

HEARTFIRE

THE TALES OF ALVIN MAKER, VOLUME V

ORSON SCOTT CARD



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THE
TALES OF
ALVIN MAKER, VOLUME V



A TOM DOHERTY ASSOCIATES BOOK
NEW YORK

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To Mark and Margaret,
for whom all heartfires
burn bright

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As so often before, I thank Clark and Kathy Kidd for providing me with a retreat where I could jump-start this book.

Thanks also to Kathleen Bellamy and Scott J. Allen for help above and beyond the call of duty; to Jane Brady and Geoffrey Card for their collection of data from the earlier books.

As Alvin wanders through the world, it is his wife who provides his harbor; this, my wife, Kristine, also provides for me. All my stories are told first to her.



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Gooses

Arthur Stuart stood at the window of the taxidermy shop, rapt. Alvin Smith was halfway down the block before he realized that Arthur was no longer with him. By the time he got back, a tall White man was questioning the boy.

“Where’s your master, then?”

Arthur did not look at him, his gaze riveted on a stuffed bird, posed as if it were about to land on a branch.

“Boy, answer me, or I’ll have the constable ...”

“He’s with me,” said Alvin.

The man at once became friendly. “Glad to know it, friend. A boy this age, you’d think if he was free his parents would have taught him proper respect when a White man—”

“I think he only cares about the birds in the window.” Alvin laid a gentle hand on Arthur’s shoulder. “What is it, Arthur Stuart?”

Only the sound of Alvin’s voice could draw Arthur out of his reverie. “How did he see?”

“Who?” asked the man.

“See what?” asked Alvin.

“The way the bird pushes down with his wings just before roosting, and then poses like a statue. Nobody sees that.”

“What’s the boy talking about?” asked the man.

“He’s a great observer of birds,” said Alvin. “I think he’s admiring the taxidermy work in the window.”

The man beamed with pride. “I’m the taxidermist here. Almost all of those are mine.”

Arthur finally responded to the taxidermist. “Most of these are just dead birds. They looked more alive when they lay bloody in the field where the shotgun brought them down. But this one. And that one...” He pointed to a hawk, stooping. “Those were done by someone who knew the living bird.”

The taxidermist glowered for a moment, then put on a tradesman’s smile. “Do you like those? The work of a French fellow goes by the name ‘John-James.’” He said the double name as if it were a joke. “Journeyman work, is all. Those delicate poses—I doubt the wires will hold up over time.”

Alvin smiled at the man. “I’m a journeyman myself, but I do work that lasts.”

“No offense meant,” the taxidermist said at once. But he also seemed to have lost interest, for if Alvin was merely a journeyman in some trade, he wouldn’t have enough money to buy anything; nor would an itinerant workman have much use for stuffed

animals.

“So you sell this Frenchman’s work for less?” asked Alvin.

The taxidermist hesitated. “More, actually.”

“The price falls when it’s done by the master?” asked Alvin innocently.

The taxidermist glared at him. “I sell his work on consignment, and he sets the price. I doubt anyone will buy it. But the fellow fancies himself an artist. He only stuffs and mounts the birds so he can paint pictures of them, and when he’s done painting, he sells the bird itself.”

“He’d be better to talk to the bird instead of killing it,” said Arthur Stuart. “They’d hold still for him to paint, a man who sees birds so true.”

The taxidermist looked at Arthur Stuart oddly. “You let this boy talk a bit forward, don’t you?”

“In Philadelphia I thought all folks could talk plain,” said Alvin, smiling.

The taxidermist finally understood just how deeply Alvin was mocking him. “I’m not a Quaker, my man, and neither are you.” With that he turned his back on Alvin and Arthur and returned to his store. Through the window Alvin could see him sulking, casting sidelong glances at them now and then.

“Come on, Arthur Stuart, let’s go meet Verily and Mike for dinner.”

Arthur took one step, but still couldn’t tear his gaze from the roosting bird.

“Arthur, before the fellow comes out and orders us to move along.”

Even with that, Alvin finally had to take Arthur by the hand and near drag him away. And as they walked, Arthur had an inward look to him. “What are you brooding about?” asked Alvin.

“I want to talk to that Frenchman. I have a question to ask him.”

Alvin knew better than to ask Arthur Stuart what the question was. It would spare him hearing Arthur’s inevitable reply: “Why should I ask *you*? *You* don’t know.”

Verily Cooper and Mike Fink were already eating when Alvin and Arthur got to the rooming house. The proprietor was a Quaker woman of astonishing girth and very limited talents as a cook—but she made up for the blandness of her food with the quantities she served, and more important was the fact that, being a Quaker in more than name, Mistress Louder made no distinction between half-Black Arthur Stuart and the three White men traveling with him. Arthur Stuart sat at the same table as the others, and even though one roomer moved out the day Arthur Stuart first sat at table, she never acted as if she even noticed the fellow was gone. Which was why Alvin tried to make up for it by taking Arthur Stuart with him on daily forays out into the woods and meadows along the river to gather wild ginger, wintergreen, spearmint, and thyme to spice up her cooking. She took the herbs, with their implied criticism of her kitchen, in good humor, and tonight the potatoes had been boiled with the wintergreen they brought her yesterday.

“Edible?” she asked Alvin as he took his first bite.

Verily was the one who answered, while Alvin savored the mouthful with a beatific expression on his face. “Madame, your generosity guarantees you will go to heaven, but it’s the flavor of tonight’s potatoes that assures you will be asked to cook there.”

She laughed and made as if to hit him with a spoon. “Verily Cooper, thou smooth-tongued lawyer, knowest thou not that Quakers have no truck with flattery?” But they

all knew that while she didn't believe the flattery, she did believe the warm heartedness behind it.

While the other roomers were still at table, Mike Fink regaled them all with the tale of his visit to the Simple House, where Andrew Jackson was scandalizing the elite of Philadelphia by bringing his cronies from Tennizy and Kenituck, letting them chew and spit in rooms that once offered homesick European ambassadors a touch of the elegance of the old country. Fink repeated a tale that Jackson himself told that very day, about a fine Philadelphia lady who criticized the behavior of his companions. "This is the Simple House," Jackson declared, "and these are simple people." When the lady tried to refute the point, Jackson told her, "This is *my* house for the next four years, and these are my friends."

"But they have no manners," said the lady.

"They have excellent manners," said Jackson. "Western manners. But they're tolerant folks. They'll overlook the fact that you ain't took a bite of food yet, nor drunk any good corn liquor, nor spat once even though you always look like you got a mouth full of *somethin'*." Mike Fink laughed long and hard at this, and so did the roomers, though some were laughing at the lady and some were laughing at Jackson.

Arthur Stuart asked a question that was bothering Alvin. "How does Andy Jackson get anything done, if the Simple House is full of river rats and bumpkins all day?"

"He needs something done, why, one of us river rats went and done it for him," said Mike.

"But most rivermen can't read or write," Arthur said.

"Well, Old Hickory can do all the readin' and writin' for hisself," said Mike. "He sends the river rats to deliver messages and persuade people."

"Persuade people?" asked Alvin. "I hope they don't use the methods of persuasion you once tried on *me*"

Mike whooped at that. "Iffen Old Hickory let the boys do *those* old tricks, I don't think there'd be six noses left in Congress, nor twenty ears!"

Finally, though, the tales of the frolicking at the Simple House—or degradation, depending on your point of view—wound down and the other roomers left. Only Alvin and Arthur, as latecomers, were still eating as they made their serious reports on the day's work.

Mike shook his head sadly when Alvin asked him if he'd had a chance to talk to Andy Jackson. "Oh, he included me in the room, if that's what you mean. But talking alone, no, not likely. See, Andy Jackson may be a lawyer but he knows river rats, and my name rang a bell with him. Haven't lived down my old reputation yet, Alvin. Sorry."

Alvin smiled and waved off the apology. "There'll come a day when the president will meet with us."

"It was premature, anyway," said Verily. "Why try for a land grant when we don't even know what we're going to use it for?"

"Do so," said Alvin, playing at a children's quarrel.

"Do not," said Verily, grinning.

"We got a city to build."

"No sir," said Verily. "We have the *name* of a city, but we don't have the *plan* of a city, or even the idea of the city—"

“It’s a city of Makers!”

“Well, it would have been nice if the Red Prophet had told you what that means,” said Verily.

“He showed it to me inside the waterspout,” said Alvin. “He doesn’t know what it means any more than I do. But we both saw it, a city made of glass, filled with people, and the city itself taught them everything.”

“Amid all that seeing,” said Verily, “did you perhaps hear a hint of what we’re supposed to tell people to persuade them to come and help us build it?”

“I take it that means you didn’t accomplish what you set out to do, either,” said Alvin.

“Oh, I perused the Congressional Library,” said Verily. “Found many references to the Crystal City, but most of them were tied up with Spanish explorers who thought it had something to do with the fountain of youth or the Seven Cities of the Onion.”

“Onion?” asked Arthur Stuart.

“One of the sources misheard the Indian name ‘Cibola’ as a Spanish word for ‘onion,’ and I thought it was funny,” said Verily. “All dead ends. But there *is* an interesting datum that I can’t readily construe.”

“Wouldn’t want to have anything constroodled redly,” said Alvin.

“Don’t play frontiersman with me,” said Verily. “Your wife was a better schoolteacher than to leave you that ignorant.”

“You two leave off teasing,” demanded Arthur Stuart. “What did you find out?”

“There’s a post office in a place that calls itself Crystal City in the state of Tennizy.”

“There’s probably a place called Fountain of Youth, too,” said Alvin.

“Well, I thought it was interesting,” said Verily.

“Know anything else about it?”

“Postmaster’s a Mr. Crawford, who also has the titles Mayor and—I think you’ll like this, Alvin—White Prophet.”

Mike Fink laughed, but Alvin didn’t like it. “White Prophet. As if to set himself against Tenskwa-Tawa?”

“I just told you all I know,” said Verily. “Now, what did *you* accomplish?”

“I’ve been in Philadelphia for two weeks and I haven’t accomplished a thing,” said Alvin. “I thought the city of Benjamin Franklin would have something to teach me. But Franklin’s dead, and there’s no special music in the street, no wisdom lingering around his grave. Here’s where America was born, boys, but I don’t think it lives here anymore. America lives out there where I grew up—what we got in Philadelphia now is just the *government* of America. Like finding fresh dung on the road. It ain’t a horse, but it tells you a horse is somewhere nearby.”

“It took you two weeks in Philadelphia to find *that* out?” said Mike Fink.

Verily joined in. “My father always said that government is like watching another man piss in your boot. Someone feels better but it certainly isn’t you.”

“If we can take a break from all of this philosophy,” said Alvin, “I got a letter from Margaret.” He was the only one who called his wife by that name—everyone else called her Peggy. “From Camelot.”

“She’s not in Appalachee anymore?” asked Mike Fink.

“All the agitation for keeping slavery in Appalachee is coming from the Crown Colonies,” said Alvin, “so there she went.”

“King ain’t about to let Appalachee close off slavery, I reckon,” said Mike Fink.

“I thought they already settled Appalachee independence with a war back in the last century,” said Verily.

“I reckon some folks think they need another war to settle whether Black people can be free,” said Alvin. “So Margaret’s in Camelot, hoping to get an audience with the King and plead the cause of peace and freedom.”

“The only time a nation ever has both at the same time,” said Verily, “is during that brief period of exhilarated exhaustion after winning a war.”

“You’re sure grim for a man what’s never even killed anybody,” said Mike Fink.

“Iffen Miz Lerner wants to talk to Arthur Stuart, I’m right here,” said Arthur with a grin. Mike Fink made a show of slapping him upside the head. Arthur laughed—it was his favorite joke these days, that he’d been given the same name as the King of England, who ruled in exile in the slave shires of the South.

“And she also has reason to believe that my younger brother is there,” said Alvin.

At that news Verily angrily looked down and played with the last scraps of food on his plate, while Mike Fink stared off into space. They both had their opinions of Alvin’s little brother.

“Well, I don’t know,” said Alvin.

“Don’t know what?” asked Verily.

“Whether to go there and join her. She told me not to, of course, because she has some idea that when Calvin and I get together, then I’ll die.”

Mike grinned nastily. “I don’t care what that boy’s knack is, I’d like to see him try.”

“Margaret never said he’d kill me,” said Alvin. “In fact she never said I’d die, exactly. But that’s what I gather. She doesn’t want me there until she can assure me that Calvin is out of town. But I’d like to meet the King my own self.”

“Not to mention seeing your wife,” said Verily.

“I could use a few days with her.”

“And nights,” murmured Mike.

Alvin raised an eyebrow at him and Mike grinned stupidly.

“Biggest question is,” Alvin went on, “could I safely take Arthur Stuart down there? In the Crown Colonies it’s illegal to bring a free person of even one-sixteenth Black blood into the country.”

“You could pretend he’s your slave,” said Mike.

“But what if I died down there? Or got arrested? I don’t want any chance of Arthur getting confiscated and sold away. It’s too dangerous.”

“So don’t go there,” said Verily. “The King doesn’t know a thing about building the Crystal City, anyway.”

“I know,” said Alvin. “But neither do I, and neither does anyone else.”

Verily smiled. “Maybe that’s not true.”

Alvin was impatient. “Don’t play with me, Verily. What do you know?”

“Nothing but what you already know yourself, Alvin. There’s two parts to building the Crystal City. The first part is about Making and all that. And I’m no help to you there, nor is any mortal soul, as far as I can see. But the second part is the word *city*. No matter what else you do, it’ll be a place where people have to live together. That means there’s got to be government and laws.”

“Does there *have* to be?” asked Mike wistfully.

“Or something to do the same jobs,” said Verily. “And land, divided up so people can live. Food planted and harvested, or brought in to feed the population. Dry goods to make or buy, houses to build, clothes to make. There’ll be marrying and giving in marriage, unless I’m mistaken, and people will have children so we’ll need schools. No matter how visionary this city makes the people, they still need roofs and roads, unless you expect them all to fly.”

Alvin leaned back in his chair with his eyes closed.

“Have I put you to sleep, or are you thinking?” asked Verily.

Alvin didn’t open his eyes when he answered. “I’m just thinking that I really don’t know a blame thing about what I’m doing. White Murderer Harrison may have been the lowest man I ever knowed, but at least he could build a city in the wilderness.”

“It’s easy to build a city when you arrange the rules so that bad men can get rich without getting caught,” said Verily. “You build such a place and greed will bring you your citizens, if you can stand to live with them.”

“It ought to be possible to do the same for decent folks,” said Alvin.

“It ought to be and is,” said Verily. “It’s been done, and you can learn from the way they did it.”

“Who?” asked Mike Fink. “I never heard of such a town.”

“A hundred towns at least,” said Verily. “I’m speaking of New England, of course. Massachusetts most particularly. Founded by Puritans to be their Zion, a land of pure religion across the western ocean. All my life, growing up in England, I heard about how perfect New England was, how pure and godly, where there were neither rich nor poor, but all partakers of the heavenly gift, and where they were free of distraction from the world. They live in peace and equity, in the land most just of all that have ever existed on God’s Earth.”

Alvin shook his head. “Verily, if Arthur can’t go to Camelot, it’s a sure bet you and I can’t go to New England.”

“There’s no slavery there,” said Verily.

“You know what I mean,” said Alvin. “They hang witches.”

“I’m no witch,” said Verily. “Nor are you.”

“By their lights we are.”

“Only if we do any hexery or use hidden powers,” said Verily. “Surely we can restrain ourselves long enough to learn how they created such a large country free of strife and oppression, and filled with the love of God.”

“Dangerous,” said Alvin.

“I agree,” said Mike. “We’d be insane to go there. Isn’t that where that lawyer fellow Daniel Webster came from? He’ll know about you, Alvin.”

“He’s in Carthage City making money from corrupt men,” said Alvin.

“Last you heard of him, maybe,” said Mike. “But he can write letters. He can come home. Things can go wrong.”

Arthur Stuart looked up at Mike Fink. “Things can go wrong lying in your own bed on Sunday.”

Alvin at last opened his eyes. “I have to learn. Verily’s right. It’s not enough to learn Making. I have to learn governing, too, and city building, and everything else. I have to learn everything about everything, and I’m just getting farther behind the longer I sit here.”

Arthur Stuart looked glum. "So I'm never going to meet the King."

"Far as I'm concerned," said Mike Fink, "you *are* the real Arthur Stuart, and you've got as much right as he has to be king in this land."

"I want him to make me a knight."

Alvin sighed. Mike rolled his eyes. Verily put a hand on Arthur's shoulder. "The day the King knights a half-Black boy..."

"Can't he knight the White half?" asked Arthur Stuart. "If I do something real brave? That's how a fellow gets hisself knighted, I hear."

"Definitely time to go to New England," said Alvin.

"I tell you I got misgivings," said Mike Fink.

"Me too," said Alvin. "But Verily's right. They built a good place and got good people to come to it."

"Why not go to that Tennizy place as calls itself Crystal City?" asked Mike.

"Maybe that's where we'll go after we get run out of New England," said Alvin.

Verily laughed. "You're an optimist, aren't you."

They mostly packed before they went to bed that night. Not that there was that much to put in their satchels. When a man is traveling with only a horse to carry himself and his goods, he gets a different idea of what he needs to carry from place to place than does a man riding a coach, or followed by servants and pack animals. It's not much more than a walking man would be willing to tote, lest he wear down the horse.

Alvin woke early in the morning, before dawn, but it took him no more than two breaths to notice that Arthur Stuart was gone. The window stood open, and though they were on the top floor of the house, Alvin knew that wouldn't stop Arthur Stuart, who seemed to think that gravity owed him a favor.

Alvin woke Verily and Mike, who were stirring anyway, and asked them to get the horses saddled and loaded up while he went in search of the boy.

Mike only laughed, though. "Probably found him some girl he wants to kiss good-bye."

Alvin looked at him in shock. "What are you talking about?"

Mike looked back at him, just as surprised. "Are you blind? Are you deaf? Arthur's voice is changing. He's one whisker from being a man."

"Speaking of whiskers," said Verily, "I think the shadow on his upper lip is due to become a brush pretty soon. In fact, I daresay his face grows more hair on it already than yours does, Alvin."

"I don't see your face flowing with moustachery, either," said Alvin.

"I shave," said Verily.

"But it's a long time between Christmases," said Alvin. "I'll see you before breakfast is done, I wager."

As Alvin went downstairs, he stopped into the kitchen, where Mistress Louder was rolling out the dough for morning biscuits. "You didn't happen to see Arthur Stuart this morning?" asked Alvin.

"And when wast thou planning to tell me ye were leaving?"

"When we settled up after breakfast," said Alvin. "We wasn't trying to slip out, it was no secret we were packing up."

Only then did he notice the tears running down her cheeks. "I hardly slept last