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Wolfsbane



Par Patricia Briggs
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurThe second Sianim novel from the #1 New York Times bestselling author of Masques.For the last ten years, shapeshifting mercenary Aralorn has led a dangerous existencea far cry from her noble upbringing. Now she must return home under the most unfortunate circumstances. Her father, the Lyon of Lambshold, has passed away. But when Aralorn and her companion Wolf arrive, the combination of their magic uncovers something wonderful yet alarminghes not actually dead, but only appears so. Yet a dark mist is also very much alive within him... The Lyon of Lambshold has been ensorcelled by the aeMagi, whos using him as a conduit to finally destroy Aralorn and Wolf. With her father as the pawn, can Aralorn

overcome this mysterious mist with her magic? Or will she finally fall to the blackest of magic, losing not only her one true companion, but also her life...Extrait

A winterwill cried out twice. There was nothing untoward about that, the winterwill a smallish, gray-gold lark was one of the few birds that did not migrate south in the winter. Aralorn didn't shift her gaze from the snow-laden trail before her, but she watched her mount's ears flicker as he broke through a drift of snow. Winterwills were both common and loud; but it had called out just at the moment when she took the left-hand fork in the path she followed. The snow thinned for a bit, so she nudged Sheen off the trail on the uphill side. Sure enough, a winterwill called out three times and twice more when she returned to the trail again. Sheen snorted and shook his head, jangling his bit. "Plague it," muttered Aralorn. The path broke through the trees and leveled a bit as the trees cleared away on either side. She shifted her weight, and her horses stopped. On a lead line, the roan, her secondary mount, stood docilely, but Sheen threw up his head and pitched his ears forward. "Good lords of the forest," called Aralorn, "I have urgent business to attend. I beg leave to pay toll that I might pass unmolested through here." She could almost feel the chagrin that descended upon the brigands still under the cover of the trees around her. At long last, a man stepped out. His clothing was neatly patched, and Aralorn was reminded in some indefinable way of the carefully mended cottage where she'd purchased her cheese not a half-hour ride from here. The hood of his undyed cloak was pulled up, and his face was further disguised by a winter scarf wound about his chin and nose. "You don't have the appearance of a Trader," commented the man gruffly. "How is it you presume to take advantage of their pact with us." Before she'd seen the man, she'd had a story ready. Aralorn always had a story ready. But the man's appearance changed her plans. Though his clothes were worn, his boots were good-quality royal issue, and there was confidence in the manner he rested his hand on his short sword. He'd been an army man at sometime. If he'd been in the Rethian army, he'd know her father. Truth would have a better chance with him than any falsehood. "I have several close friends among the Traders," she said. "But as you say, there is no treaty between you and me; you have no reason to grant me passage." "The treaty's existence is a closely guarded secret," he said. "One that many would kill to protect." She smiled at him gently, ignoring his threat. "I've passed for Trader before, and I could have this time as well. But when I saw you for an army man, I thought the truth would work as well. I only lie when I have to." She surprised a laugh out of him though his hand didn't move from his sword hilt. "All right then, Mistress, tell me this truth of yours." "I am Aralorn, mercenary of Sianim. My father is dead," she said. Her voice wobbled unexpectedly disconcerting her momentarily. She wasn't used to its doing anything she hadn't intended. "The Lyon of Lambshold. If you delay me more than a few hours, I will miss his funeral." "I haven't heard any such news. I know the Lyon," stated the bandit with suspicion. "You don't look like him." Aralorn rolled her eyes. "I know that. I am his eldest daughter by a peasant woman." At the growing tension in her voice, Sheen began fretting. His attention drawn to the horse, the bandit leader stiffened and drew in his breath, holding up a hand to silence her. He walked slowly around him, then nodded abruptly. "I believe you. Your stallion could be the double of the one cut down under the Lyon at the battle of Valner Pass." "His sire died at Valner Pass," agreed Aralorn, "fourteen years ago." The bandit produced a faded bit of green ribbon and caught Sheen's bit, tying the thin cloth to the shank of the curb. "This will get you past my men. Don't remove it until you come to the Wayfarer's Inndo you know it?" Aralorn nodded, started to turn her horses, then stopped. "Tell your wife she makes excellent cheese and take my advice: Don't let her patch your thieving clothes with the same cloth as her apron. I might not be the only one to notice it." Startled, the bandit looked at the yellow-and-green weave that covered his right knee. Softly, Aralorn continued, "It is a hard thing for a woman alone to raise children to adulthood." She could tell that he was reconsidering his decision not to kill her, something he wouldn't have done if she'd kept her mouth closed; but she could clearly remember the walnut brown eyes of the toddler who held on to his mother's brightly colored apron. He wouldn't fare well in the world without a father to protect him from harm, and Aralorn had a weakness for children. "You are a smart man, sir," she said. "If I had wanted to have you caught, it would have made more sense for me to go to Lord Larmouth, whose province this is, and tell him what I saw than for me to warn you." Slowly, his hand moved away from the small sword, but Aralorn could hear a nearby creaking that told her that someone held a nocked bow. "I will tell her." She nudged Sheen with her knees and left the bandit behind. She crossed the first mountain pass late that night, and the second and last pass before Lambshold the following afternoon. The snow was heavier as she traveled northward. Aralorn switched horses often, but Sheen still took the brunt of the work since he was better suited for breaking through the crusted, knee-deep drifts. Gradually, as new light dawned over the edge of the pass, the mountain trail began to move downward, and the snow lessened. Aralorn swayed wearily in the saddle. It was less than two hours'

ride to Lambshold, but she and the horses were going to need rest before then. The road passed by another small village with an inn. Aralorn dismounted and led her exhausted horses to the stableyard. If the hostler was surprised at the arrival of a guest in the morning, he gave no sign of it. Nor did he argue when Aralorn gave him the lead to the roan and began the task of grooming Sheen on her own. The warhorse was not so fierce that a stableboy could not have groomed him, but it was her habit to perform the task herself when she was troubled. Before she stored her tack, she untied the scrap of ribbon from Sheen's bit. She left the horses dozing comfortably and entered the inn through the stable door. The innkeeper, whom she found in the kitchen, was a different man than the one she remembered, but the room he led her to was familiar and clean.

She closed the door behind him, stripped off her boots and breeches, then climbed between the sweet-smelling sheets. Too tired, too numb, to dread sleeping as she'd learned to do in the last few weeks, she let oblivion take her. The dream, when it came, started gently. Aralorn found herself wandering through a corridor in the ae'Magi's castle. It looked much the same as the last time she had seen it, the night the ae'Magi died. The forbidding stairway loomed out of the darkness. Aralorn set her hand to the wall and took the downward steps, though it was so dark that she could barely see where to put her feet. Dread coated the back of her throat like sour honey, and she knew that something terrible awaited her. She took another step down and found herself unexpectedly in a small stone room that smelled of offal and ammonia. A woman lay on a wooden table, her face frozen in death. Despite the pallor that clung to her skin and the fine lines of suffering, she was beautiful; her fiery hair seemed out of place in the presence of death. Arcanely etched iron manacles, thicker than the pale wrists they enclosed, had left scars testifying to the years they'd remained in place. At the foot of the table stood a raven-haired boy regarding the dead woman. He paid no attention to Aralorn or anything else. His face still had that unformed look of childhood. His yellow eyes were oddly remote as he looked at the body, ancient eyes that revealed his identity to Aralorn. Wolf, thought Aralorn, this was her Wolf as a child. "She was my mother?" the boy who would be Wolf said at last. His voice was unexpected, soft rather than the hoarse rasp that she associated with Wolf. "Yes." Aralorn looked for the owner of the second voice, but she couldn't see him. Only his words echoed in her ears, without inflection or tone. It could have been anyone who spoke. "I thought you might like to see her before I disposed of her." The boy shrugged. "I cannot imagine why you thought that. May I return to my studies now, Father?" The vision faded, and Aralorn found herself taking another step down. "Even as a child he was cold. Impersonal. Unnatural. Evil," whispered something out of the darkness of the stairwell. Aralorn shook her head, denying the words. She knew better than anyone the emotions Wolf could conceal equally well behind a blank face or the silver mask he usually wore. If anything, he was more emotional than most people. She opened her mouth to argue when a scream distracted her. She stepped down, toward the sound. She was naked and cold, her breath rose above her in a puff of mist. She tried to move to conserve her warmth, but iron chains bound her where she was. Cool metal touched her throat, and Wolf pressed the blade down until her flesh parted. He smiled sweetly as the knife cut slowly deeper. "Hush now, this won't hurt." She screamed, and his smile widened incongruously, catching her attention. It wasn't Wolf's smile. She knew his smile: It was as rare as green diamonds, not practiced as this was. Fiercely, she denied what she saw. Under her hot stare, her tormentor's yellow eyes darkened to blue. When he spoke a second time, it was in the ae'Magi's dulcet tones. "Come, my son, it is time for you to learn more." "No." Something shifted painfully in Aralorn's head with rude suddenness and jerked her from the table to somewhere behind the ae'Magi, whose knife pressed against the neck of a pale woman who was too frightened even to moan. Truth, thought Aralorn, feeling the rightness in this dream. The boy stood apart from his father, no longer so young as her earlier vision of him. Already, his face had begun to show signs of matching the Archmage's feature for feature except for his eyes. "Come," repeated the ae'Magi. "The death you deal her will be much easier than the one I will give her. It will also be easier for you, Cain, if you do as I ask." "No." The boy who had been Cain before he was her Wolf spoke softly, without defiance or deference. The ae'Magi smiled and walked to his son, caressing his face with the hand that still held the bloody knife. Some part of Aralorn tensed as she saw the Archmage's caressing hand. Bits and pieces of things Wolf had told her coalesced with the sexuality of the ae'Magi's gesture. "As you will," said the sorcerer softly. "I, at least, will enjoy it more." Rage suffused her with hatred of a man she knew to be dead. She stepped forward, as if she could alter events long past, and the scene changed again. The boy stood on the tower parapet, a violent storm raged overhead. He was older now, with a man's height though his shoulders were still narrow with youth. Cold rain poured down, and Wolf shivered. "It's power, Cain. Don't you want it?" Slowly, the boy lifted his arms to embrace the storm. But that taint of wrongness had returned, and Aralorn called upon her magic, girded in the truth of

natural order, to pull it right. She had no more magic than the average hedgewitch, but it seemed to be enough for the job. Once more, the scene shifted subtly, as if a farseeing glass were twisted into focus. "It's power, Cain. Don't you want it?" "It comes too fast, Father. I can't control it." Wolf spoke the words without the inflection that would have added urgency to them. "I will control the magic." When Wolf appeared unmoved, the ae'Magi's voice softened to an ugly whisper. "I can assure you, you won't like the alternative." Even in the storm-darkened night, Aralorn could see Wolf's face blanch, though his expression never altered. "Very well, then." There was something quiet and purposeful in his voice that Aralorn wondered at. Something that only someone who knew him well would have heard. Wolf bent his head, and Aralorn was aware of the currents of magic he drew. The Archmage closed his hands on his son's shoulders; Wolf flinched slightly at the touch, then resumed passing his power on to his father. Lightning flashed, and the magic he held doubled, then trebled in an instant. Slowly, Wolf lifted his arms, and lightning flashed a second time, hitting him squarely in the chest. He called it to him on purpose, thought Aralorn, stunned. If he had been wholly human, he would have died there, and his father with him. For a green mage, whose blood comes from an older race, lightning contains magic rather than death but he would have had no way of knowing that. He didn't know what his mother had been, not then. For an instant, the two stood utterly still, except for the soundless, formless force Wolf had assembled; then a stone exploded into rubble, followed by another and another. The broken bits of granite began to glow with the heat of wild magic released without control. Aralorn couldn't tell if Wolf was trying to control the magic at all though the ae'Magi had stepped back and was gesturing wildly in an attempt to stem the tide. Shadow was banished by the heat of the flames. Aralorn saw Wolf smile; "No!" cried the ae'Magi, as molten rock splattered across Wolf's face, from a stone that burst in front of him. Wolf screamed, a sound lost in the crack of shattering stone. The ae'Magi cast a spell, drawing on the very magic that wreaked such havoc. A warding, thought Aralorn, as a rock fell from a parapet and bounced off an invisible barrier that surrounded the ae'Magi as he knelt over his unconscious son. "I will not lose the power. You shall not escape me today." The scene faded, and Aralorn found herself back in the corridor, but she was not alone. The ae'Magi stepped to her, frowning. "How did you?" His voice trailed off, and his face twisted in a spasm of an emotion so strong she wasn't able to tell what it was. "You love him?" Though his voice wasn't loud, it cracked and twisted until it was no longer the ae'Magi's voice. It was familiar, though; Aralorn struggled to remember to whom it belonged. "Who are you?" she asked. The figure of the ae'Magi melted away, as did the corridor, fading into an ancient darkness that began to reach for her. She screamed and; Awake, Aralorn listened to the muffled sounds of the inn. Hearing no urgent footsteps, she decided that she must not have screamed out loud. This was not the kind of place where such a sound would have been dismissed. She sat up to shake off the effects of the nightmare, but the terror of the eerie, hungry emptiness lingered. She might as well get up. She'd begun having nightmares when Wolf disappeared a few weeks ago. Nightmares weren't an unexpected part of being a mercenary, but these had been relentless. Dreams of being trapped in the ae'Magi's dungeon unable to escape the pain or the voice that asked over and over again, "Where is Cain? Where is my son?" But this dream had been different; it had been more than a dream. She pulled on her clothes. Her acceptance of what she had seen had been born of the peculiar acceptance that was the gift of a dreamer. Awake now, she wondered. It had felt like truth. If the ae'Magi were still alive, she would have cheerfully attributed it to an attack by him a little nasty designed to make her doubt Wolf and make his life a little more miserable. An attack that had failed only because she had a little magic of her own to call upon. But the ae'Magi was dead, and she could think of no one else who would know the intimate details of Wolf's childhood things that even she had not known for certain. It was a dream, she decided as she headed out to the stables. Only a dream. *Revue de presse* Charming and well-written... Aralorn remains complicated and intelligent and it's delightful to see her in her childhood home with her family. *RT Book s* Many enjoyable aspects of the world-building and characters to savour. And a sweet and touching tentative romance. *Urban Fantasy Book s*