

A WIZARD, A WARRIOR, AND A KITE

by

A.R.R. Ash

*R*edheaded Valya and brunette Nerada held their hands over their noses and mouths to keep at bay the smell of the alley—a smell so pervasive and powerful that it coated the backs of their tongues and throats like a putrid patina and would require barrels of soap to wash the clinging stench from their hair.

“Ne’er did I experience such a stink,” Nerada whispered through her covering hand. A white scar ran from her hairline, skipping over her right eye, down her cheek to the corner of her mouth. “I detect notes of overripe fish; stale, cheap ale; and, lest I forget, long-marinating urine.”

“Shh,” came Valya’s harsh whisper. Then in a thoughtful tone and with a sideways glance, she added, “Forget not the reek of rotted meat.”

Nerada opened her mouth in response, but the shriek of a black kite circling above ended the debate. The bird sported a forked tail of black feathers, black beak and claws, and black flight feathers, though the feathers of her body were a mottled brown.

As one, the two women rose from behind their concealment of moldering crates. Nerada, in her leather-wrapped chain, pulled her swords—named, appropriately, Long and Short—from their sheaths, their blades coated in black oil to absorb the moonlight and starlight. Valya, in her

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voluminous robe over form-fitting leather armor, pulled one of her dozen wands—this one, a sliver of redwood—affixed to a wide leather belt.

The two exited the main alleyway and moved to the entrance of a smaller side alley just as a cat burglar in all black touched the ground and two others followed down a rope grappled to a third-floor balcony.

The ground-level burglar, his head hidden within a balaclava, started at the sisters' appearance, then he whisper-shouted a single word: "Tumble!"

Nerada and Valya had been in the company of thieves enough to understand the cant—*Trouble*—a word starting with the same letter and which rhymes with the intended word.

The burglar pulled a dagger, blackened like Nerada's own, while the other two hastened down the rope. All three wore packs that bulged at the seams.

For their part, the ambushing sisters politely waited for the other two thieves to reach the ground.

"Be away with you while you can," the first thief said through clenched teeth. He angled his dagger toward them in a steady hand.

"The fullness of the situation seems to escape his perception," Valya said to Nerada while keeping her eyes on the thieves.

"By our count, the *fullness* of the situation is three to two." Though his mouth was covered, his sneer shone through.

"We'll be takin' your score," Valya continued. "You need not be harmed in the takin'."

"By the left hand of Laverna! Do you know who we work for?"

Nerada nodded. "We're counting on it."