows as she rode through the Vale. Those that had not yet been attacked, that is. This could be a prosperous valley if these people could only stop fighting each other.

The interruption gave her a little more time to study her host. He was no mountain savage. His speech was cultured, intelligent and he had already displayed both courtesy and shrewdness. And a sharp reaction to her deliberate barb at his inability to protect all his people.

Yes, she had noticed much on the short walk across the courtyard to the keep. She had also noticed the fine contours of his face, the raw grace of his movements, the sinewy strength of his bare arms—but these things she pushed aside as dangerous distractions.

Single-pointed focus on her purpose had to remain clear in her mind—

The boom of the alarm drum reverberated through the table beneath her fingers. Jaren was instantly on his feet. She made to follow but he held up a restraining hand.

“No! Valara who is and is not a sell-sword will stay here until I know I can trust you. Then I might return your weapons to you.” With that he was gone, running for the door leading to the courtyard as the war cries and screams began outside.

Valara considered disobeying her host, relying on the strength and integrity of her mailshirt and her own skill at unarmed combat to grab a weapon from one of the raiders before throwing him off the palisade and carving a path through the attackers. It would be satisfying to impress this arrogant young chieftain with her abilities. She would show him how indispensable she was.

Maybe not. Trust seemed to be his issue at the moment and this garrison had doubtless survived enough previous raids to provoke the defensive measures she had seen outside. He had not forbidden her from wandering around the keep, so she took advantage of his omission.

The ground floor comprised only the Great Hall with the kitchen and stores set behind. Stone walls, with rough flagged floors strewn with rushes. The aroma of food mingled with crushed reeds and the wet fur of hunting dogs, a drift of smoke from the fire at the far end. A small room lay to one side where she found a scrawny middle-aged woman busy setting out bandages and potions. A dispensary then, with a healer who was accustomed to responding promptly when the alarm drum sounded.

The woman looked up. “You wounded already?”

“No. I’m just a visitor.”

“Did Jaren send you with a message?”

“No. He went to the palisade.”

“Then leave. I need this place clear.”

Valara decided to take this as an invitation to explore further. Wooden stairs led to the upper level, a kind of mezzanine with four small rooms and a shielded rail from whence arrows could be launched at any raiders who might make it as far as the hall below. Apart from the healer and three cooks on the ground floor, the place seemed deserted. No doubt everyone had been summoned to defend the wall.

Sleeping quarters were of no interest to Valara, but the small library at the end promised to hold something useful. She walked in, casting a searching glance across the shelves. Maybe library was too grand a word for this small collection of scrolls. The breathtaking archive she had seen in the palace of Khotann in Annubia was in another league but no matter, her evaluation of this war-torn outpost rose a little at the sight of these records. It must mean more than one person here could read, otherwise what would be the point of recording anything?

She walked over to the table by the window. A sheet of amate-paper lay on its surface, held in place by a pebble on one side and an inkwell and quill on the other. She picked it up carefully and held it to the light of the narrow window.

The paper looked to be crudely formed from beaten reeds, the ink meandering across its surface revealing an unstable mix of soot and oil. Still, it functioned, although the letters would doubtless fade before many years would pass. There was little of interest written here so she moved on to other scrolls set neatly along the shelves until she found what she was seeking. An insight into how these people viewed that place they called Maratic.

“There are many Elementals gathered around the Great Pinnacle. When they are not creating wildfires and hailstorms, they use humans as playthings, like living pieces on a Tican board. They watch the struggles and battles for supremacy as they shift the balance of power back and forth, giving gifts to one group and then to another.

From the stone knife to the bronze dagger to the steel blade, the power they bestow on mere mortals to kill and destroy grows ever greater.’

Valara smiled. Judging by the condition of the ink, this had been written quite recently. A small but essential insight into the culture and viewpoint of the people here. And now she knew how to persuade Jaren to help her—

“Who gave you permission to invade my study?”

Jaren’s control must be slipping, anger edging his words.

She turned to face him, holding her calm about her like a cloak.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t know it was your place. I assumed some old scribe would emerge from a dusty corner and show me around. It is unusual for a warrior to have this skill.”

“Out.”

He stepped back to stand at the side of the doorway.

She kept the scroll in her hand as she walked past him and descended the stairs to the Great Hall.

5

Jaren grasped Valara's arm and steered her back to the table. Firm, but not aggressive. There would be no advantage in provoking a Fae warrior of unknown origins. He sat down opposite her again, hoping he could pick up the conversation from where they had left off. Give her a chance to repair the damage she had created by snooping around.

"What were you looking for?"

She ignored the question. "Are any of your warriors wounded? I have some skill as a healer. I could help your herbalist if you wish."

"Corila is the best in Eldaran. And we sustained nothing serious this time. I suspect the attack was a feint, to draw us out as cover for another raid on an outlying farmstead. I already sent patrols out to check." He stared at her in silence, waiting for her answer, hoping she would not provoke him, make him ask again.

Finally, she spoke. "Your herbalist ordered me out of her dispensary. I suppose we had not been properly introduced. I was curious, so I went looking for anyone outside fighting age who might tell me more about this place." She laid the scroll on the table in front of him. "Is this your summary of Maratic?"

He spread the stiff sheet open and scanned the contents.

"It is written in my hand. I felt I should record the views of the elders in case they or I are killed in one of these raids."

“But it is not your view?”

“I... don't know. The elders have more time for contemplating the movements of the stars and the cycles of seasons and storms than those of us who are constantly being called away to fight. I have sensed a connection with the Elementals each time I made a breakthrough with the forging of weapons...”

Jaren failed to finish the sentence, his attention drawn to Valara's chainmail, so light and fine compared to his own. He found himself trying to judge how effective it might be.

The instant he looked up and caught her eye, he knew she had guessed his thoughts.

“Where did you get such fine work...’ He broke off when he saw the twitch of amusement on her lips.

“You are trying to pretend you were not looking at my breasts?” Her head dipped to one side, almost mischievously.

Trying to mask the conflict of embarrassment and indignation made him feel even more awkward. Was this all a planned strategy on her part? Or had she noticed that brief moment of his distraction before he hastily concealed it?

“Magnificent though I'm sure they are, it is the quality of your chainmail that will protect my warriors when the raids become more deadly. I want to know where to source it...” He paused, as another idea slipped into his mind. “Or how to forge it.”

This time her smile seemed more genuine.

“Now you are beginning to understand. If you want this knowledge, this skill, it is there for the taking. And I can show you how.”

He stared at her. “There for the taking? Where?”

She dipped her head to the window. The gnarled rock pinnacle was glowing rose in the afternoon sun.

“Maratic. It has been there, waiting for you all this time. He who controls the place of power controls all the tribes and will become master of the conflict, which will bring these pointless raids to an end. Then you can focus all your time and effort into creating wealth.”

“Impossible. The Elementals are too powerful. I might as well try to conquer a mountain or a wildfire.”

“For you, perhaps. A Power Mage could do it. I would need your help of course.”

“And that is what you are? I have never heard of such.”

“I am. And I have seen this done already, in Annubia.”

So many questions filled his mind. How had it been done? Why had she left, if it had been as successful as she suggested? And above all, even if she succeeded, could he trust her?

She frowned. “You fear I would become your overlord.”

“Obviously. If you have the kind of skill that could do this, why would I help you become even more powerful?”

“Because you humans do not trust the Fae. If I try to replace you as head of your tribe, I would have to rule by force, not by consent. I am too intelligent to seek a life of violence and treachery. It makes more sense for me to help you. For us to work together.”

“And you have no fear that I might get rid of you once I have what I want and no longer need you?”

This time she laughed. The sense of it was not carefree, but confident with perhaps a hint of gentle challenge.

“Jaren, you will always need me.”

“I will think about this. When you tell me more about where you come from and what happened in your past encounters with this kind of power, I will be able to make an informed decision.”

She held his gaze. “There are some things I have sworn to secrecy, for good reason. And I am not one to break an oath once made. But give me a little time to consider, and I think I can give you enough of my story to satisfy your need for reassurance.”

“Until tomorrow then. Corila will show you a place to sleep.” Jaren stood and made a courteous bow to Valara before returning to his study. The tiny room enclosed him, bringing the sense of calm and relaxation it always did, brushing away the clash and snarl of battle.

He sat at the table by the window for a few long moments, gazing across the evening valley to Maratic, now fading into the evening dusk. The temptation was too great. He knew he would be hard put to refuse Valara’s offer, however he might feel about her story. The thought of a future of peace and prosperity for his valley was compelling. If a Power Mage could make such a conquest elsewhere, it would be foolish not to try it here.

A frisson of disturbing thought came into his mind. If he refused her, she would go straight to the Samari merchants—or even the Northland Jarls and he would have thrown away his one chance to make Eldaran free and wealthy. History would pass harsh judgement on anyone who made a mistake like that.

He dipped his quill in the ink and added the day’s events to the page on the table.

Jaren and Valara will be back next year with more of their unfolding story. Meanwhile, you can discover what happened in the aftermath of what they achieved in *A Dance of Fire & Shadow*, available on www.jayaspenn.com

Map



More details on www.jayaspenn.com

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