

Arantur

Book One of the 'Riothamus Trilogy'

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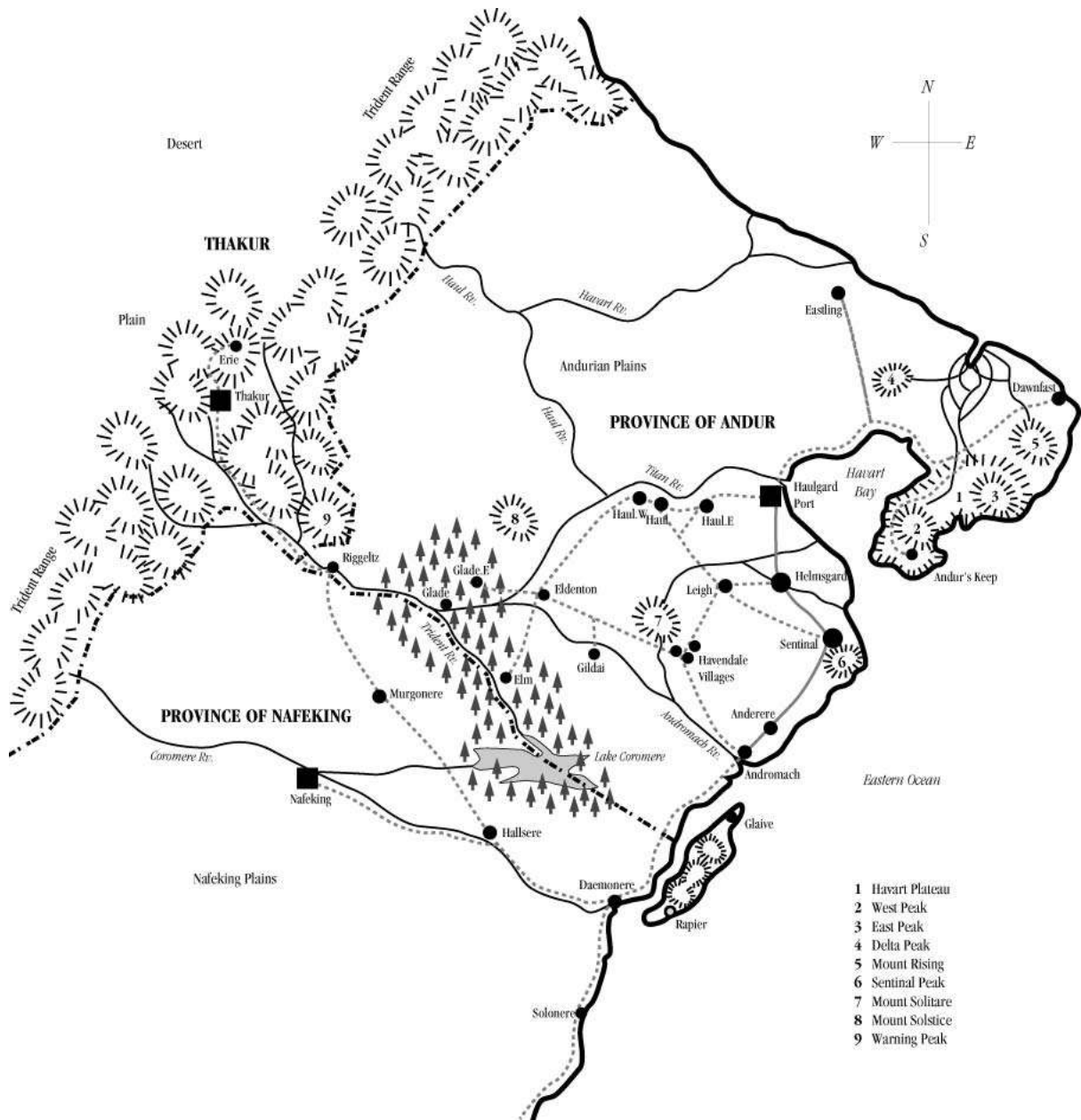
*I'd like to dedicate the 'Riothamus' trilogy to a number of people who have helped
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- 1 Havart Plateau
- 2 West Peak
- 3 East Peak
- 4 Delta Peak
- 5 Mount Rising
- 6 Sentinal Peak
- 7 Mount Solitaire
- 8 Mount Solstice
- 9 Warning Peak

Chapter—Prequel

Andur gazed across the ravaged battleground and felt the last of his rage seep away into the bloodied ground. Above him the black-garbed ravens darkened the autumn sky calling harsh tidings of death and destruction. In lowering flocks they flapped and settled upon the mangled and still twitching corpses of the battle just recently won. Picking up a stone, the bronze and leather-clad plainsman-warrior at his side drew back his arm to shie the stone at the scavenging birds, but Andur's voice stayed his hand.

“Leave them. They do no harm and much good, besides they will save us the chore of burying them...”

The blood-splattered plainsman nodded and let the stone drop soundlessly into the grass by his feet. “What of the others?” he asked, remembering how the remaining Serat had fled into the vastness of the Havart plains which bounded the Trident Range's foothills.

Andur shook his head, “The army is in no fit condition to follow them. Let them go. I am done with war.” Slowly and stiffly he removed his mud-splattered steel helmet and mail coif, and pulling from his head the rust and blood stained arming cap, finally shook his dirty blond braids free. Wearily he wiped the blood of his enemy from his face with the back of his hand and sheathed his sword in the wood and leather scabbard. Gazing once more across the battlefield and the circling ravens he sighed heavily and turned away from the carnage to gaze instead at the army regrouping at his back. After making sure that his orders were being followed, he turned again to the west and his companion's silent contemplation of the death that lay strewn before them.

“It is all over Erike,” Andur said at last, “The remaining Serat flee. Let the wolves pick off what is left of the enemy. I am bone-weary of blood and battle. We have a land to cleanse now.”

“Aye Warleader,” replied the other, removing his blood splattered leather gauntlets, “We surely have much work ahead of us.”

Slowly, singly, and then in groups, the provinces rag-tag army rejoined their Warleader at the camp. Andur regretfully noted the many missing soldiers—dozens of men he had only just begun to name as friends before the months of battle had taken their lives. As soon as word filtered back to the towns, there would be many widows and mothers mourning their dead. Although this victory had come at great loss, a defeat would not have been imaginable. If the Serat had taken the field and the day, there would have not been a person left alive. Not one of his soldiers, or any of the people of the province of Havart guarding the great walled towns would have been spared death by burning, which was the Serat punishment for rebellion and disobedience. In truth the province would have died upon their defeat.

This had been the final battle in a rebellion that had lasted ten months. First the small outlying villages had been retaken. Then as the rebel army had doubled, then tripled in size from the growing intake of peasant soldiers, the major towns had fallen one by one after several protracted sieges. With the occupying soldiers under siege by the rebel forces, the normally placid townsfolk had taken up arms and begun to harass the Serat guard. Facing enemies from within and without, the Serat finally surrendered and were imprisoned in the same dungeons and cells that rebellious citizens had only recently vacated.

The last battle of the rebellion had been made against the occupying forces of Seawatch Keep. The final confrontation of the rebel army against the remaining Serat forces had still been two to one against the patriots. Warleader Andur had decided to make his stand near Delta Peak. The natural defenses of the marsh of the Havart delta, and the Bay gave him a narrow neck of plain to defend. With the province retaken behind the rebel army, all that remained was the Havart plateau and Seawatch Keep.

In their arrogance, the Serat had left Seawatch with only a minimal guard, taking the remainder of their forces from the Keep and those encamped outside down off the plateau to make war upon the rebel army gathered on the plain. With the Keep so lightly defended, the mages of Glaive had gained successful access to Seawatch via a little known seaward route. The mage fought battle had been brief but noisy, and Andur had been notified of the victory by a prearranged signal from the mages in the Keep. Thirty-eight hours later the remaining Serat army had been sighted marching down from the plateau. After a brief war council, Andur and his battle leaders quickly moved the rebel army into position. The battle had taken three days, and even with the veterans of his rebel army and the fierce mounted archers of the plainsmen it had been a near thing ... then finally it was over.

As Warleader Andur shrugged off his chain mail, and divested himself of his rust-marked gambeson, the light drizzle and heavy overcast began to part, and for the first time in five weeks the sun finally broke through the heavy clouds. The war weary soldiers saw this as a divine blessing, and began to praise the name of their valiant Warleader.

It had certainly been a near thing, but now was the time of rebuilding. The Havart Province had suffered under three hundred and fifty years of oppressive Serat occupation. The spreading blue skies could only be an omen of future good fortune, and peace for the land.

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Chapter 1—Arantur

Over three hundred years had passed since Warleader Andur had stood on that battleground and wished for peace. Three hundred years had given the new province of Andur a time of reconciliation and growth. For those who lived in the quiet central-Andurian town of Leigh this day was very much like another, a day with its share of triumphs and tragedies, happiness and sorrow, like an unfolding tapestry of colour and emotion. Only a few would realise that the long reign of peace was drawing to a close, and that the lowering storm clouds of war and chaos would soon be marching over the horizon.

On this day however, to the residents of Leigh it seemed as if the entire population of Andur had gathered in their town for the late-summer Market and Fair. There were thousands of people milling about the dirt streets, some wealthy farmers from the districts surrounding Leigh, others were farm hands and labourers clutching personal riches of a few bronze pennies or a silver coin or two, each coin hoarded carefully through the year for this one occasion. Itinerant entertainers and musicians gathered on the crossroads and corners, singing, dancing and playing, trying to tempt a few small coppers in payment for their entertainment. In the centre of Leigh set up on the green was the market itself. Comprising a large number of small booths, stalls, and even cloth laid down upon the ground, the merchants of Leigh and other surrounding villages displayed their many and varied wares for public inspection. As it had been a good and fruitful season, produce was in abundance, but the locals cast only a cursory eye across the cart loads of turnips, carrots, beans and melons. The stalls that attracted the most interest were those of the merchants that had come from the great walled towns of Sentinal, Helmsgard, and Haulgard. Fine cloth was displayed. Also displayed was jewellery that might attract the eyes of a wealthy landholder's wife or daughter. Beads, needles, thread, and bangles of tin or copper for the masses. Perfumes, potions, and cure-alls reputed to have come from the mage's isle of Glaive were all examined and bought, or sadly laid aside.

Arantur stood at the back of his master's stall and noted, without malice, that their pots and pans were of a finer quality than those sold by the other blacksmiths at the fair. He glanced at his Master Cody and indicated another blacksmith's booth, pointing briefly towards a pot which had rough and unfinished edges. His master smiled his agreement, shaking his head briefly at the shoddy workmanship displayed. Cody surveyed his own items and smiled in satisfaction. There was no comparison; they had the finest at the fair. Not all the metalwork for sale had been of the master's hand. As an apprentice blacksmith Arantur was allowed only to do the simplest smithing until he gained his trade, but the items he had made were simple, functional, and very beautiful with clean, pure, unblemished lines. Even from the first day of Arantur's apprenticeship Cody had recognised the latent talent in the young man. Others too had commented on the quality of the lad's work, and thus Cody had received orders for Arantur's tools that could not be filled for many weeks.

Over the years of his apprenticeship he had watched Arantur work and it pleased him to see how the young man seemed to have a way with metals that was almost uncanny. Using an economy of hand and eye, Arantur made dents, joints, and fold lines disappear without trace. Cody knew that he had finally found a man to replace him as the master blacksmith of Leigh.

Suddenly Arantur heard his name being called. Immediately he looked across the green, saw his foster-brother Sed wave at him, and walk over to the stall. Sed was small and dark and had hazel eyes set in a narrow face that darted here and there, seemingly always on the lookout for mischief. In his own mind Sed rather fancied himself in the role of the town wit, and upon seeing his elder brother's serious face and hard eyes, immediately adopted a weaving, unsteady gait. It gained him endless amusement from baiting his quiet and introspective foster-brother into action. Even now, he was certain that Arantur would want to make some comment about him spending the warm summer afternoon in the taverns drinking, and not being gainfully employed.

"Aran, are you to be standing the entire day with your pots and pans?" he called out loudly, attracting the attention of several passers-by. "It seems to me you have forgotten the greased pig competition. You did agree to take part this year."

Cody smiled and motioned his apprentice to go, "Lad, I can mind shop as best as thee, run thy race now and spend some time with thy kin."

Arantur looked up, and the corners of his mouth tightened as he caught Sed rolling his eyes and pulling faces at Cody's archaic turn of phrase. Arantur had been apprenticed to Cody for so long now that he hardly noticed the difference in the way his Master spoke. The Old Speech, which Cody used, was believed to be the language of the ancient past and a few people who were older or more learned than most sometimes adopted it as their own. Arantur sighed, immediately thinking dark thoughts about Sed's childish behaviour and wished, belatedly, that he had the presence of mind to say something cutting to the younger man. However realising that the moment had gone, he instead resignedly removed the blacksmith's blackened apron, and ran well-formed, work callused hands through his longish dark-blond hair to smooth it into place. At almost twenty he had the look and physique of a much older man, for working over the fire for many years had hardened and sculpted his features and form, and from the daily heavy work his muscles had grown strong, developing excellent co-ordination. Moving out from behind the stall he walked across to where Sed was standing grinning at him.

Sed looked up at his tall half brother and laughed, "I have wagered two marks with Tomas the Fletcher that you will win today Aran. Don't make me lose my silver!"

Aran growled, exasperated, "You are too soon parted with your money Sed. Why do you throw it away like this?"

Sed smiled knowingly and felt Arantur's hard muscled arm, "Because I only bet on a sure thing brother," he laughed. "You may not be fast, but you are one of the strongest men I know."

Aran eyed the lengthening shadows doubtfully, "When is the competition to be run, I would very much like a drink."

Sed glanced at the sun, "Soon Aran...we ought to gather with the others so you are not left behind."

Aran's head turned angrily, his grey eyes hardening with sudden anger, "You are not going to race? You knew I was only going to run if you..."

Sed laughed, interrupting Aran's protest, "Aran, do you honestly see me catching a large greased pig." he chuckled, flexing wiry muscles. "By Andur I would have trouble bringing down a hen with my physique."

His always-quick anger ebbing, Aran had to agree with that and together they walked towards the town square where the competition was to be run.

It did not take them long to arrive at the town square, but after hanging around for a moment or two and finding nothing happening, they instead decided to wait with several other young men outside the nearby 'Stalwart Boar' tavern. A number of patrons of the 'Boar' had gathered on the road near the doorway to the tavern in order to see the competition run. Aran standing nearby, listened idly to snatches of conversation going on around him. Suddenly he heard something that made him pay closer attention, and he strained to hear while trying to appear unobtrusive.

"... and the raids from Thakur art increasing, I too hast heard of merchants now employing soldiers to guard their wagons on the remote roads" one man was saying.

"I'd wager the mercenaries are profiting from the Thakur incursions," growled another, "They can set their own fees, large ones too I warrant, for they know that the merchants will not profit by running the risk of travelling without guard."

"I do not believe these rumours," remarked another scornfully, "They are stories circulated by the guards in order to increase their trade."

The first man turned to stare at the cynic, "Thou hast doubts?"

"Aye, we have had no proof," the bearded man replied.

Another man carefully poured out onto the cobbles the dregs of the ale he had been moodily swirling around the bottom of his mug, "You call raids on Riggeltz no proof! By Andur man, would you have Thakur raiding parties seen within this very town square before you would accept proof?"

The other shook his head, "No, never. But Riggeltz is a border town frequented by thieves and adventurers. How does one know it is not local troubles that are being reported as Thakur raids?"

The older man walked back into the tavern to return his mug, and reappearing frowned, "I for one believe these reports, and can only hope that the Provincial Council also takes them seriously."

"The Council will do anything to avoid any sort of confrontation," the bearded man spat onto the road in contempt. "If it comes to a war, we have the most inept Council ever formed to protect our interests. The Goddess must help Andur, for that is the only help we are likely to receive."

"True," interjected another, "This Council is weak and split into factions. Look back through our history and you will see invasion whenever the rulers of the land are divided, if we only had a high king to overturn the Council and make the land strong."

The first man sighed, "If wishes were kings, the Andur line has been dead for at least five generations. We have to do something about this problem ourselves. We cannot rely on the Council..."

"Aran!" Sed hissed, "Arantur, have you fallen asleep? They are calling for those who wish to compete in the competition. Aran..."

Aran swung around, forgetting for a moment why he had been waiting outside the Boar in the first place.

Sed and Aran walked over to where a group of young men had gathered around a large wooden box. Through the gaps in the timbers Aran could see a large and obviously unhappy

pig. Briefly one of its small beady eyes fastened upon them and it squealed loudly. Aran grimaced and straightened his for once spotless tunic, guessing he would not be clean for much longer.

Upon a small, raised platform nearby, the town mayor was explaining the rules of the competition. Aran listened, they were simple enough, the pig was to be released and moments later the runners would be given the signal to catch it. The pig could only be caught with one's bare hands, use of nets, traps etc would be considered cheating and the entrant disallowed. If the pig was not caught within the hour, then the prize money would increase for the next year's competition.

Sed briefly clasped his shoulder and wished his brother the best of luck. Aran thought sourly that Sed was thinking only of his bet and would not be overly troubled if Aran came out the worst for it. Aran was fond of his foster-brother, but he knew that Sed's great love of money would stand higher than his apparent regard for his family.

His thoughts were distracted by a tearing sound, and he turned to see two men with crowbars removing one of the ends of the box containing the pig. Sensing freedom and seeing a way to escape, the pig did not linger long in the box and trotted outside. It swung its head, and peering shortsightedly at the great mass of men around quickly decided that this was not a good place to forage for food, and set off at a fast trot for the nearest side street out of the square. Moments later the mayor blew a horn, and the young men of the town dashed off in hot pursuit, with Aran, who was not the fleetest of runners, taking the rear.

Aran loped along easily following the uproar and keeping his eyes upon the other runners in the distance. The pig could be heard squealing farther ahead, its hooves a-patter on the cobblestones of the central part of the town. Shouts from well-meaning bystanders told Aran that the pig had dived into the Narrows, the oldest, darkest, narrowest streets of Leigh - streets that were the haunt of the prostitutes, common thieves and drunks of the town. It figures, he thought, if I was a pig, that's where I would be heading. I would be finding the darkest, smelliest, dampest corner, and there I would stay until nightfall. Aran stopped and tried to remember the layout of the maze-like streets of the Narrows. Ahead he could hear the sound of the pursuit and going by the direction they were taking, the runners would soon be out of the town and into the fields beyond. As the noise faded away he stood very quietly and listened for the tell-tale patter of the pig's hooves, but heard nothing. Quietly he walked, stopped and listened, but still heard nothing. At one street corner he caught the distasteful aroma of rotting vegetables, possibly one of the town's seedier tavern's back doors opened out into this part of the Narrows. Aran moved into the dead-end street, wrinkling his nose against the foul odour of rotting turnips. He stopped and listened intently, whilst trying to peer into the damp darkness. Finally his ears caught the sound of an animal pawing through and investigating the garbage at the street's dead-end. He moved silently, glad for once that the strong vegetable odours were disguising his own scent and closed in upon the animal. His reasoning had proved accurate, the pig moved unconcernedly across a small sunlit patch as it rooted amongst the limp greens and slimy vegetables heaped into the corner. Aran held himself back only for a moment, then diving into the corner landed upon the pig, vegetables and all. The pig squealed in surprise and tried to knock itself loose from Aran's grasp, but taking a deep breath Aran strengthened his grip upon the pig's oiled hide and gave the animal a few mighty blows that it was soon rendered unconscious.

Aran stood and gingerly inspected his limbs, grimacing at the seeping blood where he had grazed his knees upon the cobblestones. Habitually pulling his fingers through his hair, he encountered a tender spot on his scalp and dampness starting to dribble down the side of his face. Pulling his hand away he discovered blood on his fingers and reasoned he must have cracked his scalp on the wall when he crash-tackled the pig. Pulling off his now fragrant tunic, he balled it up and sat briefly on an old wooden box with the tunic to his head waiting for the growing dizziness to pass and the flow of blood to ease. As his eyes adjusted to the dim light of the street, he noticed the furtive movements of rats scuttling against the wall trying to find the deepest darkness in which to hide. We will need cats let loose in these streets, he thought sourly, otherwise we will have another outbreak of plague; I'd best have a word with a mayor after the fair. With his head no longer spinning, and feeling a little more composed he threw his blood-stained shirt back on, bent over and with easy strength, lifted the pig over one shoulder and walked out of the Narrows.

The crowds gathering in the square cheered when they saw Aran with the pig. Seeing them he grinned back briefly and placed the still unconscious animal at the feet of the mayor. Sed ran up and clapped Aran on the back, jubilant that he had won his bet. In the distance Aran could still hear the noise of the pursuit, briefly he wondered what the runners could be following. A couple of older men lifted the pig and put it into another box. After the presentation it would be slaughtered, and would be slowly roasted on a spit over a large fire at the feast for the fair's close tomorrow afternoon. Aran sat down and inspected his scalp with his hands. The blood flow had ceased but he could feel the makings of a large and prominent lump beginning to form. Silently he cursed himself for a fool for allowing Sed to talk him into participating.

As word finally reached them, the other runners returned sheepishly to the square. It seemed that for last twenty minutes they had been chasing a large, fat, and understandably unhappy pig dog which had been minding its own business at the far end of the Narrows. The crowd good-naturedly gave them a ribbing about their mistake, and there was general laughter amongst spectators and runners. The mayor, dressed in his ceremonial robes, smiled and waved at the crowd to quieten down, so he could present the winner with the prize. He motioned for Aran to join him on the raised platform.

"Lords and Ladies," the generally working class spectators laughed at that. "We are here to present to our very own apprentice blacksmith, Arantur of Leigh, this pouch containing five silver marks, and one gold mark for the heroic capture of the pig."

He was drowned out by loud cheering and whistling from the crowd, which was enjoying every moment of this.

"...Arantur..." the mayor ginned at the raucous crowd before him, but he had to wait until the noise had dropped to a low murmur like the distant sea. "Arantur has shown strength and cunning in capturing this animal," more cheering then erupted from the crowd. "So by mutual agreement of all of Leigh's councillors, we would also like to present him with this fine dagger." Smiling, the mayor turned to Aran and handed him a long, black hafted dagger and the thin leather pouch containing the prize money and slapped his back in congratulations. Aran received his prizes with a hesitant smile, and briefly waved at the crowd who cheered back enthusiastically.

“Speech, speech,” someone in the crowd called out. Aran peered into the mob and spotted Sed grinning and waving. The crowd caught the hint Sed had dropped, and everyone started calling out for Arantur to make a speech. Cursing Sed yet again, Aran turned over the dagger in his hands, professionally noting the fineness of the blade and the simplicity, yet functionality of the weapon. This dagger had not been made in Leigh. The nearest swordsmiths were in the great walled towns which boasted garrisons of soldiers. He mused for a moment about the fine work that would go into such a weapon then became aware of the crowd yelling out for him to say something.

Reluctantly he cleared his throat, “I, I thank you all for these fine gifts...” he began. The crowd cheered again, fuelled by an afternoon spent in the nearby taverns, Aran stared at the crowd and wondered briefly why their faces were starting to blur. “...And wish to say...”

Aran shook his head in frustration. He was starting to feel dizzy again. “...And wish to say that...” he closed his eyes for a moment, thinking that the knock he sustained must have been harder than he expected. Then slowly, and without ceremony, Aran dropped to the ground unconscious, like an oak in a forest felled by a woodsman’s axe....

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Aran was not aware of being moved—his struggle back to consciousness was greeted with a voice he didn't recognise.

“He shall be quite recovered soon. All head wounds bleed freely and this cold side of mutton I have placed upon the wound will help to reduce the size of the lump. I would be interested in how he gained this injury. Did he perhaps head-butt the pig into insensibility?” Then the voice drifted nearer, and he felt a cool hand upon his brow and heard a voice filled with genuine concern. “Are you awake, young man? How are you feeling?”

Aran opened heavy eyes and looked up to meet the dark and interested gaze of an elderly man with a short-bristly grey hair, who was dressed in the grey and red robes of a healer.

“I have a headache,” he admitted, trying to focus his eyes upon the stranger.

“That is to be expected after such a blow.” The man moved away to the fireplace where he removed a small cauldron from the embers. Taking a flask from the table he poured some of the contents of the cauldron into the flask and appeared again at Arantur’s side. “This is a concoction made from the bark of the willow tree,” he explained. “Drink it. Your headache will soon be gone.”

Aran took the warm flask and sipped the bitter brew, he made a face and turned to set it aside, but the elderly healer stayed his hand. “To the dregs, most of the healing properties of this tea are in the leavings at the bottom.” Aran frowned at that but nevertheless drank the liquid in one go.

“Did you go to Glaive to learn your skills, healer?” Aran heard Sed speak from behind.

“Aye, and a very long time that was ago too,” the old man replied, pulling up a stool to sit beside his patient on the low pallet.

“Can you not stay in Leigh?” Sed inquired, “We do not have a resident healer, and all our injuries are handled by a herbalist. She is very competent, but is certainly not a Glaive trained healer.”

The old man shook his lined and sun-darkened face. “Most healers by their calling are solitary creatures and spend their lives on the road. I came to Leigh on business, however

once my business here is finished I shall move on again. I have pressing matters to attend to at Sentinal.” He turned back to Arantur, “Now young man how are you feeling?”

Arantur pulled himself to a sitting position and gingerly felt his scalp, “Better, less dizzy. I hit the wall of the Narrows you know...” he explained with a rueful smile, “When I grabbed the pig. I didn’t know it at the time. Only when I felt the blood did I realise I had hurt myself.”

The healer removed the cold meat compress and inspected the wound, “It will heal soon. The blood has clotted and the lump is starting to go down. There is no injury to the brain other than the mild concussion, you will fully recover, just don’t do it again.”

Aran looked around until he met Sed’s eye, “Oh you can be certain of that.”

“What is your business in Leigh?” Sed asked of the healer, as he rapidly changed the subject.

He glanced over to Sed and considered his youth, “I am looking for a man. Perhaps you may know him?”

Sed walked over to the pallet and sat down near the healer, “I was born in Leigh and have lived here all my life. There are few men in the town I do not know,” he added proudly.

“The man I seek is not a native of this town,” the healer replied, “But I understand that he may have lived here since he was a small child. His parents died when he was an infant and he and his twin sister were taken by the travelling people when they happened upon the babies.”

“How did that happen?” asked Arantur, interested, “Were they killed?”

The healer shook his head, “No, they died of the bloody flux after eating bad mussels from the Titan River. There was not a healer within a day’s ride, so they died alone in their remote home.” He sighed, “Only the babies were spared as they were not yet on solid food, but still on mother’s milk.” He paused as if remembering back a score of years, “The parents had been dead only a matter of hours when the travelling people were alerted to the children’s plight by their screams of hunger. So they took them in and looked after them.”

“What happened to the twin sister, if you are looking for the boy?” asked Sed curiously, “Or have you already found the girl?”

The healer shook his head, “She died a couple of years later, bitten by a grey snake when she was three. I understand she wandered off from one of their encampments into the forest. When she did not return they went searching, for they feared she had been taken by wolves. They came across her body later that day. Her leg was swollen and discoloured from the bite.” He gnawed on one thumbnail, “There are very few adults that survive the bite of that snake, and children not at all.”

“So how did the son come to be in Leigh?” asked Aran.

“It was the year of the plague and in one of the towns the travelling people had picked up the infection,” he replied. “The sickness ravaged the encampment, however the boy escaped the contagion because the elderly woman who originally took the children in, walked out of the encampment with the child and took him to the nearest town. I understand that she walked for three days until she reached the farms surrounding Leigh, where she placed him with a family.”

“What happened to the woman?” asked Aran.

“She returned to the few who remained of her people,” the healer shook his head in amazement. “She must have had a strong constitution, because shortly afterwards she too caught the plague, but survived it. When I finally caught up with the people fifteen years later, she was still alive...of great age and hoary as an old tree, but in good health for her age and situation.” He looked across at Sed, “So do you know of a man with such a history?”

Aran glanced at Sed for support, but his foster-brother shrugged his shoulders dismissively.

Turning to the healer and with eyes haunted Aran admitted quietly, “I may be the one you seek. I have no family of my own and I was raised by a carter and his wife.” He nodded towards Sed, “That is my foster-brother Sed. I am named Arantur and I remember my foster parents telling me that I had been given to them by one of the travelling people fleeing the plague.”

The healer started in shock at Aran’s words and then taking a candle, he placed it so the light fell upon the young man’s face. Carefully he studied Arantur’s features, immediately noting the blood-smearred, dark-blond hair and the hint of blond stubble upon the cheeks, chin and strong jaw. He saw too the high, broad cheekbones, the narrow, finely-chiselled nose and the arching dark-blond eyebrows framing hard grey eyes clouded still with the effects of the concussion.

“You may be the one,” he agreed finally, “However I need to see your right shoulder. The travelling woman told me that the child had a small birthmark there that marked him, as well as his sister.”

Arantur sat up, and with Sed’s help pulled off his tunic to bare his chest.

The healer noted the prominent muscles, and then moved the candle so he could study the young man’s back. It did not take him long to find the small birthmark. It was about the size and shape of an orange seed.

“You can put on your tunic,” he smiled sitting back on the stool, “For I am certain you are the man I seek.” He held out his hand in greeting, “My name is Healmage Trevan, and I have been searching for you for nigh on twenty years. Young man, you are wanted at Glaive.”

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Chapter 2—Sentinal

It was now completely dark, and the crowd had long since moved off the streets and into the inns and taverns of Leigh when Sed and Aran walked slowly home.

“So will you go with him Aran?” asked Sed of his foster-brother.

Aran bowed his head in an agony of indecision, “I honestly do not know. I have obligations towards my master Cody. By Andur I enjoy blacksmithing and would be loathe to give it up on a fool’s errand to Glaive. Yet...” and he sighed heavily, “This healer has been looking for me for nigh on twenty years. I cannot lightly forget that obligation.”

“He did not say why you are wanted at Glaive,” Sed reminded him.

“Aye, he was close-mouthed about that,” Aran agreed, “But I must go. I cannot disappoint a man who has been searching for me before I was even born. I can always return to Leigh and resume my trade. At least there is nothing that will stop me from doing that.”

Aran fell silent as he thought again of his long dead family. Before he and Sed had left, Aran had pressed the old man for more information about his folks but the healer had shook his head, saying that he had already told them all he knew.

“Perhaps you are to be a mage?” wondered Sed aloud.

Aran stopped in his tracks and laughed, “I...a mage! For once in your life can you be serious Sed. Can you imagine me casting spells?”

Sed stared at the taller man, “True, but you are mightily adept at metals and can turn even the crudest lump of iron into a fine tool. I have heard Cody speak of your smithing skills with awe and he is a perfectionist at the trade.”

“Aye and he will be reluctant to let me go,” Arantur sighed and resumed walking.

“However, I certainly won’t be rushing off. We have back orders to fill and Cody won’t release me until this busy period is over...that I can assure you.”

*

Arantur was back at the forge the next morning working on fashioning a new axle for a farm wagon which had broken only days before. His injury was healing well and he felt no lingering after effects from his accident. Confidently he shaped the steel bar into the required shape, and studied the metal for imperfections that would weaken the axle. After much inspection he found no defects that would cause problems later on. He heard voices drifting in from the front of the shop, and immediately recognised his master Cody, so easing back on the bellows to lessen the din he finally made out the quiet voice of the healer.

Sighing he put down his tools, and plunged his face and hands into a tub of cool water to clean up after the grimy business of working at the forge. Rolling down his sleeves he walked out to the front of the shop to see what the conversation was all about.

It did not take him long to find out. The healer was arguing heatedly with the blacksmith, insisting that Cody release his apprentice from his obligations at the forge. Cody turned to Arantur and with pleading eyes asked, “Surely thou dost not believe him.”

Aran shrugged unhappily, “There seems to be no doubt of it Master Cody. The Archmage at Glaive has asked for me and it seems I must go there.” Aran glanced over at the healer, “Although I am certain you can wait until my apprenticeship is complete?”

Healer Trevan shook his head, “You must come straight away, already I am twenty years late. I cannot tarry another day. We must leave immediately.”

“Immediately?” Cody and Aran spoke in horrified unison. “That’s impossible,” argued Cody, “I cannot allow it!”

“It must be so,” growled Trevan, rapidly losing his patience with the craftsman. “I am under strict obligation to my masters in Glaive. Aran has been asked for and I am obliged to bring him to Glaive.” He stared at Cody and there passed an unspoken look between them, Cody turned his head aside, he could not meet the power that briefly flared in the old man’s dark eyes.

“Very well,” Cody mumbled grudgingly, “Arantur, I release thee from thy apprenticeship. Go now, and return when thou art finished at Glaive.”

Aran was still in shock, “You want me to go now?” he demanded of Trevan. “Why? What is this urgent business that needs to have me rushing off so suddenly?”

Trevan adjusted his robes, “Of that I cannot speak, my masters only will explain. Come now, we must return to your home so you can gather your belongings and farewell your family.” He frowned at the confusion in Aran’s eyes, “However you should know that it is important matters that hasten your departure. If it was my decision only, then I would let you stay and finish your apprenticeship, but these decisions are out of my hands. I have finally found you and the patience of my masters is not eternal. Come, make your farewells and let us go, we have days of travel ahead of us.”

Briefly, unhappily Aran hugged Master Cody, and with many a backward glance walked from the forge.

*

“This is as far as you may accompany us,” Trevan turned to Sed who had walked with his foster-brother and the healer to the last of the farms surrounding Leigh. “We must now mount, and make this a swifter journey than by foot.”

Sed glanced at his brother who had been leading a tall bay gelding by the bridle. Trevan, despite his age, mounted his grey mare effortlessly, and secured to his saddle the lead rope of the lean chestnut pack horse upon which all their possessions had been packed.

“I will send a message when I am able,” Aran reassured Sed, clasping the younger man on his shoulder, “I am sure I will not be gone long. Keep hopeful that I shall be returned in a matter of weeks.”

Sed briefly hugged Aran, “I will want to hear of all your travels, be well brother.”

“And you Sed,” replied Aran, “Stay out of the taverns in my absence.”

Sed grinned, “That promise I do not think I shall be able to keep brother. However mount; I have not seen you ride a horse since I was a boy.”

Arantur clambered into the saddle with a lot less grace than Trevan. He fiddled briefly with the stirrups until they were the right length, and then settled the old travelling cloak given to him by his foster-mother firmly about his shoulders.

“Ride a safe road, Aran,” called out Sed.

“May the Goddess and Andur’s name protect you,” Aran replied, the formal farewell sounding strange upon his lips.

Trevan turned to check Arantur, “Are you ready lad?”

Aran nodded, whilst gazing back towards Leigh.

“Then let us be off,” Trevan drove his heels into the flank of the mare and she leapt forward.

Arantur waved farewell to Sed, whilst grabbing the saddle as the gelding moved into a trot. It took a moment to settle into the saddle, and then finally he was secure enough to turn around to wave a last goodbye. In the distance he could vaguely see Sed waving and calling farewell until he too disappeared into the dusk and the dusk kicked up by the horse's hooves.

*

Night had been several hours old when Trevan pulled his horse up at a remote hostel on the Sentinal road. There was a lantern burning in the entrance and the door opened to admit the Alewife.

"Be ye after bed and board strangers?"

Trevan dismounted and handed his reins to a groom who had suddenly appeared out of the absolute darkness of the road.

"Aye, mistress, for just this one night, two rooms only, for we will be leaving at first light."

She took their cloaks and hung them on pegs in the entrance hall, "Well there is lamb stew in the pot, and bread fresh yesterday." She sat them down on a bench in front of a well scrubbed wooden table, digging into his pouch Trevan silently paid her two bronze pennies for their accommodation whilst she served out two generous helpings of stew.

Aran ate hungrily. He had not broken his fast since eggs and bread this morning, and the simple hostel food helped to assuage his hunger.

Trevan was mopping up the last of the stew with his bread when Aran leant back and stretched tired limbs. It had been many years since he had ridden and the unfamiliar exercise had stiffened muscles.

"How is business, Mistress? Aran asked politely.

The Alewife looked up from a table she had been scrubbing, "Fair, young master. Custom of late has been good, especially in the days leading up to the Leigh market, but before that, and after the merchants have returned to the walled towns it will only be infrequent visitors and travelling healers like yon master which allows me an income."

Aran was perplexed, "Why? Does no one travel on the roads these days?"

"Only a few young master." She sighed and paused in her scrubbing to glance up at her visitors. "Rumours of attacks on the road have dissuaded people from leaving their home towns except for special events, and then only in company with many others, or riding under guard."

Aran frowned, "But those attacks were rumoured only to be happening around the remote border regions of Riggeltz. Surely there are no troubles this close to the garrisons of the walled towns?"

"Aye, we are free of those troubles here, this road is as safe as it ever was...but people take their own counsel and believe the Thakur to be on every lonely stretch of road in the province." She looked up again, "People seem to be nervous of their own shadows, and our Council does nothing to quell the troubles where they originate. I have heard no word of soldiers being sent to Riggeltz." She glanced over at Trevan gazing into the fire seemingly completely lost in his own thoughts, "What say you master healer. Do you know if the Council plans to send troops to Riggeltz?"

Trevan reluctantly turned away from the fire and shook his grey head, "I doubt it. The Council seems to want to keep the provincial legions in the cities" He shook his head again. "I cannot understand their reasoning."

Finally he stood, ending the conversation “T’was a fine stew Mistress...Arantur.”

Aran stood. “Yes Trevan?”

Trevan motioned Aran towards the door. “It is time for bed. We have an early start.”

*

The sun was just starting to creep over the low hills when Trevan and Arantur mounted and set off again on their journey to Glaive. With a good night’s sleep, and with a breakfast of porridge and fresh baked bread behind them, Trevan was disposed to talk whilst they rode.

“What sort of education do you possess lad,” he asked of Arantur as they rode side by side.

Aran looked across at his travelling companion and saw a rare smile light Trevan’s wrinkled old face.

“I can read and write passably well, Healer Trevan. Master Cody made sure that my education was enough for me to be a successful businessman, as well as a good blacksmith, although I must own that I have not the head for figures that Master Cody had.”

Trevan prodded his horse into a faster walk, “Cody seems a good man, I am only sorry that I had to remove you from his employ. You would have made a fine blacksmith in fact I saw examples of your work whilst I was waiting to speak with him.”

Aran frowned. “How could you tell my work from my master’s? Was it so bad?”

Trevan shook his head, “On the contrary, you produced some very fine pieces.” He glanced across at the younger man. “Yours was the skillet, the blade of the hoe and the deep-sided pan.”

“Yes, but how did you know....?”

“I am from Glaive, and all the Glaive trained Healers are also Mages. Did you not know that every person has a way, a mark or aura about him and for a craftsman that mark is mirrored in everything he makes. You may be a saddler or fletcher from Daemonere, and a mage could recognise your work right across the province. If a mage has seen the aura of the man, then he could recognise the mark of the man in everything he or she makes.”

Aran gnawed his lower lip nervously, “You are a mage?”

Trevan nodded.

Aran slowly rearranged his astounded features into a semblance of calm, “Are then all healers mages?”

“Aye, most Healers have a mage Ability, however training on Glaive will enhance and refine it.”

“So how does one know if one has an Ability?” Aran asked his grey eyes narrowing.

“One has a knack, or an extraordinary talent at something,” Trevan explained, “Sometimes an Ability manifests itself as an affinity with nature, the elements, the earth and all its creatures.” He looked across at Arantur’s puzzled face, “Let me try and explain...many years ago I passed through a remote western village. In my capacity as a healer I stayed for a few days to treat what illness or injury had come to pass whilst I was in the area. One day a young woman came to me with a chronic complaint...”

“What was wrong with her?” asked Aran, deeply interested.

Trevan frowned at the interruption but nevertheless continued on, “She was but three and twenty and came to me complaining of heaviness in the head and frequent headaches. Now such problems can be symptoms of greater or lesser illnesses, so I cast my powers and looked into her health and to my surprise found no disease or reason for such ills.” Trevan urged his

lagging horse back into a fast walk, "I questioned her at length to find out if these headaches came at particular seasons, or within certain times of her moon cycle."

"Huh," Aran was puzzled at the term, "What's a moon cycle?"

Trevan chuckled, "It is obvious that you're not intimate with women." He shook his head, "I'm sorry Arantur, for my explanation will have to wait for another time."

Arantur feeling uncomfortable at his ignorance fell silent.

Trevan continued his story, "No, she said. It did not come with the cycles, but it was very odd that I mentioned it, for as sure as the sun would come up in the morning, there would be a tremendous storm a day or two after she felt a headache coming on. I knew then that she had the latent Weathermage Ability. Her knack, her innate powers would bring on severe headaches prior to major weather changes moving through her area. Her power, being untrained, was slight and at that time she could only subconsciously sense the weather." He smiled, "That was a few years ago. With her training on Glaive, she should not only be able to consciously sense and predict the weather, but with skill, also direct the weather as well."

Arantur cleared his suddenly dry throat, "My master Cody often said that I seemed to have a knack with metals... Does this mean that I may be a mage too?"

Trevan pulled his horse to a stop and stared long and hard at Arantur, "It is possible you may well have an Ability, but remember that it is very rare for a mage to be able to use his or her Ability to work metal. In Glaive's long history only the ancient Metalimages have had the Ability to work power through metals, thus was the high King's Sword made."

Aran prodded his gelding back into a walk, "I have heard people tell of that weapon. That the mages have made it so that only a descendant of High King Andur could raise it. That it is magical and will consume any that dare to touch it, any that are not of Andur's line."

"Quite true, but with one exception," Trevan nodded at Arantur's knowledge, "The Archmage of Glaive can lift it, but only whilst he or she is protected by certain arcane spells and incantations, then for a short time only will the sword recognise a temporary master."

"And no one else can touch it?" Aran was amazed.

Trevan shook his head, "When the spelling was complete not even those early Metalimages could handle it."

"So where is the sword now?" asked Arantur, fascinated.

"After the line of Andur died, it was taken from Andur's Keep by the then Archmage Xides, and placed in protection at Glaive." He smiled, "If you are fortunate you may get to see it when we get to Glaive."

Aran shook his head in amazement, "Such wonders, yet I should like to see this sword for myself." He looked across at Trevan, "I may be but an apprentice blacksmith and not a swordsmith, however I find that I have an interest in seeing this particular weapon."

They rode for a while longer in silence, but Arantur was full of questions and could not hold his peace.

"Trevan"

"Yes.

"Is the high King's Sword the reason why we have not crowned another king, of another equally ancient lineage as that of the Andurian line?"

Trevan sneezed and blew his nose noisily, "That is indeed the truth. The sword is attuned, directly connected to the land and without its power; the king is nothing but a figurehead.

However..." and he paused to arrange his cloak more firmly about him as a light shower dusted them with moisture "A king ruling with the sword would be at one with the earthpower of the land, sea and air."

Arantur pulled a face, "It was short-sighted of the early mages to construct a weapon that could only be wielded by one family line. Did they not envisage a time that the Andur line would be no more? Can today's mages not spell another sword for another king and another lineage?"

"No Arantur," Trevan sighed wearily. "To do such a thing is beyond the powers currently existing at Glaive. The mages look to explain the world and all in it through the sciences. Basic and elemental magics only are taught in the great college. Weather-witching, healing, mages that are attuned to animals and all growing, living things are educated on the mage's isle. The great feats of power are of the past, even Archmage Maran himself is but a Weathermage." Trevan gazed at the lowering clouds, and hastened to add, "Of the highest order of course. However even he is reluctant to attempt to cast the ancient great spells."

Arantur turned a shocked face to Trevan, "I did not know! All in Leigh talk of Glaive with hushed and awed speech, as if one of the master mages could materialise in their midst and berate them for speaking of things beyond their knowledge."

Trevan chuckled, "In all my years I have never known of any mage, of any era, to master instantaneous translocation. I believe it was attempted in the past, but when those that cast the necessary spells disappeared, never to be seen of again on this world, well the practice became unpopular for obvious reasons." He laughed again, "Why do you think we ride horses?"

Arantur smiled then frowned as he continued the thread of the conversation, "So when did the great powers leave Glaive?"

The sun came out again and Trevan opened his cloak and shook off the wetness, "After the murder of the High King Alexi, his Queen Darnice, and their children in Andur's Keep by Serat assassins in the year 203."

"The last of the Andurian line," mused Arantur aloud, "Almost as if the magepower faded in the land with the lineage of the High King, but there must still be power still! The very existence of mages on Glaive attests to that, could it be that the power of the lineage lives still within the high King's Sword?"

Trevan nodded, "That is the general opinion on Glaive. Now enough talk for we are falling behind and I wish to make Sentinal before dusk, else the gates will be closed and we will not be admitted until the following day."

*

It was close on dusk when they rode across the heavy drawbridge and through the large stone gatehouse that was Sentinal's main entrance. Rain slicked cobbled streets rose up from the entrance to disappear into a maze of lanes more narrow and convoluted than even the Narrows of Leigh could boast. Aran hunched deeper into his sodden cloak, and cursed the intermittent showers that had plagued them all day. Above them the sky darkened, and the overcast deepened, resolving into the promise of heavy rain on the morrow.

Following Trevan's example, Aran dismounted and led his horse along the darkening streets, neither of them trusting their mounts' footing on the slippery cobbles. They walked for a while, slowly climbing as the city rose before them. On either side of the street ancient

wooden gabled houses leant precariously across and at times almost touching in the middle. Aran looking around had seen no one since they had passed the legion guards in the gatehouse, the rain and chill obviously keeping the townsfolk indoors. When they drew near an inn called 'The Mermaid', Aran lingered near its entrance, whilst casting Trevan a meaningful glance.

"Not here," Trevan spoke quietly, "I know this place, the beds are full of vermin and you'll be lucky to leave in the morning with your life. The Swan is my choice, it's not far to walk now."

Aran sighed and thought of the water pooling in his boots, and believed that it would take him at least a week to dry out. Warily he pulled on the lead rein and the gelding, dozing tiredly in the rain, roused itself to follow in damp acquiescence after Trevan and the other two horses.

A few minutes later they stood outside a large, solidly built hostel with a freshly painted sign displaying a white swan in flight. Trevan handed Aran his lead reins and going to the door rapped smartly upon it. Arantur waiting in the street saw the door open and caught a glimpse of a fiercely burning fire inside, and the unmistakable aroma of a roast cooking.

"Who is it?" queried a balding man peering out into the damp darkness of the street.

"Guests, Chanten," growled Trevan, "Can you arrange accommodation for two, and stabling for three horses?"

"Trevan, is that you?" The small portly man moved out from the brightness of the hostel into the chill and foetid dampness of the street so his eyes could adjust to the darkness.

Trevan pushed back the hood of his cloak, and walked into the light spilling from the doorway.

"It is you!" the hostel keeper shook Trevan's hand, "It's been too many years old friend, however you have certainly picked an unseasonably cold and wet night for your journeying. Come in, come in...Olav," he called back over his shoulder, immediately a large, bear-like man eased his way through the doorframe. "Three horses to be stabled and when you are finished take the saddlebags to the two front rooms." he instructed.

"Aye, master Chanten," the large man pulled his forelock, and gathering up the reins urged the horses down an almost hidden side entrance to the stables at the back of the hostel.

Aran watched the horses being led away and then sighed with relief as he followed Trevan and the hostel-keeper back into the warm comfort of the building. Placing his dripping cloak amongst others hung upon pegs in the entrance hall, Aran was close behind the heels of the other two men as they moved into the common room.

"Come warm yourselves by the fire," said Chanten, "As soon as Olav is finished with the horses he shall bring up your bags and you can change into dry clothes." He noticed Arantur shivering by the door, "Or perhaps a hot bath is required sooner?"

Aran looked up at that suggestion and nodded damply.

"Aye, I thought as much...Seedne, Seedne," he called loudly.

A slight, blonde headed and sparsely bearded youth appeared from the direction of the kitchen.

"Seedne, can you go back to the kitchens and arrange water to be warmed for baths for two," he glanced at Trevan, but Trevan silently shook his head.

"Very well Trevan. No Seedne, bathwater only for one."

“Yes, master Chanten,” the youth disappeared back into a doorway.

“Now,” and the hostel keeper turned back to his two guests, “I will take you to your rooms. As soon as you are warm and dry come back down and I shall arrange for a meal to be served.”

He led them up some stairs, and then turned down a dark hallway lit only by a couple of flickering lamps. They came to a couple of doors before the end of the hall and producing a key from a pocket in his apron, Chanten opened them.

“Your rooms,” he said briskly, “Now as I recall Trevan, you usually have this one on the right. How many nights do you intend staying?”

Trevan cocked an ear to the rain now drumming on the roof shingles, “Until the worse of this rain eases. I do not mind travelling in light showers, but by Andur I’ll not travel in pouring rain.”

“Then you’ll be a few days here,” Chanten said immediately, “This rain seems set in and will not pass overnight.”

He turned to Arantur, “What is your name lad?”

“Arantur,” Aran replied.

“Well Arantur, this is your room on the left. There is a hot bath being drawn for you now downstairs in the washroom. After you are finished come back up and your clothes will be here.” Chanten walked into Aran’s room and lifted the lid of a wooden box near the bed. Reaching in, he withdrew two large loosely woven cloths, then handing one to Trevan and one to Arantur indicated for the young man to follow him.

“Come Arantur, I shall show you the washroom.”

Arantur, hugging his large, soft drying-cloth to his chest, trailed Chanten back downstairs.

*

Later that evening Arantur was lying back on the bed enjoying its softness and warmth when he was alerted by a soft knock outside. Rousing himself he pushed himself up from the bed and opened the door.

Trevan was waiting in the hallway, and he quickly walked into Arantur’s room.

“Trouble?” asked Arantur, turning back towards the elderly mage.

Trevan shook his head and sat down upon a stool near the window.

Arantur sat back upon the bed and waited for Trevan to explain the reason for the visit.

The Healmage stared at the rain drumming on the thick glassed pane of the small window. Glass was rare and expensive and if the whole of the hostel’s windows were glazed then Chanten would have paid a king’s ransom for such an alteration.

Trevan cleared his throat, “We will be staying in Sentinal at least two days,” he said finally, “It will give the weather a chance to clear, and I have some urgent business to conduct here.”

Arantur was mildly surprised, “I thought we were needed quickly in Glaive.”

“Aye, so we are,” agreed Trevan. “However we have yet to ride to Andromach and we shall need fair north-westerly winds to sail to Glaive and this rain is driven by a southerly. Do not worry, I shall send a message to Glaive which will alert them to our imminent arrival.”

“May I explore the town whilst you are conducting your business?” asked Arantur.

“Of course, but exercise caution. Most of the taverns I would certainly avoid.” Trevan advised.

“I would speak to some of the blacksmiths of Sentinal,” Arantur mused, “I would like to see what their smithing is like. I am certain that Cody would be interested to hear what I see of their work.”

“Very well,” Trevan agreed, “Sentinal is an ancient and interesting town, and it has much history. The defensive walls and some of the churches date back to the time of the Warrior Kings,” he added, “And you may not be aware, but Sentinal boasts the finest swordsmiths of all Andur. If you are visiting blacksmiths, try to see the swordsmith’s work, for I have noticed that you already possess a Sentinal blade.”

Aran frowned puzzled, “I have never owned a sword.”

“Perhaps not, but your dagger sitting there on top of your saddlebags is of the finest Sentinal quality. You received it as part of your prize for catching that pig?”

Aran nodded in agreement, and leant across to pick up the blade to inspect it closer.

“Trevan?” asked Arantur suddenly.

The old mage paused as he started to walk back to his room.

“Do you wish me to pay for my lodgings here? I’ve been thinking that it would amount to a sizable sum for two to be staying at such an establishment.”

Trevan shook his head, “No, do not concern yourself about such matters. Besides I have coins enough, for Glaive is paying for this particular expedition. You keep your money, perhaps you may wish to purchase some more clothes, or even a newer travelling cloak. As we move out of summer the weather will deteriorate into rain more often and you will certainly need more than one cloak for your health and comfort.”

Aran heard the increasing rain and nodded, “I think I shall do that, this cold, wet weather is most unusual for late-summer.”

Trevan opened the door, “You’ll most likely not see me tomorrow. I have business that will keep me away most of the day. Enjoy your day Arantur...” He gestured to the bolt, “I trust Chanten and his staff here, but I think it may be best to bolt your door tonight, I do not know who else is staying under this roof... Sleep well.”

“And you,” Arantur replied.

*

It was dark still when Aran awoke the next morning. Getting up, he stumbled through the unfamiliar room to unlatch the small narrow window and gaze out at the wet streets below. Darker, heavier clouds had rolled in overnight, and steady rain drummed upon the cobblestones of Sentinal. Aran guessed it was still quite early in the morning. He lay back upon the bed and decided that he would postpone his exploration of the town until later that day, and after being so thoroughly drenched the day before Aran had no wish to immediately repeat the experience.

Idly he leant across and lit the small oil lamp that stood on a wooden table by his bed. Rummaging through his saddlebag he drew out carefully an oiled waterproof skin bag. Within the bag was his most prized possession, his one and only book.

The History of the Province of Andur may have contained only dry and dusty facts, but to Aran it was priceless. It had taken him three years of paid apprenticeship to save enough to buy it from Leigh’s only scribe. The printing press had been in use in the province for only the last fifty years, and even then the first books had been made for the mages, the Council, and the wealthy noble landholders. When a young Arantur had ventured for the first time into

Jarad scribe's establishment in Leigh four years ago, he had only just been accepted into apprenticeship by Cody the blacksmith. For three months he had eyes only for the half-dozen bound books that Jarad kept for sale amongst all the usual scrolls and papers that the scribe had on offer. It was an important day in Aran's life when he gave Jarad twelve bronze pennies, for Aran a full half year's wage, as down payment on a single book. Aran's foster parents had lamented the loss of the money, and Sed had ragged him mercilessly about the fact that his elder brother was turning into a cleric, but it was Cody's implicit approval that kept Aran steadfast against all opposition. Three years later he had returned to Jarad's shop with a bulging purse, and soon after walked out with his treasured book. Cody's lessons with letters and numbers had enabled Aran to read it fully, and he had spent many an evening reading out extracts to his illiterate foster brother and foster parents. Aran may have admitted to being a poor mathematician, but he was an able reader and had read the weighty volume completely at least three times in the past year.

Aran opened it yet again, and turned to his favourite section, the telling of the retaking of the province by Warleader Andur, and his victorious rebel forces. The victory had been so complete and so popular to the population, that by general acclaim the Warleader had been hailed as High King and the province renamed after his lineage—even the calendar had been readjusted to start anew on the day of his coronation.

The newly crowned High King returned to Seawatch Keep, renamed now Andur's Keep in honour of the victory, and immediately set up court there. The finest veterans of the rebel force had been promoted to the Andurian King's Guard and regular training established at the Keep as insurance against future attack by the Serat. When High King Andur married his childhood love Baranta, who was soon delivered of a son Maran, and a year later, a daughter Alicia, the province was content and well pleased with the fertility of their new King and Queen. Twenty years later Maran succeeded his father as the High King of Andur, and Maran's son, Trenor succeeded him, and so continued the Andurian lineage, Aran thought to himself as he carefully closed the book. No one back in those heady, early days of the High King's reign would guess that the remnants of the Serat fleeing into the western plains and mountains would rise again hundreds of years later. Seemingly in vengeance for their defeat, they sent a handful of picked assassins into the province to kill High King Alexi, and with the deaths of both him and his family ensured the complete destruction of the Andurian line.

Aran continued reading for a while, then saving the oil in his lamp for that night, closed his book and replaced it in its hide bag. He gazed up at the roof. It had been a while now since he had heard the drumming of the rain, so standing he opened the window and gazed out at the wet streets below. The rain had finally eased to a slight drizzle, so Aran decided to venture out and explore the town. Swiftly he dressed and ran downstairs. The hostel was virtually deserted, most of its inmates were taking the wet weather as an opportunity for a sleep-in. Quickly he took his now dry travel cloak off its peg, and tossing it about his shoulders, walked into the street.

There were more people about now in the streets, Aran saw, and judging them by their clothing and air of self importance guessed them to be merchants and tradesmen. The cobblestones gleamed wetly and Aran walked up the slight hill away from the way they had come the evening before.

Almost immediately his wanderings took him into a street which his nose identified as consisting mainly of spice merchants. He took another turning and discovered a row of bakers, each with several customers waiting to be served. Arantur, not yet feeling hungry, walked on until finally in the distance he could hear the unmistakable sounds of blacksmiths at their trade. Aran let his ears be his guide, and after several minutes of rapidly walking through a veritable maze of narrow streets, he came at last to the street of the blacksmiths and swordsmiths. Slowly he wandered past whilst furtively eyeing off their workmanship, and occasionally catching glimpses of several at work in the forges. All he passed seemed too busy to stop and chat, so he contented himself with examining some pieces that had been laid out in front of the shops. Nodding at the quality, some of which rivalled Cody's work, he continued his meandering way up the street until he happened across the swordsmiths of which Sentinal was famed.

The forges and shops of the swordsmiths were no different to those of the blacksmiths, except for the finished items laid out for sale in front. Admiringly Aran gazed at the Sentinal weapons, noting the straight even features of the blades and the flawless metalwork. He caught the eye of one of the smiths and the older man nodded, so Aran reached down and examined one of the swords. The first thing he noticed was the almost perfect balance, moving back he gave a couple of experimental swings. Seeing his clumsiness, the swordsmith moved forward.

"These blades are some of the finest in Sentinal, note the flexibility in the blade...each one of our swords is pattern welded for extra strength." He took the blade back from Aran's inexperienced grasp and bringing the sword down upon a log, cut an inch into the wood without any perceivable effort. The blade rang gently as it bit into the wood.

"Impressive," admired Aran aloud, "How much?"

The swordsmith eyed Aran, noting his plain but serviceable gear, "More than you'll ever be able to afford, lad."

Arantur pulled a face, and took out his own dagger and handed it to the swordsmith. "I've been told this is a Sentinal blade. Do you know who made this?" he asked.

The smith took the dagger and turning it over in his hands studied it carefully.

"I see it is Jerad's work. In fact it is one of his better daggers." He looked up at Arantur, "This is old work...how came you by one of Jerad's blades?"

Aran accepted back his dagger, and replaced it in his belt, "It was a gift. How do you know who made it, there is no maker's mark."

"Aye, no mark, but we who know blades recognises each other's style and work," the smith replied. "Jerad, when he was alive was one of the finest swordsmiths of the province. He learned his trade from his father and his father from his own father before him. There has been swordsmithing in Jerad's lineage for generations. I even understand that the great sword of the high kings was made originally by Jerad's ancestor..."

He coughed and spat to the side, "That is before the mages interfered with it, ensuring that no one could wield it other than those of the Andurian line." He spat again in disgust, "Damn waste of a fine weapon if you ask my opinion, it now sits at Glaive and gathers dust and cobwebs." The swordsmith glared for a moment at the weather, then seemingly to recollect himself, leant down and picking up an oily rag ran it across the face of the blade, explaining

“It’s this damp weather you see,” he grinned ruefully “The swords will rust even as you watch, and who then will buy a rusty blade?”

Aran had to agree, the clouds were thickening again and the rain, which for a time had been reduced to intermittent showers, was settling into a fine old downpour. He stepped forward, edging closer into the swordsmith's shop to keep as dry as possible. Two other people who had been inspecting the blades also moved into the shelter of the shop. One, a thickset man in his mid-fifties was also dressed in travelling gear, but with the exception that beneath his cloak Aran caught the gleam of chainmail and saw a sword belted at his waist. His companion, whose features were hidden behind a hooded cloak, was of a similar height to the older man, although slighter and seemed to be considerably younger.

“What about this swordsmith, father?” The younger spoke with an unmistakably female voice.

Aran looked around in surprise. He had assumed the younger traveller was male for not many women sought the skills of a swordsmith, because in Leigh and working as an apprentice blacksmith he usually only had dealings with men. Women, in his opinion, tended to shy away from the noise, heat and grime associated with metalworking, so Aran was more than surprised to see a young woman frequenting with her father this particular street in Sentinal.

“Perhaps Alissa,” replied the older man, “Let me see the quality of his work.” So saying he picked up a small, narrow sword and tested the balance and weight in his hands. “Not bad,” he approved, “I’ve certainly seen worse. Come daughter, see if this suits you.”

The young woman pushed back the hood of her travelling cloak to reveal tightly braided long red-gold hair pulled back from a pale, fine featured face. She took the sword, and swung it in a series of practiced, yet economical exercises.

She nodded, “Yes this is a fine weapon, but I would like to see others before we settle on this one in particular.”

The young woman turned to regard Arantur, who was watching the interplay with great interest, “And what do you think traveller? Is it not a fine sword?” she asked in an unusually direct manner, her green eyes bright with interest.

Aran reddened uncomfortably under her clear gaze, “I know little about swords, lady...besides I am but newly come to Sentinal.”

She stared at him intently, her eyes studying him critically. Just for a moment Aran thought that she was trying to recollect his face from somewhere, and then suddenly she smiled and shrugged, “Then we have something in common for this is my first time in Sentinal too traveller, so do not be discomfited. My father Taran and I have just lately come from Andur's Keep where he is the Captain of the Guard.”

Aran gazed in amazement at the self-assured young woman. Obviously she had spent a great deal of her youth in company with the Guards. Even to Aran’s untrained eye, her knowledge, and skills in handling the blade was obvious.

“Ah, the worst of the rain is over,” exclaimed the older man looking at the sky, “We can continue on. Alissa...” he turned to his daughter who was replacing the sword amongst the others on display, “Have you finished here?”

“Yes Father” she assented, then turning to Aran briefly inclined her head, “A fair day to you traveller. May you ride with Andur.”

“And you,” replied Aran with a hesitant smile.

“A remarkable young woman,” remarked the swordsmith to Aran, when they had gone.

“Aye,” Arantur was still gazing after them.

“So are you interested in buying a sword?” queried the swordsmith.

“Whassat!” Aran spun around, finally aware that the smith was talking to him.

The smith smiled benevolently, “I said, are you intending on buying a sword?”

Aran turned back to the older tradesman and shook his head ruefully, “No...I came only to look at the blades. You see I am an apprentice blacksmith and Sentinel’s blades are well regarded.”

The swordsmith stared at Aran, “I know most of the apprentices in this street. You are not from Sentinel.”

Aran shook his head, “I was lately apprenticed to Master Cody of Leigh.”

“Cody! I have heard tell of his work, my fellow smiths...” and he gestured down the road to the forges of the blacksmiths, “Say that there is no finer blacksmith in the province. You have done well to be accepted by him, but what are you doing here in Sentinel? How has Cody released you when you are still in his apprenticeship?”

Aran frowned and his grey eyes hardened imperceptibly, “I am on my way to Glaive. For reasons which I have not been told, the mages require me there.”

“At Glaive?” the swordsmith was all astonishment.

“Yes!” Aran’s reply was angry and curt.

The swordsmith shrugged, “I know little about Glaive lad, but my only advice to you is to keep your own counsel when you are there. Only once or twice have I met a mage and on both occasions they desired little of my company and all seemed preoccupied with far weightier matters than I could determine.”

Aran sighed heavily, “I will be glad to be rid of this obligation. I look forward only to resuming my apprenticeship with Master Cody.”

“Aye,” agreed the swordsmith, “Stay with what you know and desire and do not let these mages interfere with your own inclinations. I hazard a guess that perhaps they have sensed Ability in you, and would turn it to their own purposes.”

Aran sighed again and settled his cloak about his shoulders, “I guess as much,” he agreed sadly, “But I will remember what you say. I will take no road that I do not utterly desire. So I bid you a good day to you smith, and thank-you for your time.”

Aran walked from the forge then feeling his stomach growling with hunger, methodically retraced his steps back to the street of the bakers. There was still much to be done he mused, with vague thoughts of purchasing another travel cloak, and the day grows old, I must hasten.

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It was late afternoon when Aran returned to the Swan. Whilst he was away he had bought new travelling clothes quite early in the day, but it had taken him most of the afternoon to find his way back to the hostel. A brisk westerly had started up mid-afternoon, and the wind was enthusiastically pushing the heavy clouds out to sea. Far in the west Aran could see the makings of a sunset which would herald a fine day on the morrow.

Aran shouldered his way through the common room as it was now quite crowded with patrons and chance travellers. Upstairs he paused at Trevan’s door. He listened but heard no

movement within. Softly he knocked, but received no reply. Back in his own room he repacked his saddlebag with the new gear and stretched out on the bed to rest his tired feet.

Aran must have dozed off for a while for he was awakened by a knock on his door. Opening it he greeted Trevan, whose face was rosy and damp from a visit to the washroom.

“How was your day lad?” he asked sitting himself down on the end of Aran’s bed.

Aran yawning walked across to the window and peered out, “Interesting...rain’s clearing.” He turned to the mage, “Are we on our way in the morning?”

Trevan nodded whilst vigorously drying his hair, which was standing upon his scalp like a short grey halo, “That is if the weather doesn’t change again.”

“It shouldn’t, this wind will blow it clear,” Aran moved away from the window.

“What did you think of Sentinel?” Trevan put his drying cloth down, and eyed the young man thoughtfully.

“Confusing streets,” was Aran’s swift reply. “In fact I got lost several times...had to ask for directions.” Aran’s tone implied that he would never have got lost in Leigh. “However I did find the swordsmiths.”

“And what did you think?”

Aran’s habitually serious face broke into a rare smile, “Fine work. I asked about my dagger, it seems it was made by a smith called Jerad...”

Trevan’s eyes brightened, “Jerad. I know that name. I have never met the man but his work is well known throughout the province.” Trevan picked up the dagger from its customary position on top of the saddlebags and closing his eyes ran his hands across the steel.

“What are you doing?” asked Aran bewildered. “How in Andur’s name can you examine it if your eyes are closed?”

“Shhhh,” admonished Trevan gently, “I am seeing with my inner eye, with my magepower. Do you know that closing your eyes can enhance the Ability. Having no visual distractions to muddy ones concentration, one can see the aura of the maker, especially after not having met the man and not knowing his aura in the flesh, so to speak.”

“Oh...” Aran gnawed his lower lip, “What does it look like?”

Trevan opened his eyes and handed the knife over, “Here see for yourself.”

Aran stepped back, his grey eyes wide with fear.

“I’m no mage,” he cried out in horror, “There is no way...” he turned back towards the window, his shoulders stiff with rejection.

Trevan held out the dagger still, “This is as true a test of the power as any, and if you do have an Ability we will soon know of it.” Fear, alarm and curiosity waged a short but uncomfortable battle in Aran’s mind. Finally, he gathered his resolve and turned to accept the dagger.

“Hold it properly,” Trevan admonished, “Not like a dead fish!”

Aran grimaced and grasped the dagger firmly by the hilt.

“Now close your eyes and empty your mind of all thought,” advised the mage.

Aran dutifully closed his eyes and tried to think blank thoughts. He shook his head and tensed his shoulders. Finally he opened one eye, “Nothing’s happening.”

Trevan tut tutted, “Relax, you are not having a tooth pulled. This should be a simple exercise, as natural as breathing.”

Aran sighed heavily and closed his eyes again. Images from the day passed across his mind then slowly, and with concentration focused only upon his breathing, he cleared his mind.

“Ahhh good,” approved Trevan, “Now tell me what you see.”

“Blackness,” breathed Aran, “Nothing but dark...”

Aran opened his eyes in consternation.

Trevan smiled. “What did you see?”

Aran moistened dry lips, “First nothing, but then I saw an image form, seemingly almost a memory of the blade upon the forge.” Aran swallowed from a suddenly dry mouth, “It was still hot from the making, then as it cooled to the dull steel I saw a great swirl of golds, reds and oranges appear upon it...like a whirlpool reflecting a sunset.”

Trevan placed a hand upon the younger man’s shoulder, “I saw the same.”

Aran looked up concernedly at Trevan, “It is certain then, I have an Ability.”

Trevan smiled and nodded.

Aran groaned miserably and wished himself anywhere but in that room.

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Chapter 3—The Road to Glaive

The crowds had thinned from the common room when Aran and Trevan moved downstairs for their supper. Aran's mind was in turmoil. To imagine he was a mage was one thing, but to actually possess an Ability was another entirely. He belatedly wished that he had not taken up the offered test, but however much he could wish otherwise, the deed had been done. Aran was no coward he just preferred to live a serene and uneventful life. However, from the very moment he had met Trevan, the stone of unpredictability had been flung into the quiet pond of his life and already the ripples of that meeting were starting to spread outwards. He was not going to be a mage he thought fiercely, his destiny was in Leigh with Master Cody. There was nothing the mages could do or say to dissuade him from his dream of being a blacksmith. As Aran stared into the fire waiting for his supper to be served, he remembered some of the first words that Cody had addressed to him when he had started his apprenticeship.

'Tis is a fine, creditable profession young Arantur,' Cody had said as he skillfully worked the steel into the form of a hoe. 'Thou't not find another with such honour. Men who form and bend the steel are creators. They are craftsmen of the earth's blood and bone. Thou wilt be able to look others in the eye and know that there is no one who is lesser in rightness and virtue.'

'Not even the mages and the long dead kings?' Arantur had asked.

Cody had looked up from his work, and his eyes were steady. 'Nay lad, the mages have thine own plans and needs which concern us not...and as to the kings.' He turned back to his work, 'Some wert fine men, men I'd gladly break bread with, but...' and he looked up again, 'There is a old saying that reminds us that power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely...no, I'd not trust any king.'

Or any mage, thought Aran sourly, as Cody said, they have their own plans.

"Deep thoughts," said a familiar voice behind him, "I hope they are worthy of the fine fire at which they are directed?"

Aran spun around in some confusion meeting the amused green eyes of the young woman he had met so briefly earlier in the day.

"Uhhhh...la...la...lady," he stammered in embarrassment.

She sat herself down next to him on the bench, "Well our paths meet again young traveller. Although I am not surprised, The Swan is certainly the pick of the hostels in Sentinal" she laughed, "You could not imagine where we slept last night. I had many bedfellows and all of them bit." She scratched her neck in recollection.

"The Mermaid?" Aran asked, hazarding a guess.

"No, The Black Ox...although I guess The Mermaid would be a similar establishment," she smiled again, "We changed our lodgings as soon as were able this morning."

"How long are you in Sentinal?" he asked directly, emboldened by her openness and forthright manner.

She shrugged, "I don't know...it's up to father to decide." She shifted her bottom on the hard bench, "Although I hope it is not too soon for a week in the saddle is long enough for me."

Aran grimaced, "I know...I empathise. I too am unused to riding so far." He stared down at the wooden floor at his feet, cursing his reticence, yet intimately aware of the light touch of the woman's thigh as it occasionally brushed his own.

"Did you find your sword today lady?" Aran queried at last, finally getting control over his racing pulse.

"No," she replied, "We must look at all the swordsmith's work in Sentinal before we purchase." Confidentially, her bright head leant in towards his, "Father is buying for the Guards on this trip, but I also have my own shopping in mind. There is no market at the Keep and if I want to wear dresses and not go about in the casts-offs of the Guards then I must look to myself."

"Are you the only female at the Keep?" Aran looked up at her astounded.

She laughed again at that. "No of course not, there are the kitchen staff and those who warm the beds of the Guards." She smiled at the sudden redness that suffused Aran's face, "And I am not one of those. Father would have my hide if I showed inclination towards any Guard. Mind you it does get very lonely. The servant girls have no great conversation and aside from a couple of acquaintances, I mostly don't talk with those other women" she mused.

Aran felt himself warming to this young woman, and held out his hand in shy greeting, "My name is Arantur, I am from Leigh."

Her hand flew out to grasp his firmly, "I forget myself. I am Alissa daughter of Taran."

They shook hands silently, solemnly.

"We leave in the morning Lady Alissa," Aran explained, "For we are on our way to Glaive."

"We?"

Aran nodded towards Trevan, who was in lively conversation with Alissa's father.

"Mage Trevan!"

Aran was astounded, "You know Trevan?"

"Aye, he brought me into the world...Healer Trevan is a regular visitor to the Keep. I've known him all my life," she grinned ruefully. "A scarce nineteen years."

Aran's jaw sagged, with effort he closed it.

Alissa's eyes narrowed, "What is your business with Trevan? He has travelled alone for as long as I've known him. Are you a mage and in his apprenticeship?"

Aran smiled and held out his broad hands, "Are these the hands of a healer Lady?"

Alissa took his hands and turned them over. "Nay Arantur, they are the hands of a craftsman, perhaps a swordsmith or blacksmith going by all the nicks and burns."

Aran hurriedly withdrew his hands from her unsettling grasp and buried them under the folds of his tunic.

"I am an apprentice blacksmith," he owned.

Her mobile mouth quirked immediately upwards into a flashing smile, "A fine trade Arantur, but what does Glaive require of an apprentice blacksmith?"

Aran shrugged, he was not going to admit his newly discovered Ability to this particular young woman, however personable she might be.

"Have you an Ability?" Alissa asked directly, bluntly.

"No!" he flared.

Her hands flew up to her mouth to apologise for her lack of tact.

“Forgive me Arantur, my tongue speaks too quickly, my Father tries to curb it,” she smiled abashed, “To little avail, I am afraid.”

“Don’t apologise,” replied Aran gruffly, he stared at his mud -flecked boots, “It’s just that you hit a nerve.” He looked up at her and thought that however great the fear, he had to be honest with her, “You see I do have an Ability. I’m sorry I lied, I’ve only just found out...and to tell you the truth I’m worried about it.”

She smiled again, and there was understanding in her eyes, “You shouldn’t concern yourself about it Arantur, I mean I have an Ability too, and it’s not changed my life.”

“You?” Aran was astounded.

A small flicker of annoyance crossed her face, “Of course. Do you think that women can’t be mages?”

Aran felt himself suffuse with chagrin, this young woman’s moods were as mercurial as the weather, “I didn’t mean...”

Alissa smiled again and laid a sun-bronzed hand upon his arm, “Don’t mind me. My temper always runs hot and cold, but as to my Ability it is a small thing to do with living, growing things and a kinship with animals.” She stared across to her father, “Mage Trevan discovered an Ability in me when I was little more than a child. You see I had a knack of growing spring flowers in the winter.” She laughed. “He was furious at the time, but I was very young and didn’t know it was against nature to ask the flowers to bloom in the winter. I was a child and the colours looked so pretty against the snow.”

“Did you go to Glaive?”

She nodded, “Oh yes, every person with a newly discovered Ability must present themselves to the Archmage so the depths of their power can be determined.” She stared into the fire, recollecting old memories, “I was just a little girl and the mages to me were old, terrible men and women who seemed caught in their dreams and higher things.” She looked back at Aran, “They Scanned me and determined that I did have an Ability, but my Ability was a small thing and Earthmages can be as common as stars in the sky you see. So I was sent home for I was too young to be considered for Glaive.”

Aran laughed, his shyness all but forgotten, “And do you still ask flowers to bloom in the snow?”

Alissa pulled a face, “Certainly not after that lecture from Trevan, however...” and her green eyes twinkled, “My flower beds are reckoned the finest in the Keep.”

Their conversation was then interrupted by a serving woman who was busy handing out bowls of meat and vegetable stew with also thick slices of the freshly baked bread from the town’s bakeries. The fare was excellent, large servings helping to banish the cold, and the knot of hunger which habitually resided in the bottom of Aran’s stomach.

After the meal was over Alissa stood up and brushed the bread crumbs from her serviceable red wool gown, “I must go now Arantur, my father has told me that I must retire to bed directly after supper.”

“Always the dutiful daughter Lady Alissa,” Aran smiled, sympathising.

Her nose wrinkled distastefully, “Father seems to want to keep me on a short leash...I am certain our conversation was only tolerated because you are the companion of Mage Trevan.” She sniffed, “Soon I will be twenty and then father will know my own mind on things. I may be a dutiful daughter, but I have plans and dreams too.”

“Follow your dreams Lady Alissa,” Aran advised, quietly reaching up to briefly clasp her hand, “That is all you can do, and let no one gainsay them.”

“Aye, that is all we can ever do,” she inclined her head, “I have enjoyed our conversation but I must bid a good day to you Arantur, and safe travels. May you ride with Andur.”

Aran inclined his head, “And you Lady Alissa. May the Goddess and Andur’s name protect you too.”

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The next day dawned bright and clear, with a fresh westerly blowing from the distant snowcapped mountains of the Trident Range. Aran dressed in haste and scanning his room, made certain he had left nothing behind. Picking up his saddlebags he quickly tossed them over one shoulder, on his way out he glanced into Trevan’s room, it stood empty, and Aran guessed that the Healer was already downstairs at breakfast.

After they had eaten they rode their horses back down the narrow streets of Sentinal towards the main gate. The streets had dried quickly with the wind and the sun, so they rode confidently across the sometimes treacherous cobbles and Aran, remembering his conversation of the previous evening felt mildly optimistic for the first time since he had left Leigh. As if perceiving his thoughts, Trevan spoke for the first time that morning.

“So what did you think of young Alissa?”

Aran stared at the brilliant blue sky above him, “She’s remarkable. Quite different to most of the women I have ever met” He grinned suddenly, “Not that I’ve known many, but the ones I have known have been ignorant and simpering.” Aran smiled in remembrance, “Alissa certainly can speak her mind.”

Trevan laughed at that, “Takes after her father in that regard. You are right though, Alissa wouldn’t know how to simper if she tried.” He glanced across at Aran who seemed to be lost in his own thoughts, “Did Alissa tell you that she grew up and trained with the Guards?”

Aran pulled himself out of his reverie, “No...although I had met both of them at the swordsmith. For a woman she seemed to be very capable with weapons. If she trained with the Guards, well that would explain her skill.”

Soon they passed under the town gates, Trevan calling a greeting to a sleepy legio guard who obviously was finishing the very end of the dawn watch, and then moving off the cobbles onto the dirt road, he spurred his horse into a slow canter. Aran settled his cloak firmly across his shoulders and urged his horse into a canter to catch up with Trevan who was moving on quickly ahead. They kept up a good speed that day, sometimes cantering, other times dismounting and walking to rest the horses. At noon they tied their mounts to the low branches of an old oak that was growing by the road. Trevan brought from the saddlebags a small flask of mead, a crusty loaf of bread, a pottery jar of honey, and a couple of the small, sweet apples of which the farmlands around Sentinal were famed. Biting into the crunchy apple, Aran lay back against the trunk of the oak and gazed at the many farms and orchards that dotted the rolling landscape of the Province. Apart from the last few unseasonable days, the summer had been perfect for the farmers. All were bringing in a bumper harvest with no worries of shortages over the winter. A bee, attracted by the sweetness of the honey jar, butted itself into almost insensibility until Aran taking pity upon it, stowed away the jar in the saddlebag.

Trevan opened one eye. He had been dozing in the warm sunlight, “Are you ready to go Arantur?” he asked.

Aran stood up, grimacing a little at the soreness of his thighs and behind, it would certainly take him a while to get used to so much riding. Untying his gelding, he stiffly climbed into the saddle. Trevan secured the single saddlebag he had removed for lunch, and quickly mounted. He clicked his tongue and the grey mare ambled off into a walk.

“How long is it until we reach Glaive?” Aran asked, pulling his old felt hat down low over his head against the brightness of the sun.

Trevan fondly scratched the neck of his mare, “We should reach Anderere by tomorrow morning. However we won’t stop until we reach Andromach where we shall board the first boat to Glaive.”

“Are we going to stop somewhere tonight?” asked Aran, thinking of his sore muscles.

Trevan shook his head, “We will take a meal at the halfway house, but we will ride on through the night. We have an appointment at Glaive and I want to take advantage of this wind. I’m hoping it will swing soon to the north and I don’t want to miss the boat.” He glanced across at Arantur, “Don’t worry, the soreness will soon pass, I have been riding now for twenty years and the first few days are always the worst. Besides you will be able to sleep on the boat,” he added sympathetically.

Aran gazed to the east, away to the distant and unknown ocean. “I am looking forward to seeing the sea, I have never seen it but Master Cody has and he said that it was vast and grey like a winter sky.”

Trevan nodded, “Your Master Cody must have seen it during the winter storm season. In summer it is green and blue and sparkles like all the jewels of the earth.”

“That must be something to see,” mused Aran, “And how long does it take to get from Andromach to Glaive?”

“A day, if the winds are fair,” replied Trevan kicking his horse into a canter.

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As they rode southwards, the countryside spread outwards on either side of the Anderere road like a green quilt dotted with farms, pastures and orchards. The gentle hills of the region had been extensively cultivated, with only narrow strips of the original native scrubby vegetation bordering the farms and the meandering streams. Far to the south-west was the Mahe Forest with its ancient woodlands, and further southwards again was Lake Coromere which bordered the southern reaches of the Forest. Aran had never seen the great Forests, but travellers stopping by at the forge had spoken of abundant game to tempt the hunter, and also of stories of great packs of wolves which preyed upon the unwary or ill-prepared. Some had also whispered of mysterious happenings which defied all rational explanation. Aran, upon hearing the stories had pressed the hunters for details but they had immediately turned away, refusing to elaborate further.

Aran fingered his dagger and thanked the Goddess that they did not need to travel through the forests to reach Glaive. Nervously he hunched his shoulders to dispel a sudden sense of foreboding. Shaking his head he tried to ignore the uneasy prickling at the back of his mind when he thought of the mysterious lands to the west. It was not just the thought of the wolves that sent his pulse a-racing, but somehow deep within he felt there was a great danger rising there. Aran suddenly sighed. With this sense of danger so tangible to him he keenly felt the

lack of any weapons skill. His foster-brother Sed was an amateur bowman and reckoned a creditable shot in Leigh. Before Aran had begun his apprenticeship, the two brothers had spent many an hour out around the farmlands and pastures surrounding Leigh trying to shoot rabbits that plagued the farms. Although Aran had height and a breadth of shoulder, he seemed never to be able to match his brother with a bow. Sed, who was smaller and wiry, was lethal with his short light bow and brought down most of his targets. Aran frowned upon recollection and remembered with distaste many previous hunting trips with Sed triumphant, sporting a fine brace of rabbits and hares followed by Aran trailing behind, lucky to have perhaps winged one in passing.

It was this lack of skill as a hunter that had prompted Aran to ask his foster-parents about the possibility of seeking a trade with one of the craftsmen in Leigh. His foster-father Dram eyed the tall boy and saw that he would grow into strength, and promised to have a word with Master Cody the blacksmith. That word had proved unnecessary, for that very evening Cody turned up at the door asking for Aran as an apprentice. The blacksmith had had his eye on Aran for many months often noticing his height and breadth of shoulder, and knew by experience that Aran would have the physique needed for blacksmithing. Tradesmen in Leigh normally accepted apprentices after their fourteenth birthday and Cody knew that there were several who had their eye on the carter's foster-son. No-one knew Aran's true birthday, not even Aran himself, so Cody waited as long as he dared before asking for the boy. Aran had taken to blacksmithing like a fish to water, and the master blacksmith was well pleased with his apprentice's progress. Aran seemed to have a natural inclination of working with his hands, and the metal responded well to his touch. Within days Cody knew that he had made the right choice.

Deep in memories, Aran was paying little attention to the road and was subsequently almost thrown from the saddle when his horse reared suddenly.

"Aran," Trevan barked, "Watch yourself. There is a snake on the road."

Aran shook himself out of his reverie and fought to control his horse which was wild-eyed and plunging at the nearness of the reptile. He finally calmed the animal, and pulled it over to the far side of the road where he watched the snake sluggishly move from the warmth of the road where it had been sunning itself, into the bracken beyond. "What was it?" he asked.

"A grey snake," replied the mage inscrutably.

Aran looked across at Trevan and they exchanged glances, Aran remembered that his sister had died from a bite from the grey snake.

"I've never seen one so close to the coast," Trevan remarked, "I wonder what has driven it from the forests."

"How common are they in the forest?" Aran asked for he knew little about the species.

"Like fleas on a dog," replied Trevan sourly.

Aran shuddered, "Do many hunters get bitten? I mean if they are so common I wonder that anyone ventures into the forests at all."

Trevan eyed the lengthening shadows and turning his mare southwards urged her into a trot. "When the first frosts come, then it is safe to venture into the forest," he replied. Aran kicked his gelding into a trot to keep up. "Why then?" he asked Trevan, "Won't the game be scarce with winter near?" Aran was perplexed; he thought that summer would be the ideal time for hunting.

Trevan looked across at the young man, “Summer’s heat makes the snakes active and restless. When the first frosts appear on the plains surrounding the forests then the snakes become sleepy and lethargic and will usually hibernate until late spring.”

“What about wolves, are they not a danger?”

Trevan nodded, “Of course, there is always the risk of wolves attacking, but wolves will steer clear of a large, well-armed party.” Then he paused, “I have also heard that within the forest are greater dangers than the snakes and the wolves. Perhaps it is well that we are not required to travel there.”

Aran recalling Cody’s geography lessons remembered that several small villages lay within the vastness of the forest. “Trevan?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“What about the villages of Elm and Glade and those other towns that lay within the shadow of the forest. How do they survive the snakes and the wolves and these other dangers of which you speak?”

Trevan looked ahead and saw, far in the distance, a thin finger of smoke rising into the darkening sky which revealed the location of the half-way house. “I have heard that the villages in the forest have high stout walls which keep out the wolves,” he strove to explain, “And the people there have trained hounds which can scent and flush out a grey snake if it is near. They also use long snake whips to kill any that venture near the villages and forest roads.” Trevan looked across at Aran and saw the young man’s interest, “The grey snakes are not stupid they have learnt not to venture near human habitation.”

“And the one we saw today?”

Trevan shook his head in uncertainty, “I don’t know... I have never heard of them straying far from the forests, perhaps one was caught and released near here, although I doubt it, for who in their right mind would try and capture a grey snake to later release it?”

“It may have been captured,” mused Aran, “But then escaped. Will it breed here?” he asked in some concern.

Trevan shook his head, “It was a male. If it had been female and carrying eggs I would have killed it, regardless of the danger.”

Aran was amazed, “You can tell the difference?”

“Of course, the females are much larger and have a plain grey skin. That one you saw today was small and had the grey mottling distinctive of the males.” Trevan looked again at the spiralling smoke from the half-way house and stirred his horse back into a trot, “Come Arantur, the day is growing old and we still have many hours of travel ahead of us.”

Aran gazed back at the low bracken where the snake had disappeared and shuddered, remembering how his sister had died. Despite trying as hard as he was able his memory failed him when he tried to remember her. His mouth hardened with unexpected grief when he realised that he did not even know his sister’s name.

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Night had fallen completely by the time the halfway house was reached. They wearily dismounted as a groom led away their horses to be fed and watered whilst they supped inside. As Trevan opened the door Aran immediately saw that they were not the only travellers passing through. A good twenty seats were occupied by traders, merchants and ordinary common folk on journeys between the large coastal towns. There was much noise and bustle,

and even though it was late summer, the low fire was a welcome relief from the night's creeping chill outside. Quickly shrugging off their travel cloaks onto the customary pegs in the entrance hall, they walked inside and found two spare seats at a long table near the fire. A large group of merchants occupied the far end of the table, and by their dress and manner Aran did not think they were from central Andur, but from the towns further south and west. The innkeeper appeared from out of the noise and bustle and inquired of the length of their stay. Trevan, who was massaging his narrow fingers back into warmth, indicated that they would be supping only, not staying. Aran stretched out his long legs under the table and wriggled his toes to get the blood flowing again to his feet. He leant back as far as the seat allowed and his neck, back and shoulders emitted a chorus of cracks from joints that had been held in the one position all day.

Trevan who had tried to take the opportunity to have a short doze, opened one eye at the noise, "You should relax more when you are riding" he advised. "For such a young man you hold yourself too stiff...it is no wonder you are a mess of aches and pains at the end of the day."

Aran did not deign answer to that particular comment, and instead closed his eyes as the warmth from the fire slowly began to penetrate his bones. Sitting back waiting for their meal, Aran could clearly hear the conversation of the merchants at the far end of the table. It did not take him long to determine that the troubles around Riggeltz was still the most popular item of conversation in Andur, and from what Aran could make out, it was getting worse and not better as time went on.

"...and three times a week now, but you never know what days they choose those devils from the mountains, so you have to have guards on each shipment just in case." A tall black bearded merchant was angrily exclaiming.

"So what are we going to do about it?" whined a short fat merchant, wiping perspiration from his brow with the back of his food flecked sleeve.

"Well I'm off to Haulgard Port," snapped another merchant whose red hair exactly matched the colour of his face, "I'm fed up with the Council ignoring the border merchants. I'm going to tell that weak excuse for a Council exactly what is happening on the border. Maybe I can get them off their backsides for once."

"Good-luck," laughed the black-bearded one cynically, "If you do, then I'll give you the profits from my next two shipments."

The red-headed merchant spat into his hand and held it out, "Is this a wager friend?"

"Aye," black-beard nodded emphatically, "In exchange, the profit from your next shipment if you don't succeed."

The merchant looked carefully at his friend and his red hair seemed in bristle in annoyance, "One shipment only? You'll not match me in this?"

"No," the other laughed and spat into his own hand, "If the Council throws you out and you lose, you'll need all your profits man...for the Thakur are keen and cunning and can smell an Andurian merchant within a hundred leagues of Thakur city." He extended his hand, "Come Shodak, let's seal this wager..."

The two merchants quickly shook hands. Aran turned back to Trevan who was pretending to be asleep. "Trevan? Who exactly are the Thakur? I mean where do they come from?"

Trevan reluctantly opened one eye and with a sigh decided that he was not going to be able to doze.

“What do you know of the Thakur?” he queried softly.

Aran shrugged his shoulders eloquently, “Almost nothing I guess. Only that they come from the Trident Range and prey upon our border traffic.”

Trevan’s mouth twitched, “Then you know as much as any in Andur, lad. I understand that Archmage Maran keeps himself better informed than most.” He shrugged, “The Thakur are pirates, outlaws, gangs of opportunists. Nothing that a Legion or two of Andurian soldiers could not deal with swiftly...but I must agree with our friends there,” gesturing at the merchants now fully occupied with eating. “It certainly seems as though the Thakur are getting bolder and more arrogant, soon the Council will have to do something about it.”

Arantur felt the unfamiliar anger again rising, “Why haven’t they done anything? I mean this is our land, shouldn’t the Council have an obligation to keep our borders secure?”

Trevan sighed at the impatience of the young. “Arantur, as I have explained before, the Council wants to keep the armies in the coastal towns. The last time Andur was taken, the invaders came from the sea. The Council doesn’t want to weaken our coastal defenses by sending the main bulk of our army to put down minor incursions on our western borders. Some Council members have long memories and remember well tales of the atrocities of the Serat. If they come again from the sea, then we must be ready for them.”

Aran shook his head in amazement, “Do they really think the Serat will come again?”

“Oh aye,” Trevan was emphatic. “One day they will sail in from the east and when that happens we must destroy them before they even set foot upon Andurian soil.”

“But would one Legion sent to patrol our western borders weaken our coastal defences so much?” persisted Aran. “If the Thakur find no resistance they will forget the slim pickings of the border merchant traffic and raid our remote towns and villages.”

Trevan sighed again for he knew Arantur was correct in this. “Aye lad,” he admitted heavily, “For I have no idea what is stopping our Council from sending out a single Legion to deal with these border troubles. They seem nervous even of reducing our coastal strength by a single company.” He sighed again and his face seemed older and wearier, “Our only hope would be to crown a new lineage on the Andurian throne. A high king would stiffen the resolve of our councillors and then something would be done about the Thakur problem.”

It was Aran’s turn to pull a face, “We are prevented by the King’s Sword and Glaive’s inability to spell a new one” he muttered.

Trevan’s hand shot out to quickly grasp Aran’s arm, “Quiet! Less said of Glaive’s troubles the better,” he hissed softly, “I would not have it common knowledge that the magepower has left Glaive.”

Aran looked up in surprise and his lips thinned in annoyance, “Very well, I will not speak of it again. But it is Glaive’s fault entirely that this problem has come to pass” he shrugged, “And I suppose the Serat’s too for the loss of the Andurian line.”

“Aye,” agreed Trevan. “That guilt and knowledge lies heavily upon the Archmage and the high mages of the inner circle of Glaive.”

Their conversation was suddenly interrupted by the arrival of bowls of steaming hot beef soup, and generous helpings of slices of vegetable pie, crisp fresh bread, and jugs of the mild cider of the region. Cooks employed by the hostels and inns of the province were not very

imaginative, but the meals were hearty and would certainly fill the belly of the hungry traveller. Trevan and Arantur grinned hungrily at each other, and set to eating with a gusto that would have gladdened the eye of the cook had he been watching.

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It was clear and cold when Maran and Arantur stepped out of the halfway house to reclaim their horses from one of the grooms. Checking that their saddlebags had not been interfered with, they quickly mounted and turned their horses from the yard and onto the southward road. The night was brilliantly clear with hard, bright stars littering the sky, and the larger of their world's two small moons providing them with light enough to see their way on the highway. They immediately urged their horses into a trot, for the night had barely begun and their road was long. They spoke little upon the journey, Trevan seemed wrapped in his own thoughts and Aran concentrating upon the road felt uncertain of his riding ability to fall too deeply into memories again. The night had been several hours long, and the moons had traversed a good way across the sky when Aran felt he needed to question Trevan more closely about his unknown past. He had been thinking of his long-dead family and sister, and after the incident with the grey snake had a burning desire to know of her, and to hear her name.

"You think of your sister," suddenly commented Trevan out of the darkness.

Aran was no longer surprised at the way Trevan could use the mage Ability.

Trevan chuckled, "Do not be so surprised lad; your questions are loud within your mind. Your thoughts whisper around you as moths flutter about the flame."

"Can you tell me of her?" Aran asked finally.

Aran vaguely saw Trevan shrug in the moonlight, "I know only what the travelling woman told me and I have told you all I know. However I have also sensed her presence about you."

Aran almost dropped his reins in surprise.

"What!"

Trevan's voice floated across the darkness, "Oh yes, her spirit is very much with you. I was not certain at first...but since an Ability was proven in you I have sensed her very near."

Aran looked about him wildly in alarm.

Trevan laughed. "Don't worry. You cannot see her. Even I cannot see her, but at times I sense her presence. It is like there is another aspect of you about, younger yes, more timid but very curious about you."

Aran felt his hair crawling in sympathy up the back of his scalp.

Trevan looked across at the younger man. "Do not be afraid, she is your sister and will not harm you. She is just naturally curious about her only brother."

"Can you...?" Aran swallowed from a suddenly dry mouth, "Can you sense her about now?"

Trevan fell silent and the cool wind rushed fretfully though the wheat fields bordering the road.

"Aye, she is here," he murmured, "No place really, just an impression of a young girl child's thoughts and feelings about you Arantur."

Aran swallowed again, and coughed to clear his throat, "What's her name?" he asked finally.

“Ask her yourself,” replied Trevan firmly turning his thoughts back to the road and the night.

Aran frowned. He hated the way the mage kept expecting him to use the magepower. He stared bitterly at the distant stars, he had no desire to be a mage but there was something about Trevan that afforded no argument. The mage had a way about him that if he declined the test or made some excuse Aran would have felt less of a man.

“What do I do?” he asked finally, unhappily.

“Just ask,” Trevan replied, “If she wishes to reply, you will know it.”

Aran sighed heavily and tried to relax his jaw muscles which had tightened at the very thought of conversing with a spirit.

“Sister,” he finally gasped, “I remember you not; please tell me your name.”

The night was silent except for the hissing of the wind across the grain.

“Sister!” he called again, “Do you hear me?”

The wind rose again, and the seed pods on the fruit trees rattled like old bones in the night.

Aran was about to call again when a soft, warm breeze lightly brushed his cheek, and he heard a soft whisper. Quietly, like a child deep in dream.

“You heard?” Trevan asked from where he rode ahead.

“Aye,” breathed Aran, gingerly rubbing where he had felt the light and almost zephyr touch, “Her name is Sarana.”

Trevan’s breath forced its way out, “She has given you her true name. The travelling folk called her Alder, after the tree, but her birth name, her true name is Sarana.”

“You knew?”

“Aye lad, I’ve known for a while now. She gave me her name as soon as I sensed her presence. At Glaive we are taught that you must be always formal with spirits and they must be addressed by name otherwise they will not take heed of mortals.”

Aran rode deep in thought for many minutes before he turned again to the Healer mage.

“Trevan, can all mages speak to spirits?”

“Aye,” Trevan was almost lost in darkness as the road crossed under the dark shadows of the roadside trees. “Most can, unless their power is very slight. It is one of the first taught lessons at Glaive. Although few mages find need of that skill in everyday life.” he added dryly.

Aran pondered that fact for a while more. He was fretting about something but it took him a while to pin it down.

“Trevan”

“Aye lad”

“Is my name my birth name, or did the travelling people name me Arantur?”

Trevan shook his head, “No, if the people had named you, you would be called Beechstrong or something similar. They have a habit of naming children after growing things. Arantur is a very old name. I believe it dates back to the times of the archaic high kings. Your birth mother must have had a fancy for the old days to name her son for them.”

“But why did the travelling people call me Arantur? I was a baby when I was taken, surely they did not know my name then?”

Trevan stopped his mare and waited until Aran caught up. “Arantur, you were born with this mage Ability,” Trevan urged. “It did not come upon you like your first whiskers when

you reached adulthood. The travelling people live very close to the land and they are certainly aware of the existence of magepowers. It is not inconceivable that you told the people yourself, even though you were but a babe at the time.”

“But I did not know my sister’s name?” Aran was still puzzled.

Trevan clucked at his horse to move it into a walk, “Think Arantur. A baby would recognise his name whispered at his mother’s breast. It would be one of the first words he would be able to identify as his own. But a sister’s name would be meaningless, lost in a confusion of words and sounds.”

“Then my sister did not have an Ability,” it came out as a statement of fact, not a question.

“Evidently not,” Trevan replied, “If one sibling possesses Ability, then it does not necessarily follow that the rest of the family has it as well. Sometimes an Ability can jump one or two generations before being recognised in a family. Even fraternal twins such as Sarana and you do not have to share the Ability. In identical twins it is very common for the Ability to be shared, but not always amongst fraternal twins.”

Aran fell quiet after that. He still felt a vague unease at the notion of a spirit following him about, but with a shrug he reasoned that short of telling her to go away, which he dared not do, he really couldn't do a thing about it.

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Apart from the light of the moons, the darkness was absolute. The isolated farms and homesteads they rode past were sheathed in shadow. Their horse's hoof-falls upon the road woke a lightly slumbering farm dog. The dog greeted them with a chorus of barks which drew an equally angry response from the sleepy farmer. Aran heard a splash and a sudden yelp and then the night was silent again. The long ride began to take on for Aran a surreal quality. In fact he had to pinch himself a few times to make certain that he had not slipped into a dream. Then finally after several hours of weary riding Aran first noticed the coming dawn low on the western horizon.

“Anderere will be only an hour away” Trevan quietly commented out of the darkness, “We will breakfast there, then we shall ride on to Andromach. I hope to be on a boat by mid-morning.”

“Good,” Aran sighed, as he succumbed to a jaw breaking yawn.

As the sun slowly rose, Aran noticed that they were no longer alone on the great southern highway. Farmers with carts full of produce turned onto the road from their lands and homesteads to make the short trip to Anderere in time for the morning markets. One farmer, his cart full of boxed apples and stone fruit, tossed each of the weary travellers a ripe red apple to break their fast. Aran smiled his thanks and hungrily bit into the juicy fruit—he was very much looking forward to a decent meal in Anderere. The land they passed was very similar to the farm lands near Sentinal. Patchwork fields butted up against wooded streams and gently rolling hills were covered in the native low scrub. From his studies Aran remembered that the coastal farms were referred to as the grain and fruit bowl of the province, with central Andur providing the sheep, cattle and other livestock for the hungry province. The horse tribes of the Andurian plains supplied mounts, and the fishing industries were clumped around Andromach, Daemonere and the great walled city of Haulgard Port.

The river towns, nestling on the banks of the Titan River supplied the markets with freshwater fish and shellfish. The province of Andur had trade routes only with the few towns

of Nafeking Province. To the south beyond Nafeking rolled endless featureless plains. To the west of Andur lay the great snowcapped Trident Range and the erstwhile Province of Thakur and further west again was a desert beyond which no lands were known. Andur itself stretched north for many weeks travel, first across the rivers and farmlands of central Andur. Beyond the farmlands around the Titan River the Andurian plains extended for many hundreds of leagues, populated only by the nomadic plainsmen.

Further north again, beyond even the plains the Trident range curved across to meet the sea, forming a natural barrier against the desert beyond. His thoughts turning to the ocean, Aran took a deep breath and inhaled, hoping to catch a trace of the sea-air which Cody had told him about. However all he smelt was the dust of the road, and the neighbouring fields ripe with fruit on the bough.

Many hundreds of years before the Serat swept across the province like a locust plague across grain, and before even the times of the archaic high kings, there had been the times of the Ancient sea-raiders. Where now stood Haulgard Port, there had been in those distant times a large settlement of fierce and adventurous souls. Aran remembered reading in his book colourful accounts of the almost legendary voyages and exploits of that time. It was generally believed amongst the chroniclers that the province of Andur had been discovered and settled by those Ancients over two thousand years ago.

Over time however, succeeding generations had moved inland following the coast southwards, building homes and villages until the barriers of the plains and deserts had been reached. Little was known of where the Ancient sea-raiders originally came from, but their homeland must have been far away indeed, for sea-trade had not been considered viable even when the population had seemed to spend most of their lives on the ocean. Hundreds of years passed and with the population of the province expanding, towns grew from small villages and so came the times of the Warrior Kings. In that unsettled period each town had its warlord, and the province, which had been united under the Archaic High Kings for so long, was now divided under numerous petty kings, all squabbling and fighting for land and the riches of the province. Into that turmoil the Serat had sailed and within a few short months the divided land was conquered and under foreign rule.

Aran looked up from his musings and saw that Anderere was finally visible in the distance. Half an hour of steady riding had brought the weary travellers into the town, which at first sight looked very similar to Leigh. Even though this was technically a coastal town, it was not as old as the three great walled towns of Helmsgard, Haulgard or Sentinal. Those towns had been built during the latter half of the times of the Archaic High Kings, along with Andur's Keep known then as Seawatch Keep. All the latter villages and towns were built during the times of the Warrior Kings. Stout timber walls and embrasures that had been built around each settlement by the warrior kings, was in turn torn down by the townsfolk after the defeat of the Serat to provide lumber for repair of houses damaged during the long war. Only the twenty-foot wide stone-walls of the three great walled towns defied the plunderers, remaining intact, a legacy to the inspired builders of the ancient past.

"Come!" called Trevan, his grey mare stumbling tiredly with exhaustion. "There is an inn ahead, we will breakfast there and rest our horses for an hour or two."

"So, how soon until we reach Andromach?" Aran asked

“Midday,” replied Trevan, “I had hoped to reach it sooner, but our horses are almost at their last strength. I think it would be better to rest our mounts for a couple of hours, than to press on and risk killing them.”

Aran felt that he too could do with a bit of shut-eye but he knew that it was not going to happen until they had boarded a boat at Andromach. The wind had turned during the night and had been blowing strongly from the north-west for the past eight hours. Trevan seemed to be familiar with the weather patterns in this part of the province, so Aran was content to follow his advice. If the winds swung again they would miss the opportunity and be obliged to wait in Andromach until the winds turned in their favour.

Suppressing yet another yawn, Aran urged his weary horse into a faster walk and thought, with heartfelt longings of a nice soft bed.

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With breakfast behind them and their mounts, if not fresh at least slightly rested, Aran and Trevan pulled themselves stiffly back into the saddles for the last stage of their journey.

“Will we take the horses with us on the boat?” asked Aran as he fondly rubbed his bay gelding’s neck.

“No,” replied Trevan as he leant over and adjusted his stirrups, “Glaive keeps a stable at Andromach for any mainland bound mages. There are some horses on the island, but there is not much travel required on Glaive.”

Remembering his geography lessons Aran recalled that there was another settlement on Glaive, far to the south.

“No-one lives at Rapier now,” commented Trevan intercepting Aran’s thoughts. “It was like the great college of Glaive, a place for specialist mages.”

“Why? What happened?” asked Aran; for this was the first time that Rapier had been mentioned. He had assumed that it was an ordinary town not a mage’s college.

Trevan sighed and urged his horse into a walk, “In the times of the archaic high kings the mage Ability was strong in the province and the use of the magepowers was a daily occurrence on Glaive. Those mages that were one with the land and air, the Weathermages, the Earthmages and the Healmages all resided at the great college of Glaive. The other mages had previously founded a college at Rapier for the two ideologies were very different.”

“What ideologies? What mages?” questioned Aran, for this had never been mentioned in his book.

Trevan turned to the younger man, “Sometimes the mage Ability manifests itself in other ways. Take yourself for instance. I would guess that you are a Metalmage, a mage who has an affinity with metal. In those early days Metalmages went to Rapier to learn their craft along with the Warriormages, for only a true Metalmage could make the weapons wielded by the Warriormages. The Warriormages held themselves apart from the others at Glaive, for only they knew the secrets of using the mage Ability for fighting and warfare.”

“A Metalmage!” for a moment Aran was lost for words, then gathering his wit he asked, “So what happened to Rapier?” questioned Aran, deeply interested in the fate of these ancient mages.

“During the times of the Warrior Kings, many Warriormages from Rapier were employed by the warlords as fighters in their petty conflicts. Instead of using their Ability to protect the land, they hired themselves out as mercenaries to the highest bidder. When the Serat invaded,

our Warriormages were scattered across the land and thus as individuals were ineffective at fighting a large army. Those that had remained true to their oath and had stayed on at Rapier were too few against the Serat and died in the first battles of the invasion. The only ones left on the island were a few Metalmages and they were so ashamed of what had happened that they burned Rapier to the ground and took ancient and binding oaths never to use their craft again, returning to the mainland to work as blacksmiths.”

“So if all the Warriormages had died,” questioned Aran, “How did Glaive take Andur’s Keep?”

Trevan gazed at the brilliant blue sky. “A group of Weathermages gained entrance to the Keep and called forth a small thunderstorm, forming it entirely within its walls. The guard that had been left by the Serat was then instantly incinerated by the lightning bolts.” He smiled as if remembering the story, “I have heard that the magepower required to form such a storm came from at least ten different Weathermages. Mostly they were used to control the storm and to direct its bolts...and I have also heard that it took the mages involved many months to recover from efforts of the spelling.”

Aran fell silent as he imagined the force of will needed to form a thunder storm inside a building.

“So where did they find Metalmages to spell the king’s sword?” Aran asked finally.

Trevan looked across at his young companion, “After the Serat was defeated, Glaive sent the call out across the province for any with the Ability to present themselves to the Archmage and the circle of High Mages. They found only five latent Metalmages in the whole of the province and no Warriormages. The men and women who were latent Metalmages were personally tutored in their Ability by the Archmage. So the high King’s Sword was spelled, not by High Mages, but by novices new to their craft.” He smiled almost in recollection, “They may have been new to their skills, but they did fine work on the blade. You told me Jerad the swordsmith made your dagger. Well the King’s Sword was made by one of Jerad’s ancestors...and I believe that Jerad’s line is originally descended from an ancient Metalmage who renounced Rapier and returned to the mainland to work.”

“So what happened to those Metalmages after they spelled the sword?” asked Aran quizzically.

Trevan shrugged, “They returned to the mainland. The Archmage could only teach them so much and all their masters were dead. The knowledge of Rapier had been lost years before and besides there was no longer any living Warriormages to use their weapons.” Trevan sighed heavily, “So they left Glaive, for there was nothing left to hold them there...”

As they rode Aran thought deeply over these matters trying to relate this new information to his own experiences. He still had no real idea why Glaive required him. If he was a Metalmage and he cringed inwardly at the thought, there were no Warriormages alive for him to work with—unless, despite the destruction of Rapier, Glaive had somehow managed to instruct Warriormages. He shook his head, this puzzle would only be resolved at Glaive, and if the winds continued favourable they would be at the mage’s isle by tomorrow. Seeing Trevan draw ahead, he urged the gelding into a tired trot and wished fiercely to know what answers the next day would bring.

The sun was high in the sky when they arrived at Glaive's stables at Andromach on stumbling, exhausted horses. As soon as the saddlebags had been removed their mounts were led away by several grooms for stabling. Their own gear had been loaded into a small cart driven by another man attached to the stables. Sitting on the hard wooden seat of the cart next to Trevan, Aran looked about him as they were driven through Andromach. As Anderere was similar to Leigh, so Andromach was similar to Anderere, with narrow streets of hard trodden, compacted soil, tall wooden houses that leant inwards so they almost met in the middle of the street, and a population that sounded as raucous as a flock of ravens. Gazing at their dress Aran surmised that there were the usual assemblage of tradesmen and merchants. However there were a number of men and women dressed in a queer costume of smock and knee length breeches with legs bare from the knees down. Glancing at his own serviceable cloak, tunic, hosen and boots Aran wondered why those people dressed as they did. Trevan saw where Aran's eye fell and laughed softly, "Aye, I had forgotten you have never seen the sea. Those oddly dressed individuals are merely fishermen and sailors. You will be seeing a lot of their kind today and tomorrow."

"Where is the sea? Shouldn't we be seeing it soon?" Aran asked interestedly.

Trevan tapped him on the shoulder, "Look ahead Arantur, we are approaching the wharves now."

Aran looked up and saw a great forest of timber masts, beyond which he could see a great glittering, blue-grey expanse which stretched as far as the eye could see in the distance.

"This is the mouth of the Andromach River," explained Trevan. "The Andromach River empties out into the Eastern Ocean...which you can now see ahead of us."

Aran gazed out at the sometimes blue, sometimes grey-green expanse of water and swallowed nervously, "How far is Glaive from here?"

"Oh about fifteen leagues...it will take us the rest of today and most of tomorrow to sail the distance, assuming the winds don't change."

"And if they do?"

"It will take considerably longer," replied Trevan cheerfully.

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With the smell of salt, fish and seaweed filling the air, the driver drove his cart onto the wooden wharves which creaked and groaned as the cart moved along. Finally he stopped the horse at the far end of the dock where a wooden trading vessel was moored at the very end of the row of fishing boats. Larger than the others, it boasted three masts of various sizes with the canvas sails neatly unfurled ready for sailing. It was a hive of activity on deck, with sailors in their odd outfits scrambling across the planks readying the ship for departure.

"Two more passengers Captain Obain," called their driver as he unloaded their saddlebags from the back of the cart.

A large blond man with an impressive beard appeared on deck and called back, "Aye, we are near to sailing but we can fit two more on board. Have you their names?"

"Mage Trevan and Arantur of Leigh" he replied.

The blond captain pushed across the narrow wooden gangplank to where they stood. "Come aboard then," he called out cheerily.

Aran took his belongings from the driver, and with some degree of trepidation walked across the narrow beam to jump down onto the wooden deck of the trader. Trevan was

moments behind him, and as they stood upon the deck the driver hopped back in his cart and with a short command to the horse, headed back to the stables at a quick trot.

The captain turned to Trevan, "We're almost at capacity...but if you don't mind sharing I can fit you both into a forward cabin."

"That will be fine Master Captain," replied Trevan. "We have been on the road all night from Sentinal so we will likely sleep most of the voyage."

Calling to one of the deckhands to take their gear, the Captain led the way below to their cabin. Below decks it was very dark, and smelt strongly of salt and the resinous wood which the Trader had been built. The Captain stopped at a wooden door and opening it, instructed the deckhand to dump their luggage into a corner. Aran peering inside, grimaced at the size of the cabin, but brightened when he saw the small square window letting in the fresh sea air.

"We are about ready to cast off," the Captain told Trevan, "I might advise coming up on deck for the passage through the river bar may be more pleasant for you both up top."

Trevan shook his head, "I have passed through this bar many times without problems, and I shall turn in. However Arantur here has never seen the sea and may want to spend a little time on deck."

Aran gave another jaw breaking yawn and nodded, "For a short time," he agreed.

Up on deck Aran found himself a vantage point that seemed to be well out of the way of the busy sailors, but which still afforded him a glorious view of Andromach and the mouth of the Andromach River. Ahead, past the broken water which Aran presumed was the river bar, the ocean glittered and shone.

As Aran watched, sea birds spun and dove in their wake, scooping up fish and other morsels disturbed by their passage along the river. Above him the sails billowed out, catching the stiff breeze and pushing the trader along at good pace. With a loud creaking of timbers the Trader hit the first swells of the bar. The ocean ahead of it, the ship seemed to be enthusiastically plunging into each deep trough and then in rising up cast a great spray of salt water which doused everything, including Aran at the bow of the boat. Shaking the water out of his hair and rubbing the salt from his eyes Aran felt the great boat plunge again into another deep trough and rapidly decided that he was wet enough and swiftly made his way below deck to find their cabin.

Opening the door he espied Trevan fast asleep on the far bunk and going to his saddlebags he changed into dry clothes, hanging his wet ones to dry on a peg from the door. Lying back he realised now why the bunks had such high sides, for as the boat continued to plunge and rise into the swells he felt himself rolling with its movement. Closing his eyes he thought ahead to Glaive and the answers it would finally provide him. He smiled to himself and thought cheerfully that if all went well on the mage's isle, the next time he sailed it would be on a boat taking him on the homeward journey to Leigh.

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Chapter 4—Glaive

The long journey from Sentinal, and the rolling of the ship had proved a powerful combination and Aran slept for many hours. At last waking, he immediately felt disorientated and stared at the wooden ceiling for a moment to determine where he was. Finally the motion of the ship, the creaking of the beams and the distant voices of sailors on deck seeped into his sleep clouded mind and he remembered that they were en-route to Glaive on one of the great sailing ships. Immediately his stomach growled, reminding him that it had not been fed in many hours. Aran sat up and glanced across to Trevan's bunk, it was empty and there was no indication how long the mage had been awake. Aran stood up, and pulled his boots on, whilst his body tried to readjust to the unfamiliar rolling of the ship. He ran his fingers through his dark blond hair, trying to tidy it into some kind of respectability. It had grown long, and Aran searching through his saddlebags, finally found a length of leather to tie it back.

He walked across to the small window, trying to adapt his movements to the rolling of the ship. Gazing out of the window he saw only grey featureless ocean stretching away in great long swells. His stomach rumbled again, so he decided to venture again on deck to enquire where he could get some food.

It took some effort and skill this time to climb to the deck for the sleep had made him feel lethargic and his body seemed not to be yet fully awake. As he moved out onto the exposed deck he was immediately blasted by a cold, damp wind blowing strongly from the west. Looking up, he saw that some of the great mass of sails had been lashed down, with the remainder billowing and straining with the strong wind behind them. Moving out of the way of a hurrying sailor, he looked to the western mountains and noticed a great expanse of heavy cloud building up.

"Glaive is only an hour or two ahead, we have made good time," said Mage Trevan, suddenly coming up behind him. Trevan had seen Aran on deck and quickly guided him to a spot near the rail which was not being drenched by spray every other moment.

"When is it?" asked Aran.

Trevan chuckled, "Mid-morning of the day after, you have slept right through. Are you interested in a meal, the cook may be able to find us something to eat."

Aran nodded and glanced again at the storm clouds building up.

Trevan followed Aran's eye and nodded, "Aye there is a storm on the way. One of the winter storms has come early, but we have a good wind behind us and should be long in harbour before that one reaches us."

"Then why are the sails gathered in?" asked Aran. "From what I understand about ships the captain needs to catch as much wind as possible to speed his voyage."

Trevan eyed the reefed in sails, "The wind is strong and likely to get stronger, an excess of canvas could flap and rip, and then where would we be with our mainsail in tatters. No, the Captain has done right, he has gathered in the excess canvas and what remains can be controlled in the rising wind, but it still affords us a swift passage."

Aran frowned and ruefully decided that he had a lot to learn about sailing.

Trevan clasped his arm, "Come now...I warrant that you are as hungry as I, let us find the cook and his kitchen."

The air below decks seemed dark and stuffy after the buffeting by the salt wind above. Trevan seemed to have a talent for locating food, for they found the kitchen just as the cook was bringing out of his oven a dozen hot sweet mince pies. He noticed the hungry travellers and with a grin indicated that they could take a pie each, whilst also cutting them off generous slabs of bread and tossing them each an apple. They smiled their thanks and returned to the relative comfort of their cabin to eat.

“When did you wake?” asked Aran after he quickly ate his meal and stood to brush the crumbs from the front of his tunic.

“Not long before you,” Trevan replied, slowly savouring his pie. “I always sleep well on ships. I think it must have something to do with the motion and the sea air.”

Aran went to the window and stared out, their window faced south and Aran could see the storm clouds building up in the far distance.

“What will happen when we get to Glaive?” he asked finally, turning to the mage.

Trevan stood and joined him at the window, “I must report first to the Archmage and the Great Circle of Glaive, then you will be sent for. If the Archmage is not busy you may be fortunate and see him this very evening, but most likely it may take a day or two before you are called before the great circle of mages. The Archmage laid this quest upon me over nineteen years ago and this is the first time I have returned to Glaive in all that time. I expect to be in conference with him for a number of hours. Next the summons must be sent out to gather the Great Circle together. The gathering of the Great Circle only happens four times a year, once in each season to scan the new applicants who wish to become mages. To arrange such a circle outside those times takes some time, as mages may be deep in research or the casting of spells.”

He glanced over at Aran, “Prepare for a lengthy stay Arantur. You may be on Glaive for a couple of weeks. Longer if the Archmage has need of you.”

Aran bowed his head in resignation, it seemed that this journey which at the start promised to be soon over, now looked like dragging on into autumn. “I wish I knew why Glaive required me” grumbled Aran almost to himself. In some desperation, he looked up at Trevan, “What exactly did the Archmage ask you to do all those years ago? And what can you tell me of my family?”

The old Healmage sighed deeply, “Arantur, of your family I have told you everything I know,” he shrugged ruefully, “Which unfortunately I admit, is little.” He then looked across to the young man, “Many years ago at Glaive I was commanded to present myself to the Archmage, who handed me large pouch of gold and told to travel as quickly as I could to the Titan River and search out the family of Sevtur the woodcarver and his wife, Yesmond. It seemed that Yesmond was soon to be delivered of twins and when she was fit to travel I was to bring the family with me to Glaive.” Trevan paused, lost in memory, “It took weeks longer than expected to find the family for they had recently moved to a remote holding on the far western reaches of the river. When I arrived I found nothing but two mouldering corpses with their last meal of shellfish flyblown on the table. I searched for the babies but found only two empty cots inside the holding and outside, the cart tracks of the travelling folk barely visible in the dust of the yard. I had missed them by only a matter of days.”

“What did you do next?” asked Aran, “For I assume you did you go after the travelling folk?”

Trevan nodded, "Eventually. However I returned to Haulgard Port to send a message to Glaive on the first ship bound to the mage's isle. The outcome had changed and the Archmage needed to be informed." He sighed, "It took two weeks for the Archmage's message to return to me, for the ship did not have the benefit of a fair wind and were battling northerlies all the way back to Haulgard."

"What did the Archmage say?"

Trevan stared out to sea, "Many things Arantur, but the substance of the message was that I was to keep following the travelling folk and locate the babies. He also bade me perform my duties as a healer upon my travels, and the first thing he did was send me to Andur's Keep for the Captain of the Guard's wife was expecting her first child and there was no midwife within a day's ride."

"You delivered Alissa?" Aran fondly remembered his conversation with the young woman from Andur's Keep.

"Aye, the daughter was born to the loss of the mother. Dela was never a strong woman and her fiery little daughter taxed her strength so much that even I, a Healmage could not bring her back from the final darkness."

"Land-ahead!" cried a faint voice from above and Trevan turned and going to his bunk began methodically to repack his saddlebag.

Following Trevan's example, Aran packed away the few items he had removed from his saddlebag, and securely fastened the straps and buckles. He threw over his shoulders his new travelling cloak, and jammed his hat firmly onto his head to prevent the wind from casting it into the sea.

"Shall we go up on deck?" asked Aran.

Trevan nodded, "I prefer the fresh sea air...however leave our bags here. We will return to collect them once the boat has docked." He glanced at Aran's hat, "I'd leave your hat here too, else you'll lose it soon enough with that wind up top."

"It's on tight" Aran replied, pulling it down even more firmly about his ears, "If you don't mind I'd rather wear it."

Trevan shrugged. "Suit yourself."

Up on deck the wind was stronger than ever and Aran had to keep a firm hand to his head. Trevan glanced across at the younger man and smiled and shook his head in wry amusement. Aran grimaced and held on even tighter as a fierce gust caught his cloak, flapping about him.

Trevan pointed ahead and called out above the wind, "Look there Arantur, Glaive Island and Glaive port just ahead. If your eyes are keen you may even see the College at the base of the mountain."

Aran peered out across the lashing waves and the ever present salt spray and saw a rocky, mountainous coastline with a small settlement on a promontory. Behind the promontory was a large building tucked in at the foot of the mountain.

Trevan moved close to Aran so he didn't have to shout above the noise of the wind and sea, "Did you know Glaive Island is formed from three ancient volcanoes?"

Aran shook his head in bewilderment, "I know of volcanoes from what Master Cody has told me, but I did not realise that Glaive has three of them."

Trevan nodded, "Aye, three volcanoes, but mercifully long quiet. That is why although Glaive is so rocky, the soil that is there is very rich and fertile and the Earthmages can grow all our fruit and vegetables so we do not need to depend on the mainland."

"You must have herds too, or do you purchase all your cheese and milk from the mainland?"

Trevan shook his head, "We have our own herds of goats, sheep, a few horses, and some milk cows. Although if we want to eat beef we must order it from the mainland for we have not the pastureland for the great cattle herds."

"So you are mostly self-sufficient," surmised Aran.

"Of course, but we were especially so during the time of the Serat occupation. Our High Weathermages used their craft to discourage any ship sailing towards our island." Trevan stood, seemingly lost in recollection. "In our great histories, the mages wrote how Glaive was ringed by weather spells maintained for over a hundred and fifty years by a series of High Weathermages. However the spells worked upon both invader and invaded, and the mages had very little communication with the mainland during that period. From time to time a fleeing mage managed to escape from the occupied mainland and work his or her way through the spells to safety on Glaive." Trevan sighed, "Of course the remaining Metalmages who had abandoned their craft soon after the invasion left Glaive in secret bound for a new life on the mainland." Trevan sighed again. "Most made it, but a few, new to their skill or weak in power did not make it though the web of spells and perished at sea."

Aran stared out at the white caps and the billowing sails and thought of those desperate, unhappy men who had blamed themselves so deeply for the tragedy of the Serat invasion, that they had left their only refuge for a perilous voyage and an uncertain time on the mainland.

"So if Glaive was under siege, seemingly cut off from everything that was happening, how did the mages know that Warleader Andur was leading a successful revolt?" asked Aran remembering his book.

Trevan also stared across the sea, "The great-grandson of one of the original Metalmages who had taken up residence in Sentinal all those years ago, had heard the stories of the mages isle from his grandfather. This young man, not much older than you are now had the Metalmage Ability latent in him, no doubt passed down from his illustrious ancestor. He heard the news about the rebellion and decided to risk the terrible voyage to Glaive. Against all odds, and half dead from exposure and days drifting with torn sails and damaged rigging, he and his boat were found by the mages washed up on a remote beach on Glaive. After several days of Healing he recovered his senses, and told the mages of the rising rebellion and Warleader Andur. The mages immediately sent a small delegation from Glaive to where Andur was besieging Haulgard Port." Trevan paused to turn his gaze to the approaching island, "Andur knew that once Haulgard had fallen there was only the remote and almost impenetrable Seawatch Keep still to take. He knew that he could never take it without aid, so he asked only that one time for the mages assistance and it was freely given. You know the rest. After Seawatch fell, the mages lifted the spells that secured Glaive's refuge and made themselves available once more to assist Andur in his rebuilding of the province."

Aran looked across at the rapidly approaching shoreline of Glaive and thought of the secrets and powers bound up in that island and a small, cold finger of fear drifted down his spine.

Trevan watched the interplay of emotions across Arantur's face and sighed yet again. He had his own suspicions of why Glaive required that young man, but it was only guesses and he could not resolve them into words or assemble them into facts. He knew implicitly that Aran possessed a high level of the mage Ability, but beyond that fact he could not understand Glaive's interest in the young man. Although Arantur seemed unassuming and shy, Trevan believed that that young man possessed a disturbing presence or aura that called to others. Almost from the first time they had met Trevan had found himself responding to the young blacksmith. Trevan furtively glanced at Arantur's hard grey eyes and sighed. He was certain that Arantur possessed the latent Metalmageing Ability...how that Ability could be used only Glaive itself knew. He felt too that the mastercraftsman Cody was a Metalmage as well. In many cases like called to like and Cody may have unconsciously sensed the presence of another latent Metalmage in the town.

The old ability of Metalmageing seemed to be on the rise, Trevan mused to himself. It was almost as if nature had sensed the lack and was starting to fill in the gaps. Or perhaps with the worsening situation in the west the ancient Abilities were manifesting again for future need. Trevan shook his head gently in bewilderment, if that were so it meant that the magepower was on the rise again. Trevan's brow creased in worry, there could only be one answer to such a puzzle...and that did not bear thinking about.

Disturbed, Trevan stared across at the sea to see if he could find answers there, but the churning waves only suggested future chaos and uncertainty. He turned back towards Glaive and espied clearly the buildings on the dock. Tapping Aran on the shoulder, he indicated that they should retrieve their luggage. Mentally shrugging the heavy thoughts from his mind, Trevan led the way below decks, secure in the knowledge that he would be meeting with the Archmage by day's end. Then perhaps, he'd be granted some answers.

At last the Trader was docked, and Aran and Trevan with saddlebags flung over their shoulders, made their way down the gangplank to the wharf below. Behind them on the ship the sailors were hurrying to off load cargo from the mainland before the impending storm struck, and the other passengers were already dispersing towards the college and settlements clustered near the port. Aran glanced behind him and saw the towering thunder boulders and the eerily green grey sky, and was glad that he had solid ground once more underneath his feet. Aran settled his saddlebags more comfortably across his shoulders and looked for Trevan. He soon caught sight of him in earnest conversation with an elderly man dressed in a dark grey robe with a black mantle across his shoulders. Looking up from his conversation, Trevan noticed Aran and gestured for the young man to come across and join them.

"Arantur, this is Weathermage Cladd."

Aran dipped his head in greeting.

Cladd turned to Aran, "Welcome to Glaive young man..."

He turned back to Trevan, "I have a pony and cart waiting, I've alerted the ship's master to secure their moorings but we really ought to be on our way." He glanced again at the storm and a faraway look passed over his eyes, "This is as bad a storm as we've had in many a year and I'd like to be back at the College by the time it strikes."

"Well, let us go then," replied Trevan picking up his saddlebags.

The small, neat wharf was scarcely populated when they had arrived but with the approaching storm it emptied even further as the final boxes of cargo were stored away in the

nearby stone buildings. Following Trevan and Cladd, Aran hurried along in the deepening darkness trying to keep one eye on the two mages ahead and the other taking in his surroundings.

Everything seemed to be built of stone on Glaive, even the dock had been built of the dark grey granite with only the wooden mooring posts being of timber. Gazing about him, Aran surmised that Glaive was a rather barren island on which timber was rare and prized, and used only for flooring and furniture. The small forests that did exist seemed confined to narrow protected valleys nestled in between the ridges and slopes of the ancient volcanoes, whilst the ridges were a convoluted mass of rock, scrub and grass. Looking up towards the distant summit, Aran was amazed to see a faint glimmer of white. The peaks were so high that they still wore a mantle of snow from the previous winter.

Trevan called back to Aran, "Come lad we must hurry, the storm is approaching quickly."

Aran broke into a jog and soon caught up with the others who were busily unhitching a white pony and cart from a rail.

Aran tossed his saddlebags in the back of the cart and joined Cladd and Trevan on the narrow driver's seat. Cladd whistled to the fat cob and it immediately moved into a trot, its quickness giving lie to its rotund appearance. The wind was starting to pick up and Aran jammed his soft felt hat firmly onto his head and tucked his cloak closer about his body.

The iron framed cartwheels sang along the cobbled roads as the pony trotted up from the wharves to the College of Glaive. Aran stared ahead trying to make out their final destination for all about him he could only see small farms taking advantage of the rich, red volcanic soil, and everywhere were dotted the large granite boulders that seemed such a feature of the island. They passed through a small village which seemed to provide residence for all the non-mages on the island, all those men and women who worked at the wharves and were employed at the great College beyond.

Finally they turned a corner, and ahead loomed a building Aran was certain was the great College of Glaive. Built out of the grey granite of the island, the College resembled a large fortress with its towering walls and banners of white, all snapping and pulling in the rising wind. Three levels high, its large glassed windows looked out onto an increasingly angry sea. Cladd flicked the reins and the pony moved into a faster trot bringing them ever closer to the dark grey walls. As they rode closer Aran caught a faint whiff of a rather unusual smell, he sniffed deeply and vaguely identified it as being similar to rotten eggs, but it was gone again and he thought no more about it.

A few minutes later they rode under the College gate and through a tunnel which opened out into a courtyard cum stabling yard beyond. Aran looked around, from what he could see the College was built on a square pattern, quartered by low walls in a cross formation. Following Trevan's example he jumped down from the cart and retrieved his saddlebags from the back. Cladd had immediately moved off, disappearing quickly into a doorway and groomsmen had appeared and were busily unhitching the pony from the cart, leading it away into stabling located within the depths of the walls.

Trevan pulled him undercover as heavy drops of rain began to fall. Aran heard too the first rumblings of thunder—the storm was almost upon Glaive.

As Aran turned and gazed about him, he immediately noticed that on either side of the tunnel they had just come through were two sets of stairs leading to the upper levels of the

College. Trevan took the left hand set and with Aran following upon his heels they moved up into the darkness. The stairs brought them out onto a wide walkway which ran all the way around the inside of the square plan of the College. Trevan paused for a moment to point out to Aran the layout of Glaive College.

“You see Arantur,” he motioned across at the stone-walls of the internal cross, “The area which we first came into is the front-left courtyard which is the entrance yard as well as stabling for the College’s horses. This one on our right here, what we call the front-right yard, is the communal courtyard for the novices and students. The one at the back-left is reserved for the mages and the courtyard at the back-right is for the High and Master Mages and the Archmage.” He gestured at the innumerable rooms which made up the thick outer walls of the College. “The level we are on is the residential level for the students and it also comprises the Great Hall. The next level up comprises the classrooms, libraries and laboratories. The top level is the residential quarters for the mages, and the Archmage’s quarters and private rooms.”

Thinking of his stomach which was starting to complain again Aran looked around and finally asked. “Where are the kitchens?”

Trevan looked out across the now pouring rain, “Below us, the kitchens, baths, laundry and storerooms are off the students and mage’s courtyards on the ground level.”

Staring about him in fascination Aran asked, “This building is huge, how many people live here.”

Trevan shrugged, “It’s hard to tell. I don’t know how many are here now, however when I was a mage the College had around two hundred students and eighty mages on its books. Some years there are a lot less, other years there are many more.” He gazed around at the building which was in truth the size of a small town. “I understand that at maximum capacity the College can accommodate four hundred students and two hundred mages...but there has never been a time in Glaive’s history when the College has been full.”

Suddenly there was a muffled bang, and the college rocked briefly on its ancient foundations. Trevan laughed and patted Aran reassuringly on the shoulder, “Don’t worry, that’s just the student Weathermages doing lightning experiments. I’ve heard that the best time to mess about with lightning is during a storm, for the air is already charged with power. I also understand that to bring lightning out of a fine and mild day needs strength and power beyond belief.”

He chuckled again, “Don’t be concerned, Glaive College has weathered far worse than these student’s experiments.”

Picking up their saddlebags again, Trevan lead the way down the right hand side of the walkways past many doors and entrance ways leading into the maze-like structure of the rooms within the vast internal walls. The College was uniformly made out the grey Glaive granite. Even the walkway had been constructed of the same stone with only the doors being of painted wood.

“This would be a mightily cold place come winter.” commented Aran staring at all the stone.

Trevan shook his head, “it’s not actually. You remember me telling you that Glaive Island is dominated by three ancient volcanoes...”

“Aye,” replied Aran, whilst shifting his heavy saddlebags onto his other shoulder.

“Not far from Glaive College is an area of natural thermal activity which comprises hot mud pools, geysers of scalding water and blow holes of superheated steam. Well, many hundreds of years ago the ancient mages controlled and tapped this resource, channelling much of the hot water and steam via stone pipes into the college.” He smiled, “During winter, vents are opened and hot air is channelled all across the college via stone ducting within the walls. Here you will never go in need of a hot bath. The water is piped directly from the thermal areas to the baths and sweat rooms.”

“Sounds like a marvellous place to live,” sighed Aran, “Are there any drawbacks?”

Trevan shrugged, “There is a bit of a smell when the air gets piped though the College...”

“I smelt something on my way in,” interrupted Aran.

Trevan eyebrows lifted marginally, “You’ve a good nose...it’s the sulphur you see, from the thermal areas. The first few days after they open the vents are a bit hard to take, but you get used to it and after a while you don’t even notice.”

Trevan stopped in front of a white painted door, dissimilar from the all others which had been painted a dark green.

“This is the office of the Master of Novice Mages” Trevan explained. “He’ll register and find accommodation for you whilst we are here. You’ll be sharing with another, only mages have their own rooms.”

Aran shrugged, “I don’t mind, but surely the College doesn’t have to bunk two together out of necessity?” Aran gestured about him. “I mean, they seem to have leagues of space...”

Trevan nodded, “True, however many of the students who come over from the mainland are very young, and the mages feel that they adapt better to their new surroundings if they have another student mage as a room-mate.”

Trevan knocked on the door briefly and hearing a voice from inside call assent, opened it.

Aran followed Trevan inside, noting that on his way in that the room was really an anteroom with an internal door leading into another private chamber beyond. Inside the anteroom was a large carved wooden table, behind which was a small bookcase partly filled with books. Dominating the room was shelving filled to the brim with rows and rows of neatly rolled scrolls.

Seated at the desk that was lit by a large, fat beeswax candle, was a man of late middle-age dressed in a dark grey robe and brown mantle with a grey border. His hair at one time may have been raven black, but now it was salt and pepper, and reached down to his shoulders in tight wiry curls. He had been busily writing on one of the many scrolls with inkpot and quill, but at their entrance looked up to see who his visitor was. Aran watched as the Master’s gaze swept over him then came to rest on Trevan. He watched the other man’s eyes narrow then suddenly his face was broken by a large delighted grin.

“Trevan! By all that’s wonderful. It’s been years.”

Trevan smiled and shook the other’s hand, “Aye twenty years Adoe and they seem to have been kind to you old friend. But where did all that grey hair come from?”

The Master of Student Mages put his hand to his head and grinned. “That grey came from looking after all those young rascals for twenty-five years. I’m only surprised that I’m not on my deathbed from worry...” he glanced across and winked at Aran.

Trevan pulled out a couple of stools which had been placed against the wall, and Aran following Trevan’s example sat down quietly.

“So how are the students Adoe? Has the College had much of an intake this year? I’ve been sending over all the ones with a latent Ability I’ve come across in my travels...” Trevan paused in thought recollecting his many year of travel, “That must mean at least two dozen more for the College.”

Adoe nodded, “Certainly, and all are still here barring a couple that found it not to their liking and a couple more that the College found not to it’s liking.” He smiled, “There is one, Hela of Gildai who is working out to be an excellent Weathermage...will most likely be made a mage soon, now that her final year is complete.” Another round of muffled thumps could be heard from deep within the College and several scrolls fell from the shelves. “That’s probably her now,” remarked Adoe, “I’m no Weathermage but I’ve heard that that one certainly has an affinity with storms.”

Trevan wrinkled his brow, “Hela? Hela? Ah now I recollect, she was the one that was always sick before storms.”

“The best Weathermages always are, so you Healmages tell me,” laughed the other mage as he reached down to replace the scrolls. “Now you are back and with another prospective student in tow.” Adoe glanced across at Aran, “Although he’s a bit old to be a novice. What’s his Ability, or haven’t you discovered that yet?”

It was Trevan’s turn to glance across at Aran, who was sitting nervously on the stool. “He’s a special case...asked for by the Archmage himself.”

The other mage stared at Aran critically, “Really! I wonder why? I mean he looks very ordinary...”

“He does have Ability,” Trevan said dryly.

Adoe’s gaze flashed back to the young man and Arantur felt himself scrutinised closely.

“I can’t make out the Ability....it’s not clear....almost as if there is a couple of Abilities intermixed.” Adoe sat back and rubbed his nose with his ink stained fingers, “I give up Trevan, you were always much better at seeing Ability than me.”

Trevan was silent.

He stared again at Aran then his gaze settled back on Trevan, “If the lad knows, then I should know too.”

Trevan sighed, “He knows...I’m certain he’s a latent Metalmage and likely to be an adept too.”

Adoe leant forward and stared at Aran in some fascination. “A Metalmage? Are you sure? We haven’t had a Metalmage at the College in my lifetime.”

“Not in anyone’s lifetime” muttered Trevan. “We have one now,” he grunted, “and I’m at a loss as how the College is going to instruct him in the skills. That knowledge was lost with the destruction of Rapier and from what I understand, those Metalmages that made the King’s Sword made it up as they went along.”

Adoe nodded sagely, “Too true, but think...a Metalmage, perhaps even Warriormages will be reappearing in these corridors again.”

Trevan grunted again, “Perhaps, but it seems that Metalmageing is again on the rise. Young Arantur is apprenticed to a master blacksmith in Leigh, and I have suspicions that Master Cody the blacksmith is yet another Metalmage, but unaware he has an Ability.” Aran’s head snapped back to Trevan. He had been following the conversation with interest but Trevan’s offhand remark that Cody may be a Metalmage shook him deeply. He badly wanted to

question Trevan about this, but felt nervous and uncertain before the other man, deciding instead to keep his silence and wait until Trevan was alone before broaching the subject. Trevan stood and with a clatter pushed back his stool against the stone, "I must go now and report to the Archmage. I've dallied long enough." He bent to pick up his saddlebags and turned to Adoe "Can you look after Arantur whilst I'm gone? I have news for the Archmage and I expect to be away for a time."

Adoe stood and selected a scroll from the shelves, "Of course," he replied turning back to Trevan and eyed off Aran, "He'll share with a young man called Kaled. Although Kaled's been in the College four months he's still our newest novice and your lad will feel much happier with someone new to their Ability." He grimaced, "Some of our long-term students can be terribly disparaging towards the newer ones."

Trevan sniffed, "They'll learn...as soon as they are mages they'll really discover how much they don't know. I mean I've been a mage for over fifty years and I'm still learning my craft."

Adoe smiled gently, "Oh yes, but when the mantle of your Ability was placed about your shoulders, did you not feel wonderful?"

Trevan opened the door and looked back at the other mage, "Aye Adoe, like a god." Then he turned to Arantur, "I'll say goodbye now, lad. Adoe will make sure you're settled. I expect you'll see me again when you get the summons from the Archmage." He lifted a hand briefly in farewell and disappeared into the deepening gloom.

Adoe turned back to his papers and carefully unrolled the scroll that he had removed. On it was a large diagram filled with lines and words and the mage's eyes scanned across it, then his finger jabbed down and he stared at the point on the scroll intently. He looked up at Aran, who was watching his activities with some interest, "It's this year's floor plan of this level of the College with the names of the student's rooms," he explained. "There are so many rooms, and this year we are at three-quarter capacity" he shrugged, "I get lost all the time so I keep this map handy."

He stood up and eased his large body out from behind the table, "Get your bags Arantur, I'll take you to your room now."

The storm was at the height of its fury when they stepped outside. The rain lashed the covered walkways and forced them to walk close up against the walls to escape being drenched. Lightning flared above and instantly there was a double report of thunder, one from the skies, another rumble from the College itself. To Aran it seemed that the old building shook again almost in mild reproof. In the distance Aran could hear a growing noise and moments later hailstones the size of small pebbles started bouncing amidst the rain. "Master Adoe," shouted Aran above the rain and the thunder. "Will your crops be damaged by the hail?"

Adoe turned back, his robe swirling about him in the wind gusts, "Nay lad, as soon as we knew from the Weathermages that there was hail in this storm we placed protection over our crops."

"We?" queried Aran.

Adoe moved in closer so he could talk above the storm's fury, "I am an Earthmage...we deal with all plants and animals, did you not notice my mantle?"

Arantur eyed the brown mantle flapping around on the mage's neck, "I did, but what do they mean Master Adoe?"

The other gestured to continue walking, "It's quite easy to remember young man, for brown is for Earthmages, black is for Weathermages, red is for Healmages and white is worn by the Archmage." He glanced back at Aran, "If you truly have the Metalmage Ability and you become a mage, you would wear a light grey mantle, I think the Warriormages wore a dark blue mantle but I am not certain of that."

"What about the students?" asked Aran holding his cloak close to himself.

"No mantle for the students" replied Adoe, "Just the grey robe of Glaive."

He stopped and turned to survey the storm, gazing out across the internal courtyards now being hammered by the hail. Adoe then turned back towards Arantur, "If you look below you will see that we are directly above the wall that separates the student's courtyard from the Archmage's courtyard." He turned inwards, "This door will lead us into a corridor which will take us to your room." He opened the door and moved into a dark hallway lit only by several steadily burning lamps. They had walked for a minute or two, passing several identical green doors when the hall suddenly turned right, finishing at three doors.

"The centre door will take you down a flight of stairs which leads to the student's courtyard," pointed out Adoe, "The right hand door is the latrine for this set of rooms and this left hand door leads into the room which you will be sharing with Kaled, you are lucky, it is outside facing with a window."

He opened the door easily for it had no lock.

Once inside, Aran noticed that the room had been furnished with two beds. At the foot of each was a large wooden chest. By each bed, stood a small table and a wooden stool, a large window gave panoramic views outside to the rain and the storm whipped ocean in the distance. On the floors were scattered a number of woven rugs, providing a splash of colour to a uniformly grey and brown room. The right hand side of the room had signs of recent occupation. On the table several scrolls were neatly stacked, and under the bed was a pair of scuffed boots.

Adoe went to the unoccupied side of the room and opened the large wooden chest. He pulled out a grey robe, a metal wash basin, a pottery jug and a metal goblet. Aran turned around and saw that on either side of the door were two small tables, one already had an identical washbasin, jug and goblet upon it.

Adoe placed the utensils upon the spare table, "Kaled will show you where to draw hot water for your wash. We are lucky here, we have thermal pools nearby which boil our water and heat the College in winter."

He shook out the dark grey robe and placed it on the bed, "You will wish to change. All mages, students and visitors wear the grey robe of Glaive when at the college. You will find it warm and comfortable. New robes are brought in at weeks-end, and the old ones removed for washing." He stared at Aran, "Some of the mages and students cannot tolerate the prickly wool directly against their skin. If you are so affected you may wear your tunic and hosen under it."

"So when will Kaled return?" asked Aran looking about him.

“Soon I expect. All the students are at their classes, but it is growing quickly dark,” he opened the door, “There will be a bell rung for dinner, you will almost certainly hear it. Goodbye Arantur, I hope your stay here will be pleasant.”

Aran nodded his farewell and watched as the door closed behind the mage. Going to the bed he sat down and started to unpack his saddlebag. Pulling out his soiled clothes he tossed them into a heap on the floor. Then gently removing his book he placed it on the table along with his dagger and several small ripe apples. He upended his bag and shook out a quill and ink pot, clean undergarments and hosen and a fresh tunic. Quickly he undressed and threw on the light wool robe of Glaive. He felt a little cool about his middle so Aran pulled the robe tightly about his waist with his leather belt. The ink pot and quill went on the table with his book, and Aran packed his saddlebag and clean clothes away in the wooden chest. Sitting on the bed Aran gazed about him and noted the uncluttered cleanliness of the room and surmised that most mages were methodical creatures, accustomed to order and routine. Standing by the window Aran thought with longing of Leigh and wished that he had been granted a simpler life. Although this kind of life as a mage would have suited Aran’s temperament he really did not ask for it, and only wished to resume the life he had chosen—that as a blacksmith in Leigh. He stared out at the lashing fury of the storm and hoped that the Archmage would quickly see him and send him back to where he really belonged. Yawning suddenly he decided to lay down, thankfully stretching out wearily on the bed. The straw mattress was a little hard but Aran was tired after his journey and immediately fell asleep.

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The noise of a wooden chest opening and closing woke Aran from his light doze and he sat up a little disorientated in the darkness.

“Well, at least you don’t snore,” remarked a cheerful voice from the other side of the room. “You’ve no idea what it’s like sharing a room with a snorer in full voice. The last guest here sounded like an avalanche crashing down a mountain.”

A dark shape moved into the light of a lantern which had been placed on the inside window sill between the two beds. Aran looked up and saw a lad a year or two his junior sitting down on the opposite bed.

Aran held out his hand in greeting and it was solemnly shaken by the other.

“My name is Kaled...” the student smiled introducing himself. “I’m originally from Haulgard but I’ve been here almost five months studying to be a Weathermage.”

Aran nodded his greeting, “My name’s Arantur, and I’m from Leigh...and I don’t know how long I’ll be staying.”

“You have an Ability?” queried Kaled brushing back his thick brown hair.

“Aye, I’ve been told I may be a Metalmage,” Aran replied

Kaled’s eyes opened in wonder, “Metalmage! Now that’s unusual, I don’t think we have any Metalmages here now,” he shrugged, “In the past, sure but...” his voice trailed off in amazement.

“When’s dinner?” asked Aran swiftly changing the subject of his unusual Ability.

Kaled’s eyebrow’s lifted slightly, then he nodded his understanding, “Don’t worry, I’ll keep it to myself...as for dinner, well I was just about to wake you. The bell was rung only moments ago.”

“Good, I’m starved,” stated Aran emphatically whilst pulling himself out of bed.

“I hope you’re not expecting anything fancy for dinner,” Kaled commented whilst pulling a silver comb through his shoulder length brown hair, “it’s all plain and hearty fare here I’m afraid.”

“What did you do before you came here?” asked Aran as he noted Kaled’s unmarked, unworked hands.

Kaled glanced across, “Nothing really, my family are kin to one of the Old Families of Haulgard and are as close to the idle rich as anyone is likely to be. Father has interests in many farms and businesses around Haulgard.” He pulled a face, “My esteemed great-grandfather discovered a lost hoard of family gold that had been hidden during the Serat invasion.” He shrugged at the memory, “He was enterprising and bought a number of businesses and we’ve been living off the fat of his labour ever since.”

“So what does your father really do?” asked Aran, not really imagining that anyone could be idle all their life.

Kaled carefully replaced his silver comb back on the table, “Oh, he oversees the managers of the businesses, and occasionally sits on the Andurian High Council when the mood takes him.”

Aran was taken aback, “Your father is a Councillor!”

Kaled rolled his eyes, “Not a real Councillor Arantur. The Council asks prominent businessmen and members of the Old Families to sit in on their deliberations,” he grinned suddenly, his bright blue eyes dancing, “The voice of the people you could say.”

Aran could barely keep the contempt out of his reply, “Voice of the people indeed. No disrespect to your family Kaled, but it sounds like the Council has deliberately kept the real people out of their meetings.”

Kaled laughed. “No disrespect taken...for that is exactly what they have done.” He shook his head in amazement, “Ever since I have left Haulgard I have never heard so much complaining and bitterness towards the Council in all my life. The Council is very much a Haulgard institution and the people,” and he glanced at Aran in wry amusement, “All the people of Haulgard are very proud of it. However the feeling does not extend outside Haulgard’s thick walls.”

Aran choked back a laugh, “I can just imagine, however, what about dinner?”

“Aye dinner” replied Kaled picking up the lantern, “Follow me and I’ll take you to the Great Hall.”

Outside the room the dark hallway was lit by several of the ever-burning lamps placed in small alcoves in the stone walls. The lamps shone with a steady radiance, and lit their way until the two young men emerged out onto the walkways into a cool, clear late-summer night. Aran looked out at the myriad of stars and saw the first of the two moons clearing the ramparts of the College.

“Storm has gone,” Aran stated, a little unnecessarily.

“Aye, as swiftly as it came,” was Kaled’s only comment as he turned to the right and headed down the walkway merging with the other students, en-route to dinner.

Aran hastened to catch up with Kaled, reluctant to lose the only familiar face in a crowd of young men and women wearing the identical grey robes of Glaive. They walked for a few minutes then as one turned into a doorway flanked by a set of impressive oak doors.

Kaled turned and motioned for Aran to join him, "This is the Great Hall of the College. All the students take their meals in here, sometimes the mages join us, but usually they take their meals in their own rooms." He gestured at the rows of tables, most of which were filled with students quietly speaking to each other. "We of the different Schools sit together. Although you're not a Weathermage student you are still a guest and may sit with us at the Weathermage tables."

"Is that a hard and fast rule?" asked Aran curiously looking about him.

Kaled shook his head, "Of course not. If I was walking out with a girl who was a Healmage, or if my best friend was an Earthmage I would certainly be welcome at their tables. I guess it was a habit that started hundreds of years ago and it's been habit for so long that it's custom now."

Aran sat himself down next to Kaled on an unoccupied seat at the end of one of the tables. Immediately a serving man placed a large bowl of lamb and vegetable stew, and a thick buttered slice of almost fresh bread down in front of him. Aran took the spoon that was laid out ready, and turned to eat.

A hand stayed his arm and Kaled spoke quietly, "Do not eat yet, the Master of Student Mages must first address us."

Aran regretfully put down his spoon and watched whilst a small group of mages came in through the door close in upon the heels of the student latecomers. They made their way to the empty top table and sat down quietly, waiting whilst they too were served the bowls of lamb stew.

Aran quickly picked out Master Adoe in their midst as he had stood up almost immediately to address the students. He did not have to wait for silence for the students were obviously hungry and were waiting quietly for his appearance.

"Students of Glaive," he began. "Another day is finished and I hope with new gains in knowledge and experience." He glanced at the Weathermage table and smiled briefly, "I know some of our students have taken advantage of today's weather...at the expense of my poor ears." He waited until the ripple of laughter had died down from the hall, "Eat now with gratitude of the bounty of the Goddess...and sleep deeply with minds fresh for new knowledge on the morrow."

The Master of Students sat back down and began to eat. This was obviously a signal to the hall for Aran noticed that everyone else quickly took up spoons and bread and joined in the meal.

The slight delay had not ruined the meal for the stew was still hot and very delicious with a Master Cook obviously overseeing its preparation. Aran ate with great appreciation, more so with the natural enjoyment brought on by hunger. Aran finally finished his meal and was mopping up the last of the juices with the remainder of his bread when he noticed a hush fall over the hall of students and with a quiet scrape of chairs they all rose to their feet.

Aran, seconds behind the others also rose, his mouth still full of bread.

"It is the Archmage! Come to visit, this is highly irregular," hissed one of the other students to Kaled.

Aran overhearing, quickly swallowed the remains of his meal and turned, his glance flying to the main doors which were flanked by a large group of mages gathering around someone deep in their midst. Aran searched their numbers and for a moment he thought he caught a

glimpse of Trevan, now dressed in the customary dark grey of Glaive, then the crowd moved again and he was lost from view. Whatever low conversation that may have begun was immediately extinguished when an elderly man in a plain white robe and mantle appeared from the midst of the mages. He walked soundlessly to the very front of the hall and held up his hand for absolute silence. The hall fell even quieter than Aran thought was possible given the hundreds of students gathered. He briefly indicated that everyone should resume their seats, and whilst the students quietly sat down his light grey eyes scanned the crowded hall. Archmage Maran's gaze, for Arantur was certain that this tall elderly man was the Archmage, came to rest on the student Weathermage table. Momentarily his eye fell on Aran and his brow creased a little in concentration, then his eye passed and moved onto others at the table.

Aran shivered and slowly let his breath out. He had felt clearly the power of the Archmage rest upon him and the effect was at the very least unsettling. However the Archmage opened his mouth and spoke a few quiet words, quiet but yet audible to the entire hall.

"Novice Hela of Gildai, attend me."

Aran glimpsed movement from further up the table as a small woman with unruly frizzy blond hair pushed her chair back and with a nervous smile for her companions walked up to the Archmage and quickly knelt.

"Novice Hela of Gildai?" questioned Archmage Maran.

"Aye, Lord," she replied.

Aran watched whilst the Archmage motioned for a middle-aged mage wearing a black mantle to join them.

"She is ready?" questioned the Archmage of the other mage.

"Aye, Lord," he replied.

Archmage Maran inclined his head and took from the hands of the other mage a small bundle of neatly folded cloth. Briefly he turned and unfolding the cloth, placed the black mantle around the shoulders of the kneeling woman.

"Welcome Sister Mage" he said clearly. "Welcome Mage Gildai to Glaive."

He lifted her to her feet and smiled whilst placing a formal kiss on her brow, then after a brief word with the older Weathermage, the Archmage left with the large group of mages.

Upon the Archmage's departure the hall erupted in clapping and conversation which smiling, the Master of Student Mages did not attempt to quell.

Aran in bewilderment turned to Kaled, "Does that happen very often?"

Kaled shook his head, watching as the newly made mage returned to sit with her friends. "No, but I've only been here a few months. Hela is the first time I've seen a mage made." He turned to Aran, "You're lucky to see the Archmage so soon. I've only seen him once before in all these months, and that was the time I was Scanned for my Ability."

He stared at Hela, "From what I understand final year student mages are sent for by the Archmage and are given the mantle in his private hall. I've never known for the Archmage to go to the Great Hall to make a public presentation." He scratched his head in perplexion, "I understand that Hela is very clever, almost a genius in her dealings with weather in class..." His voice trailed off, "Do you think that the Archmage wanted to give her added honour, because she is so bright?"

Aran shrugged, "I'm the newcomer here. You tell me."

Kaled shook his head and went back to the remains of his meal.

Aran nodded towards the new mage, now surrounded by dozens of her friends and well-wishers, “What will happen to her now?” he asked.

Kaled looked up from his almost empty bowl, “She will be given a room on the mage’s floor and apprenticed to an experienced Weathermage. They will then spend months out in the field conducting experiments before she returns to Glaive for several years of further study. After that she’ll be made a full mage in a private, highly secret ceremony.” He twirled the spoon absently around his fingers, “If she proves herself worthy, she will then go onto further study and experimentation to become a Master Weathermage.”

Aran frowned, “How long does it take to become a mage?”

Kaled ceased his twirling of the spoon and placed it carefully onto the table. “Initially five years of student studies makes you a mage. After that you have two compulsory years of apprenticeship with three years of further study—that makes you a full mage.” He glanced around the room, “Most here only aim that high. Some, like Hela will go onto the ten years of further study to become a Master at their craft, but not all are so dedicated, or have the mage Ability that would allow such aspirations...after that there are those who dream to be High Mages.”

“High mages?” questioned Aran, alarmed at all the years of study required to become a mage.

“Aye, those Master Mages who lift themselves higher through further study, research and experimentation. They will be awarded by their peers the title of High Mage,” he frowned again, “It is not a common thing for Glaive has barely a dozen High Mages in residence. After all that and out of the ranks of such an exulted group one will be elected the Archmage.”

Aran stared across at all the fresh young faces of the students and tried to understand how they could readily accept such an undertaking. “How often is the Archmage elected?” asked Aran dully, hoping against all hope that he wasn’t destined to be a student here.

Kaled’s voice dropped to a low whisper, “Archmage Maran has been the only Archmage in living memory. I guess the old records must speak of others, but it is not discussed in class. I have heard that the High Mages gain such power that they become almost immortal...choosing death only when they have ceased to learn and have lost their love of life.”

Aware finally that he was holding his breath, Aran let it out in a hurry and felt the familiar tingle of fear creep across the hairs on the back of his neck. This place was not for him, Aran thought in some consternation. Although the routine and pleasant accommodation suited his character, he certainly could not see himself devoting over ten years of his life to dry and dusty study and research.

“When can I go?” asked Aran tightly, his words subconsciously echoing his thoughts.

“What? To bed?” asked Kaled in some surprise, “Are you tired already?”

Aran pulled a face, “Aye, tired indeed,” he replied cuttingly, “Perhaps a good sleep will improve my view of this place.”

“Huh?” it was Kaled’s turn to be confused. “Don’t you want to be a mage Arantur?”

Aran drummed his fingers resentfully on the wooden tabletop, “No,” he growled angrily.

He turned to the younger man, “I already have a profession. I am apprenticed to one of the finest blacksmiths in Andur...only” and his voice dropped to a low growl, “The Archmage

has sent for me, and I've been told I have this, this Ability." He spat as if clearing something unpleasant from his mouth. "Up to now I have been given no choice...but I'll be damned if I'm just going to sit back and let them have their will of me."

"Them, Arantur?" asked Kaled gently.

"Them, the mages of Glaive, they seem to have it in for me, and by Andur I wish I was out of it and back at Leigh where I belong," he snapped angrily.

Kaled placed a reassuring hand on Aran's shoulder, "Even though I am the newest here I do know that every student that comes to Glaive has a choice about their future. If you choose not to be a mage, Glaive will not hold you. Only a direct order from the Archmage could not be questioned and I believe he is a reasonable man. Think clearly Arantur! Glaive will not hold you against your will. There is no student here that does not freely wish to be a mage and who does not accept the years of study ahead of them."

Aran turned to stare at the young man, "You believe that?"

Kaled nodded firmly.

Aran's shoulders sagged, "Then I must believe it too and hope that the Archmage is reasonable and grant me my request to return to Leigh."

"If he believes it is the right and proper path for you, then he will not hesitate to set you upon it," reassured Kaled, "Now let us retire, you have expressed tiredness, and I have a difficult day ahead of me tomorrow..."

Aran stood up with the other younger man, "Difficult, in what way?"

Kaled massaged fingers already stiffening from a day trying to cast spells, "I must gather a sea fog tomorrow. In late-summer with the noon sun high in the sky!"

Aran glanced uncomprehendingly at his companion, "Why in Andur do the mages want a sea fog at all?"

Kaled laughed wryly, "Oh no reason other than to tax their poor students to the very limit of their Ability." He glanced across at Hela still celebrating with her close friends, "Now I am certain that one could do it with her eyes open and her hands tied behind her back," he sighed. "Come now Arantur, let us retire and leave these 'masters' to their celebrations."

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Arantur woke to the morning sun streaming in through the large windows in their room. He looked across to the other bed, it was empty with the blankets neatly drawn up and folded, obviously lessons for the students started early in Glaive College. He sat up and scratched absently at his chest, looking down he noticed red welts where he had been unconsciously scratching during the night. Aran pursed his lips in consternation. Obviously he had the same problems with the wool robe as the others Master Adoe had told him about. He pulled off the robe and dressed again in his comfortable tunic and hosen then threw the robe over his normal clothes. Tugging on his boots, he fastened his belt and walking across to the washing table briefly splashed water onto his face.

'What to do now?' he thought as he munched on one of the apples left over from the journey. He sat back on the bed and contemplated the range of options open to him. The first thing he really ought to do was find the kitchens and search out some breakfast. Then perhaps explore the college and find Glaive's famed hot pools and sweat rooms and have a decent bath. After that perhaps go for a walk or try and find Trevan and get some idea when the Archmage was going to call for him. Aran sighed in frustration, he knew that he had no right

to venture into the upper levels of the College, but how in Andur was he going to contact Trevan?

Aran finally shrugged in resignation, his only option was to call in on the Master of Student Mages and ask him to find the Healmage. With this thought in mind he left his quarters to find his way back to the room of Master Adoe.

Standing nervously outside the white door of the Master of Student Mages, Aran hesitated briefly then knocked gently. There was no answer so he rapped again, a little more loudly, still no reply. Aran turned and leaning on the stone parapet he gazed across the College in bafflement. Was he to be left completely to his own devices today? He turned his footsteps back towards his quarters for he knew that near them was a staircase that led down to the student's courtyard.

He had got lost only once in his walk back, turning too soon into a doorway and coming face to face with two young women as they emerged from their room. He retreated, crimson faced from their smiles and giggles and fled, happily for him into the correct corridor. Aran moved cautiously down the stairs, feeling his way slowly in the semi-darkness, very uncertain of his way and wishing by all fortune to avoid any more embarrassing mishaps in the immediate future.

Luckily the stairs opened out into the large student courtyard, a large open area of flower and herb beds intersected by stone paths and a paved central area surrounding a circular pool and fountain. Looking about him, Aran noticed other dark doorways opening out into the courtyard. Mercifully they had been labelled with clear titles, 'To the Baths', 'To the Kitchens', 'To the Stables and Main Entrance', and the one that Aran had just come down was signed, 'To the Students Quarters'. Studying the names, Aran guessed correctly they were labelled for the benefit of workers and guests. Mages would not pamper students with such a convenience, explaining the absence of such signage on the upper levels of the College.

Aran stood and regarded the signed entrances, his mind battling briefly about the choice of first bathing or eating. His long untidy hair and the smells emanating from his grimy skin gave him the final inducement to search out the baths, and ignoring his complaining stomach, headed down the passageway to the hot thermal pools. The College of Glaive was certainly a maze of rooms and passageways, and if not for the signs posted at each major turn, Aran would have been completely lost long ago. The passageway to the baths had led Aran right around to the far side of the College, to a door which opened out to a large room dominated by a massively constructed square pool which was gently steaming with water hot from the thermal region. Aran heard the sound of someone approaching and swung around to intercept them.

The stranger was a middle aged woman whose dark red hair was liberally flecked with grey and she was soberly dressed in a dark blue robe.

"Classes have already started young master," she spoke. "You must make haste."

"I am not a student here," Aran corrected her, "I am a visitor newly arrived late yesterday. I have come to have a bath."

Her eyebrows winged upwards at that as she took in his lank and smelly hair, "Aye, I agree, you certainly do need a bath. Come with me, I shall show you what to do."

Mutely Aran followed her stout form around the side of the pool where she disappeared into a small room to emerge moments later with a large drying cloth over her arm.

“This is the washing pool of Glaive,” she informed Aran, “It is a communal pool for men and women, students and mages. Usually men and women have their separate bathing times—women in the early morning and men in the late afternoon, but since all are now at their studies and classes, you may use the pool.” She turned back to him, her voice brisk, “It is considered polite to avert one’s eyes from others whilst you are here. This is not a place for social gatherings.” She glanced at his tall and well muscled physique and the strong handsome lines of his face, “I dare say that there may be many amongst the women who would be eager to make your acquaintance, but the baths are not the place for such intimacy.”

Aran felt colour suffusing his face, “I assure you good woman, I have no intention...”

She glanced sharply at him, “And the College does not tolerate intimacy between men either...”

Aran had to interrupt, “...you read me wrongly good woman, I am not interested...” he stammered, “...all I wish to do is bathe and breakfast, I desire no intimacy at this place.”

She stared at him, pursing her lips in thought, “Aye, I understand, but you’re a handsome one and you may find that trouble will come to you, even if you’re not inclined to seek it out.” She tossed back her dark red hair with a gesture that implied that if she was thirty years younger she would do something about it herself.

Aran was at a loss, “Good woman let me have my bath in peace.”

“Aye,” she handed him the drying cloth, “Leave your clothes in this room if you want them washed, otherwise hang them on this rack to keep them out of the wet. Enjoy your bath young man.”

Aran waited until the woman had left the room, and then hurriedly undressed, throwing his robe and clothes on the rack before descending naked into the pool. The water was gently warm and tasted of salts and minerals, and the smell of sulphur was heavy in the air. Aran dove underwater, scrubbing at his hair with his fingers until he was satisfied that he was finally clean. Succumbing to the warmth of the water Aran leant back against the side of the pool and let his thoughts drift.

He knew that he was considered handsome although he had never reckoned himself so, for his shyness and natural reticence had kept all but the most determined of women away. When younger he had lain with one of the easy women of the town and immediately regretted the experience, finding the whole affair hurried and clumsy and determined not to repeat it with such a bold and streetwise companion. He frowned at the memory, recalling that Sed however was always falling in and out of such affairs, showing off each bright and bold eyed companion to a brother whose only thought was wariness around such women. At least that sole woman of his experience had not borne a child of their union, for Aran had seen her many months later plying her ancient trade around the taverns of Glaive. Aran smiled grimly at the memory, Sed not content to just tease his brother about his bookish habits, had also ragged him for his disinclination of pursuing any or all of the available women of the town. With the now familiar anger rising at the memory of old insults, Aran turned fiercely and swam strongly across to the other side of the warm pool, hoping that the repetitive strokes would dull the memory and loosen the tension from his body.

Several lengths later, the exercise and the warm salty water finally worked the tightness from his shoulders, and Aran relaxed for the first time since he had come to Glaive. Leaving the pool he dried and dressed himself again, tying his long blond hair back neatly. He left the drying cloth in the small washroom for collection by the washerwoman, and finally paying heed to his grumbling stomach, went off in search of some breakfast.

The College was completely deserted when Aran emerged from the kitchens where friendly cooks had given him a slice of freshly baked apple pie to eat, and also a mug of fine cider to drink. Thus fortified, Aran went in search of company but found to his disgust that not a soul was to be seen. He was near the front tunnel and gate of the College, so giving in to his natural inclination to explore; he wandered outside in search of fresh air and some promising hills to climb. The storm yesterday afternoon had settled the dust, leaving the world bright and clear as new spring morning. The low foothills of Glaive's ancient volcanoes beckoned, so hiking the grey robe up about his belt, Aran trudged off in the hope of views and exercise.

Over an hour later, and breathing deeply Aran paused at the top of the ridge he had been toiling up to survey the view. To the south Glaive stretched as far as the eye could see, the island dominated by the massive volcanoes that formed its spine. To the west was the vast expanse of the Province itself with the distant Trident Range entirely lost in the sea haze. However before he could turn his eyes to the north, he felt again that sudden sense of horror and disquiet that seemed to emanate from the far west. Uncomfortably feeling a sudden nausea, he tore his awareness away from the west, and the sickness slowly subsided. Aran did not know what was bringing on the sudden bouts of nausea, briefly he hoped he wasn't set to sickening.

Clutching his arms about his still churning stomach, Aran thankfully turned his face to the north and espied a faint smudge in the clear air. Squinting against the glare from the sea, he determined that it must be Sentinel Peak. Beyond that lone mountain, lost in the far sea haze was the tremendous bulk of the Havart Plateau and Andur's Keep. Still gazing out to sea, he sat down amongst the gorse and acacia, reflectively chewing a grass stalk. Alissa had come from Andur's Keep, he remembered, wondering briefly if she had returned with her father or if they were still in Sentinel in search of swords. Recalling his earlier thoughts, Aran smiled at the remembrance of that lively and intelligent girl and wished belatedly that he had been given more time to know her better. He grinned, Sed himself would not disparage such a woman, her quicksilver character even a match for his erstwhile brother.

Aran's gaze was caught by the flight of a sea eagle spiralling on the air currents around the quiescent volcano. The bird barely had to move a wingtip to gently turn and curve, seeking out its prey amongst the tall grass and gorse of the foothills. Following its movement, Aran watched as it flew closer, losing altitude with every long slow spiral. Aran was more than surprised when the bird swooped in and landed not five yards from where he sat. The eagle cocked its magnificent white head and regarded him with bright, tawny eyes, and then with a shake of its feathers, its form dissolved and changed into that of a tall man with bright yellow eyes with long gold hair tousled about his shoulders who was dressed in the grey robe of Glaive.

"You are Arantur of Leigh?" the strange mage spoke.

"Aye..." Aran was amazed and astounded at the mage's arrival.

“You must return to the College at once,” the tall mage said abruptly, “Archmage Maran has sent for you.” The mage stepped towards him and grasped him firmly by the shoulder, “Do not be alarmed...our journey back to the College will be short and swift.” Immediately Aran felt enveloped by a sudden heat, and to his great horror found the ground rapidly spinning away from beneath him. He tried to call out in terror but found to his dismay that his voice came out as a startled yowl.

‘Be still!’ a voice spoke into his mind, ‘This is as difficult for you as it is for me. I can only keep our transformations intact if you keep quiet and still.’

Transformations! Aran wildly thought. Where and what am I? Aran felt sharp claws settle themselves more securely into the soft folds of the skin of his neck, and he caught the unnervingly close view of the eagle’s piercing golden eyes.

‘You are a small kitten,’ laughed the voice in his mind, ‘Minus claws in case you try experimenting on me. This was the only way to get you to the Archmage in time. I would have changed you into a bird but it takes time to learn to fly and time is something I don’t have.’

‘What is your name?’ questioned Aran, replying in the strange mind-speak of the bird, as he did not feel brave enough to speak aloud in case it came out as a meow.

‘High Earthmage Drayden of Eastling,’ replied the other. ‘Where have you been small one? Did you not know that we who are High Earthmages have the Ability to transform?’

Aran shook his head, disconcerted by the sensation of his whiskers blowing about in the breeze.

‘Then you know now,’ Drayden chuckled, ‘I am being very careful of you small one. All mother cats carry their kittens around by the neck...that is why I chose that form for you.’

‘Then take care not to drop me,’ Aran replied nervously. He frowned and tried not to look at the ground flashing past his paws, ‘I am no Earthmage... How did you transform my shape?’ he asked.

The eagle Drayden stared at him intently, ‘With a great deal of effort. It could only be done with another mage of course, or someone with a latent Ability. No power of mine, however great could alter the form of a non-mage.’ The great eagle turned its head back to its flight. ‘Did you know you have the Metalmage Ability?’

Aran nodded in resignation.

‘Very odd,’ Aran caught the eagle’s thoughts, ‘And I sensed another lesser Ability as well, but I could not determine it as the Metalmageing Ability ran so strongly, almost obscuring the other.’ The golden eye fastened on Aran again, ‘I find it very odd that you possess two Abilities and still have not been made a student of the College...very odd indeed.’

Aran had no answer to that question for he was very much aware of the ground rushing up to meet him. ‘Here we are. The Archmage’s courtyard,’ Drayden commented, ‘Now be a good cat and stretch out all four feet. We are about to land.’

Aran stretched out his legs and immediately felt the powerful grasp of the eagle fall away. With a startled yowl he landed safely on the ground, his fur bristled out in terror. Immediately the sensation of heat rushed through him again and he was highly relieved to find himself back in his own body again.

The eagle landed on the low marble wall of the fountain and shifted its feathers, again the form blurred and the familiar features of the mage Drayden emerged.

“You're awfully heavy for a small cat” complained Drayden trying to work the stiffness from his shoulders. “You ought to lose weight,” he glanced back at Aran. “No, it’s all that muscle...weighs a ton, even on a small kitten.” He rearranged his clothing and when satisfied pulled his crumpled brown mantle from a voluminous pocket of his robe and laid it about his shoulders.

“Come quickly Arantur,” he motioned. “The Great Circle of Glaive is waiting for you.”

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Chapter 5—The Seaward Route

Still feeling unnerved by his peculiar experience, Arantur followed the other mage out of the courtyard and up the many stairs that led to the Archmage's quarters. Although he felt that at long last he might finally receive answers for his many questions, he still felt he hadn't prepared himself fully for this interview. Hurriedly unhitching the robe from his belt, he tried to straighten his clothes and hair into some semblance of neatness. He knew little about this Archmage, and from what Aran had seen of the man the previous evening, he suspected that the Archmage had a will of iron and expected absolute obedience from those around him.

The stairs finished at the third floor of the College. The floor comprised the rooms of the mages, and the Archmage's quarters and private hall. Walking swiftly to an impressively large set of white doors, Drayden quickly rapped upon them. Without a sound the doors swung inwards, and before the mage blocked his view, Aran caught a brief glimpse of a large room lit with more of those odd smokeless, steadily burning lamps that were so common throughout Glaive. Observing his interest, Drayden swung around to face Arantur.

"Young man," he said, "The Great Circle sits in readiness for your appearance. I must now go and join my brethren in the Circle. You however must wait here until you receive the final summons." He smiled briefly at Aran's discomfiture, "Do not be alarmed, the Great Circle is gathered so for every new applicant to Glaive. It should not be any more alarming than your recent experience."

Aran nodded only, not trusting his voice to be steady.

Drayden disappeared into the room and Aran stood by the now shut doors trying to gather his composure. He hoped that Trevan was in this Great Circle for he did not wish to go into such company totally friendless. Briefly he thought back about his disturbing experience of transformation, and silently promised himself that he would try and remove himself from Glaive by all means possible. Aran ground his teeth together in frustration. He did not like the mages of Glaive, finding them closemouthed and exercising little empathy or diplomacy in their dealings with others. If he had the great misfortune to be ordered to stay here then he would attempt some means of leaving the island, for he knew that the mage's life was not for him.

The great doors swung open again, and an elderly woman with snow-white hair and wearing the red mantle of a healer about her shoulders stepped out.

"Art thou Arantur of Leigh?" She spoke formally in the archaic speech.

Aran nodded.

"Then thou must follow me. Thy presence art commanded by Archmage Maran of Glaive."

"Aye," Aran finally managed to whisper.

She took his hand in her wrinkled hand and led him gently across the threshold and into the Archmage's Hall. Aran's gaze was fixed very firmly on the ground ahead of him, but occasionally he caught glimpses of the hall as he passed. Large it was, but not as large as the Great Hall of Glaive on the first floor of the College. Constructed of the grey granite of Glaive, it additionally was decorated with tall fluted columns of the pinkish white marble traded from the southern province of Nafeking. The mages currently at Glaive sat in a large circle, shoulder to shoulder on tall, high backed, ornately carved chairs. There was an opening in the circle and the woman led Aran inside. As they walked into the circle, Aran

caught sight of a blue robed man placing an empty chair to fill the gap. The female Healmage led Aran to a carved stool placed in the exact centre of the circle. She indicated that he should sit down and then returned to the other mages, occupying the chair that had been used to fill the gap. Aran sat down on the centre stool and looked around. The circle was now complete.

“Arantur of Leigh,” a clear voice spoke from a part of the circle directly ahead of Aran, “You have led us a merry dance this morning young man...”

The speaker stood and Aran at last identified the Archmage by his white robe. Aran tried to speak but his vocal cords seemed to have frozen in fright.

“However, no harm is done and you are here. At last returned to us,” the Archmage added. The Archmage walked softly towards Aran, “What art thou’s greatest desire, Arantur of Leigh?” he asked, speaking the traditional words of the Great Circle.

Aran was torn by indecision. Should he be totally honest with himself and this ancient, powerful mage...and suffer Glaive’s anger as a result, or lie to himself and Glaive and be condemned to spend years on this island.

“I would rather be anywhere else than on this island, Lord,” Aran admitted, mentally bracing himself for the fury which would surely erupt at his words, but the mages must have been highly disciplined for no shadow of consternation or reproof marked their serene, aged faces. The Archmage merely nodded and walked back to sit again in his chair. For a moment he just sat and stared at the young man seated so nervously on the central stool, then almost imperceptibly the Archmage’s hand rose and fell upon his knee. Suddenly, involuntarily, Aran cried out as he experienced the horrid sensation of fire completely consuming his body. Grimacing and trying hard not to shout out in pain, he instead gazed ahead, resisting the compulsion to check himself for burns. He was certain he was completely unscathed...the intense heat being only a residual effect of the Scanning by the mages. Finally he felt composed enough to look up and around at the Great Circle, and was disconcerted to see astonishment and questions in the eyes of the mages. Aran knew that he had the Metalmage Ability for he had been told that by two separate mages. Surely that knowledge was not cause for concern?

The Archmage stood again, “Arantur of Leigh, thou hast been Scanned. Truly thou art possessed of the magepower, for two Abilities have been observed within thee. Thou art possessed of the Metalmage Ability, and....” then the Archmage for a moment looked perturbed, “Thou also possess the Warriormage Ability, but to a lesser degree.”

Aran almost fell off his stool in astonishment.

‘Warriormage!’ He thought desperately to himself, his gut twisting and writhing in nervous reaction, and he felt the sickness of nausea rise up into his throat at. ‘Never, they must be wrong. I have no skill with weapons. I mean I barely know which end of a sword to pick up...’

The play of emotions across Aran’s face was very easy to read and the Archmage spoke again.

“Not since before the dark days of the Serat invasion has a Warriormage stood in these halls.” Aran noticed immediately that the formal language had been dropped. “Although not unheard of in Glaive’s history, it is certainly very rare for a novice to come to Glaive with two Abilities.” Aran met the piercing grey eyes of Archmage Maran. “Rarer still is one that

comes with the Abilities of Metalmage and Warriormage. Abilities thought long since lost to the Province of Andur.”

A brief flutter of unrest moved across the Great Circle.

“But what is to be done with this young man?” continued the Archmage walking slowly towards Arantur. “No longer on Glaive do we have the Masters with the knowledge to instruct such a student. Lost in the fire at Rapier are the scrolls which would give us clues about how to train such a one...if we should return such a rare student to the mainland then Glaive would lose a prospective mage with such little known and rare Abilities.”

The Archmage stopped at Aran’s shoulder and stood looking down at the obviously nervous young man.

“Such is our problem and our dilemma,” finished Archmage Maran.

“Do we then return him to Craftmaster Cody of Leigh?” asked Trevan from the circle. Aran swung his head around and intercepted Trevan’s reassuring gaze.

Aran’s heart sunk to his boots as he watched Archmage Maran slowly shake his head.

“No, that cannot be. Cody I have heard is a fine man, well skilled in his Craft and with perhaps latent Ability as a Metalmage too, but Arantur cannot be returned to Leigh. This other Ability must be nurtured as well.”

He turned and regarded Arantur, “Glaive cannot afford to lose these rare Abilities. However thanks to Craftmaster Cody, Arantur already possesses some skill with metal. He needs now to cultivate this other, lesser Ability of Warriormage.”

Archmage Maran swung away from the centre of the circle returning quickly to his chair. “There is no other solution,” he said finally. “Arantur of Leigh is to be sent from Glaive to Andur’s Keep to train in weaponry with the Guards, for there is in the Province of Andur no other band of fighters more fit to the task of guiding an infant Warriormage than those at the Keep.” He gazed about him at the other mages, they stood and waited at attention, “This session of the Great Circle is now closed. The rest of you may go. Arantur, Trevan, wait with me please.”

As Aran watched the mages file from the Hall he felt both elated and dismayed at the Archmage’s words. His desire of quitting Glaive had been granted, but still he was not to return to Leigh, but instead to travel onto the Keep to learn weaponry from the Guards. For a moment, he remembered that he might again see Alissa, and then recalled that he had no reassurance from the Archmage that he would ever see Leigh again.

“You will see your foster family and your Craftmaster again.”

Aran looked up and noticed that the Archmage was standing again by his shoulder. “I can see that far ahead in your future, young man,” reassured Archmage Maran. “However, of that future I cannot and will not speak,” he continued seeing the questions in Aran’s eyes. “Know only that you must go onto Andur’s Keep, your Abilities demand of me no other action.”

“Why was I brought here Lord?” asked Aran in desperation, “Did you know even before I was born that I had these Abilities.”

Maran’s eyebrows lifted marginally, “I had some inkling that you were to be possessed of a rare Ability. I knew too that you were a child with a destiny. I only regret that Glaive did not claim you at your youth, instead of bringing you here when you were a man grown.”

Aran’s eyes flashed up to the Archmage’s. “What destiny is mine Lord?”

Maran's eyes glimmered with leashed power, "Do not push me lad, you know I cannot speak of these things. However I must now show you something which may clarify these questions of yours. Trevan, attend me."

Trevan walked up to stand beside his master.

"Come...follow me," commanded the Archmage to Aran.

He swung around and moved through the circle of chairs. Instead of heading back towards the main doors, the Archmage walked down the length of the hall to the featureless granite wall at the far end. Stopping not two feet from the end of the hall, the Archmage held up a hand marked with skin parchment thin and also marred with prominent veins and age spots, and placed it upon the wall. Watching, Aran saw the Archmage close his eyes and press ever so gently on the unyielding stone. At his touch the wall shimmered and dissolved away to resolve in its place a room which seemed to be a hidden, secret extension of the main hall.

The Archmage walked into the room, with Trevan and Aran closely following.

The old man stopped and surveyed the room which was comprised mainly of shelving filled with ancient parchments and scrolls.

"Look well Arantur," he spoke gently, his hands moving as if to encompass the ancient scrolls, "Here lies the heritage of Glaive, its ancient scrolls of power, although most I must admit are incomprehensible to the mages of today. Since word came from Trevan that you had been located and of your possible Metalmage Ability, I have been searching through these shelves for writings on how to train those with the ancient, lost Abilities, but to no avail. All such knowledge has been lost in the destruction of Rapier."

He sighed and turned towards a locked wooden cabinet sitting alone in the centre of the room. "All writings from Rapier lost," he mused sorrowfully. "Then I thought to find words written down by the previous Archmages... still nothing. Even my predecessor did not commit to words his knowledge of the lost Abilities." He studied the wooden cabinet resentfully, "With all this knowledge lost, this..." with a crash he swung the cabinet lid open to reveal an ancient blade lying on a bed of dark blue velvet, "This King's Sword is useless to us!"

Aran involuntarily stepped forward, his eyes full of the ancient weapon before him. Glowing dully in the half-light of the room the rune incised steel of the short-straight blade seemed to leap with life. The downwardly curved hilt of steel and silver was darkened with age, and embedded with small, midnight blue sapphires. The grip seemed to be made of a dark timber cross-laced with much worn leather strips, the pommel was of the same age-darkened silver and steel and shaped like a halved oyster shell. The sword sat and glimmered upon its bed of dark-blue velvet. To Aran it looked very practical and very deadly.

Aran forced himself to take a half-step back. Firmly putting his hands behind his back he stared at the sword with bewildered fascination. There was something about the sword that spoke to him, spoke to his Ability. However the ancient Metalmages had spelled the sword, it still called him as another Metalmage and its siren song was insistent and deadly.

"What is my role in this?" he said abruptly, forcing himself to turn away from the demanding presence of the weapon. "Why did you show me this?" he asked, forgetting to address the Archmage respectfully.

Archmage Maran's eyebrows lifted again, but he made no comment on the young man's disrespect. "What do you think your role is, Arantur of Leigh?" replied the Archmage.

Taking a slow step forward whilst fighting hard the sword's compulsion, Aran turned to stare at the weapon. Finally he replied, the words sticking heavily upon his lips, "I believe that you want me to somehow make a new blade for a new lineage. One that a new line of kings can wield..." He looked up and sighed, seeing how the pieces of the puzzle had fallen in place. "I know we're having problems with the Thakur," he added. "You mean to go against them with a new king crowned at Andur's Keep."

The breath seemed to ease out of the old Archmage and he leant heavily on the side of the sword's cabinet.

"You recognise the culmination of your Abilities," answered Maran straightening.

"Aye, Lord," agreed Aran carefully, "But you must realise that I have no sword smithing skills. My expertise is from a blacksmith. Mastercraftsman that he is, I believe Cody has never made a sword in his life."

Archmage Maran carefully closed the lid of the cabinet, "Then you must know the sword to craft one. That is one of my reasons for sending you to the Keep to train with the Guards."

"And the other reasons, Lord?" asked Aran, hopeful that the Archmage would forget and reveal his closely guarded secrets.

Maran glared at the young man, "I keep my own counsel on these matters. Do not press me further young man"

Aran shrugged and glazed longingly at the cabinet that held the King's Sword, for one regretful moment he wished that he may have been granted a closer look.

Archmage Maran turned stiffly back towards the hall and the circle of chairs, "I will make immediate preparations for you to leave Glaive..." He turned towards Trevan with a sad smile, "I am sorry old friend, but you must leave your home yet again. I entrust Arantur in your care. I know that you will see that Glaive's will is done in this matter."

Trevan inclined his head deeply, "Aye Lord. I guessed as much, you will provide a letter for the Captain of the Guard detailing your wishes?"

"Of course, Taran will be given as much detail as I feel that he should know." The Archmage swung around suddenly to confront Arantur, "You will understand that what we have said here is under the strictest confidence. However you may speak to others of your Abilities, for that is a man's own and can be spoken of freely," he said, "It will also explain to the Guard why you were placed with them."

Aran nodded then the Archmage glared at him fiercely. "However you will know the full measure of Glaive's displeasure if you ever speak of the matters pertaining to the sword. Do you understand me Arantur of Leigh?"

Trying to quell his racing heart, Aran stammered, "Aye Lord, I will not speak of it..."

"Good!" The Archmage turned away, "Trevan, you will sail on the evening tide...I will send word immediately to the Captain of the Falcon that they are to sail immediately to the Keep."

He made an impatient gesture in the air, "Go then, take a meal and collect your gear. I expect you both to be on the dock before dusk."

Aran felt the Healmage take him by the shoulder and hustle him out of the Archmage's hall. He did not ease his vice-like grip until they were well down the stairs and out into the College below.

“By Andur lad...” Trevan railed. “Did your foster parents not tell you to mind your tongue when in company with your betters? I was certain the Archmage was set to fry you with lightning bolts when you pressed him for his secrets.”

Aran felt his ire rise and he stopped suddenly and glared at the Healmage, “T’was only my right. I am fed up that my life and future is being kept from me by mages with their own plans and calculations.” Aran’s eyes were as stonily grey as the Archmage’s. “I meant no disrespect,” he added icily, his eyes hardening with sudden anger, “But there is only so much a man can tolerate. I feel that up to now I have given Glaive all due consideration, but I warn you Trevan, after this matter is resolved Glaive will have no further hold on me.”

Trevan had drawn back in shock and anger, but as he watched the controlled fury of the young man, he smiled suddenly and nodded. ‘Now I understand Archmage Maran’ he murmured to himself.

“Come young wolf,” he gentled soothingly, “You are certainly of a kind with Archmage Maran! I have never known two men so alike in their tempers. I know things have been difficult and confusing for you, but I am certain that everything will soon be resolved. I am certain that you will find the Keep interesting, and training with the Guards I think will suit you very well.”

“Better than here at Glaive,” mumbled Aran, feeling more than a little embarrassed by his outburst of temper.

Trevan eyed Arantur narrowly out of the corner of his eye and privately agreed that Aran was one who was never meant to be at Glaive.

Back in his own quarters Aran methodically began to repack his saddlebags. He was deeply engrossed in his task when Kaled ambled through the door.

“What, off already? I understand you were Scanned today. Did Glaive not find you to its liking?”

“No, Glaive found me very much to its liking,” Aran answered, straightening from his work and turning to face the younger man, “For I am to be sent to Andur’s Keep to train with the Andurian Guards.”

Kaled pursed his lips and frowned, “What in Andur’s name would the Guards want with a Metalmage, for I assume you were Scanned as a Metalmage?”

Aran nodded and folded a tunic carefully, “Aye, but their Scanning found another Ability, a lesser one.”

Kaled shook his head in confusion then his eyes widened, and he whispered, “Warrormage?”

Aran nodded again and silently packed the tunic into a saddlebag.

Feeling his legs giving way beneath him, Kaled sat down heavily on the other bed. “Metalmage and Warrormage! What in Andur’s name did you do in your previous life to earn such Abilities in this one, by the Goddess, how will they school you?”

Aran sighed heavily, “As I said, with the Guards. In the words of Archmage Maran, ‘...There is in the Province of Andur no other band of fighters more fit to the task of guiding an infant Warrormage than those at the Keep’.”

Kaled whistled through his teeth. “Good luck to you then. I hear that the Captain of the Guard is quite a terror and his men go in fear of him.”

Aran nodded, "I've met him once... a taciturn man, not given to pleasantries. He sounds as fiery as his daughter."

Kaled who had laid himself back, now rolled onto his stomach to face Aran.

"He has a daughter?"

Aran laughed suddenly in recollection, "Aye, tall and slender, with hair like beaten gold, but as mercurial as the weather. One never knows if she'll shine brightly, or cast a storm about your shoulders." He grinned at Kaled, "The only benefit of being sent to the Keep is that she'll be there."

"I envy you," Kaled laughed, "Good luck both with the daughter and with the Guard."

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Several hours later Aran clambered down from the pony cart and walked again on the weathered grey granite of Glaive's dock. Whilst Trevan spoke at length to the Captain of the Falcon who had met the cart when it had arrived, Aran ambled down to the edge of the dock and stood watching the ocean which had been veiled in a fine sea mist. Before his departure he had spent the rest of the afternoon with Kaled, who seemed for once to have a couple of hours free of lessons. Wandering about the student courtyard, the young novice mage spoke with enthusiasm of Glaive and his studies, obviously pleased to have direction in his life. Aran had spoken little, letting the younger man ramble on at length. Lost in his own thoughts, Aran became finally aware that Kaled was directing a question to him. "You don't seem to be happy, yet you are leaving Glaive. Isn't that what you wanted all along?"

Aran had looked up at that, "Aye, but there are other issues, deep ones of which the Archmage will not speak, and other ones of which I am bound to secrecy. I only wish that like most men I had control over my life and destiny. I am tired of being Glaive's puppet, moving to their whims and inclinations."

Kaled had turned to Aran, "There are scarce few men that say they control their life and destiny. The farmer is tied to his land. The craftsman is bound by the wants and needs of the people he services. Even the king, if we had one, would not be free to follow his own inclinations. Only the rootless, kinless wanderer has obligations only to fill his stomach and find a spot to sleep at night. We are all under obligation Aran it is our duty to craft a right and proper lifepath through those obligations."

Aran had sighed at that, "I guess so Kaled... although I was well contented with my lifepath back home."

Kaled scoffed, "For the moment aye, but think of a time when you were old and grey and the chains of your trade had tied you securely to that one forge and that one small town. At least now you have the chance to travel, see wondrous things and when you return to Leigh you will be able to tell your stay-at-home kinfolk and friends that you walked the halls of Glaive, met Archmage Maran, and trained with the Andurian Guards. I would be certain that there would be few men in your town with such life experiences."

Aran gazed out at the cold sea mist reflecting deeply upon that afternoon's conversation. Kaled had been right of course in all he said. Now was the time for new experiences and adventure, too soon he would be back at Leigh, settled in his life and craft.

"Aran," Trevan called out from the gangplank of the Trader, "Hurry along... we are to board now."

Pulling his thoughts back to the moment, Aran gathered his travelling cloak about his shoulders and walked back to the waiting ship. Trevan was standing by the gangplank, their saddlebags in a heap at his feet. He waited until the younger man arrived, and then he bent down to pick up his own.

“We are back in our usual cabin...although I fear the voyage will be longer than our first trip.” He gazed at the sea mist which hung heavily against the dock, “If the winds don’t strengthen soon then it will mean a lengthy journey to the Keep.” He shot a glance back at the College, “The Archmage knows of our journey, perhaps he will command the Weathermages to cast winds to speed our voyage.”

Aran picked up his own bags, hefting them easily across his shoulder, “Do the mages do that very often?”

Trevan’s frown creased, “Only when there is absolute and utter need. I’ve heard tell that Weathermaging here in the waters around Glaive will not greatly affect the mainland weather.” He sighed, “However to summon fresh southerlies to aid our voyage will certainly disrupt the weather all along Andur’s coastline...” Trevan ambled across the gangplank, “And I do not think that our task requires that much urgency,” he added.

On board, sailors quickly took their saddlebags below deck to their cabin, and Aran found a comfortable spot against the ship’s rail to watch their departure from Glaive. Leaning up against the smooth polished wood, Aran gazed back towards the hidden College. He had certainly found some answers to his questions here, but Glaive and the Archmage had provided more unanswerable questions for him to ponder over. As he watched, the sea mist that had lain undisturbed across the water stirred fitfully and began to break. A slight breeze caught his cloak and ruffled his blond hair against his neck. Aran glanced at Trevan who answered him with an unreadable look. Obviously the Archmage was intent on speeding their voyage to the Keep. The Captain of the Falcon took one look at the breaking sea fog, and called out orders to the crew to unfurl sails and ready the Trader for the voyage north. The light breeze had swiftly grown to a strong wind by the time the Captain was satisfied that the Falcon was ready to sail. Aran, gazing up at the sailors aloft in the rigging was very glad that he had not been asked to climb to such a precarious position. Although Aran did not have a fear of heights, after that uncalled-for flight with Mage Drayden he now felt nervous about heights and was glad he was not up in the sails with those sailors.

“Do you think this is the Archmage’s doing?” he asked, nodding towards the wisps of sea mist still remaining.

“Assuredly so,” agreed Trevan, “It is highly unlikely for a wind to start up so suddenly, especially out of a cloudless blue sky as we have had today. I would assume that the Archmage will arrange fair passage for the ship from the confines of Glaive Island. After that it is up to the seamanship of the Captain and crew of the Falcon to take us further north.”

Aran leant over the rail and watched as the sailors hurriedly cast off, the Falcon shuddering a little as she left the dock. The ship had been facing south in her mooring, and the Captain immediately hurried the sailors to their tasks to reorient the sails for her northward journey. The Falcon plunged as she left the sheltered mooring and hit the first of the swells coming in from the open ocean. Aran pulled his cloak closer about him and made sure his old felt hat was securely jammed on his head. He had missed most of the first voyage whilst he slept, so he was keen to see more of the sea in this longer voyage to the north.

Trevan had long since gone below and night had fallen completely, when Aran stood up stiffly from his narrow seat at the ship's rail. He had spent the late afternoon and evening watching as the faint lights of Glaive slipped away slowly to the south. Now the island and its brooding volcanoes were just a distant, dark mass against the endless number of bright stars littering the night sky. As soon as dusk had fallen, the Captain of the Falcon had set four lanterns alight on the ship. A white one at the bow, a blue tinted one at the stern and yellow tinted ones at the entrances to the two major hatches on deck.

"Do you intend to remain here all night?" asked Trevan, noiselessly appearing at his side.

"No, I was just coming down," replied Aran, shivering a little in the fresh sea air. "Have they served dinner yet?"

"Aye...I just came to fetch you. We have chicken and vegetable roast waiting in our cabin."

"Good, I'm starved," Aran replied. One of the sailors had only just left the cabin with their empty bowls when Trevan turned to Aran.

"I was reluctant about tutoring you about in the magepower until I knew the mind of the Archmage," he said quietly, "Now I am free to give you instruction."

Aran's eyebrows crawled up into his unruly blond hair, "Does this mean I am still to be a mage?"

"Of sorts," Trevan sat back on his bunk, "There is no one alive that can teach you how to be a Metalmage or a Warriormage. Master Cody I suspect is a latent Metalmage, it certainly shows in his work and how he has instructed you in the craft. A master blacksmith without the magepower within him would have certainly given you excellent tuition, but only a Metalmage-trained novice would have produced such...inspired work."

"Then through Cody I know Metalmageing?" queried Aran.

Trevan shook his head, "No...not really." He frowned as he tried to explain. "Through Cody you know the basics of the craft, but it's your Ability that makes you more than an ordinary blacksmith." He shook his head in dismay, "Can you remember Arantur how you felt when you were working with the metal? Did you have a knack you employed to help you concentrate and make the pieces turn out so well?"

Aran shrugged, "I don't know exactly, I would remember Master Cody's instructions. Apart from that..." Aran's voice drifted away as he became lost in memories. "There were times when there would be a point when I would go beyond conscious concentration. When it seemed to me that the metal would move under my hand as if alive and compliant with my wishes. I remember time would seem to slow and the world itself would be barely tangible. All that would exist would be the metal and myself." He shook his head to straighten his thoughts and looked across at Trevan, "Was that magepower?"

Trevan stared at him his face inscrutable, "For a Metalmage it may well be the case. We Healmages use different keys to access the magepower, but losing yourself in the metal may well be the key to your Ability."

"What of the Warriormage Ability?" Aran asked. "Do I use the same key as for forming metal?"

It was Trevan's turn to shrug, "I don't know, it might well be so for in the past the two Abilities were complimentary to each other. Warriormagepower may be reached by losing yourself in the fight, in the sword. You will certainly find the answer to that question when we reach the Keep and you start training with the Andurian Guard."

Aran nodded, slowly understanding, “So the Guards will teach me the basics of the craft, but it is up to me to take it beyond to Warriormageing.” He let his breath out in a rush, “It would have been so much simpler if there had been Metalmages and Warriormages around still to instruct me.” Suddenly Aran looked up in some panic, “How will I know if I am doing the right thing? That I am not deluding myself that I have found the key to my Ability?”

Trevan met his strained face and smiled gently, “There is no problem. You will find that you will progress swiftly and produce fine work if you have properly tapped the magepower. I understand that new recruits brought to the Keep usually train for three years before they are admitted to the ranks of the Guard. From what I understand about the ancient Warriormages is this, they could stand equal with battle hardened soldiers after only a month’s training. Yet their own training at Rapier lasted over five years before their peers hailed them as Warriormages.”

“Five years!” Aran was incredulous, “Yet I am expected to train with the Guards and come out a full Warriormage...I don’t think so.”

Trevan laughed. “Nor has a short apprenticeship with Master Cody has made you a full Metalmage either. Be easy Arantur, the Archmage does not intend you to be fully conversant with your Abilities. At any rate it would be impossible for you to achieve such without proper tuition and those who could provide such tuition are now lost.” He shook his head sadly, “Alas the truth of it is that we have no mages to teach you what you should know.”

Aran rounded on Trevan in some exasperation, “Then if I can’t be taught, what in Andur’s name are you to teach me?”

Trevan’s eyes flared angrily, “Things that every mage should know. Small, common uses of the magepower.” He closed his eyes, seemingly to take his anger in hand, “You must work with me Arantur. If you were back at the College things would be done slowly, differently. You would be with your own kind, learning properly about the Ability and how to use it.” He looked up at the young man and Aran saw his eyes were now calm, “Those knacks I have taught you so far, like seeing the mark of the maker in the object he has crafted and conversing with the spirits about us, are known to all mages, of all disciplines.”

Aran frowned. “I remember you telling me that the magepower was dying in the land. How can I access this power if it is so weak?”

Trevan drew his hand wearily across his face, “I was wrong, the magepower exists and is strong...in fact it has never really left the land.” He looked up and across at the younger man, sitting and staring back at him with the Archmage’s eyes. “It was only our inability to access the magepower that was the problem.” He fumbled with his cloak, drawing it closer about his body. “When I was much younger and new to the mantle of mage, I knew there were limits to what I could achieve with the Healmage Ability. That fact has never changed in over forty years...”

“Until now,” Aran interrupted.

Trevan looked up and nodded, “Aye, until now. Since my return to Glaive I am told that the young student mages are outstripping their teachers, that they are testing the old barriers. Pushing out, exceeding limits that would have been unthinkable in my youth.” He gazed across at Aran with troubled eyes, “We rejoice of course that the magepower is moving, rising again, but we are concerned why.” Trevan sighed, “Even now we older mages are

finding that the barriers that prevented us from casting the higher spells are weakening and in some instances, actually breaking.”

Aran scratched absently at the stubble upon his cheek, “Why should Glaive be unhappy about the magepower returning? I remember that only days ago you were bemoaning its absence.”

Absentmindedly Trevan plucked the lint from his woollen cloak, “In the remote past all mages were able to access the magepower. Recently however, access to that power has been difficult, like swimming against a swift current, or trying to see clearly in dense fog. Now it seems that the magepower is on the rise and our ability to access it is rising too.”

“You are not answering my question Trevan,” Aran interrupted, irritated by the mage’s roundabout answers.

Trevan paused in his methodical work and looked up at Aran with penetrating eyes, “Do you really want to know that answer? Why it is on the rise?”

Aran shrugged, “It seems to me that it moves in phases, in cycles like our seasons.”

Trevan slowly shook his head, “No, we now know for certain that the magepower is a constant, it has no cycles.” Trevan frowned, deep in contemplation, “For a long time it was mostly blocked to us. Only the most experienced of mages were able to venture beyond the barriers. Until several years ago only the highest elevated mages could go beyond the normal weak tendrils of the power that used to mark its limits. However, we know that it is that it is returning. Why Arantur, you are living proof of that.”

Aran’s grey eyes narrowed, “In what way am I tied to the magepower?”

Trevan turned away, “You have the Metalmage and Warriormage Abilities. Ancient powers that were thought lost forever to Glaive.”

Aran stretched out on the bed and regarded the low wooden ceiling, “I remember you said something about the old Abilities returning because of a possible threat to the province. Is this what you are not saying about the return of the magepower?”

Trevan stood and walked to the small window, “Perhaps.”

He turned away from the window to face the young man, “Of what I am going to say you must keep in absolute confidence.”

Trevan did not continue until he saw Aran mutely nod his head in acquiescence.

“I have spoken to the Archmage about the Thakur problem in the western mountains...” Trevan paced the small room distractedly. “He is as concerned about it as I am. I believe that Glaive will shortly be sending a representation to Haulgard Port to petition the Council to send a Legion or two to rid the province of this threat. However...”

He paused and glared at Aran who had opened his mouth to say something.

“However, both the Archmage and the mages of the high circle believe that there is something happening that is larger and more sinister, something that goes beyond the facade of these raids.”

Aran stared mutely at the Healmage.

“Even now High Earthmage Drayden is winging his way from Glaive to the Trident Range to find out what lies at the very essence of these Thakur raids,” Trevan finished.

With a start Aran realised what the other mage meant.

“You mean that Mage Drayden is flying all the way to the Trident Range...as a sea eagle?”

Trevan nodded.

Aran settled his whirling thoughts, “Are his transformations further proof of the rising magepower?” he asked at last.

Trevan nodded imperceptibly, “Aye, such an act would have been unthinkable many years ago. I spoke to Drayden last night and it seems that fifteen years ago his power was limited to conversing with the birds, and imprinting his mind upon theirs whilst they flew. The knack of transformation had been lost to Glaive since the time of the Andurian line...” Trevan smiled as he remembered the conversation, “It seems that one day he had as usual meshed his mind with a sea-eagle that he had spotted circling high on the air currents near Glaive College. The next thing he knew was that he was found thrashing on the floor of his room whilst crying out and spreading feathers about him. To his dismay he had turned into a very irate and confused bird.”

“How did he turn back?” Aran asked, shocked and yet entranced by the story.

Trevan sat down and began to unlace his boots, “A young Master Earthmage, one who had been only newly elevated to that rank, was hurriedly sent for as there was no other of higher rank residing at Glaive at that time. After several hours she managed to mesh minds with Drayden and remind him that he was human and not a bird. He changed back almost immediately.”

Aran traced the wood patterns of the ceiling with his eyes, “I’m surprised that he dared to transform again after that experience.”

Trevan absently smoothed back his neatly trimmed grey hair, “The next time he tried was under the watchful eyes of his peers. All were ready to haul him back if he ventured too far into the mind of the bird.” Trevan slipped his wrinkled feet from his boots, wiggling his toes pleurably. “The experiment was successful and for the last three years Drayden has been perfecting this knack. Now, as you can well attest he has it down to a fine art. Indeed he has taught it to the other ranked Earthmages...all of whom can now transform to a greater or lesser extent.”

“But I am not an Earthmage,” worried Aran. “How could I be changed?”

Trevan drew back the blankets and lay down he then leant across to fasten the clips securing the high side of the bunk.

“Drayden was able to interlace his Ability with yours,” he replied, “Thus successfully transforming you for the duration of the flight.” Trevan pulled a wry face, “It is no mean feat to maintain two separate non-human transformations. Only a High Mage would be able to do it.”

Aran turned onto his side and met Trevan’s eyes, “Tell me truthfully Trevan. What level mage are you?”

Trevan lifted one hand and with a small gesture extinguished the flame in the lantern that was hanging high from a hook on the ceiling, “I am a Healmage. I have never aspired to be a High Mage, or even a Master Mage.”

Aran stared at the darkened lantern, “Then how did you do that?”

Trevan pulled the blankets to his chin and turned to face the wall, “A knack only. All student mages barely a year into their studies can do it.”

Aran gazed into the darkness at the now quenched lantern.

“Could I?” he asked finally.

Trevan replied with a sonorous snore.

Aran stared at the lantern with mounting dismay and frustration. He knew that Trevan would have told him if it was beyond his Ability. It was a knack after all, seemingly a small extension of a mage's power. He should be able to do it...

Worn out by the day, Aran fell asleep.

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Early morning came, and with it gusty winds and light rain beating on the small glass window of the cabin. Trevan woke and almost immediately noticed the lantern swinging erratically from the hook, its light dancing in time with the rolling of the ship. Trevan frowned. He was certain he had extinguished the flame last night. He vaguely remembered a conversation with Arantur about that knack. The Healmage looked across at the other bunk and noticed Arantur deeply asleep, one lithe, tanned arm carelessly flung out from the tangled blankets. Trevan closed his eyes and focused upon the young man.

There, he thought, catching a tendril of the magepower that still clung tenaciously to Arantur. I thought as much, he lit the lantern. Trevan opened his eyes and stared at the ceiling. It must have happened whilst he slept, he reasoned, stroking absently the magepower as it moved sluggishly through his waking mind. Otherwise he would have consciously blocked it. He frowned at the ceiling. Trevan knew all too well that Arantur needed schooling. Sighing he glanced at the lantern and snuffed out the flame. Such knacks were for a future time. Nurturing the Warriormage Ability was more important now, of that he was certain.

Trevan was just finishing lacing his boots when he heard a quiet knock on the cabin door. Straightening, he opened the door to find the Captain hovering anxiously outside.

"Trouble, Captain?" he asked in a low voice.

The younger man shrugged, "It may well be...I've had a crewman up half the night with internal pains. The ship's healer's been with him, but he's at loss to determine the cause. We first suspected food poisoning, but it seems to be getting worse! Can you help?"

Trevan nodded briskly, "Why didn't you wake me earlier?"

The Captain cast Trevan a worried glance, "We thought it was a minor thing, certainly not serious enough to disturb a Healmage's sleep. We've all had our fair share of illnesses in the past and our healer has had no trouble until now?"

Trevan closed the cabin door, "Then I'll go directly."

The Captain nodded his head towards Trevan's cabin, "What about the lad?"

The mage shook his head, "Let him sleep. If I need him he can be sent for...now where is this sick man?"

The Captain moved ahead of Trevan. "We put him in the healer's room. It's this way..."

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Arantur woke suddenly out of a dream of being jostled by a crowd in Leigh's marketplace. Opening his eyes he noticed a young sailor standing by him whilst urgently shaking his shoulder.

"What is it man? Are we sinking?" mumbled Aran, not fully awake.

"Nay sir mage," the boy piped, "The Healmage asks for your assistance."

"My assistance?" Aran was feeling very groggy, "Whatever is this all about?"

"You must make haste!" The young sailor was already turning away, "I am to take you directly to him."

Aran sat up and pulled a hand across his face, “By Andur man I’ve just woken. Can you wait for one moment...?”

Aran sat for a moment trying to gather his thoughts whilst trying to ignore the boy who was hopping on one foot, then the other in impatience.

Aran sighed heavily and stood up whilst brushing the wrinkles out of his tunic and hosen, “Lead the way. I’ll put my boots on when I get there.”

Immediately the boy raced out of the door, with Aran boots in hand only a few steps behind.

Along the narrow corridor Aran jogged, his mind churning with guesses as to why Trevan needed him so urgently. Ahead the boy raced down a flight of stairs, Aran shadowing him, taking two steps at a time to keep up. At the end of the corridor there was a group of sailors around an open cabin door. As soon as they saw him they immediately gave way, letting him pass quickly inside. Aran ducked under the low lintel, and found himself in a darkened cabin lit only by a flickering lantern hung from the cabin’s ceiling. Inside the cabin was a knot of three men gathered around a man lying on a bunk. Aran immediately spotted Trevan who was stripped down to his short sleeved under tunic whilst busily soaping his hands. At the foot of the bunk was the Captain, his sun darkened face pale now with worry. The other man Aran could not identify.

Trevan turned at his entrance, “Ah good, you are here. I have need of your mage strength Arantur. I have to perform a Withdrawal upon this patient,” Trevan indicated with a glance the figure on the bed.

“A Withdrawal? What do you want me to do?” asked Aran in some puzzlement.

Trevan rinsed off the last of the lather and shook his hands to air dry them. “I must borrow some of your strength lad. I have to perform a delicate operation and all my magepower must go into the Withdrawal. Your task is to lend the patient strength.”

Aran stared at the man now writhing from side to side in agony, “What’s wrong with him?”

Trevan moved over to the bunk, “He has an internal organ which is ready to rupture. If it bursts then it will flood his body with poisons which will surely kill him. We must act quickly. I have the power to Withdraw the diseased organ, but if it bursts before or during Withdrawal I have not the power to cleanse his body of the poison.”

Trevan gestured to Aran, “Go to the other side of the bunk and take the man’s hand in your own. Focus completely upon him and try to channel some of the magepower within you into his body.”

Aran swallowed nervously, and moved to the other side of the bunk. Numbly he took up the man’s heat-fevered and calloused hand, and closed his eyes trying to concentrate upon the task ahead of him.

“Gently Arantur,” advised Trevan, “Ease your concentration somewhat, the magepower will not move unless you are relaxed.”

Aran opened his eyes and grimaced in frustration, he did not know how to do this! Suddenly he remembered the exercise in relaxation and concentration that Master Cody had taught him to do before attempting any delicate work upon the forge. Methodically he worked his jaw and shoulders to ease the tightness from the muscles, then he taking a deep breath, slowly blew the air from his mouth. He took another breath for the exercise required several.

“Good, Arantur,” Trevan murmured, “It’s flowing now.” He looked up at Aran and smiled in reassurance, “Can you keep this up?”

Aran nodded briefly.

“Excellent, now please do not be alarmed at what I am about to do, this man will feel nothing. I have shielded him from all pain”

Aran watched in some trepidation as Trevan moved the covering sheet down. The man’s body was unnaturally pale and sweat slicked, but at least he was now lying quietly, temporarily free of the pains which had scoured him only moments before. As Aran watched, he saw Trevan lay his hand flat upon the patient’s skin near his right hip. Hardly believing what he was seeing he observed the Healmage’s fingers slide into the body as easily as a knife would dip into a tub of warm lard. Repelled, yet fascinated, he watched Trevan’s hand move under the skin as it carefully sought the diseased organ. A moment later the hand stopped moving, and for a minute or two all was still, suddenly there was a brief flare of light from beneath the skin and Trevan withdrew his blood streaked fist.

“The bowl...now please Captain,” Trevan barked. Captain Obain moved with alacrity placing a deep sided wooden dish on the side of the bunk.

Trevan opened his reddened fist to reveal a small, bloated piece of tissue still dripping blood. Carefully he placed it in the bowl, making certain that his movements did not rupture the swollen organ.

He took the bowl and handed it back to the Captain. “Burn it and the bowl immediately, and then make certain any ashes that remain are to be tossed overboard.” He turned to the other man, “Healer, your crewman will be fine now but he will need several days of complete rest whilst his body recovers. Any sort of Withdrawal is stressful upon the patient, but this one was a very near thing. A longer delay would have meant his death. I felt the organ was close to rupturing even as I held it within my grasp.” He turned back to the washing bowl, now fully refilled with hot water direct from the galley.

“He will not bleed to death Healmage?” asked the ship’s healer.

Trevan looked up at the other man, “No, I have sealed the blood vessels and parts of the body that were once connected to the diseased organ. There will be swelling and quite a bit of bruising. Apply cloths soaked in cold sea water across the areas affected.”

Aran was amazed. All that showed that a Withdrawal had been performed was a long thin red line down near the man’s hip. There was a little blood drying around it but the edge had been sealed as effectively as if a red hot iron tip had cauterised it closed.

Trevan looked across at Arantur still holding the sailor’s hand, “You did well lad, however he sleeps now and has no further need of your mage strength. Come, let us go to the upper deck, I have need of some cool, fresh air.”

Aran let go of the sick man’s hand and picked up his boots which had fallen, quite forgotten to the floor. He had never before seen a mage perform a Healing. Sed had told him that Trevan had used no unnatural powers to heal his cracked head that time, only a cold compress and a brew from the willow bark which was a standard remedy used by any ordinary healer or herbalist. Remembering how Trevan had eased his hand into the body of the patient, Aran shuddered and knew that no herbalist would ever attempt such a thing.

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Later, up on deck, with the rain misty about him, Aran was idly staring at the featureless ocean sliding past when Trevan joined him at his vigil at the rail.

“So, what did you think of a Healing young Arantur?” asked Trevan curiously.

Aran turned away from the waves to face the elderly mage, “Do you have to do that often? I mean actually put your hand into his body and remove an organ?”

Trevan leant on the rail and stared out at the water, “Occasionally, however for most of my cures I use only basic medicines, herbs, cold and hot compresses and the like. My Ability comes in handy to determine the cause of the complaint for I can use my magepower to look into a person, like the way you were Scanned at Glaive, to determine the cause of the illness. Once determined, I can then decide how to treat it. Usually it needs nothing more than the use of conventional medicines but sometimes, like today, I must remove a diseased organ, or in the case of a broken bone...hold the bone with my hand whilst I fuse the break with the magepower.”

“What does it feel like, to be under his skin like that?” questioned Aran in repelled fascination.

Trevan shrugged, “I feel the heat of the body, the involuntary movements of the organs as they operate, the coursing of the life-force...but mostly I seek with my inner eye the least invasive route though the mass of organs, blood vessels and muscles to reach the diseased organ.” Trevan's eyes tracked the passage of a seagull high above the waves. “We are taught at Glaive that our hand, in a Healing or Withdrawal, loses a great deal of its material form in order to pass through the body. It is substantial enough to remove the organ, but insubstantial to leave only very little damage behind. That is the reason why after all Healings and Withdrawals there will be swelling and bruising, it is an unfortunate side-effect of the operation.”

“So what marks the difference between an ordinary Healmage and those of your discipline who have gone onto higher levels?” Aran asked fascinated.

“The Master and High Mages of my discipline do not need to put their hand into a patient's body,” Trevan replied. “With their mind alone they can plumb the very depths of the human body and brain and with a thought send a minute shaft of magepower into the body to either heal a fracture or break. Or dissipate into nothingness a diseased organ where it sits, and search through the body removing growths and tumours in the same way. I can do almost as much as them, but only with my hand for my mind has not the mage strength enough to follow.”

Suddenly there was a cry from high aloft in the ship's sails, Aran looked up flinching, fully expecting to see some sailor come crashing down to the deck in a fall, but all he saw was a lookout pointing out to sea in some excitement.

Aran looked out not knowing what to expect but all he saw were some unusual grey shapes surfacing in the distance.

“Whales,” Trevan informed him, “Great beasts of the sea.”

Aran studied the distant shapes, watching in fascination as one blew out a great fountain of water from its body, “So why the excitement?”

“Normally they are ocean creatures, seldom do they come so close to shore,” Trevan murmured.

Aran looked about him in consternation, “Aren't we out in the ocean...I can't see the shore now.”

Trevan shook his grizzled old head, “The mainland is just over the horizon. I’m certain we should be seeing Sentinel Peak ahead of us before long. We are certainly not in the deep ocean.”

Aran fell silent as he watched the whales surfacing, blowing out water and plunging again beneath the waves. They are playing, he suddenly realised.

Aran felt a warm breeze by his right shoulder and a thin voice whispered gently into his ear. ‘They have young, brother. I have swum and played with them and encouraged them to be here for you to see.’

Aran looked about and his eyes flashed to Trevan in consternation.

Trevan smiled gently and nodded, “Speak to her Arantur, she is feeling talkative today.”

“Sister?” Aran whispered, “Sarana?”

‘They come no closer brother, for they are wary of this man-thing on which you stand and are protective of their young.’ The voice fell quiet for a moment and Aran thought she had gone but moments later she spoke again. ‘I wanted to show you them for I have been travelling with them since you have been on this man-thing.’

Aran didn’t know what to think—he was actually holding a conversation with a spirit.

“How long can you stay, Sarana?” he asked finally.

But there was no reply, she had gone.

Trevan smiled, “She likes you Arantur, but you must remember that she was only three when she died. Her attention span is not long—she only wanted to show you her new friends.”

“Does she travel with me always?” Aran asked, still feeling slightly shaken by the experience.

“Off and on,” replied Trevan, “She was with us often on the road, but since we left for Glaive she has been preoccupied with the whales. No doubt she will return when we reach the Keep.”

Aran looked about him but no one else was witness to his strange conversation. “Trevan, I know that you can hear and sense her, and I certainly can...but what about others? Does it look that I am carrying on a conversation with myself?”

Trevan laughed. “Only mages can talk to spirits, some non-mages can sense their presence but the spirits need the magepower in a mage to make their thoughts audible. The common folk shy away from us when we talk to ourselves, but our mumbling is no symptom of madness, all they are hearing is the one-sided conversation with spirits.”

Aran was certain that if that fact was commonly known mages would be shunned even more than if they were simply mad.

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The day wore on, and before long, the ship’s cook had organised helpers to bring up on deck for lunch a selection of breads, cuts of salted meat and small vegetable pies still hot from the galley oven.

“Glaive must pay the Falcon well for her dealings with the mages,” commented Aran as he bit into yet another of the tasty pies, “This food is delicious!”

“Aye,” agreed Trevan, “The Falcon has been commissioned by Glaive to be its sole trader, supply and passenger vessel. The commission will last five years before new tenders are called for from the merchant shipping of the province. Whoever wins will have guaranteed

work for the following five years. There is much competition amongst the merchant fleet to win the contract for it is well known that the mages pay handsomely.”

Aran stared out at the waves. He was growing rapidly bored with this voyage. Correctly interpreting Aran’s expression, Trevan added, “We should reach the Keep by tomorrow night. We will not disembark until the following morning because the rocks around the base of the Havart Plateau are sharp and treacherous, and the captain will be reluctant to bring his ship in too close until he can see where the dangers lie.”

“So how do we reach the top of the plateau when we will be landing at its base? Do we scale the rocks hand over hand until we reach the Keep?” Aran asked.

Trevan shook his head, “We will be met...the ship will signal to the Guard when the Keep is in sight.”

Aran left the remains of his lunch and leant over the rail idly watching the waves break against the ship’s hull. Trevan chewed on a pork spare rib and watched the younger man from the corner of his eye. Wiping the grease from his mouth with the back of his hand, Trevan commented, “If you're not too busy I’d like to do some exercises that will aid you in accessing the magepower and maintaining it.”

Aran turned in some surprise, “I thought I already had an aid. I assumed I found the magepower quite quickly before.”

Trevan nodded, “Aye, you did, but only once you were totally relaxed. Do you think you will still be able to find that same concentration and maintain it whilst you are learning your weaponskill and swordcraft?”

Aran stared at him aghast, “I am to hold the magepower whilst learning swordcraft?”

Trevan stared back at him, “Of course, all the Warriormages in the past used a combination of the mage-forged weapons crafted by the Metalmages, and the magepower to enhance and release the power contained within the weapon.”

“So does that mean that the Andurian line of kings were mages!” suddenly exclaimed Aran, “I mean the King’s blade is mage-forged.”

Trevan looked up and his brow creased, “Aye, there is no doubt that the King’s Sword is mage-forged, but I am not certain if the mage Ability was strong within the Andurian line. There have been kings and queens born with a latent Ability in the past, but I don’t know if any of them were Warriormages...except for Andur of course. He was a latent Warriormage, but he never went to Glaive to develop his talent, I guess he was too busy restoring the province.”

“High King Andur was a Warriormage?” Aran was astounded.

“A latent one, Aran,” Trevan repeated.

“But there has never been anything said...I mean in my book not a word was breathed of it.”

Trevan frowned, “It is not common knowledge outside of Glaive. How many people do you know would accept a mage upon the throne of Andur?” He sighed, “The King’s blade was made for Andur, and after his death it recognised his blood in his descendants. That’s how it became uniquely attuned to the Andurian line and the province itself.”

“So there were kings and queens born with Ability?” Aran persisted, incredulous that his history book had failed to mention this fact.

“Aye,” agreed Trevan, “But the province has never had a throned king or queen who was also a Glaive trained mage. The two are incompatible.”

“But why?” asked Aran, his head full of questions.

Trevan stared long and hard at the young man, “The Ability is demanding of time and energy. I have read of no monarch that could balance both a throne and also learn and practice the magepower.”

Aran fell silent, obviously in the past one could be a mage or a king, but never both.

Trevan rounded on the young man, “Now enough questions, I need to teach you these aids to concentration.”

Aran frowned and shrugged his shoulders in resignation.

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“Now do it for me one more time,” Trevan demanded.

Aran glanced in weariness at the darkening sky and tried to quell the headache which had been slowly creeping up on him all afternoon. Sighing, he stood up and started to go through the simple series of body movements which Trevan had taught him. As he flowed through the movements, the headache eased until he was barely aware of it, and instead he became acutely and intimately aware that the magepower was once again coursing through his body. The outside world faded away, and he became intent and focused only on the initial set of simple movements. The familiar concentration gave him a heightened awareness of everything he was doing, and the distractions of the world did not intrude into his conscious mind. Settling the power into a curled ball in his chest, he started to go through the more complicated exercises which were designed to tax the memory and body, whilst one endeavoured to retain possession of the magepower.

Trevan watched silently as the young man stepped through the series of seven simple and seven complex exercises. The seven simple exercises had been memorised quickly, proving the young man had a good memory and an agile mind. The following seven complex movements were also grasped quickly, and Trevan was quietly pleased to see his student’s progress. It was a great pity that Aran was not destined for Glaive, he mused to himself. Such natural application to the basics of magecraft spoke volumes to Trevan of the depths of Aran’s Ability. It was certainly a great pity, he sighed regretfully. Standing up, Trevan clapped once, a signal that Aran’s lesson was at an end.

Aran stopped and yawned suddenly, “Is that it Trevan? Do I now possess these aids?”

Trevan shook his head, “You have done well lad, but you have still a while to go. There are still the intermediate and advanced levels ahead of you.”

Aran was stricken, “Intermediate and advanced?”

“Aye, the intermediate chants are next,” Aran was informed
“Chants”

Trevan nodded, “Aye, two series of seven chants must be committed to memory then recited whilst performing the exercises.”

Aran’s jaw sagged, “Seven, why seven?”

Trevan walked over to his student and gently placed his hand briefly on Aran’s brow, immediately the headache which had been building again, faded away.

“Just as there are seven simple movements and seven complex movements,” Trevan replied, “So there are seven simple chants and seven complex chants.” Trevan smiled as he caught

sight of Aran's downcast face, "Do not think I am being harsh with you, every novice mage who comes to Glaive learns these aids before anything else."

Aran's face was a study in apprehension, "So what is the advanced level?"

"Seven simple, then seven complex applications of the magepower, whilst simultaneously reciting the chants and stepping through the movements," replied Trevan.

Aran sagged against the rail, "And every student at Glaive goes through this?" he gasped, "I wonder indeed that any at all achieve the mantle of the mage."

"And this is just the introduction to the magepower," cautioned Trevan. "Once these aids are achieved and perfected the student must then go onto serious study and examination of his or her own discipline." Trevan smiled and laid a gentle hand on the young man's shoulder, "Let us go below and have dinner. An early night would be desirable after such a taxing day."

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"I have been wondering, Trevan, why these exercises always seem to be seven of things?"

It was the next day and Aran had positioned himself at the bow of the Trader in order to spot the Keep when it came into view.

Trevan settled himself more comfortably upon an upturned empty water barrel. "Seven you ask, a good question to pose, Aran, and one that has its origins in the early years of Glaive."

Aran gazed ahead at the sea, trying to see through the afternoon haze the outlines of the Havart Plateau.

Giving up after a moment, he turned back to his teacher, "Well?" he asked.

"Seven is an ancient number. Sacred in Andur's history," murmured Trevan.

Aran looked up in some surprise, "Sacred, in what way?"

Trevan sighed at the ignorance of the young, "You know that our province was settled by the Ancient sea-raiders."

Aran nodded.

"Well history tells us that those Ancients came here in seven great ships. Each ship had a crew of thirty men and women and once they found this land they decided never to return to their homeland. That is the reason why seven is sacred to this province."

Trevan too stared ahead, trying to make out the distant plateau, "We also say that number seven is sacred because it is the totality of the Goddess."

Aran pulled a face. He, like other lads his age had tried to avoid being drawn into the Provinces official religion. Sighing, he knew he had to ask. "So, in what way does the numeral seven mean the totality of the Goddess?"

Trevan eyes flickered across Aran's face, "Did you not go to Church lad! Why, look about you, let us count the totality the Goddess." Trevan took a breath and began an almost rhythmic chant. "One is the sun that gives us life, two are the moons and stars that fill the night, three is the land beneath our feet, four is water and the waves, five is the air of which we breathe, six is the life the Goddess has given, and seven is the power that encompasses all." Trevan stared intently at the young man, "Lad, I learnt that when I was but a youngster playing at my mother's feet. Did you avoid Church altogether?"

Aran nodded sheepishly, "Sed encouraged me to hunt rabbits instead..." He laughed at the memory, "I would have been better attending Church for at archery I had no skill."

Trevan's brows rose until they were lost in his hair, "So you know nothing of the Goddess?"

Aran shrugged in some embarrassment, "Only that I have heard there is one." He hastened to explain, "Master Cody was a devout man, but he never forced me to attend Church... somehow religion and smithing were never mixed. I had my trade, it filled my life... what did a young man need with religion. In Sed's words, 'Church is for the women and the old, why do we need it.'" Aran grinned ruefully; "It seemed to make perfect sense at the time," he finished lamely.

Trevan sighed and gazed at the northern horizon, "You won't be able to avoid Church all your life. I will find out if the priestess is in residence at the Keep, she will be able to instruct you in religious matters."

Aran looked across, questioningly, "I'd much rather you taught me Trevan."

Trevan shook his head abruptly, "The Church has never seen eye to eye with Glaive on certain matters. It is best that your instruction is not coloured by a mage's prejudices, then you can make up your own mind on matters of religious doctrine, then Delana can't accuse me of giving you misinformation."

"Delana?"

Trevan pulled a wry face and his eyes softened, "An old sparring partner of mine, the resident priestess at the Keep."

Aran looked quickly away as a smile hovered about his lips; it seemed obvious that Trevan had a soft spot for this priestess Delana. In all the time he had travelled with Trevan the old mage had never once mentioned that he had a wife or family. Aran had heard that sometimes mages wed, often within their own ranks, but he had not heard of a priestess marrying. Usually priestesses took a companion for a year or two, although their vows did not prevent them from marrying, for some reason none ever did. Aran gazed north at the still empty horizon and wondered what sort of woman would have endeared herself to his ancient companion.

"Aran," Trevan gently reminded him, "I'd like to hear the simple chants again."

"Again?" Aran replied, his face falling in dismay, "I've already done them over a dozen times this afternoon."

"Again," replied Trevan firmly, "You mispronounced the middle of the third and sixth chants last time. I am sorry. I can only accept perfection in this task."

Aran sighed heavily and took a deep breath, "very well. *'Assna, reido, tumra, dovok. Issdu, hasna, ilba, raisling...'*"

*

"By Andur!" exclaimed Aran the next morning, "How will we scale those cliffs, they seem almost insurmountable."

"You are quite correct," agreed Trevan, "They are insurmountable. However there is another way to reach the top, we go by the seaward route."

Aran gazed up at the towering cliffs of the Havart Plateau, and in the early morning light saw, finally the ancient weathered grey walls of Andur's Keep.

The Trader had reached the foot of the plateau well after dark the previous night. Her swift passage delayed by a sudden lull in the constant southerlies which had been speeding their voyage north. For over two hours the ship lay becalmed, until happily the wind had started up

again, quickly filling the flaccid sails. Later that evening a sharp-eyed sailor in the lookout had quickly warned the Captain of the approaching rocks and cliffs and the Captain responded by reefing in the sails and throwing out both sea anchors. Now safely anchored at the foot of the cliffs, the Trader was rocking gently in the waves, her anchorage keeping her out of the swells rolling in beyond the plateau.

Aran yawned hugely, "I hardly slept a wink last night," he ruefully admitted to Trevan, "I kept thinking about the Keep and sleep just seemed to fade away each time I closed my eyes."

Trevan glanced across at the younger man, "Excited about being here, eh?"

Aran nodded, then glanced down at the saddlebags at their feet, "I also keep thinking I've forgotten something," he murmured distractedly, "I've been back twice to the cabin and I can't see anything I may have forgotten, but I've got this general impression..." his voice trailed off.

"Well if it's anything important, the Captain will send it onto Glaive," Trevan replied, "Besides it's too late now to check again, the Captain is calling for us."

Aran and Trevan awkwardly climbed down the rope ladder which hung down the ship's side and jumped carefully into a small rowboat which had appeared, bobbing alongside the sleek wooden hull of the Trader. Aran glanced at Trevan in puzzlement, the oarsman and his rowboat did not belong to the Trader, where on Andur had they come from?

"Good journeying Captain," Trevan called up to the group of sailors on deck, "We have been treated well these past three days."

"The Sea Blessing upon you Healer and you lad," the Captain called out. "I'll not forget the service you did me in saving the life of my crewman, but for your skill and power I'd be taking the unhappy walk to his widow and children in Haulgard Port," the Captain called back. He gestured to the oarsman, "Be certain to give them a safe ride Guardsman Ban, for I'd not want to have these mages fall overboard."

"Aye Captain," the young man replied, "I know these rocks as well as a woman's body."

Aran smiled at that and heard laughter back on deck.

As soon as Aran and Trevan sat down, and their saddlebags stowed at their feet, the oarsman swung the small boat out and away from the Trader. Looking back, Aran noticed that the Captain had hustled the rest of the crew back to their duties. Moments later the sea anchors were lifted, the sails unfurled and the Trader turned to resume its southern voyage.

"How goes the Keep, Guardsman Ban?" Trevan asked of the young oarsman.

"Well enough, mage," replied the Guardsman.

"I am hoping to speak to Captain Taran," the old mage asked, "Has he yet returned to the Keep?"

"No, mage," the young man replied intent upon his task. "He still visits the southern cities. However we have had word that he will return within the month."

"And who has Taran appointed head of the Guards during his absence?" Trevan asked.

"Guardsman Morel, mage."

Trevan nodded in understanding.

Aran was disappointed. He had been hoping to see Alissa again soon, now it seemed that it would be weeks before she would be returning to the Keep.

The sun had just cleared the horizon and a light, cool, salty breeze was blowing across the ocean. Protected by the cliffs from the rolling swells, the small boat made easy headway towards the rocks with only an occasional wave splashing high against the bow and casting the occupants with a fine spray. Trevan gazed ahead, his gaze seemingly searching the tumbled rocks of the plateau's base for a landing place.

"It's directly ahead, Ban," called Trevan to their oarsman.

"Aye," the Guardsman replied turning his head to look, "I see it now. I'll swing around so we can enter."

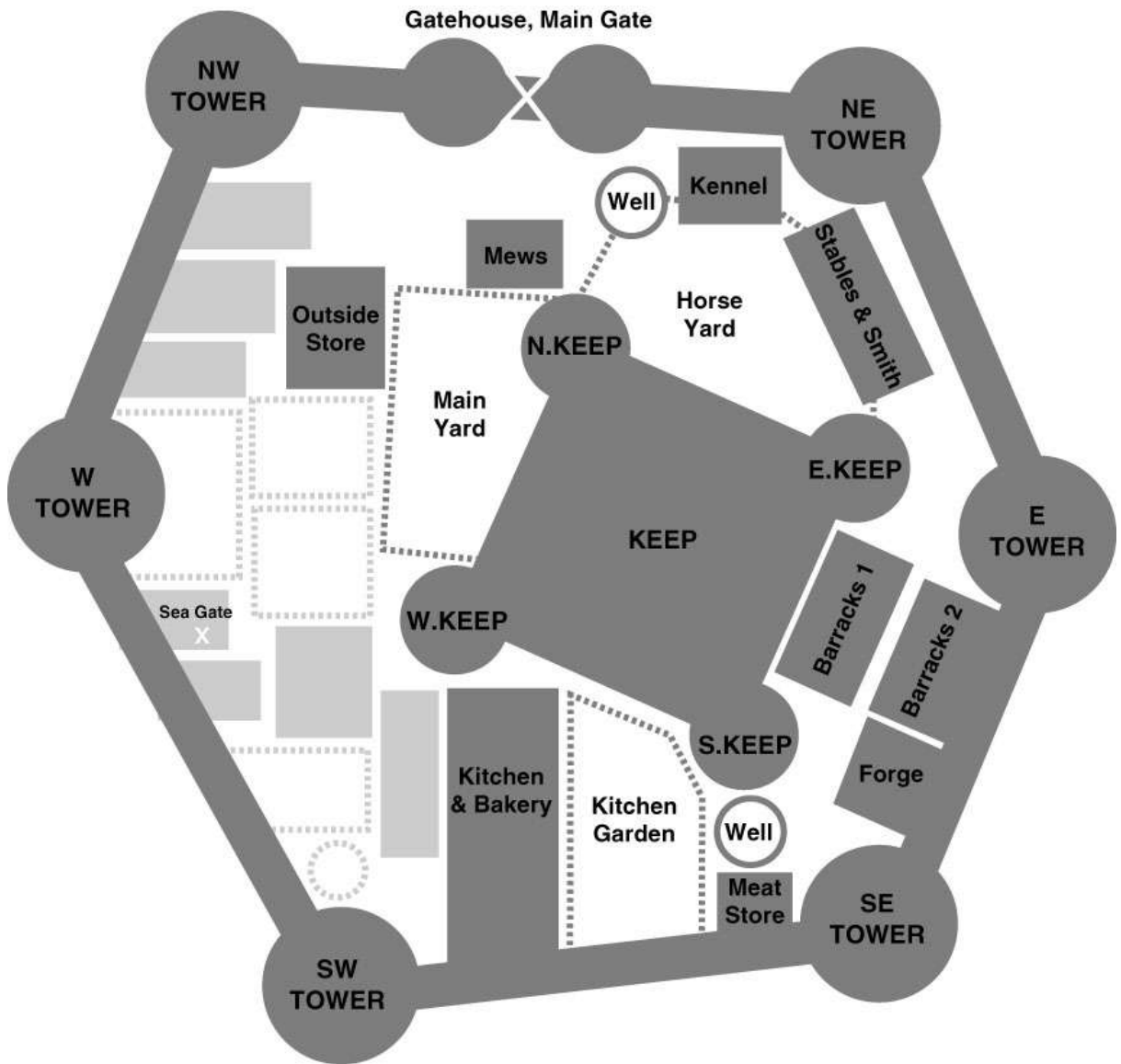
"Enter?" Aran asked, perplexed, "Enter what?"

Trevan spared Aran only a quick glance before his gaze went back to the rocks, "A sea cave Aran, with a tunnel and stairs leading up to the Keep. This is the ancient seaward route."

"The one that the mages used to retake Seawatch Keep during the war," Aran asked fascinated.

Trevan gave him a quick smile, "The very one. We are almost at Andur's Keep, Arantur."

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- Abandoned Building
- Used Building
- Abandoned Courtyard
- Used Courtyard

Chapter 6—Andur’s Keep

Andur’s Keep, the ancient citadel of the province and hereditary seat of the kings and queens of the land. Andur’s Keep, which before the war was called Seawatch Keep, sited atop the Havart Plateau, ringed by sea and plain, buffeted by wind and gale.

Aran craned his neck to gaze far above him, catching sight of the vast, sturdy walls built close against the cliff edge. Sea birds circled on the winds that rose against the cliffs, their nests built into the nooks and crannies of the rock. Even down near the splashing waves Aran could hear their raucous cries, as they wheeled and turned in eddies and up drafts.

Slowly, under the expert oarsmanship of the Guardsman, the small rowboat was eased through the treacherous rocks and boulders till finally it passed between them and slipped under the overhanging confines of a sea cave. Inside the cave, and out of the soft morning light, engulfing darkness came down like a hammer upon them. Ahead Aran could see torches dimly burning, illuminating a small stone pier which jutted out into the cave. The noise of the breaking waves faded away, until all that could be heard was the soft splash of the oars as they were rhythmically dipped into the water.

“Who built this?” Aran’s voice sounded unnaturally loud in the quiet.

Trevan cleared his throat, “The Archaic High Kings with assistance from the mages of Glaive. It was quite an engineering feat to hollow out the tunnel and cave through the bedrock of the plateau. It is sobering to think that even now we cannot match their technology and skill.”

Aran gazed about him, noticing the time-worn smoothness of the stone and hearing the gentle lapping of the waves against the rock walls.

Moments later the rowboat was drawn up against the pier, and the Guardsman quickly clambered out, securing the rowboat to a stone pillar with a stout rope. Trevan hopped out, and Aran passed the mage the saddlebags. Bracing himself against the rocking boat, Aran climbed out, and stood in a pool of light cast by the torches. For a few moments his legs felt unsteady under him, and then his body readjusted to once again being on dry land.

“Let me take your saddlebags, mage,” offered the young Guardsman to Trevan. “For it’s a fair climb and I’ll warrant you’ll not want to carry your gear.”

Trevan stared ahead at the tunnel which led from the pier up into the rock itself. “Aye, I’ll certainly accept your offer. I believe those stairs get longer and longer every time I come here.”

“How long is it?” wondered Aran out loud.

“Over a thousand steps in all, it will take a goodly time to climb,” replied the Guardsman cheerfully, “Mind you we must run them twice a week for the Guard training, for with no war to employ us, we must keep our fitness and the seaward route is a run much favoured by our Captain.”

Trevan handed over his saddlebag to the young Guardsman, “Come let us be off, my bones and I have no desire to be waiting in this cold, damp place.”

Trevan led the small party, with Aran behind him, saddlebags thrown over one shoulder, with the Guardsman Ban bringing up the rear.

Aran paused momentarily to readjust the saddlebags on his shoulder and rest the aching muscles in his calves and thighs. It had been a long and wearisome climb, but now the Guardsman assured him that there was now only a little way to go. For over an hour they had climbed the featureless stone stairs, the narrow cold passageway lit by the same eternally burning torches that were ever present at Glaive. The stairs seemed to have been worn smooth by many generations of feet, and Aran did not look forward to passing this way twice a week on a Guard training run. He hoped fervently that Captain Taran might absolve him from this particular duty, but somehow Aran suspected that the Guards would not tolerate any laggardness or shortcomings in their ranks or recruits. Numbly he put one foot ahead of the other, plodding upwards and occasionally catching sight of Trevan as he rounded a bend further up. As he rounded the next corner he felt a cool, fresh breeze upon his face and looking up, saw Trevan silhouetted against an opening lit by the early morning light.

Excitement now giving his legs strength, he increased his pace, and within moments was standing with the mage at a stone entrance which opened out into an ancient ruinous building. The Guardsman Ban quickly joined them and his young, tanned face was lit with pleasure as he looked out at the Keep.

“This is the oldest part,” he explained, “This original section is now unoccupied and for the most part ruined...” He frowned, “The Council refuses to send any money towards its repair and renovation so the Guard and the Keep household live in the newer, eastern part which was built during the time of the Andurian line.”

Aran looked about him in some interest, “So this part dates back to the time of the Archaic High Kings?”

“Aye,” replied the Guard, “It’s worth taking the time to see it. I have explored it, although Lady Alissa, daughter of our Captain, treats the old section like it is her own quarters.” He smiled with some fondness, “She never seems to be out of it.”

Aran’s mouth tightened, Alissa seemed to have an admirer in this young Guardsman.

“You know her well?” Aran asked quietly, coldly, catching a speculative look from Trevan out of the corner of his eye.

“Oh aye,” replied Ban, totally unaware of the way Aran’s eyes were hardening, “She sometimes trains with us and calls us brothers” he laughed. “Although I dare say there are many in the Guard, myself included who would rather be something more to her...”

“Come,” Trevan interrupted, “I’d like to get our quarters arranged and I need to speak to Guardsman Morel as soon as I can.”

Ban bobbed his head, “Certainly mage... I’ll take you directly to Morel and then he will arrange your accommodation in the Keep.”

Aran walked behind the other two, his mind in some turmoil. It was obvious that the Guards were vying for Alissa’s affections. In Andur’s name, Aran thought in some exasperation, how could he catch her eye with all these other young men already well known to her. Belatedly he remembered what Alissa herself had said that evening in the Swan at Sentinal, that her father would have her skin if she had inclination towards any Guard. Suppose that includes myself mused Aran unhappily, now that I will be training with them.

‘She has looked twice at you, brother,’ whispered a warm, quiet voice in his ear, ‘You should have no concern about her...’

Aran looked around suddenly and caught a glimpse of Trevan staring back at him in some amusement. Trevan nodded and mouthed the word, 'Sarana,' then turned to follow the Guardsman.

Still following the others, but drawing back a few yards Aran asked quietly. "Are you with me, sister?"

'I have always been with you, my brother Arantur,' she replied gently. 'Ever since my life was taken from me, I have watched over you.'

"All my life?" he whispered in some astonishment.

He caught the faint suggestion of a laugh.

'Of course, I believe that you are my anchor to this world my twin, else I would have long gone-on...' she added softly. 'But since I am held here,' she added, 'At least through you I can experience its wonders.'

"You cannot die?"

'Sleep is denied to me, my heart. I think that I will not gain it for a very long time...'

"Can you see my death, Sarana?" Aran asked in some trepidation.

There was a pause then she answered, 'No, the future is closed to me. I may be a spirit, but I am bound as securely to this world, this time, as closely as a living mortal.'

"Where are the whales?" he asked relieved not to be told of his death.

'Gone, but they promised me they will return. Whilst you remain in this place which is caught between sea and sky I am free to visit both my sea friends and watch over my brother.'

"Why did you not visit at Glaive? It is as sea swept as this place," Aran asked finally.

'Too many ears...too much power...' she replied enigmatically.

But then she was gone and all Aran heard was the distant, circling gulls.

The Guardsman Ban had led Trevan and Aran out of the crumbling, ancient section of the Keep and into a newer, better maintained area. Walls had been repaired and whitewashed. Roofs still sported tiles with joins filled with lead. Floors looked strong and sturdy with no indication of the rot which had all but destroyed the older part of the Keep. Aran occasionally saw a man or woman in the distance, hurrying along on some task or errand. Finally, they rounded a corner and walked into a cobbled courtyard, easily the larger of the two they had walked through. The courtyard backed onto the towering mass of the central Keep itself, and it was filled with the sights and sounds of a full company of a hundred or so soldiers drilling and working through a series of movements and exercises with sword, spear or axe. All were wearing tunics, boots, hosen and dark blue padded gambesons. Additionally they wore conical helmets and all had either mail or steel gauntlets on their hands. As they walked past, some Guardsmen stopped their training to turn and watch the newcomers, others called out a greeting to Ban. Aran tried not to stare, but he was overwhelmed by the Guards. He tried to imagine himself training with these soldiers but his imagination faltered in disbelief.

Moments later, a soldier in his late thirties appeared out of the crowd and walked towards them. Of middle height, the soldier had a compact strength that was readily apparent in all his movements. Clad in the uniform blue gambeson, but with an additional mail shirt belted in at his waist he moved to intercept them, his green eyes filled with immediate recognition.

"Mage Trevan, it's been years! How have you been?" he called out in welcome.

“It’s been seven years Guardsman Morel, and thank you, I have been keeping well,” replied Trevan.

“Are you passing through, or is this an extended visit?” the Guardsman asked. “You have missed Captain Taran; he is in the southern cities with Lady Alissa.”

“So I understand,” growled Trevan. “I have a letter and a request from Archmage Maran for him. I cannot show you the letter as it is sealed and personally addressed to Taran, but he requests that this lad Arantur is to be trained by the Guard.”

Morel swung around to study Arantur, “Really? He looks a likely sort. Why is he to be trained? Despite what the Archmage desires, you know we don’t take on every man who presents himself here...”

Trevan pulled him over to one side so as to speak confidentially.

“He has the Warriormage Ability,” Trevan replied softly.

“Warriormage!” The soldier rocked back on his heels in amazement, “What in Andur’s name can the Guard teach a Warriormage?”

“Swordcraft, Guardsman Morel” replied Trevan. “At the moment he does not know one end of a sword from the other...but he has quick intelligence and strength.”

“Aye, I can see that,” Morel mused, sizing up Aran and noting the strength in his arms and hands. “This one has no common physique for a lad his age. Where in Andur did you find him?”

“At a blacksmith’s forge in Leigh, apprenticed to a Master Blacksmith,” replied the mage.

“Master Cody?” the other questioned.

“Aye,” replied Trevan.

“His work is known even here at the Keep. This lad must certainly be special to be removed from the employ of such a man,” the green-eyed soldier was keenly appraising Aran.

“Aye, special enough,” Trevan agreed.

“Do you want Arantur to start training today?” asked the Guardsman. “I dare say we can outfit him soon enough from the armoury.”

Trevan shook his head, “Not today. Let him find his feet here first. Call for him in the morning...although perhaps this afternoon he could be outfitted in suitable armour for I am certain the Archmage would like to keep him whole and hale.”

“Done!” laughed Morel, “Young Ban here can take you onto your rooms, then once he is settled they can go to the armoury.”

“Which rooms, Guardsman Morel?” asked Ban walking up to join them after hearing his name being mentioned.

“South-east tower, first and second levels Ban. There are guest rooms kept ready there.”

The young Guardsman nodded, “Aye, I know them.”

Morel nodded to Arantur, “See you in the morning. Be certain to get a good night’s sleep. You will need all your strength for tomorrow.” The soldier spun away and returned to his supervision of the training.

Guardsman Ban led Aran and Trevan down through the Guards, and out through a small gate in the southern wall of the main yard, and then finally down and around one of the round drum towers of the central Keep.

“Ahead of us are the kitchens, the kitchen garden and the well,” the Guardsman explained, pointing to a long stone building and some trees showing over the low stone walls of yet

another courtyard. “Beyond that is the meat store, around the corner from that is the forge and the two barracks.”

Aran gestured at a tower lying directly ahead. “Is that the south-east tower?”

Ban shook his head, “No, look to the left of it...beyond the kitchen garden, that is the south-east tower.”

They walked by the kitchens and were passing the kitchen garden when Aran at last spotted the tower.

“It looks awfully tall, how many levels does it have?” he asked amazed.

Ban turned about and gave him a quick grin, “Five...excluding the battlements. I’ll put you elderly mage on the first level to spare his joints. However you can take the second level. You seem to be fit enough to climb the stairs every day.”

They followed the kitchen garden wall around, passing a large well, and a small stone building built hard up against the curtain wall and nestled deep in the rock of the plateau.

“That’s the meat store,” pointed out Ban, “It goes down into the plateau a-ways and it is easily the coldest place in the entire Keep.” He smiled, “This part of the Keep was designed and built by the Glaive mages and we daily thank their engineering skill, for we are fortunate to have cold rooms for storage, well-built chimneys in the towers and halls, cold water from the wells and extensive latrines in the curtain walls.”

Aran looked back over his shoulder at the towering internal Keep. “Was that mage built too?”

Ban shrugged, but Trevan quickly supplied the answer.

“It was built by the Archaic High Kings. Since then it has been extensively repaired and renovated by the mages during the reign of the Andurian line of kings.” He followed Aran’s gaze upwards, “You can see that the internal Keep is a level or two higher than the outside curtain walls. We understand that the internal Keep was the first section to be built, followed by an initial wooden curtain wall. The old ruined western section was built next whilst the curtain walls were converted to stone...then all these other, newer eastern buildings were the last to be completed.”

Aran shook his head in wonder at the size of Andur’s Keep.

At the base of the tower was a stout oak door which Ban quickly opened.

“This tower is empty at the moment” he informed them. “It is kept ready for guests, however all but two of the rooms are being replastered. He grinned, “We had a bit of problem with the tower roof a while back.”

“What happened?” asked Trevan as he followed the young Guardsman up the spiralling stairs.

“We lost some shingles in a storm, and because the tower was shut up, we did not know that there was water damage until a couple of weeks had passed. Unfortunately the upper three levels sustained damage to the walls. We have had a craftsman in from Haulgard Port this past week to fix the roof and replaster the walls.” He grinned, “These lower levels are fine though. Here is your room, master mage.”

He opened a wooden door, and it swung inwards onto a largish circular room with a darkly-aged wooden floor on which lay some scattered rugs and skins. On one side was a small fireplace with ashes cold from last winter. On the other side of the room were several wooden chests, a simple table and stool and a low cot bed. A large wooden tub stood next to the

fireplace and a pottery jug, bowl and goblet sat on the wooden table. The room had a small narrow window with a thick, almost opaque glass pane.

“The latrines are outside within the curtain wall,” Ban explained. “You’ll need to walk up to the third level, and then there will be doors opening out to the internal wall-walk, which runs along the entire length of the curtain wall of Andur’s Keep. If you want to access the curtain wall battlements then you’ll need to go up to the fourth level and go out through those doors.”

Trevan nodded, “Thank you young man, you have been very helpful. However I am quite familiar with the Keep’s layout. However Arantur here will need your guidance.” He smiled at Ban, and took his saddlebags from the young Guardsman’s arm “You two go on, I will make myself comfortable here.”

Ban nodded and Aran picked up his saddlebags from where he had tiredly placed them on the floor.

They quickly reached the next level and Ban pushed open the door to Aran’s room. Looking inside, Aran could see that it was identical in size, shape and composition to the mage’s room below.

“These are good rooms,” commented Ban, gazing inside. He looked across at Aran who was thankfully easing the saddlebags from his shoulder. “You are lucky,” Ban said suddenly. “Guards are quartered in the barracks where there are fireplaces at each end, almost no privacy and where the snorers are frequently noisier than the gulls.” He smiled, “However I don’t really mind the soldier’s life. The pay is quite good and we have three weeks of leave a year.”

Aran sat down on the bunk and began to pull off his boots, “If you don’t mind, I’d like to rest for a bit...then I’ll go and explore.”

“We are supposed to go to the armoury,” Ban reminded him.

Aran groaned and massaged his tired feet, “Can we do it later on?”

Ban nodded, “Aye, however I really ought to get back to the training yard for a bit. I’ll tell you what; I’ll collect you mid-afternoon, directly after three bells.”

“Three bells?” Aran asked, mystified.

Ban grinned again, “Listen and you’ll soon understand.”

Aran nodded dazedly, he was more tired than he was prepared to admit.

“See you this afternoon,” the Guardsman called out cheerfully, and then he was gone.

Aran yawned and picked up his saddlebags. Slowly and methodically he began to unpack his gear onto the bunk. Standing, he walked over to the wooden chests and opened them, hoping to find an empty one for his belongings. The first one he came to was filled with several course woollen blankets and some soft furs and fleeces for the winter ahead.

The contents of the second chest included a candle holder, a selection of candle stubs, flint, and mouldering blank parchment. Down at the very bottom of the chest was some tattered feathers and nibs. Looking at all the writing tools, it seemed obvious to Aran that in the past a cleric or scribe had previously slept in this room. Finally he found some unused storage space in the third and final chest in his room. Carefully collecting his clothes, he packed them into the chest together with some herbs he had found to discourage moths and other insects. He picked up the dagger he had won. It seemed almost a lifetime ago that he was in Leigh, with a sigh he placed the dagger on top of his folded clothes and closed the lid. Turning back to the few remaining possessions scattered on the bed, Aran placed his book, ink and nib on the

table next to the bowl, jug and goblet and tossed the now empty saddlebags under the low cot bed. Straightening, he heard a faint knock on the door.

“Come in,” he called out.

Trevan stuck his head around the corner and smiled when he saw the younger man.

“How is your room?”

Aran smiled and nodded, “Good, seems identical to yours, Trevan.”

The old mage looked around, “Aye...have you blankets?” he asked.

Aran indicated the first chest, “That box is full of them.”

Trevan walked into the room, “Mind if I take a couple. There seems to be nothing but old tapestries and hangings in the chests in my room.”

Aran opened the lid and handed Trevan two thick woollen blankets and a sheepskin fur.

Trevan waved away the sheepskin, “Can’t tolerate that. Makes me itch all night,” he explained.

Aran sat back on his bed and Trevan pulled out the stool and perched upon it. “I haven't had a chance to ask you before, but what do you think of the Keep so far?”

Aran pulled off his travelling cloak and folded it at the bottom of the cot, “It’s pretty impressive...I’m looking forward to seeing all of it...,” and then Aran frowned quizzically, “It’s rather hard to explain, but in the short time since we arrived I’ve felt curiously at home here.”

Trevan smiled, “I’m not surprised. You’re a Warriormage and you’ll be training with the Guard here. I’d be more surprised if you had no connection with the place...just as I was not surprised that you felt no connection with Glaive.”

Aran grinned and nodded, “I was well pleased to leave that place,” he admitted.

“Then tomorrow after your morning training session, I’ll show you the internal Keep,” Trevan said. “If you think this is impressive, wait till you see the great hall, the throne room, the chapel and priestess quarters, the royal rooms and solar, the armoury and the great storerooms below ground.”

Aran’s eyes widened in disbelief, “Who actually lives in the internal Keep?” he asked. “I mean the Guards seem to have their own quarters. I expect the workers live where their trades are located, and these towers seem to be set aside for guests. For such a huge place, Andur’s Keep seems almost deserted.”

Trevan nodded in agreement, “Aye Arantur, at the moment I suspect the Keep is at less than ten percent capacity. The royal rooms and solar are of course unused, but Captain Taran and Alissa have rooms in the internal Keep, along with the priestess, a cleric and perhaps a dozen others who have duties there.” He smiled in recollection and his eyes were lost in memory, “I have read in the old texts that during the reign of the Andurian line of kings the Keep was often full to bursting. Its walls were overflowing with the royal retinue including courtiers and fine ladies from all over the province.” He sighed and his eyes focused again on Aran, “Such was the grandeur of the past.”

Aran stretched out on the bed. At least the straw filled mattress was comfortable enough. Trevan took the hint and stood up, “I might get some shut-eye too. I’ve a few days of riding ahead of me.”

Aran opened his eyes and sat upright in some dismay, “You're not staying?”

Trevan shook his head, "Only for a couple of days until you get settled. My duties as a Healmage must be resumed and there are remote towns and some very small villages north of here that almost never see a healer." He smiled at Aran's worried face, "Don't worry, I shall of course return. I need to have a word with Captain Taran, and I'd like to see young Alissa again. Besides, once you start training with the Guards you'll find your days here will fly by."

"But who will instruct me in the magecraft. I have not completed those aids to discipline," Aran worried.

Trevan was unconcerned, "In the couple of weeks I shall be gone you will be spending all your time in swordskill and weaponscraft. When I return we shall resume the mage lessons. Besides you already know enough to take you through to the first part of your training."

Aran lay back down, "I shall miss you Trevan. You have been a good friend to me."

The old mage walked to the door, "Aye, I shall miss you too, but I am certain that you will make new friends amongst the Guards."

Aran watched the old man close the door, and heard his steps as he slowly walked down the spiral stairs of the tower. Closing his eyes he heard Trevan's door close and then all was quiet, the only noise to break the silence was the whistling of the wind and the faraway cries of the gulls circling near the cliffs. Moments later he was deeply asleep.

*

A distant bell woke him from a dreamless sleep. He sat up, disorientated for a moment, then realising that he was in Andur's Keep he got up and with some difficulty released the stiff latch on the heavy window pane to let in the cool, salt laden sea breeze. Far in the distance he heard the bell ringing. Belatedly he counted the strokes he got to five when it stopped. Uncertain of the hour he craned his neck to see the sun's position in the sky and rightly deduced that it was near midday. Pulling on his boots, he took out a clean wool tunic and slipped it on over his light under tunic. Sniffing at the rank odours, he realised that his clothing stank, and he immediately gathered up the offending articles and went off in search of a laundress. Walking down the stairs of the tower he passed Trevan's room. The mage's door was shut and he decided against disturbing the old man.

Outside it was a glorious day with high windswept clouds in a sky as blue as the ocean. Aran walked past the tower and to the well where a middle-aged woman was drawing a bucket of water.

"Good-day to you," he greeted her with a cheerful smile.

She looked up and smiled at his youth and friendliness. "Good-day, young master. I've not seen you before, are you new to the Keep?"

Aran nodded, "I have only just arrived today and will start with the Guards tomorrow, however I need your assistance."

She put down the bucket on the well-edge and faced him squarely, "Ask away young master, I may be able to help."

Aran smiled and thought to himself that she seemed very like many of the good-wives of his hometown Leigh. "Good-woman" he replied, "I am in need of a laundress and also in need of a meal. Do you know where I can find either?"

She put her hands on her ample hips and laughed, “Aye, you have luck today. My name is Suna and I am the castle washerwoman.” She smiled, “I can also direct you to the kitchens where you can get the midday meal.”

Aran nodded and introduced himself, “Perhaps if I can take this heavy pail of water from you, you might lead me to the kitchens?” he asked cheerfully.

She smiled at that, and took his soiled garments from him so he could take the water. “You’re a strong one Arantur of Leigh” she commented, sizing up his arms and shoulders. “What were you before you came to the Keep?”

“An apprentice blacksmith, Suna” he replied, picking up the pail with almost no effort.

“Then you ought to talk to Palor, our resident smith at the Keep and Drek the armourer at the forge. They will be interested to know there is another of their trade here,” she told him as they headed into the low-walled kitchen garden and through the many rows of grain, herbs, fruit and vegetables growing there. Walking confidently, Suna led Aran through the maze like garden and out through a low door in the opposite wall. Directly ahead was a long, three storey building built in timber and stone.

Suna stopped, “Here are the kitchens Arantur. Ground level is the kitchen and laundry, second level is the food hall and bakery, the top level is the worker’s bunkhouse.”

Aran gazed at the building noting its ancient architectural style. “So what happens with meals at the Keep?”

She gazed at him oddly, “It rather depends who you are Arantur of Leigh. All come to the food hall for the day meals like breakfast and lunch. Dinner for the workers is served here too, but most nights Captain Taran, his daughter and their visitors have a formal dinner in the internal Keep.”

Aran shook his head in mock dismay, “I’d much rather eat with the Guards. What do they do?”

She smiled, “Oh they all come to the food hall to eat, excepting the end of week dinner. They take it with their Captain in the great hall when he is in residence.” She took the bucket from him and stood it by the kitchen door, “I’ll wash your clothes this afternoon. They should be dry by tomorrow midday. Where should I leave them?”

Aran looked across at the older woman, “My room is the second level of the south-east tower. I also travelled here with a Healmage. He may also want his clothes washed. He is in the room below mine.”

She looked up at him in some surprise, “Healer Trevan has returned?”

He nodded.

Suna laughed. “Then I must tell Delana that Trevan has come back. She will have his hide for staying away for so long.” The washerwoman hustled Aran into the kitchen, “Come! You must get a bite to eat now before those hungry Guards arrive and eat us out of house and hall.”

*

Later, with his belly full and fortified with a mug of the smoothest apple cider he had ever tasted, Aran set off on his exploration of the Keep. Skirting the kitchen garden with its array of fruit trees, plants, herb and grain, Aran decided to walk close to the internal Keep walls and that way avoid getting lost in the maze of buildings. Passing yet again the well and the meat store, he made his way northwards, unconsciously tugged toward the sounds of metal

being struck against an anvil. Moments later he came to a stone building with a chimney belching grey smoke. Peering inside he made out the form of a man fashioning a large and impressive war axe on an anvil. Lit by the embering fire in the pit, the armourer was a large man clad in a sleeveless light wool tunic with the long leather apron of his trade about him. Behind him was a bevy of young assistants all hard at work on less complex tasks. Some were sharpening sword blades, others were repairing kit, and another was carefully closing links of chain-mail. Seemingly intent upon his work the armourer did not see him, so Aran decided to pay the obviously busy man a visit another time and left to resume his exploration.

Beyond the forge were a couple of long two-storied buildings facing one another. Peering through a window, Aran spotted a number of cot beds arranged in rows against the walls. Angling his head he could see that both ends of the buildings contained massive fireplace. Before the fireplaces were two large common areas which comprised a scattering of small tables, some stools and bench seats. Aran rightly surmised that these two buildings were the barracks. Walking northwards between the barracks, Aran skirted between the eastern tower of the internal Keep, and the larger, taller eastern tower of the curtain walls. Ahead of him was a stone wall about the same height as the one encircling the kitchen garden. He let himself through a small bolted wooden door in the wall, and squeezed past the smooth weathered stone of the Keep tower and that of another long two-storey building, to emerge, unexpectedly, in a large yard. He glanced at his feet and realised that the cobbles that marked the surface of the Keep were absent, that this yard was made up of hard packed soil and wood chips. Glancing across he saw that the two storied building was made up of two doors only with no windows. Deciding to investigate he kept close to the edge of the yard, trying to make his way as unobtrusively as he could along the side of the building. Coming to the door he stepped inside into the darkened building. He put his hands to his eyes to attempt to shade them from the bright sunlight spilling in from the yard beyond in order to see better in the building's darkness.

"What can I do for you young man?" asked a young woman stepping out of the gloom.

Aran jumped back in some surprise, he dimly made out light blonde hair, and a trim figure dressed in tunic and hosen. For one joyous moment he thought it was Alissa, then the woman moved into the doorway and the sunlight, resolving a face of a woman a year or two his senior with long blond hair tied back into a partially unraveled plait with a face darkened and roughened by long periods of time in the sun and wind.

She held out her hand in greeting, "My name is Kiaia and I am head groom of these stables. You are newly come here for I never forget a face and I do not know you."

Aran held out his hand in greeting too, "Arantur of Leigh," he introduced himself, "I have been sent to train with the Guards."

The woman Kiaia nodded her head and indicated that he should follow her inside.

Aran, his eyes now adjusted to the gloom, could see the rows of stalls that lined either side of the main corridor which ran the length of this long building. Inside each stall, Aran could see an occasional equine head either peering out curiously at the two humans or dozing against the side of the door. Beside each door was the saddlery and tack which belonged to the animal, there was also a name emblazoned on each door. As they walked past, Aran could make out each name, 'Blazer', 'Wind', 'Guardsbane'...

“If you are training with the Guards you will also need to be assigned a mount,” the woman said suddenly. “Since you are here you may as well be assigned your horse now.” She glanced across at him, and Aran was of the impression that his character was being quickly assessed. Abruptly she turned away to place a hand gently upon the nose of one of the horses, “Luckily we have several spare from which you can choose,” the woman called Kiaia added.

Moving onwards, Aran and the groom reached the end stall but the woman kept on walking. At the far end of the building was a wooden ramp that led upwards to the second level.

“How many horses do you have here?” asked Aran, staring up and down the long row of stalls.

“Over a hundred” she replied, “and we have a resident smith...he works down on the ground level, at the far end. “ She smiled suddenly and her habitually grim face lightened, “He complains that he is forever making horseshoes and forever trimming hooves. He also complains endlessly that the horses keep throwing the shoes on purpose.” She stopped suddenly, “So how well do you ride?” she asked suddenly.

Aran pulled a face, “I recently rode from Leigh to Andromach, but before then I have not ridden much.”

She nodded, “I think then that Spirit will suit you well. She is named thus for one never feels her movements. She is so silent and easy in her passage. You will appreciate her for she is as compliant as a mage-called spirit.”

‘She lies....’ suddenly whispered his sister’s low voice, ‘Never are we compliant if we are mage-called. However I will speak to this horse, she will bear you safely and with pleasure.’

“Thank you sister,” he murmured under his breath.

Aran looked up and saw that the groom had moved ahead, busily unlatching one of the wooden stall doors.

“Come Arantur of Leigh,” she called out to him, “I would see you against this animal. Spirit is not an overly tall horse and your height may be too much for her.” Aran obligingly walked up and peered inside the stall. Spirit was a slightly smaller horse than the one he had ridden out from Leigh. Almost wheaten in colour with a dark bay mane, tail and legs she had a fine but strong physique with large prominent muscles. Inquiringly she pushed her nose into his hand and blew into it.

“She likes you...and that is to your favour Arantur of Leigh,” approved Kiaia. “Now go in and stand against her.”

Aran walked into the stall which smelled of hay and manure, and stood next to the mare. Kiaia looked them both over with a critical eye and nodded, “Aye, she’ll suit you,” she shrugged, “I cannot put my finger upon it, but walking next to you Arantur, you seem almost a head taller than you really are.” She eyed him critically, almost as if he was horseflesh, “It must be those muscles of yours. You are certainly tall, but you seem bigger than you really are.”

“I was an apprentice blacksmith before I came here,” Aran owned, “People say I look old for my age.”

“And what age would you be Arantur?” she asked inquiringly, her shrewd gaze appraising.

“Nineteen,” he replied. “Almost twenty.”

She seemed surprised, “Aye it must be your trade...I had you figured to be at least twenty four.”

Aran absently stroked the smooth, almost silky hide of the horse and Spirit turned her head and sniffed curiously at her new master.

“She has certainly taken to you, Aran of Leigh.” Kiaia was more than surprised at that, “Spirit has had other riders in the past, all she has borne but never has she loved. You must have a way with animals.”

Aran smiled sheepishly remembering Sarana’s whispered words, “Perhaps,” he replied noncommittally, quickly stepping out of the stall.

Kiaia shrugged again, “Well then you have a mount now. Be sure to visit her every day, groom her, talk to her, take her out to the exercise yard on a halter and rope and walk her around so she will readily come to know your scent, your voice and your hand on the halter. When the Guards come for mounted training, be certain to take Spirit...”

“How often do the Guards ride?” asked Aran as he ran his hand down Spirit’s finely boned nose.

“Twice a week, being mid-week and week’s-end,” she examined Spirit’s tack critically and replaced it back on its pegs, satisfied with the condition of the metal and leather. “Mid-week they drill here in the exercise yard. Week’s-end they ride out on the plateau beyond the Keep.”

Aran mentally tried to count the days since leaving Glaive.

“It’s just into week-beginning,” the groom replied, “And since there are no new horses come, you obviously came by ship. It is easy to lose count of the days when you are travelling.”

Aran nodded and heard distantly two bells being struck, “I really ought to be going,” he told her whilst giving Spirit a last pat. “I have to meet Guardsman Ban by three bells and I still have to see the rest of the Keep.”

The groom nodded and walked back with him down the ramp and to the bright sunlit yard outside. She stopped at the doorway and pointed north towards the main gate of the yard, “If you go through that gate you will pass the kennels, the horse well, the corner of the yard where our five milk cows are tethered at night, and through the gate is the mews where the hunting birds are kept.” She glanced at him, “Do you know anything about hunting birds?”

Aran shook his head silently.

She smiled grimly, “Then you’d best not venture into that place. I believe the birds are in moult and not to be disturbed.”

“May I see the dogs?” he asked, for Sed had kept a hound and Aran was quite used to being around them.

She nodded, “Mind you don’t pat them. These ones are hunting dogs, not the usual domestic type you would have seen before. They’d soon as bite your hand than lick it in welcome.”

Aran was disappointed at that. He had been used to seeing Boner, Sed’s wiry little terrier curled up before the fire at home in Leigh, her stumpy tail wagging frantically as soon as she espied her master preparing his bow for yet another hunting expedition.

“I shall leave the dogs and birds for another day,” he sighed, half to himself.

Kiaia turned back to the stables, “I must go Arantur of Leigh. I have left the other grooms nursing a gelding that has lamed itself, and there is a mare that is near to foaling.” She shot him a look, “Do not forget your responsibilities to Spirit. You must come for a short period each day. Each Guard does this it is part of their duties.”

Aran nodded, "I will not forget."

The groom disappeared back inside and Aran made his way across the horse yard, side-stepping piles of fresh manure along the way. As he passed the kennel the dogs inside started barking furiously. Immediately he quickened his pace, and moving past the large well and unlatching the main gate, quickly vacated the horse yard.

Beyond the yard was the mews on his left and to his right was the large square twin-towers of the gatehouse. Standing and sitting at the base of the gatehouse, Aran could see half a dozen Guardsmen chatting amongst themselves or intently playing a game of chance called 'Spin Stones'. They looked up as he passed and waved a greeting, obviously he had been recognised from his meeting with Guardsman Morel in the training yard earlier in the day. Resuming his exploration he passed the main yard which was now empty of the training Guards, and walked past a three storied featureless building. Seeing only a single large locked door and no windows, Aran assumed that it was a storeroom of some kind and walked on into the older, ruinous part of the Keep.

There was little left of three buildings which butted up against the towering curtain walls. Peering into doorways Aran could see that most the buildings were open to the sky and the cobbles under his feet were often broken and cracked by clumps of grass or weeds. Passing the large buildings, his meanderings took him through three courtyards, overgrown now with climbing roses, vines and ancient, gnarled fruit trees. A couple of courtyards he briefly recognised as ones he had passed through that morning on his way from the seagate.

Wandering down towards the south-west tower, he passed between two more ruinous buildings before turning a corner and discovering a small secluded courtyard ablaze with large beds of summer flowers, fruiting trees and wild roses flowering in profusion across the walls. This particular courtyard, deep in the oldest, most ruined section of the Keep, obviously showed a loving, tending hand and Aran guessed that this was Alissa's garden of which she had spoken. Walking inside, Aran was pleasantly surprised at the variety and profusion of plants and herbs. He did not call himself an expert in matters horticultural, but this garden seemed to have as many different varieties of plants as there were stars in the sky. To one side of the courtyard was a small fountain which sadly seemed no longer to be working. Around the fountain were several marble benches, each covered in a layer of moss and creeping vines. Some effort had been made to clear the benches of their covering of moss, but only a few of the benches displayed a white, marble finish...the rest were victims of creeping time.

Walking out of Alissa's garden, Aran discovered a partly ruinous well which however boasted a new bucket and rope. Leaning over he dropped a stone down the well, waiting for a long moment he finally heard a small splash far below. Straightening, he looked about him and immediately caught a whiff of bread baking. Breathing deeply of the enticing smell he immediately realised that he had come full circle and was facing the back of the kitchen and bakery.

A tugging in his belly reminded him that he had yet to find the latrines, so he entered into the nearby south-west tower of the curtain wall. Passing the locked guest rooms, he quickly climbed the spiral stairs until he had attained the third level. Opening the door that led to the wall walk he ventured along until he spotted an internal window. Gazing out through the narrow window, he quickly espied the riot of colour that was Alissa's garden. Realising that

he had taken the wrong door, he replaced his steps and returned to the south-west tower. Finding at last the door that led to the wall-walk leading to the south-west tower, Aran confidently walked along the narrow corridor which had been built within the depths of the curtain wall. His nose led him to the first set of latrines and he stopped awhile to relieve his body.

Finishing, he adjusted his clothing and set off towards the south-east tower in which his room was located. A few minutes later the wall-walk ended at an unlatched wooden door. Pushing it open he found himself back in a tower. Breathing deeply, he caught the smell of newly laid plaster and nodded happily, he was back in his own tower. Trotting down the stairs he finally came to his room and once inside, sat back on the stool feeling well pleased by his afternoon's exploration.

Barely had he eased his feet out of his boots, when he heard the distant peal of three bells. Sighing to himself, he pushed his feet back into his boots, and quickly poured himself a mug of water from the jug which someone had only recently topped up with water fresh from the well. The well water was cold, and tasted faintly of the oak bucket which it had been lifted in, however it was palatable enough and Aran drank thirstily.

Moments later there was a knock on the door, and Ban stuck his head in, "Good, you are back. I checked at two bells but you were gone."

Aran nodded, "I was exploring the Keep. I've met the head groom Kiaia and she's assigned me a horse."

Ban came into the room, "You've been busy! What horse did you get?"

"Spirit...a dun mare. Do you know her?"

The young Guardsman nodded, "Aye...she's been rested a while as she lamed herself last winter in a fall on some ice. Obviously she is over her injury if Kiaia has given her to you."

Aran nodded, "She seemed all right..." He stood up, "What's your horse?"

Ban laughed, "A lanky chestnut gelding called Demon, and he lives up to his name for he is the very devil when he doesn't get his own way." He grinned, "I have been riding him for over eighteen months now so we have come to an understanding...he very rarely bites me now."

Aran stared at the Guardsman, uncertain if the young man was pulling his leg.

Ban grinned again, "Tis Andur's truth, walk wide around Demon for if he takes a dislike to you, you will certainly know it."

Aran pulled a face, "I will heed your advice."

Ban opened the door, "Come. We ought to get to the armoury before we lose the light. Morel will have my hide if you are not outfitted by morning."

It did not take them long to return to the main training yard and at last they stood at the open stout oaken doors of the internal Keep.

"The armoury is on the ground level," Ban blithely informed Aran, "I will hopefully find something suitable for you. If we need alterations to the helmet then Drek the armourer will still be available at his forge."

Aran followed the Guardsman inside the Keep, their footsteps soundless on the ancient, worn flagstones of the floor. The internal walls were made out of dressed stone and in places the ancient plaster still showed signs of decorative paintings and murals. Seeing his eyes upon the decorations, Ban hastened to explain.

“The upper levels are more interesting. There you will see tapestries, banners and aged wall hangings. Polished oak floors on which are lying rugs that are centuries old, and furniture that was ancient even during the reign of the Andurian kings. The throne itself is said to be made from the wood of the now lost bloodwood of the Havart Plateau.”

Aran shook his head in wonderment.

Ban nodded towards a door on their left, “That door leads down to the vast underground storerooms. The door on the right leads into the armoury...let me check and make certain it is unlocked.”

A quick turn of the handle and the heavy door swung open.

Aran stepped inside close on the heels of Ban. He wrinkled his nose—it had been a while since he had smelt the familiar odour of oil and metal. The only light coming into the armoury was from several narrow, heavily glassed windows and the late afternoon sunlight streamed in, illuminating dancing dust motes in its long slanting rays. Aran gazed about him astounded for he seemed to be standing in the midst of an army of armoured figures. Each shirt of chainmail had been mounted on a heavy wooden cross, the top of each sporting an identical conical helmet with a long nasal guard. A wooden chest stood at the base of each cross.

“We’ll need to find a nasal helm to fit you,” Ban was saying. “The helms are matched to the mail shirt or hauberk. We have discovered that head size is fairly proportional to body height, so once the helmet is right, the hauberk will match up” Ban added as he went from cross to cross inspecting the armour.

“What about this one?” asked Aran, who had been mooching around the crosses in fascination.

Ban came over and quickly shook his head, “No it’s already been assigned.”

Aran examined the helmet, “There seems to be no mark.”

Ban took the helmet and replaced it back on top of the wooden cross, “There,” he said, pointing to a faint inscription on the wooden beam, “It reads W12 U...Wolf 12 U, or in other words, Guardsman Urden.”

Aran squinted to make out the spidery letters, “How do you get Guardsman Urden from W12 U?” he asked, his eyes narrowing for he suspected his leg was being pulled.

“Easy,” Ban replied “The Guard is split into two companies, the Wolf Company and the Bear Company. I happen to know that Urden is in Wolf Company. This is his armour.”

Aran stared again at the faint inscriptions then looked around, “So I’m to look for crosses without those markings.” Ban nodded and headed back into the array of crosses.

Some five minutes later Aran heard Ban calling out his name from the very back of the armoury. Working his way through the array, he finally found Ban with a helmet in one hand and some padded clothing in the other.

“Try this on Arantur,” the Guard suggested. “You’ll need to wear this padded arming cap first otherwise you’ll develop a headache. It will also help protect you from overhead blows.”

Aran took the heavily padded linen cap and pulled it on his head, tying it under his chin with the leather cords provided.

“Next the gambeson,” said Ban handing him a long sleeved dark blue padded tunic identical to what the Guards were wearing that morning.

Aran took the gambeson and pulled it on over his head and settled it down about him. He noticed that it was a good fit with the sleeves finishing just below his wrists and it was long enough to just touch his knees.

“You will notice that it is split both front and back, from hem to groin. This is so you will be able to ride,” Ban informed him. “Now that the gambeson fits so well I am hopeful that we will have a match with the mail hauberk. Can you please bend forward...”

Aran bent over as Ban lifted the great mass of oiled chainmail from the cross and over Aran’s head. Working his arms through the sleeves of the mail hauberk, Aran shook himself to settle the mail down upon his shoulders.

“Another good fit. We are in luck today,” Ban commented. “Here is the belt for this hauberk, buckle it tightly around your middle for it will help to distribute the weight of the mail upon your body.”

Aran shook himself again and the chainmail jingled in reply, “I thought it would be heavier...I could bear this.”

Ban pursed his lips, “Aye, you have unusual strength in your upper body, and that is good, you will need every ounce of muscle for the days ahead.” He took from the cross a smaller piece of chainmail, “This is the coif, it will go over the arming cap and under the helmet.”

Aran stood still as Ban slipped the mail over his head, adjusting it until the opening framed his face.

“This long section of chainmail hanging down from the neck of the coif is the ventail,” Ban instructed. As you can see it has a leather backing. If we draw it up and tie it high up on the mail at the side of your face it will cover your exposed neck and chin.” Aran waited patiently whilst that procedure was done.

“I never realised that arming was so much of a process,” Aran commented, “I mean this armour is not a thing that you could get into or out of in a hurry.”

“You get used to it,” Ban grinned in reply. “Now the helmet, this will make or break this particular armour combination.”

Aran took the proffered helmet and settled it down on his head. It rested just on his eyebrows, the long nasal guard extending down over his nose. Ban grinned, “Good, seems a perfect fit. Just secure it by tying those lacings under your chin.” Aran looked down at his feet. “What about my legs? It seems stupid to protect the upper body when a blow to the unprotected legs would cripple you.”

Ban nodded and opened the chest at the base of the cross. Carefully he sorted through the bits of plate armour that was stored inside. “Here we are” he announced happily, “Plate gauntlets, greaves, poleyn, cuisse and sabatons. They will do the trick.”

Aran stared aghast at the collection of oiled steel at his feet, “I’m expected to wear all this! Will my horse bear it? In Andur’s name how will I bear it?”

Ban smiled up at him, “You are lucky, this is the very latest in armour technology. Captain Taran has been slowly upgrading the old chainmail leggings with this new plate armour. You are in luck because this combination has the new armour.”

“I am lucky?” Aran was not so sure.

“Of course...” Ban was busily lacing and buckling all the various bit of steel onto Aran’s legs from his mid-thighs to his feet, “This new steel plate armour is actually lighter to wear than mail. It does a better job of protecting too.”

Aran tapped the rings of his mail hauberk, “Then how come this isn’t plate too?”

Ban looked up, “Oh it’s fearsome expensive to produce plate armour, that’s why we are only getting the legs and hands equipped first. Besides, for some odd reason there doesn’t seem to be many armourers around willing to take on the job of outfitting the entire Guard in plate. Drek, our armourer made all the plate worn by the Guard, and what you’ll see has taken him years to complete!”

Aran studied the articulated plate in which Ban had lifted each of his booted feet into. He shook his head in disbelief as Ban buckled each one securely onto his feet.

“What that?” he asked, pointing to his new steel boots, each with an extended toe cap.

“Sabatons,” Ban replied, “The very latest in armour technology.”

Aran sighed and guessed he was going to hear that particular statement a lot over the next few weeks.

“Now what?” Aran asked, as Ban straightened from his task.

Ban handed him two more pieces of the bright steel plate armour. “Gauntlets, don’t worry, they are easy...straight on over the hands like gloves.”

Aran took the offered metal and eased his hands into the leather-lined gauntlets. Carefully he flexed his fingers, with some surprise he noted that the oiled articulated joints moved easily.

“Anything else?” asked Aran, certain that there could be nothing else to add to his metal wardrobe.

“Aye,” Ban replied, going to a rack near the wall, “A sword, dagger, spear and shield.”

“I already have a dagger,” Aran replied quickly, “It’s a Sentinal blade.”

Ban looked around, his arms full of weapons, “Bring it to training in the morning for it will need to be approved by Guard Morel before you can use it with the Guard.”

Aran nodded, and watched as Ban inspected, then discarded a variety of swords on a rack. Finally he settled upon one, a shorter blade with a curved cross-guard, a wooden grip covered in leather strips shiny from use and a shell shaped pommel. Aran frowned; the sword Ban was studying seemed to be similar to the one he saw so briefly at Glaive. Unconsciously his hand reached out to the blade which although similar to the King’s Sword, was however much plainer in decoration.

Ban held up the sword for Aran’s inspection, “Now this one is certainly not the latest in sword technology, but it’s the finest of the swords that have been unassigned.”

Aran took it, his gauntleted hands curving unconsciously around the leather clad grip, “It looks different to the swords I saw at Sentinal and the others here. Is it old?”

“Aye, but it’s in good condition.” Ban shook his head in amazement, “They certainly knew how to make swords back then and keep them for it’s been well maintained.”

Aran held up the sword, it seemed to be a natural extension of his arm.

Ban nodded happily, “Good balance too. This is a fine weapon. I guess it dates back to Andur’s time.”

“High King Andur!” choked Aran, “But that would make it well over three hundred years old. Is it safe to use?”

Ban nodded, “I am certain of it, however if you are worried we’ll get Drek to check the strength of the steel but I’d lay an even bet that it’s as fit for work as it was the day it was set aside.”

Aran brought the sword up and studied it closely, "It's Sentinal made. The blade has the same look and feel as my dagger."

Ban looked at him in amazement, "How in Andur can you tell?"

Aran smiled a rare smile, "Because I know metals. Before I came here I was an apprentice blacksmith."

Ban studied Arantur long and hard, "How is it that a blacksmith wants to join the Guards?"

Aran sighed, "I guess you ought to know that I've been Scanned at Glaive. The mages have discovered that I have the Metalmage and Warriormage Abilities. I've been sent here to learn weaponscraft and swordskills."

Ban took a step back, "Warriormage!" he blurted out horrified, "But we haven't had Warriormages since the time, since the time..."

"Not since before the time of Andur," finished up Aran taking pity on the young Guardsman.

Ban sat back heavily on a wooden chest, "By Andur!" he gasped in astonishment, "Are you certain of this?"

Aran nodded, then he frowned as he considered the other's reaction, "In fact Ban, I'd rather not make it public knowledge. I mean Morel knows, Trevan knows, and Captain Maran will have to know when he returns, but the others should remain ignorant. I'd really rather not be treated any differently."

Ban offered Aran a shy smile and spat onto his hand, "A bargain then, master mage."

Aran took off one gauntlet, "Only if you call me Aran, not master mage." The other nodded, so they sealed the bargain with a quick hand clasp.

Aran pulled back on the gauntlet, "You mentioned a spear and shield. Have you found them?"

Ban nodded and picked up the rest of the weapons from the floor, "Aye, this is the spear, alike as any in this armoury. The shield is a standard kite-shield." He looked again in wonderment at Aran, "Are you really a Warriormage?"

Aran nodded, "I have the latent Ability, but that doesn't automatically make me a Warriormage. I understand that I would need to train for at least five years on Glaive before I am accounted one. I have the Ability, Ban...nothing more." he hastened to add.

Ban grinned "That's enough for me Aran." He stood back to survey his creation, "Now that's it, you are fully armoured up. By Andur you certainly look like a Guardsman now."

"I wouldn't say it was the most comfortable or lightest thing I've ever worn," Aran commented wryly shrugging his shoulders against the weight and pull of the armour, "However I must bear it if it is part of being a Guard."

"It certainly is," assured Ban, "Now whilst you are fully equipped we must visit Drek, so he can examine the fit and check the sword. Morel will have my hide if you go out into the field with unsuitable or ill-fitting armour."

Aran turned and walked experimentally towards the door. "Then let's go now for this may take me a while to get used to."

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"There's nothing wrong with the blade," said Drek the armourer a short while after, as he swung the sword, slashing it across a near-by log. "Last another three hundred years if it is

well maintained,” he added, peering at Aran under bushy black eye-brows. “Mind you look after it boy, this sword has a history.”

“What about the rest, Master Drek?” asked Ban whilst surreptitiously tightening a buckle at the back of one of Aran’s greaves.

The large-boned armorer handed Aran back the blade and stood back to check the armour.

“Aye looks good...you’ve been lucky, the armour seems to be made for him. What did you say his name was?”

Aran felt he ought to take part in the conversation, and held out his gauntleted hand in greeting, “Arantur, Master Drek...I am Arantur of Leigh.”

His hand, although encased in steel was completely swallowed by the huge paw of the armorer, “By Andur lad, I’m pleased to meet you,” he boomed.

Aran winced the armorer’s voice matched his huge size.

Ban tapped him on the shoulder, “Come, we are finished here. Dinner is not far away and we have still to get this lot off you and back in its place in the armoury. We will mark the wooden cross with your code as soon as Morel assigns you to a company, which will be tomorrow.”

They turned to walk back to the Keep when Trevan, who appeared around the corner, quickly intercepted Ban.

“I am looking for Arantur, Ban...have you seen him?” worried the elderly mage, “I’ve not seen him since we arrived.”

Ban shot Aran a grin, “Aye, master mage he’s here with us now.”

Trevan turned an astounded eye upon the steel clad figure next to the young Guard.

“Arantur?”

Aran grinned in return—the armour had certainly made him unrecognisable.

“Aye Trevan, don’t you recognise me?”

Trevan peered up under the helm, “In Andur’s name, it is Arantur. By the Goddess even your foster brother would not recognise you now.”

“Aye, Sed would not at that,” Aran grinned again. “Do I look like a Guardsman?”

Trevan laughed and walked around the young man, “Every inch one Arantur. How does it feel?”

Aran laughed, a rare event for the normally quiet young man, “Aye it suits me well Mage Trevan. It seems such a lot of metal but I believe I can bear it well.”

Trevan’s eyebrows went up and he gnawed a fingernail thoughtfully, “No problems?”

Aran shook his head.

“He wears it naturally,” added Ban. “It may be something to do with Aran having the Warriormage Ability.”

Trevan shot a questioning glance at Aran.

The young man shrugged, “It was my knowledge to share. He’s sworn to secrecy. I’m sure that Ban won’t tell anyone who doesn’t already know.”

Trevan nodded in agreement, “Aye Arantur, although it is certainly your knowledge to share I would advise being discriminatory in who you share it with in future.”

Aran shuffled his feet uneasily, “I promise,” he replied, his buoyant mood evaporating a little.

The mage smiled and patted Aran on the back, "You are truly a young wolf now. However dinner is close to being served and I am certain the cooks would not appreciate all that smelly metal clanking around their kitchens..."

Ban grabbed Aran's arm and flashed a smile at the elderly mage. "We were just off to the Keep to store the armour away, master mage."

"Then I'd advise that you'd hurry," chuckled Trevan, "It'll be dusk soon and I don't want to mount a search party to rescue you two from the wilderness of the armoury."

Ban hurried Aran along whilst casting nervous glances back the mage who was unconcernedly returning to his tower.

"Are they all like that?" Ban asked as soon as they were out of earshot.

Aran turned to Ban in confusion, "Who? The mages?"

Ban hurried Arantur into the internal Keep, "Aye, the mages...are they all so unnerving?"

Aran was silent for a moment whilst he remembered his meetings with the Archmage and High Mage Drayden.

"Certainly," he replied, "But more so, compared to the others at Glaive, Mage Trevan is a sweet old man who is about as frightening as a lamb in the field."

Ban shot the other man a worried look, "Then remind me never to go to Glaive."

Aran laughed, "Glaive only wants you if you have an Ability."

Ban breathed a heartfelt sigh of relief. "Thank Andur for that...I have as much mage Ability as does that stone," he grinned happily pointing to a lump of masonry which had fallen from one of the buildings.

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Later, with dinner heavy in his stomach, Aran wandered back through the starlit darkness to his room. Both moons had already risen so he had no trouble finding his way through the maze of buildings of Andur's Keep. A cool, inviting sea wind was blowing so Aran decided not to stop at his door, but instead climbed upwards until he had gained the battlements of the south-east tower. Up on the roof, he leant out over the crenellations of the battlements and saw the dark sea below, its swells and whitecaps caught in the moonlit glow. He turned his back on the sea and gazed instead northwards across the darkness of the Havart Plateau. Andur's Keep had been built on the most southerly aspect of the plateau, the bulk of which stretched northwards for many leagues. Staring hard, Aran could distantly make out East and West Peaks, their presence only revealed by the abrupt disappearance of the stars.

"You ought to see it by daylight, it's quite a view," Trevan spoke suddenly.

Aran turned quickly, almost jumping out of his skin at the sudden appearance of the mage behind him.

"Make a little more noise next time Mage Trevan," he chided, "You almost scared the life out of me!"

Trevan harrumphed, "I thought I had. Were you lost in dreams again?"

Aran shook his head, "No, just feeling the wind and the night and the age of the Keep."

Trevan harrumphed again, "You'll get plenty of wind soon," he commented dryly. "Come Autumn the wind never quits here, blowing constantly all day and night with no let-up."

Aran turned to the elderly mage, "How long do you think I will be staying here?"

Trevan stared over the battlements, "I don't know...I rather suspect that the Archmage intends you to stay until the Guards have passed you. It may take weeks, or it could take

months.” He turned to face the younger man, “Seeing you in that armour this afternoon made me believe very strongly that the Archmage was right in sending you here. From the first moment I set eyes on you, you have never looked as right as in that armour today. You had the look not only of a Guardsman, but also of a Warriormage.”

Aran was puzzled, “How? In what way...”

Trevan sighed as he tried to explain a feeling. “What I am trying to say is this...a Guardsman in his armour looks like a Guardsman. You in armour look like you’ve been wearing it every day since the day you were born, that was the real you Arantur, that’s all I can really say.”

“More real than the blacksmith’s apron?” asked Aran softly.

Trevan nodded, “Aye...more real than that, almost as if you and the metal became one.” He shook his head in bewilderment, “In all my life I’ve never seen anything like it. The only way I can explain it is that somehow the two Abilities may have merged into one, a meld of Warriormage and Metalmage.”

Aran turned back to the sea, his thoughts spinning, “I don’t feel any different,” he said finally.

“I think you are,” Trevan replied bluntly. “I’d like to Scan you if I may, something may have changed.”

It was Aran’s turn to sigh, “Won’t it show what the Great Circle already knows?”

Trevan shrugged, “Perhaps, perhaps not...just keep still for a moment,” Trevan closed his eyes in concentration.

Aran leant back on the battlements and tried to relax, immediately he felt the familiar heat of the Scanning wash over him.

Trevan straightened and opened his eyes.

“Well?” asked Aran, “Is there anything different?”

Trevan was silent then said finally, “I was mistaken, nothing has changed.”

Aran narrowed his eyes. He suspected that Trevan was being less than honest with him.

“Are you certain of that,” he questioned again an edge creeping into his voice

“Yes,” Trevan looked up in some impatience. “However, what I do know Arantur is that you have an early start at training tomorrow and the Guards do not tolerate tardiness.”

Aran sighed heavily. He knew all too well when Trevan would speak no more on a subject. “Then I will bid you a good night Trevan” he replied wryly, heading back towards the stair.

The elderly mage lifted a hand in farewell then turned back to his contemplation of the sea. Far away, and with mage-enhanced sight Trevan saw the Trader plying her way southwards. For a moment he wished he was once more on her deck, returning to his long abandoned home at Glaive. Sighing he shook his head at the heavy task his master had laid upon him, and wished one day for a return to a life that was marked only by reading the ancient texts in the esoteric quest for pure knowledge and research. Arantur, outwardly so quiet and reserved, seemed to have a maelstrom of power swirling within him. Trevan knew that he could not be honest with the boy, for as he suspected the two Abilities had somehow merged. For some reason the Warriormage Ability, which had been the lesser of the two, was now equal in strength to the Metalmageing Ability, and even more disturbing the Metalmageing Ability could not be separated from the other Ability—they had somehow melded into one. The end result was one, very powerful Ability. Trevan shrugged to himself. This was entirely out of

his experience. Belatedly he wished the Archmage was here to answer his questions. Trevan searched his memories. He recalled that in the past, when a novice came to Glaive with two Abilities they were always found separate, unable to be used in conjunction with one another. The novice mage could then elect to follow one of the two paths but never both, the Ability always demanded absolute loyalty to one or the other.

Deep in thought Trevan stared out at the dark sea. Perhaps, he reasoned, it is because Warriormages and Metalmages always worked so closely together in the past, perhaps this was a natural bridging of the two Abilities. Perhaps the rising of the magepower was triggering it in a way similar to the transformations of Drayden and other High Earthmages. Trevan gnawed his lower lip in puzzlement. Everything pointed to the fact that archaic memories were on the rise again—and nowhere were they rising so strongly as here in the ancient Seawatch Keep. Trevan shook his head in wearily bafflement. These were matters best discussed by the High Circle of mages at Glaive. Matters certainly not for one ordinary mage to try and wrestle into submission during the dead of night.

“No!” he muttered sharply to himself. “I will leave well enough alone. In the days ahead my duties lie with the villages and town north of here. Arantur will have his hands full training with the Guards. I will say nothing; he will have no time or energy spare to worry about this changing power of his.”

So resolved he turned his back on the night and sea and retraced his steps back to his room below.

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Chapter 7—The Guard

The morning dawned fine and clear, an echo of the day before. Arantur woke and swung himself from the cot and stretched. Dressing quickly in his oldest and most comfortable clothes and boots, he combed his fingers through his hair and hurriedly plaited his dark-blond hair into two tidy braids. Gulping down a mug full of water he raced down the tower, taking two steps at a time in his haste. Diving around the door he almost cannoned into Ban who had obviously been sent to wake him.

“Good, you’re up,” the Guardsman said, pleased by the appearance of the newest recruit. “Come let’s break our fast with some bread and cider, then onto training.”

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”What’s planned for today?” asked Aran later, wiping the last of the jam from his mouth.

“The plateau run...” replied Ban enigmatically, “Then you’ll be taught the basic exercises.”

“I’m not a fast runner,” Aran confided. “These aren’t races are they?”

Ban shook his head, “No, although on occasion we do have competitions and races within the Guard. These runs are to build up our fitness, to make our hearts and lungs strong.”

“So how do the slow runners keep up with the fleet footed?” asked Aran.

Ban flashed a grin, “The Guard is divided into two companies. The Wolves, of which I am one, are lithe and fast; the Bears are slow but strong. Each company runs at its own pace and trains together. At week’s end we join together and train against the other company.”

Aran looked at his own height and strength and assumed that he would become a member of the Bear Company.

“I’d mark you for a Bear,” Ban interjected, interrupting Aran’s train of thought. “You may not be fleet, but you have a strength about you that would suit that company. Ah here we are,” Ban continued as they walked into the training yard, “I’ll take you straight onto Morel.”

The yard was already filled with men of ages ranging from late-teens to veterans in their forties. All were dressed in simple tunics and leggings, their feet encased in stout leather boots. Each one of them were stretching and limbering in preparation for the morning’s activities. Some cast Aran curious gazes, but most were already deeply focused on their training ahead, their eyes turned inwards in some kind of mental exercise. Ban walked up to where the deputy Captain was talking quietly to two other Guardsmen, Aran a silent shadow at his side.

“Acting-Captain Morel,” he spoke quietly and with deference, “I have brought you Arantur of Leigh for training with the Andurian Guard.”

The Acting-Captain turned around greeting Aran with a smile, “So here is our newest recruit. I hope you slept well young man, for we have a busy morning ahead of us.”

Aran nodded and watched whilst the deputy Captain and the two other Guardsmen walked around him, critically assessing his size and physique. After a low voiced discussion the Acting-Captain turned to where Aran was standing, “Arantur of Leigh, you have been assigned to Wolf Company. Guardsman Darven here is the Wolf Leader. He will be running and training with you today.”

Ban shot Aran a surprised look and Arantur sighed silently.

“You disagree?” Morel asked Ban, after intercepting the look the two had exchanged.

“Aye, Acting-Captain,” Ban straightened, trying to add maturity to his young body, “Arantur himself admits that although he is strong he is not the fleetest of runners.”

Morel nodded to himself, “That may be true. However he shall start with the Wolves. If he does not suit that company he can easily be moved to the Bears.”

Aran saw Ban nodding in agreement. Obviously the deputy Captain’s word was flexible to some changes. Ban turned back to Aran giving him a friendly hand on the shoulder, “I must start my preparations Aran... Wolf Leader Darven will look after you now.”

Aran nodded and watched the younger man move off into the crowd of Guards.

“Arantur...”

There was a quiet voice at his shoulder and Aran turned to encounter the steady dark eyes of the Wolf Leader. “Come Arantur,” he said taking the other by the arm, “We have only a short time until we run and I must take you through the limbering exercises.”

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It had been many minutes since he had left the Keep walls, now he and the others members of the Guards were running along a narrow dirt track that skirted the boulders, wind gnarled trees and high plateau pastures on which grazed the Keep’s small herds. Once or twice had he seen the eagle-eyed sheep, cow and goat herders high up on the rocks, carefully overseeing their charges, making certain that none of the flock wandered close to the rock strewn edge of the high plateau. The noise of the gulls and other sea-birds were deafening here, so close their nests on the cliffs, and Aran wrinkled his nose as he smelt the pungent aroma of their droppings. The wind too was a constant. Forever pulling and tugging at his clothes and hair, trying by stealth or force to cast him over the cliffs into the waiting sea below.

Doggedly he ran on, matching his pace to the young, slim, dark haired Wolf Leader at his side. The other Wolves were a little way ahead. Aran could hear them above the birds as they called out encouragement to one another. The Bears were at least two hundred yards behind, their passage noted only by the snapping of twigs and the grunts of their breath. The Bears spoke little to one another, all effort directed at conserving their breath for the run. It was now past thirty minutes into the run and Aran was feeling the rivulets of sweat running down his back and staining his tunic with its wetness.

“You run well,” said Darven suddenly, “You may not be very fast but you run well.” The Wolf Leader was easily matching Arantur’s pace.

He gestured as he ran, “There are many amongst the Wolves who run quickly but tire early, and can barely drag themselves back to the Keep at the end.” He flashed a smile at Arantur, “You, on the other hand could probably go at this pace all day.”

Aran nodded, he did not wish to squander his breath in conversation.

The Wolf Leader obviously could spare breath for he added, “I marked you for a Wolf as soon as I saw you. You seem to possess the strength of a Bear, but see how we have outdistanced that company long ago. Your youth, height and fitness put you into the Wolf ranks.”

An hour later Aran was very glad to see the Keep walls rising up ahead of him. Despite what the Wolf Leader had said, he felt tired and was looking forward to stopping and having a breather. Aran’s endurance had paid off, for only moments before, he and the Wolf Leader Darven had caught up with the others of the Wolf Company. Moments later they trotted under the towering gatehouse and through the Keep to the empty training yard beyond.

Stopping exhausted, Aran bent over and breathed deeply, trying to calm his pounding heart, and to fill his oxygen starved lungs with the cool, sea air of the Keep.

“I thought you said you were slow?” Ban had wandered over to where Aran had finally eased his weary body down onto the front stone steps of the internal Keep.

Aran looked up, the young Guardsman seemed barely winded by his exertion, “I am compared to you” he replied a little irritated, “It took me the entire run to catch up with the other Wolves.”

Ban shrugged, “We can rest a little while now. However once everyone has returned and has had a breather we will need to get into training armour for drill.”

“What all that mail and plate?” Aran was horrified.

Ban laughed, “After that run? No gambesons, helmets and gauntlets only. I hope you remember where your armour was stored.”

Aran nodded tiredly, “At the back, by the wall.”

Ban turned away, “Good...I’ll have a word with Morel so he can mark the gear with your code.”

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Later, after everyone had armoured-up, the Wolf Leader appeared at Aran’s side. “I notice that you have been given one of the old broad swords,” he said, gazing at the naked blade in Aran’s gauntleted grasp. “It is a formidable and ancient weapon but one which relies heavily upon slashing techniques.” He held out his own weapon for inspection. “This is a longsword, it can also be used as a slashing weapon, but because of its superior steel it has a fine point and thus can also be used as a thrusting weapon. Because you are using a broad sword, I will be teaching you the basic slashing strokes that are suitable for use by your weapon.”

Darven pulled on his own steel gauntlets and tossed back his shoulder-length straight dark hair away from his face.

“Progressions, avoidance and blocks are the three words which will become your closest companions over the next few weeks.” Darven said quietly, as he stood relaxed in front of Aran whilst cradling the deadly longsword in his gauntleted hands. “These three words tell a swordsman how to move in a fight, how to cast a deadly or injurious blow, or how to move away from an opponent’s stroke. A Progression is a series of forward or backward movements initiating blows. Avoidances are a series of backward or sideways movements to avoid blows. Blocks are a series of movements which you would catch or block your opponent’s blow upon your sword or shield. Today and over the next few days we will be dealing primarily with the fundamental Progressions. Watch me now as I move through these first simple steps.”

Fluidly the Wolf Leader walked forward onto his right leg, whilst swinging his right sword arm down towards his left foot. Immediately his next move was to progress onto his left foot, whilst bringing his right sword arm straight upwards as if to connect with an opponent’s face or jaw. Stopping, he checked to see if Aran was still closely watching. “Do you see that my sword arm is just an extension of my body...my arms do not move independently of the body, the body and arm move as one....this will enable all the weight and power of the body to be translated into the force of the blow.”

Aran nodded, these progressions were very similar to primary smithing techniques he had been taught by Master Cody in Leigh.

“Now follow me whilst I walk you through these repeated two steps.”

Aran readjusted the helmet on his head and settling the broad sword in his gauntleted grasp, stood beside his instructor.

“Remember now...move with the body, not with the arms only.”

Mechanically Aran began to step through the simple progressions.

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“Good,” approved Darven, “You seem to have grasped these fundamentals.” Darven stared at the tall younger man standing before him, “Now do them for me again, this time yourself without using me to imitate the moves.”

Aran nodded whilst gazing into the distance, his gaze only marginally obstructed by the nasal guard of the conical helm he wore. Slowly and methodically he paced through the steps, repeating under his breath the progressions he had been taught. Mid-step he was suddenly pushed and he toppled to one side, momentarily caught off-balance. Luckily he caught himself before he landed flat on his back in the practice yard.

The Wolf Leader grinned suddenly. “You must always remember to be aware of your centre of balance Arantur. Now come here, let me demonstrate.”

Aran moved over, a little wary about what his unpredictable instructor was going to do next.

“Now stand normally.”

Aran took an easy stance. Suddenly the Wolf Leader gave him a shove to one side again Aran had to move quickly to keep from falling over.

“Now try again,” Darven said, “However this time try to keep your feet held a little way apart.”

Aran did so, and Darven shoved again, this time with all his strength. Aran did not move.

“You now have your balance centred correctly. You are a rock, a mountain...it would be difficult to unbalance you now.”

“So the wider I move my legs apart, the stronger and more stable I become?” Aran queried.

“To a point,” Darven replied. “If you take a stance or move with your legs too far apart you run the risk of becoming overextended and you will alter your centre of balance again, leaving you open to become off-balanced. The trick is to recognise your centre of balance in all your progressions and avoidances and to maintain it throughout the fight.”

Aran nodded his understanding. This swordcraft seemed to be a combination of primary smithing techniques and the simple aids to concentration that Trevan had taught him only days before.

Darven stood back and regarded the novice Guardsman. “Right, now walk through the progressions again. This time concentrate upon maintaining your centre of balance.”

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For most of the morning Aran did nothing but repeat these simple progressions. To the untrained eye it all seemed to be so simple, but actually there was an endless degree of fine tuning and perfecting the nuances of the movements. By the time the mid-day bell was rung, Aran was bone tired and his right arm quivered with the prolonged effort of holding aloft the heavy steel sword for many hours.

Darven put down his own sword and mopped his sweaty brow with the back of his forearm. “You’ve done well. Like any novice it takes a while to pick up these basics, but in all honesty you are much further ahead than I would have thought possible.”

Aran stripped off his helmet, coif and gambeson, letting the cool sea-air blow across his perspiration streaked torso.

“What now?” he asked finally.

Darven pulled off his gauntlets and sheathed his sword in its scabbard.

“Nothing actually, there will be a time in the future when you will be rostered with the other Guards to stand watch at the gatehouse, but for today the afternoon is your own” he replied.

“I do have to exercise my horse,” Aran remembered suddenly, “I did promise that to Kiaia the groom.”

“Aye and she’ll have your skin if you neglect your responsibilities to your mount,” he laughed. “In the past there has been many a Guard who has been on the receiving end of her tongue. However she will have to wait until you have had your mid-day meal. After all that training you need to get some water and food into you.”

Aran nodded, suddenly realising how ravenous he had become.

“Wolf Leader Darven,” Aran asked as the other began to gather his discarded armour and weapons.

The other looked up, “Aye?”

“I have a dagger that I would like you or Guard Morel to pass before I add it to my armour. Could I bring it around to you sometime this afternoon?” Aran asked hesitantly.

The Wolf Leader smiled and nodded reassuringly, “I’ll come to you Arantur. I am occupied this afternoon, but I may have a few minutes before dusk...perhaps I could meet you in your tower room.”

Aran nodded happily.

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It was almost two bells before Aran managed to store away his gear, grab a bite to eat from the kitchens and make his way across to the stables and horse yards. Kiaia was sitting waiting by the stables, watching him silently as he walked across the yard, smiling as he sidestepped the manure heaps.

“I was beginning to think you had forgotten,” she said as soon as he was within earshot.

He shook his head, “No, I had a few things to do after training. That is all.”

She smiled, “So how did it go?”

Aran grimaced and massaged his right arm and shoulder, “In Andur’s name, I won’t be able to move come morning.”

“Two days hence it will be even worse,” she predicted with a grin, “Unless you organise a hot tub for tonight. Either that or a massage...”

Aran grinned. “Are you offering?”

She shrugged her smile wry, “Could be...”

Aran shook his head, “No, I must decline. But thank you for the offer...”

Kiaia stood up, “Your loss, but come now I believe it is time you reacquainted yourself with Spirit.”

*

Aran slowly walked around the exercise yard his hand light on Spirit’s lead rope. Silently, impassively the mare stepped behind him, each movement easy and graceful.

“Good,” Kiaia called out from where she was watching in the middle of the exercise yard, “You have a gentle but firm hand, Spirit will respond well to that.”

Walking over she removed the short lead rope from the halter and replaced it with a much longer rope.

“This is your lunging rope,” she instructed. “I want you to take it in one hand the other hand is free to signal the animal. All the horses here have been taught to respond to a raised hand. The higher you raise it, the faster she will go. As you lower your hand, she will slow in response. To stop her you must drop your hand to your side and then immediately raise the hand which is holding the rope.”

“She knows to do this?” asked Aran wonderingly.

“Of course,” Kiaia said proudly, “All the Andurian Guard horses are highly trained. You need to lunge Spirit so she can recognise your hand on the rope, your voice and your movements. This is very important preliminary work with a horse. It bonds you to your mount.”

“So she runs in circles at my command?” Aran was disbelieving that a horse could be trained to run on command.

Kiaia nodded and handed him the long lunge rope, “See for yourself.”

Aran took the long rope and carefully raised his right hand. The mare, which had been standing quietly tossed her head and fixed him with a steady stare.

“She’s not moving,” Aran told the groom.

Kiaia took the rope and made some low clicking noises with her tongue and the mare tossed her head again and moved off into a smart walk. She allowed the horse to do a couple of circles then asked her to stop.

“Sometimes a horse just needs to be reminded,” she told Aran, “If you make those clicking noises that I did then she will move.”

Aran took back the rope and tried to imitate Kiaia’s noise. The mare shot him an unreadable look then moved off in a slow walk.

“Now lift your hand and ask her to walk quicker.”

Aran obediently lifted his hand and the mare increased her pace. Slowly he lifted it until the mare was in a slow canter.

“Now slow and stop her.”

Slowly he brought down his hand to his side and with the other hand lifted the rope high, immediately the mare stopped and tossed her head.

“Good,” Kiaia approved, “However that will do for today, come again tomorrow and repeat the same exercise for a while on both sides. Mid-week the Guard will be here for riding drill and you can ride her for the first time.”

Back at the tower Aran sat down and stretched wearily. Going to the table he poured himself some water and quickly swallowed it. Moments later, there was sharp knock at the door and Trevan stuck his head in.

“So how’s it all going?” the mage asked as he opened the door and came inside.

“Good, although very busy and exhausting,” Aran replied pulling off his boots and inspecting his reddened feet.

Trevan had taken up a position on Aran’s stool and watched while the young man stiffly pulled off his sweat soiled tunic and pulled on a clean one fresh from the laundress’s pile left behind. “I swear that this is the first time I’ve properly been able to sit down since first light this morning,” Aran complained tiredly.

Trevan smiled in sympathy, "I am certain you'll get used to it but come here, I'll do this only once for you. The rest of the time you'll have to find someone to massage it or soak it out yourself." Aran stood up and walked over to the old mage. Trevan put his hands over Aran's sore and aching arm and shoulder, immediately the dull ache and stiffness melted away and his arm felt was strong and as fresh as if it had never been used.

Aran quirked a wry eyebrow, "That's a useful talent...what a pity I don't have the Healmage Ability as well."

Trevan shook his head, "It wouldn't do you any good if you did," he replied wryly. "Hands-on healing like I just did can only be administered by another Healmage. I certainly couldn't relieve myself in that way."

Aran was amazed, "Really? You can heal others but not yourself. So what happens if you fall seriously ill?"

Trevan smiled sourly, "I fortify myself with as many healing herbal concoctions as I can swallow, and find a Healmage as soon as my old joints allow me. If I can't find anyone and the condition is serious, I die like anyone else."

Aran shook his head at that and returned to sitting down on the bed.

"So Trevan, when do you intend on quitting this place?" Aran asked whilst wiggling his tired toes.

"Day after tomorrow...if the weather is favourable," Trevan replied, "I expect to be gone a month. By the time I return you will be advanced in your training and will be ready to learn more of the aids to concentration and some of the lesser uses of the power."

"If I last that long," Aran confided ruefully. "If all the days are as exhausting as today I will be long in my grave before you return."

Trevan laughed at that, "Nonsense, you are an able and fit young man. However be certain to eat well, drink plenty of water and keep early hours. These first few days will be the worst. After that your body will become accustomed to the rigours of training and will help, not hinder you."

Aran pulled his legs wearily onto the bed and stretched, yawning tiredly, "I might get a little shut-eye Trevan. Can we postpone our tour of the internal Keep until tomorrow afternoon?"

The old mage nodded and stood up, "Certainly, I will use the time today to speak with Delana about your religious tuition. I am certain her lessons can wait until next week when you are less weary and have settled into the Guard routine."

Aran turned over onto his side and groaned, "Church...by Andur I had forgotten."

*

"Arantur"

The knock and call was repeated again, only louder.

"Whassup..." Aran sprang to his feet, muzzy headed from the afternoon nap.

"It is Darven, Arantur," the voice said on the other side of the door, "I have come to see your dagger."

Aran shook his head and habitually pulled his fingers through his hair, "Aye Wolf Leader. Wait whilst I open the door..."

Aran stumbled to the door and pulled it open.

Darven grinned when he saw his newest recruit, "You've been asleep?"

Aran nodded a little sheepishly, "That training knocked me completely out."

The other walked in, "You'll get used to it. It is after all only your first day with the Guard." He looked around, "Nice quarters, although I haven't quite worked out why Morel didn't bunk you in with the rest of us."

Aran sat down on the bed and indicated that Darven should take the stool. "I guess it is because I'm not really destined to be in the Guard," Aran replied quietly.

Darven's dark eyebrows winged up, "I don't understand why not. You seem to have a natural aptitude with the sword."

"That's the very reason," Aran sighed. "Morel knows. Ban knows, and I guess that since you are to be my company leader you ought to know too."

Darven sat forward, deeply interested, "What is it that I should know?"

Aran sighed again, wondering again how many more people he had to relate his story to.

"Wolf Leader, I have been sent from Glaive on the command of Archmage Maran. I was Scanned, and have the Warriormage Ability, so I have been sent here to train with the Guards."

Darven's eyebrow lifted again, seemingly unsurprised, "Warriormage eh? That may certainly account for your quickness today. So how long are you to stay at the Keep?"

Aran shrugged, "As long as it takes for me to learn weaponscraft and swordskill."

The Wolf Leader critically judged the young man opposite him, "I'd say three months if you learn as quickly as you did today. Most recruits, new to the Guards have a minimum of eighteen months here before I'd judge them fit to go into battle." He smiled, "Mind you true swordmastery is achieved only after years of training, battles and discipline, not something that comes easily after only a matter of weeks."

Aran gazed across at the dark haired young man, "So how long have you been in the Guard. I mean you seem around my age."

Darven studied his fingernails, "I'm twenty-one and I've been with the Guards since my fourteenth birthday."

Aran quickly added up the years, "Seven years! Have all the Guards been here that long?"

Darven nodded, "Aye, most have been here longer; I have been Wolf Leader now for ten months. I am the youngest Guard yet to wear that title."

Aran stared at the Wolf Leader with new eyes, "You must be good."

Darven smiled wryly, "They reckon me so...although I admit that some days I am as hopeless as a new recruit."

Aran smoothed his hair back into some semblance of order, "So where are you originally from?"

Darven stretched his hard muscled legs out from the stool, "Eastling."

Aran mentally recalled his map of the province, "that is our most remote northern town. What's it like?"

Darven grimaced, "Small, provincial, we live and breathe horses up there for we are the major trading centre for the plainsmen."

"So I guess you are a good horseman too?" Aran asked ruefully.

Darven nodded, "I have been riding horses since I was old enough to sit a saddle."

Aran smiled wryly, "Is there nothing you cannot do?"

The eyebrow quirked up again, "Plenty, I have no Ability. I am a hopeless scholar. I am happiest only in the saddle or with a sword in my hand." He gazed meaningfully at Aran's

book which had been left partly open and the place marked with a strip of leather, “You read, Arantur?” he asked.

Aran nodded, “And I write, although I am a poor mathematician.”

He grinned, “Please call me Aran, everyone else does...”

Darven glanced across at the other, then studied his fingernails again, “I am illiterate. It is a failing for being Wolf Leader I should at least have my letters.” He looked up at Aran, “You are a scholar Aran. You have the mage Ability...can you teach me to read?”

Aran laughed at that, “I am no teacher Darven...” then he noticed the Wolf Leader’s crestfallen face, “However I can try to tell you what I know, which is little compared to a true scribe or cleric.” Darven’s face lit up, “If I am to be a good Company Leader I should know how to read and write. I would be much obliged to you if you could pass onto me these skills.”

Aran nodded finally, “Very well Darven, be here at four bells every afternoon and I will teach you.”

The Guard smiled in genuine friendship, “Now let’s take a look at your dagger...”

*

Aran was hard at training the following morning when Trevan appeared suddenly out of the ranks of drilling men. Darven noticed too, and gestured to Aran that they should stop their routine. Seeing that the mage wanted to speak to Aran, Darven indicated that he would leave them alone, and walked over to supervise some others from Wolf Company.

“How’s the shoulder?” Trevan asked.

“Good...no stiffness, it’s handling the work better today”

Trevan nodded, “Good. Every day will be an improvement.” He fell quiet then drew the young man over to one side, “I’ve decided to leave immediately,” he said quietly. “I think that the weather may be soon changing and I really ought to get to Dawnfast before the road becomes impassable.”

Aran stared up at the cloudless blue sky, “Looks fine to me.”

Trevan shook his head, “I know this area. Take my word on it Arantur, it will change. Anyway I came to say goodbye.”

Aran pushed back his helmet, “Can I help you with your gear?”

Trevan shook his head again, “No...I’ve a horse already saddled and waiting for me.”

Aran eyed the elderly mage, “Are you sure you’ll be all right? I mean you’re not a young man. What if something happens on the road?”

The mage smiled kindly, “Thank-you for your concern Arantur, however I know this part of the province better than most...I shall be all right.” His eyes twinkled, “However the Archmage would have my hide if something happened to you. Be careful here lad, make sure you don’t hurt yourself with all these weapons and that you don’t fall off your horse.”

Aran grinned, “I’ll be fine. Besides, I’ve made a friend.”

Trevan looked up at that, “Who?”

Aran gestured to the Wolf Leader drilling some other young men.

“My Company Leader Darven...we seem to get on well.”

Trevan stared at the other young man, “He seems sensible. He’s got a lot of responsibility for such a young age.”

Aran nodded, “He’s a good soldier, and I like him.”

Trevan nodded, securing the clasp of his travelling cloak, "I've spoken with Delana...she will see you sometime next week about your religious instruction." He smiled, "She was quite upset that you were so unfamiliar with the Goddess."

Aran sighed in resignation, "Just as long as she sees me in the afternoons...my mornings are busy now."

Trevan clasped him warmly on the shoulder, "Your days will fly by here at the Keep. I'll be back before you have realised that I have gone."

Aran gave his friend a quick hug and pulled away, "I shall miss you! Ride a safe road Trevan."

"May the Goddess and Andur's name protect you, Arantur," Trevan replied formally.

They clasped hands one more time then Aran watched the old mage leave the training yard.

"So the mage is off on his travels again?" Darven had rejoined his student.

Aran nodded, "For a month, then he'll be back again."

"Ride a safe road, mage," Darven echoed the ancient farewell. "May your horse never stumble, may the skies favour your journey, and may the grass be forever bountiful under your feet."

Aran was surprised, "Is that some kind of blessing?"

Darven smiled gently, "Aye...it is the blessing of the plainsmen." He turned back to Aran, "Come on, let's get back to training." Aran nodded and readjusted his helmet, "Fine...same progressions again Darven?"

The Wolf Leader bobbed his head, "Remember to centre your balance. You were a little off in that last set..." Aran and Darven resumed their interrupted drill.

*

And so the late summer days few past in a routine of drilling, horse work and afternoons at leisure with the Guards. Most evenings Darven came over to Aran's room to continue his lessons in reading and writing, and proved to be an apt pupil, showing a keenness of mind which had already been recognised with his early elevation within the Guards. Aran and Darven formed an easy companionship, being of similar age and temperament. Darven did not seem to have the spark of Ability in him, but he made up for this loss with a quick mind, eye and hand. Aran too was already showing flair and a high degree of competence in the Guard training, and Darven had instinctively moved him onto more advanced drills and routines. Although Aran may have been a poor hunter at Leigh, he was displaying quick mastery of the sword, and an uncommon degree of battle sense in the one-on-ones against Darven, and the others in the Wolf Company.

"I am disappointed that you are not to be in the Guard," Darven lamented yet again as he and Aran took a breather from a series of mock tourneys. "The Guards rarely get someone of your calibre as a recruit. I know that you have the Warriormage Ability, but I think it is unfair that Glaive gets the benefit of our training and your Ability."

Aran pushed back the helmet and wiped the light rain from his face. "The Guards may yet have me," he replied. "I don't know the Archmage's mind on this, however I do know that there is something I will have to do for him in the future, but once that is complete my life may yet be my own. I am obliged to go back to Master Cody to complete my apprenticeship but after that I might decide to return and join the Guards."

Darven looked up in quiet pleasure, "You would consider doing that?"

Aran nodded, "Aye, of course...but it may be a number of years away."

Darven laughed, "By then my friend, I will have hopefully persuaded Kiaia that I am the only one for her...and the Goddess will have blessed us with an entire tribe of children to hold her to me."

Aran shook his head at his friend's one-sided infatuation with the head groom. "Keep hoping Darven that one day she may come round," Aran laughed. "In the meantime she still makes passes at all the Guardsmen." Aran grinned, "She obviously believes that variety is the spice of life."

The Wolf Leader groaned in dismay, "I wish I knew what fault it was of mine that keeps her away. I mean, barring you Aran, she has kept company with all the Guards. Even ancient Tordek and mad Sen," he sighed melodramatically, "And I am pointedly ignored."

Aran regarded his friend, "You are not an unhandsome man Darven. There would be many women in Leigh who would take pride and pleasure in walking out with you. Perhaps the real reason why Kiaia is avoiding you is because she is attracted to you, and is afraid of the depths of her feelings."

Darven, immersed in his own troubles was not listening. "...I mean Aran have I insulted her in some way? Excepting a word or two when we are horse training, she does not even speak to me?" Darven was genuinely puzzled.

"Have you tried speaking with her?" Aran asked, hoping to get to the bottom of his friend's distress.

The dark-haired Guardsman shrugged expressively, "What would I say? What have we in common?"

Aran shook his head at the blindness of love. "Horses, Darven! She is head groom; you are from Eastling...have you told her where you are from?"

The other shook his head, "The topic's never come up."

Aran jammed his helmet back on again. "Then bring it up! You both love horses, make that your common ground."

Darven sighed, "I will try...however I wish I was you, for you seem to have no problem talking with her."

Aran grinned, "Because I am not attracted to her you dolt," he laughed, "As far as I am concerned she is like a sister to me."

Darven looked up and a smile curled his lips, "I certainly do not want her to be my sister."

Hefting his sword, Aran nodded to the Wolf Leader, "And I would guess that she would not want that either. Now, can we return to the training?"

Darven sighed and nodded, almost immediately the drizzle which had eased a little, started up again. Looking up, Aran eyed the lowering clouds and wondered, not for the last time, when this spate of wet weather would pass.

*

"So how do you perceive the Goddess?" asked the small, elderly Priestess in the Keep's chapel.

Aran, sitting down on the hard bench squirmed a little at her probing, and wished that he was back down in the barracks relaxing with the other Guards.

"Do you see her as a mother figure, a sister, or perhaps as a wife?" The Priestess insisted, her light green eyes sharp as she gazed down at her uncomfortable pupil.

Aran sighed, “I really don’t think of her at all,” he admitted finally. “I mean I’ve just turned twenty and in all my life I’ve had no cause to think of religion.” He looked up at the Priestess and met her frosty green eyes steadily. “So what exactly is the Goddess, and why a Goddess and not a God?”

The Priestess Delana sat back and gave Aran an unreadable look. “The Goddess is everyone, everything...she is our mother, she gives us the breath of life and as she gifts life, so does she offer the caress of death when life becomes unbearable. She is earth and sky, her existence is evident in the very being of the cosmos, the first stirrings of life within the womb, the reality of the power evident in the land and in you.” She returned his gaze levelly, “The Goddess alone created life. She brought this world and the cosmos into being. There was no God to add his seed for the Goddess is both the male and female in the universe, the mother and the father, the giver and the sustainer of life—that, young Arantur is the Goddess. Now I ask you again. How do you perceive the Aspect of the Goddess?”

Aran habitually pulled a callused hand through his long dark blond hair, and gazed at the peeling, religious murals on the plastered walls of the chapel.

“The Goddess,” he mused aloud, “I cannot think of her as a mother, for I never knew my mother and although my foster-mother loved me, I was never her blood-child. Neither am I married, so I cannot in truth think of the Goddess in that way. My sister died when young, yet I know her and have conversed with her when she comes to me as a spirit. I feel kinship and closeness with my sister’s spirit even though we are separated by years and death.”

He looked up at the Priestess, candour clearly written in his eyes, “If I was to think of the Goddess I would think of her as a sister, sharing blood and kinship, linked by life and power.”

Delana stared at the young man opposite her and nodded, “In truth Arantur, the Goddess is different to each and every one of us. Only through personal thought and meditation will the guise of the Goddess be revealed and her preordained lifepath for us made clear.”

“So there is no free-will?” asked Aran thinking over the events that had brought him to the Keep.

She shook her head, “Think of your lifepath as a road with many forks. The Goddess alone knows the outcome of each fork, each decision. It is up to you however to make the right and proper decision at each turning. The Goddess cannot make those decisions for you.” She frowned, “Although unfortunately there are many poor souls who rely only on blind faith in the Goddess to steer them through the many turnings.” She shook her greying head at that, “The Goddess gifted us with life. She also gifted us with a mind to make decisions. However it is up to us to make certain our decisions are the right, proper and correct ones for not only our health and happiness, but the best for all people as well.” She stared deeply at Aran, “In your life, how many decisions have you made that were for selfish reasons alone...and how many were made to make others happy, but you less so.”

Aran opened his mouth as if to speak, but Delana motioned him quiet again.

“No, I do not want to know those answers. Those questions can only be answered in the silence of your heart. However know only this. If you have ever made in the past, or may make in the future a wholly unselfish decision about a lifepath—then we believe that later on that lifepath will in the end benefit you. Such unselfish decisions are known as a life lived in

the Goddess. An unselfish life will have its own just rewards. The Goddess is never stinting in her favours to those who love her and live her way. Do you understand Arantur?"

Aran nodded, more than a little bemused.

She nodded, "Good then take these scrolls with you. They are the words of some of the earliest Priestesses who lived long ago during the times of the Archaic High Kings. Their words may help you to understand and bring some clarity into your mind."

Aran silently took the scrolls, "I may go now?"

Delana nodded and stood, "Come again next week. I will want to know what you understand of those scrolls and how you believe it relates to you."

Aran stood and inclined his head, "Until next week, revered Priestess."

Delana's eyes twinkled, "Until next week, Arantur of Leigh."

*

"So what are these rooms?"

Aran and Darven had paused outside a series of locked rooms on the third floor of the massive internal Keep. It had taken several days to do so, but at last the Guard had been given a rest day by their acting Captain and Darven was showing Aran the parts of the internal Keep had he had not already seen.

"Oh, it's the throne room and the royal rooms," Darven answered.

"Why are they locked?" Aran asked curiously, "I mean they ought to be very interesting."

Darven nodded, "I believe they are...however I've not seen inside. They have been locked since Sen went mad in there, long before I arrived."

Aran remembered the tall, blond bearded Guard whom everyone referred to as Mad Sen. "You've never told me why everyone calls Sen mad? I mean he seems sane enough... a little quiet and distant maybe, but he is one of the best fighters in the Guard." Aran replied.

"Aye, but he is mad indeed," Darven pulled Aran to one side and confided in a low voice, "He is convinced that he is the rightful heir of the Andurian line."

Aran drew back in surprise, "That's impossible! I mean the Andurian line died out hundreds of years ago."

Darven shook his head in sadness, "Aye, so they did, but Sen is convinced he is of that line and nothing can dissuade him of it." He sighed, "The pity of it is that the Guards would have kicked him out years ago but he is one of the best fighters in its ranks and good fighters are rare and must be cherished."

Aran stared at the tall wooden doors, "So what did he do in there?"

Darven shrugged expressively, "I don't know exactly...the older Guards won't say, but I have heard stories that he was running amok brandishing his sword, standing on the thrones and yelling out that he was the king reborn. It was all hushed up and no one but the Guards and the Keep servants know, and they were sworn to secrecy."

Aran pondered the frailty of the mind, and shook his head sadly, "So is he alright now?"

Darven shrugged again, "He is of Bear Company and they don't talk about it, but I guess that he is resigned to the fact that he won't ever be believed."

Aran was silent, thinking about this then he turned to his friend. "I am not saying that I believe him, but what if he is right Darven? What if he is of the Andurian line? Not a direct-line descendant, but still an heir perhaps? Ought the mages be told...then we would have a king again."

Darven shook his head, "It's impossible. If there ever was an Andurian heir then the mages would have known and he or she would have been enthroned years ago. No Aran the man is mad, he may be a talented soldier but he is as mad as they come."

*

Over three weeks had passed at the Keep and Aran felt himself fully enmeshed in the activities of the Guard. Training with them and learning from Darven the secrets of weaponry had given Aran a fine knowledge of warcraft, and he felt relaxed and happy in the training sessions. Darven had been quietly amazed at Aran's Ability. He knew of course that the younger man had the Warriormage Ability, but to see it daily demonstrated was something that he could never have believed, had he not seen it with his own eyes. Like Aran's knack with metals, he seemed to become one with the weapon, and dance and flow through the progressions, avoidances and blocks as if he had been learning since the day he was born. He easily bested other, more experienced members of the Guard in one-on-one combats, his skills only lacking against the highly trained Company Leaders, and Morel the Acting-Captain of the Guard.

"Given only a little more time, Aran," exclaimed Morel in exhaustion after one particularly hard bout, "You will be besting us too! How I wish that we had more Warriormages in our ranks, we would be the most formidable Guard ever to stand in Andur's Keep."

Aran stood back and removed his helmet to wipe the perspiration from his brow. "Yet I have not defeated you, Darven and Caldor. I have a while to go Acting-Captain. I must learn and train more." Aran paused, trying to explain how he felt. "I know that I am already learning the most difficult of the progressions. That Darven tells me that he has little more that he can teach me...yet I feel there is a great emptiness inside me which must be filled."

Morel shook his head, "It is true, there is little more we can teach you. Perhaps when Captain Taran arrives back he will take you under his tutorage. He is the most experienced fighter here."

Aran stared south, "They are late in arriving...I hope they have not come to grief on the road."

Morel shook his head, "No, I assume they are delayed in the southern cities. Captain Taran probably waited until that wet weather ended. You came here by sea and have not seen the road that leads to the Keep. In the past when the High Kings ruled here the road was broad and well-kept, however there are now entire sections of the road which become impassable in bad weather."

"Why has the Council not done anything about it?" Aran asked curiously.

The Acting-Captain frowned, "We in Andur's Keep are at best ignored, and at the worst hated by those who govern the fat southern cities. They believe we contribute nothing to the province but live off the fat of their endeavours." Morel lowered his voice, "It is not widely known, but I believe that a number of years ago the Council was bent on razing Andur's Keep with the Guard to be broken and assimilated into the southern city Legion garrisons."

Aran's face paled, "What stopped them?"

Morel paused, then continued, "The mages got wind of it and sent a delegation to the Council. I believe the Council halls shook with their anger...the issue was never raised again."

Aran chewed his bottom lip, “How did they dare in the first place? I mean this Keep has been standing since the times of the Archaic High Kings.”

Morel frowned and inspected his sword for minute imperfections, “The Council complains that the Keep and Guard are expensive to keep and maintain. That they lose thousands from the treasury every year in a wasted enterprise of maintaining a Keep and Guard for a line of dead kings.” He looked up, “What they fail to mention is that Glaive pays the bulk of the Keep’s running costs and that the Guard, who are the elite of the province’s soldiers, would be at the vanguard against any attack by enemies. They hate to admit it, but they fear the Serat’s return and thus need the Guard. That is why we are tolerated and not disbanded. Also they go in fear of the wrath of Glaive.”

Aran remembered the temper of Archmage Maran and nodded, “If I was the Council I would certainly walk quietly around the mages. It would be suicidal to dare their anger.”

Morel inclined his head, silently agreeing “Yet they mutter against us and Glaive, but nothing is said openly.” He shook his head in weary bafflement, “I think they hope that if they ignore it, the Keep will fall down of its own accord. That is why nothing has been done about the old section.”

Aran gazed at the heavy, stout walls rising about him, “They can’t be serious, for this place would take an eternity to fall down.”

Morel shook his head, “You are wrong. Lead lined roofs crack and let in water. Shingles are lost in high winds and storms, and timbers rot, imperiling the very structure of the buildings.” He smiled sadly, “If we didn’t maintain the new section it would quickly be as tumbledown as the old.” He shook his head again, “Glaive sends us as much money as they can afford, but it all goes into the salaries of the Guard and workers here. The little that is left over keeps this place in one piece. There is nothing remaining to renovate or rebuild the old section.”

Aran stared at the ancient Keep about him, “It is a shame. This place would be magnificent if it was fully rebuilt.”

*

It was Aran’s first afternoon of guard duty, and so he stood a little self-consciously in his armour by the base of the Keep gatehouse. The other Guardsmen who had been selected for this routine duty were also fully armoured-up in accordance with tradition, and wore a similar collection of chain-mail and plate armour. Most were at ease and standing talking idly with one another, whilst those who had stood the first watch were in the gatehouse itself playing their endless games of dice.

Aran and a member of Bear Company whose name he had momentarily forgotten were standing the third watch which was the hour between third and fourth bells. Aran stared out at the plateau beyond the walls of the Keep. The sky was intensely blue, the sun only now starting its descent towards the horizon. He gazed at the low bushes and trees planted near the Keep. Already the leaves on the low growing trees were starting to change colour, a sure sign that autumn was close on summer’s heels.

It was now well over a month since he had arrived at the Keep, and every day he was expecting to see Trevan appear as suddenly as he had left. Aran had missed the elderly mage more than he thought possible, and was looking forward to resuming his magecraft lessons. He felt certain that further mage training would take his already advanced swordskills to beyond what the Guards could teach him. Inwardly he lamented the loss of the ancient

Warriormages and Metalmages, who could have taken him into their ranks, and taught him their ancient, lost secrets. Now he could only hope to learn from Trevan, and then hopefully discover the rest of the knowledge himself. Many times over the past weeks he had pondered what Archmage Maran had said—that it was his destiny to reforge the King’s Sword anew. Aran knew now that he had a better understanding of swords, and felt certain that under the guidance of one of the swordsmiths of Sentinal, he could craft one himself.

“All alert! Riders approach.” The keen eyes of the other Guardsman had spotted the tell-tale movement of dust in the distance and had called out the age-old alert to those who were also on duty.

Aran peered into the distance and could see nothing. Finally, after straining his eyes in the late afternoon light, he caught sight of riders and the dust their mounts stirred up.

“Who is it?” asked another Guardsman walking out of the gatehouse to join them.

The member of Bear Company squinted and shook his head, “They are too far away...however I’d hazard a guess that it is Captain Taran and Lady Alissa returning, although it seems to be a much bigger company than just two.”

Aran’s heart leapt at the mention of Alissa’s name.

The word soon spread that there was a company en-route to the Keep and within minutes most of the Guard had gathered by the gatehouse.

Morel had appeared with the others and seemed unfazed by the imminent arrival of his commanding officer. “Come Guards,” he called out, “Quickly form into ranks...if it is Captain Taran he will want to see order here, not you lot milling around like brainless sheep.” A few Guardsmen laughed at that but Aran was quick to note that the soldiers almost immediately paid heed and formed themselves into ranks. Aran remembered that he had been told that the Guards went in fear of their Captain, but he doubted that it was an unhappy fear, for most of them were openly smiling, happy that their leader was at last returning.

After a long look at the approaching horsemen, the keen-eyed Guardsman quickly confirmed his earlier prediction, and added also that the Captain was riding with several civilians, most of whom seemed to be mages.

Aran’s eyebrows lifted at that piece of news. He had long suspected that the problems on the Thakurian border were escalating, and it seemed obvious that some of the senior mages had left Glaive to converse with the Council. Perhaps the Council had ordered the Guard to deal with the Thakurian incursions. That would certainly explain the mages presence at the ancient fortress, he thought to himself.

As the riders drew nearer Aran finally spotted Captain Taran. He was bareheaded but dressed openly now in his mail hauberk and plate leggings. At his side rode a mage bundled up in a heavy white cloak and robes. The man was still a distance away, but it seemed immediately obvious to Aran that Archmage Maran himself was riding to Andur’s Keep.

Aran turned and hissed under his breath to the Wolf Leader. “Don’t look now Darven...but I think one of the riders is the Archmage.”

Darven’s normally serene face whitened beneath his tan, and he spun away to hurriedly confer with the Acting-Captain and Bear Leader Caldor.

The other Guardsman had sharp ears as well as long-sight and whispered across from the other side of the Keep entrance, “The Archmage? Are you sure?”

Aran nodded quickly, his eye never leaving the approaching riders, “Aye...I’d bet my life on it. It seems certain to be Archmage Maran and he is in company with eight, no nine other mages from Glaive.” Aran narrowed his eyes against the late afternoon sunlight. “Also there seems to be women and civilians riding with them.”

The Guardsman took Aran’s lead and peered into the distance, “I recognise a midnight black mare...” he glanced across and grinned at Aran, “...Lady Alissa’s preferred mount.”

Aran smiled to himself and his eyes brightened at the thought of seeing Alissa again soon.

It was not long before the large company rode up to the Keep and through the open gates. Aran stood at attention, his back up against the weathered grey stone walls of the gatehouse and saluted as the company filed past. He immediately spotted Captain Taran and the Archmage riding together, heads bent close in conversation. Immediately behind them rode the mages, all identically garbed in the grey robes of Glaive. Aran searched their ranks but could not see Trevan, obviously he was still returning from the north. As the mages rode past, he could from their mantles, make out three representatives from each of the disciplines present. With a start, he recognised High Earthmage Drayden amongst them, obviously he had returned from his mission far to the west. Behind the mages rode two women, both seemed young and dressed in similar travelling cloaks and clothes. Aran stared hard at the rider of the black mare, and was rewarded with a glimpse of a golden braid peeping out from the hood of the cloak. Aran smiled happily, Andur’s Keep’s favourite daughter had finally returned home. Behind the women were half a dozen civilians clad in heavy cloaks and gowns. All wore black caps and serious expressions on their faces.

“We are honoured,” whispered Darven sarcastically behind him. “What I wonder in Andur’s name has pried our exalted Councillors out from their inner sanctum at Haulgard to grace us with their presence.”

Aran did a double take and took another long look at that group of soberly dressed men and women.

“They are Councillors?” he asked in some amazement.

“Oh aye,” Darven whispered, “The mages must have ensorcelled them to drag them all the way out to the Keep. The last time a Councillor passed under these walls was for the funerals of the murdered Andurian line. There must be evil tidings indeed from the border to get both them and the mages together under the one roof and the Keep’s roof at that.”

Acting-Captain Morel joined them as the last of the company rode in through the Keep’s gate.

“Well lads,” he said cheerfully “Say goodbye to our quiet, uneventful life. I deem that there are great events happening in the province and my guess is that the Guards will be in the thick of it.”

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Chapter 8—The Promise

Aran's stint of guard duty finished promptly in the darkness of six bells, and he hurried back with the others to divest himself of his armour and to hopefully find Alissa. He hadn't got far across the training yard to the Keep when he noticed Darven waving at him. Aran changed direction and walked across to his friend who seemed very relieved to see him.

"Aran, I'm glad I found you so soon. I've been told that I am to present you to Captain Taran immediately in the Great Hall of the Keep," Darven hurriedly informed him.

Aran glanced down at his armour, "What, in all this? I've just come off guard duty."

Darven nodded, "As is...I don't want to keep him waiting."

Aran shrugged, "Very well."

Quickly the two men set off across the yard and up the stone stairs of the internal Keep. The Great Hall took up most of the second level of the Keep, and Aran climbed the narrow spiralling stairs awkwardly in his steel armour.

"Have you any idea why the mages and Councillors are here?" asked Aran as they climbed.

Darven shook his head, "No, no-one has said, although I guess it has something to do with the troubles on the border."

"It must be getting worse," agreed Aran, "For the Archmage to have taken the trouble of coming himself."

"Aye," nodded Darven, "They must be very close to mobilising the provincial army. I would assume that the Guards will be spearheading any attack." He stopped in front of two large oaken doors, from within could be heard the sounds of voices, "Here is the hall, I'll take you in myself."

Aran listened to the voices inside. "Is this usual for the Guards? I mean to introduce a new recruit at Hall?"

"Aye, we couldn't do it any earlier because Captain Taran has been away. However it seems that you will have an audience...the rest of the company that arrived today is gathered within as well," Darven informed him cheerfully.

Aran sighed heavily.

"Now take off your helmet and arming cap," Darven told him, "And push back the mail coif off your head so it sits on the back of your neck."

Aran did as instructed whilst also taking the opportunity to tidy his hair and straighten his braids.

"Are you ready?" Darven asked him finally.

Aran nodded.

"Then we'll go in."

The Wolf Leader swung open the doors and walked into the hall with Aran only a step behind. Aran gazing around saw that the previously empty hall now comprised a scattering of long trestle tables and bench seats, which were partially occupied by the group who had ridden in earlier. The head table faced the doors, and at it were seated the Archmage, Captain Taran and his daughter, Deputy Captain Morel and three of the highest ranked mages, plus several of the dark cloaked Councillors from Haulgard. Darven and Aran walked directly to the head table and saluted.

“Arantur of Leigh, of Wolf Company. Our newest recruit, Captain Taran,” Darven announced.

Captain Taran met his eyes and Alissa, who had been speaking to one of the mages seated on her right suddenly looked and gave him a brilliant smile in welcome. The Captain stood up, an imposing man in his armour.

“Welcome to the Guards Arantur. I hear good news about your training here from Deputy Captain Morel.”

Aran inclined his head respectfully, “Thank you Captain Taran, I am pleased to be in the Guards.”

“I understand from Archmage Maran here that you have been Scanned as a Metalmage and Warriormage. Do you feel that the Guard training has helped you to improve your Abilities?” the commander asked seriously.

Aran nodded, “Yes Sir.”

“Good.” Captain Taran studied the younger man for a moment. “You do that armour justice Guardsman Arantur,” he mused, “It seems made for you.” The Captain turned to Darven, “Wolf Leader Darven, from what I have heard from Morel is that Guardsman Arantur is a credit to your training. Congratulations young man.”

Darven smiled genially, “Thank you Captain, however Arantur’s natural talent has taken him most of the way. Rarely have I seen a man with so great natural ability, and also so well suited to the military life.”

Taran nodded, and Aran saw him exchange a telling look with the Archmage.

Captain Taran sat down and sipped at the cider in front of him, “You may go now Darven. However I believe that Archmage Maran wishes to have a few private words with Arantur.” Darven nodded and spun away, leaving Arantur standing alone in front of the high table. The Archmage stood and moved out from behind the table. The other mages clustered behind him awaiting his orders. He caught Aran’s eye and motioned him over to join them. Aran nodded and walked over to the Archmage’s group.

“So how is our young Warriormage?” asked the Archmage.

Aran knelt, “Well Lord.”

The Archmage took in the young man kneeling before him “Aye, you have become as tanned as a sailor, and as tall and as strong as a young oak. I believe that life here suits you well.”

Aran nodded in agreement.

“How is your magepower young man? Has Mage Trevan taught you the aids to concentration yet?”

“Aye Lord,” Aran replied, “I have completed the first seven simple and complex movements and Trevan is in the process of teaching me the seven simple and complex chants.”

The Archmage nodded, “I have not seen Trevan since we arrived, and I must assume that he is still visiting the northern villages and towns in his capacity as a Healer?”

Aran nodded in agreement, “Lord, he is expected back any day now.”

“Good,” he laid his hand briefly on Aran’s mailed shoulder. “You truly look like a Warriormage now. Long, long ago when I was a child I used to read about the ancient Warriormages. They were described as men who looked like battlegods fallen from the sky.

You Arantur are the first Warriormage to walk the province in hundreds of years. You certainly have the look of those men about you.”

“I feel that I am walking the right lifepath, Lord Archmage,” he answered gravely.

“Aye...” the Archmage nodded, “Life here at the Keep seems to suit you. I was correct in thinking that you were one who was never meant for Glaive,” he replied wryly. He looked up and noticed Alissa hovering nearby, “However here is another who also claims an acquaintance with you.” He smiled, “I understand that she would like to speak with you. Goodnight young Warriormage, I will speak with you again soon.”

Aran nodded and waited until the Archmage had left before he stood up.

“Come,” Alissa whispered taking his hand, “Let’s go outside...I would hear of everything that has happened to you.”

Aran happily let himself be led out of the Great Hall by the slim, golden haired woman.

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“...so when we joined up with Archmage Maran on the road and he said that he had met you and sent you to the Keep to train with the Guards, well I almost fell off my horse in my surprise,” Alissa finished. “I mean I met you twice in Sentinal, liked you immediately, lamented that I’d never see you again, now here you are at my home...a Warriormage and a Guardsman.”

“You thought well of me?” Aran asked shyly, softly, as he sat with her in one of the more secluded window seats of the upper levels of the Keep.

Alissa ran her hand briefly across the mail links on his arm, “Truth to tell I couldn’t shift you from my thoughts Arantur of Leigh.”

She smiled up at him, and her eyes softened, her lips seeming to part in expectation of a kiss. Taking the hint Aran captured her hand and enfolded it within his own calloused grasp. A moment of expectant silence passed, and then Aran slowly pulled Alissa towards him and gently kissed her. The kiss was meant only to be light, gentle...then it hardened, deepened and Aran felt Alissa’s lips soften and yield under his...

Suddenly Aran felt the young woman stiffen and pull away. For a moment he felt a flicker of annoyance that she refused his advances, but then he noticed that her green eyes were shadowed and haunted. Leaning over he gently squeezed her hand, indicating that he understood her reluctance, and did not blame her for pulling away.

After a moment she too seemed take herself in hand, then she frowned and kicked the floor fretfully with her boot, “I am sorry Arantur,” she stated quietly, “As much as I would wish it otherwise, it now seems clear to me that we should only be friends.” She looked up and her gaze lingered regretfully upon his face, “Otherwise father will have my hide and you will be kicked out of the Guard so quickly you’ll think you flew.” She smiled at him sadly, “Father is very protective of me and I am not allowed to speak my mind on things until I turn twenty. Eight long weeks away,” she mourned her green eyes sombre.

“I will treasure and value our friendship Alissa,” Aran replied as gallantly as he could, whilst gently touching her face with his fingertips. “I truly thought of no other woman since we met that day in Sentinal. I too despaired of seeing you again.” He smiled crookedly, “I ought to be indebted to the Archmage for sending me here...otherwise I cannot think of any other way our lifepaths may have crossed.”

Alissa looked out through the narrow Keep window at the darkening sky, "I must return to the hall now, however I would like to speak with you again tomorrow. Can you meet me just before dusk in my garden? Do you know where it is?"

Aran nodded, "I do...but I'm going to bring Darven with me," he replied. "I know that you want me to be just a friend, but all the same I think it would be best if he came along as well. Then your father won't be able to complain that I have behaved improperly towards you."

Alissa nodded in agreement.

Thinking of Darven suddenly gave Aran a clever idea.

"Alissa, do you know Kiaia the head groom very well?"

The young woman frowned, "Yes she is one of my few female friends here...why?" she suddenly snapped.

Aran laughed and squeezed her hand, "Now you are jealous. Don't be for it is only I would like you to invite her along too. Darven has been pining after her for months now, and he is too shy to strike up a conversation."

Alissa flared, "I was not so jealous..." then smiled ruefully as she saw Aran's eyebrows quirk upwards in amusement. "Aye, I was jealous thinking that you two had been together," she admitted her face reddening, "For Kiaia is always the one to go for a handsome man. Darven, I would have never guessed it...he has always seemed so indifferent around her." She smiled again, a secret, hidden smile. "I will speak to Kiaia tomorrow morning. I will not tell her who also will be there, only that I would like to show her how my garden is growing."

Aran nodded, "I must go now. I need to get this armour back to the armoury and I am already late for dinner."

Alissa smiled and turned to walk back to the hall, "Until five bells tomorrow."

That night Aran lay sleepless in his bunk his mind reliving the events of the day. He was pleased by Alissa's reaction to his presence at the Keep, and he hoped one day Captain Taran might unbend enough to allow his treasured daughter some say in her lifepath. For the first time since he had left Leigh Aran felt happy with his situation, and was pleased by the Archmage's intuitive decision in sending him to the Keep.

"Now if only Master Cody was here," he mused sleepily to himself. "Then I would be well pleased, and would want for nothing at all."

Unfortunately he knew that Master Cody would never leave his forge, and his friends and family in Leigh. Belatedly Aran thought of Sed, and determined there and then to send a second letter to his foster family informing them of his changed circumstances. He had written a letter to Sed that first night at Glaive, and hoped that the Glaive couriers had successfully given the letter to his brother. Not that Sed would be able to read it, he thought with a grin. Doubtless the family had made the short pilgrimage to Cody's forge for the blacksmith to read them the contents of the note.

Aran closed his eyes and drifted off to sleep whilst listening to the drumming of the waves on the rocks far below.

*

The next morning all the Guard had gathered in the training yard to watch the first bout between Aran and Captain Taran. The Captain had not delayed in seeing how the young Warriormage was shaping-up; calling for Aran directly after the Guard had broken their fast.

“Right now, are you ready Guardsman Arantur?” asked Taran pulling on his articulated steel gauntlets.

Aran tightened the chinstrap of the steel nasal helm, and carefully adjusted the heavy folds of the mail hauberk. Finally he nodded at the Captain of the Guard opposite him.

“Excellent! I’d like to see exactly how good you are,” Taran smiled tightly.

“I will do my best sir,” replied Aran evenly, noticing suddenly that the Archmage and the other mages had appeared, and were watching from the doorway of the internal Keep.

For the next twenty minutes, Aran and Taran circled each other, exchanging lightning quick blows and feints, progressions and blocks, avoidances and turns. To the watchers around them they seemed equal in skill, trading blow for blow, dazzling in their mastery of sword and steps. At first it seemed that the experience of Taran was going to win the fight, but the youth and natural Ability of Aran was coming more and more to the fore as the fight progressed. Aran could see that his opponent was clearly tiring, and although his sword arm too felt as though it was made of lead, he executed a lightning fast turn and his sword edge clipped the crosspiece of the Captain’s long two handed blade, sending it spinning into the air, and finally landing with a clatter on the lowest step of the internal Keep. Taran stopped at the loss of his weapon, and he pushed up the visor of his closed-in helm displaying a face reddened with effort.

“Never would I have believed it possible...” he wheezed when he at last had breath to speak, “And this is only after a month of training.”

He took off his helm and arming-cap and let the cool late summer wind blow the heat from his face and neck. “By Andur lad,” he breathed, “I wish we had more Warriormages in the Guard. We would be invincible.”

Morel walked up and gave the Captain back his battered sword, “My very words Captain Taran. You see now why we think so highly of him.”

“Aye,” the Captain removed his gauntlets and turned to face the Archmage.

“You don’t have any more Warriormages hidden at Glaive do you?”

The Archmage smiled and shook his head.

“Damn! I could do with twenty more like him.”

The Archmage walked down the stairs to where Aran and the Captain were standing. “His Ability will take him much further than this Captain. In truth he is only a novice Warriormage. In the old days the ancient Warriormages were truly formidable fighters. No Guardsman now, or in the past could hope to match one, even a Warriormage new to his power.”

“That I well believe,” the other agreed, adding, “Then we must find more in the province...if one has come to light, then surely there must be more that are hidden and unknown to Glaive. Can you not send out mages to find them?”

Archmage smiled and shook his head, “Few, if any would be found, Captain Taran. For some reason the Warriormage Ability ran only in certain families. With the loss of the Warriormages at the time of the Serat invasion, entire branches of that particular tree withered and died. I am convinced that Aran may be the only one of his kind of his generation.”

Alissa had been off to one side watching the fight and listening to the conversation. “Then my lord Archmage he must be nurtured so he may grow to his full power,” she interrupted

gently, walking up to join them. "It is also important that his children must be likewise tended and nurtured, for the seed of Warriormageing to again grow in the province."

Captain Taran shot her a warning look, but Archmage Maran smiled at the young woman, "Ah Alissa, I remember you coming to Glaive as a young child. You were Scanned and were discovered to possess the Earthmageing Ability...is that correct?" Alissa nodded, her cheeks reddening as she realised how presumptuous she had been in interrupting.

"Do not worry child, I am not angry with you," he smiled as he gently took her hand. "Yet you are right in this matter. Arantur must be nurtured for he carries a great heritage within him. His children too will be vitally important for the future...I see that your Ability has made you understand this so clearly."

"She is always one for growing things," growled Taran, heartily relieved that his mercurial daughter had not offended the Archmage by her interruption. "Although she is still a child and has much to learn about behaviour amongst her elders."

Archmage Maran shook his head in mild reproof, "She is a woman grown Captain Taran. You see her too closely and fail to realise that she will want her own lifepath soon. Perhaps you ought to slacken the reins a little. Your daughter has a mature mind and will not disappoint you."

Alissa was blushing furiously at the turn of the conversation, and she glanced furtively at Aran who shot her a sympathetic look in return.

Taran sighed and mumbled something about the joys of fatherhood, then finally gave Aran an unreadable look. Aran pretended not to notice, concentrating only on removing his gauntlets and the nasal helm from his head.

*

"You're in love with Alissa aren't you?"

Darven had finally cornered Aran in the armoury directly after the fight.

Aran sighed, and sat down on the chest in which he usually stored his plate armour, "Is it so obvious?"

"To me, yes...but be careful. Captain Taran will not be pleased to see his daughter walking out with a Guardsman."

Aran bent over and shook the heavy folds of mail from him onto the floor. "I'm not really in the Guard," Aran replied defensively, "I'm a Warriormage...both you and I know that the Archmage is not going to let me stay a Guardsman. He hinted at that this morning." Aran looked up at his friend, "I'm certain he has his own plans for me...in fact I wouldn't be too far off the mark in thinking that it has something to do with me being the first Warriormage to appear in hundreds of years."

Darven pulled up another chest to sit on, "You're probably right. However I would still go easy with Alissa. Warriormage or not, Taran treats his daughter like a rare jewel and would be highly suspicious of any man taking an interest in her."

Aran bent down and unbuckled the plate armour from his legs, "Do not be concerned, for we have agreed already that we are only to be friends."

Darven nodded, "That is the sensible path. I could not fault that."

Aran massaged some blood back into his calf muscles and looked up, "I am seeing her this evening in her garden. I know Alissa is only to be my friend, but all the same would you come and be our chaperone?"

Darven frowned, "I don't know...aren't you two a little old for a chaperone?"

"Alissa is asking Kiaia," Aran said simply.

Darven's face brightened, "Then I will be there" he replied without hesitation.

*

Late afternoon shadows were lengthening over the Keep, when Aran and Darven made their way back through the maze of ruinous buildings to where Alissa kept her garden.

Nearing the courtyard, and beyond the wall, the two men could hear the low sound of women's voices.

Darven stopped abruptly with a worried frown, "I don't know if this is a good idea," he mumbled his face guarded.

Aran laughed at his friend's discomfiture and pushed him onwards, "If you don't do it now you'll never find the nerve. This is as good a time as any to introduce yourself properly."

Darven sighed and straightened his impeccably combed dark hair, "I guess so, although I am at a loss of what to say to her."

Aran groaned in frustration, "Horses, Darven! You have that at least in common."

They walked into the garden in search of the women, and found them almost immediately, both sitting deep in conversation by the central pool. Alissa looked up and smiled happily when she saw the two Guardsmen, however Kiaia had the look of a rabbit ready to bolt down a hole. Aran saw Alissa put a restraining arm on the other woman's arm, and say something to her low under her breath. As they drew nearer Alissa smiled in welcome.

"Ah, Guardsman Arantur, I see you have brought us a chaperone." She smiled and winked, "We must think alike for Lady Kiaia has also come at my request to be my chaperone."

Aran smiled at her dissembling, "Then perhaps we can all stay and talk together."

Kiaia stood up her face a mask of indecision, "If Wolf Leader Darven has come then I really ought to get back to the stables...I have duties to..."

Alissa pulled her unceremoniously back down onto the marble bench, "Nonsense Kiaia...we are all friends here. I'm certain we can chat together for a while." She glanced at Darven's bemused face, "That is if Wolf Leader Darven can spare some time from his own pressing duties."

"My time is yours ladies," he replied gallantly, bowing.

Alissa smiled again, "Come, let us not be so formal. There is room on this bench for all of us. Guardsman Arantur you may sit on my left, Wolf Leader Darven, perhaps you would like to sit next to Lady Kiaia, on her right."

Aran grinned at Alissa's lady-like ways, and waiting until he made sure Darven had seated himself next to Kiaia, happily sat down next to Alissa.

"So how goes Guardsman Arantur's training, Wolf Leader?" Alissa asked of Darven.

"Well, Lady Alissa," he replied gravely, "He is the quickest and most skillful recruit in the long history of the Guards. This I believe is due to his Warriormage Ability."

Alissa nodded, and glanced at Aran, "Aye, many have spoken of his rare mage talents." She paused for a moment, "Did you know that I also went to Glaive and was found to possess an Ability."

Darven nodded solemnly, "Aye, Aran has spoken of this to me in the past. I understand you have the Earthmage Ability."

She nodded, then turning smiled warmly at Aran, “Well Guardsman Arantur, you see the fruits of my labour and the extent of my work here about you. What do you think of my garden?”

Aran gazed about him at the flowers in full bloom, and the fruit trees heavy with fruit, “You are a fine gardener Lady Alissa, never have I seen so marvellous a place. Will you perhaps take me around and show me what you have planted,” he sighed, “I cannot see it very well from here.”

Alissa laughed, “Of course Guardsman Arantur...but what of our guests?”

Darven cleared his throat, “I am certain that Lady Kiaia would agree that we two can keep ourselves occupied whilst you take your walk.”

Aran glanced curiously at Kiaia. For a moment she looked like she was about to voice an objection, however finally she sighed and smiled. Perhaps she at last understood that her visit here was not as innocent as she first thought.

“Finally I can talk to you properly,” Alissa laughed as they walked out of earshot to the far end of the garden. “Kiaia was like a nervous rabbit when she first caught sight of you two. I had to spin a very fast yarn to keep her sitting there, else she would have been off and running back to the horses.”

Aran glanced at the couple sitting so stiffly on the bench, “I hope Kiaia gives Darven a fair chance. He’s a fine man and totally smitten with her.”

Alissa glanced back, “I cannot understand why she is not comfortable with him. I mean she’s been with all the other Guards. Darven is handsome certainly, but there are many in the Guard ranks who I believe are far better looking than him.”

Aran walked quietly beside the young woman, “I don’t know, perhaps his shyness will resolve itself this afternoon.”

Alissa took a few steps then stopped and looked at Aran’s sun darkened face, “You and I have never been shy with each other have we? I wonder why?”

Aran shrugged, “I felt comfortable with you from the first. It was almost as if I had known you all my life.”

“Almost as if we were brother and sister,” she remarked.

Aran eyed Alissa and remembered her soft mouth upon his, “I could never think of you as my sister,” he said wryly. “Perhaps in time I may be able to convince you of that fact...” he added, his grey eyes intent upon her face.

Alissa shook her head, scolding, “Shhh, until I am twenty I can only think of you as a friend, a brother.” She sighed, “I wish it were otherwise,” she lamented almost under her breath. After that exchange they walked slowly around the garden, not talking just enjoying each other’s company. Occasionally they would stop and Alissa would point out a certain herb or they would pause to admire a bed of bright summer flowers.

“Look Aran!” Alissa suddenly hissed, “They are holding hands...whoever would have thought it possible.”

Aran glanced furtively towards the marble seat, and saw that the other young couple sat close, heads bent in towards each other and engaged in low whispered conversation.

Alissa shook her head in disbelief, “To think that Kiaia was all set to run away...now look at her. Wolf Leader Darven must certainly have a persuasive tongue.”

Aran bent down to pick a single white rose. "I am glad. Perhaps Kiaia did not need much persuading after all." He stood up and gravely handed Alissa the flower, "A beautiful flower for a beautiful lady," he said as gallantly as he knew how.

Alissa coloured at that and dropped a light kiss on his cheek, "I thank you Warriormage." Aran touched his cheek and smiled in pleased surprise.

Alissa took his hand, "We ought to get back...if we separate them before they have had the chance to fully speak then they will be all the eager to meet again."

Aran laughed at that "Has anyone told you that you have a devious mind Alissa."

The young woman smiled, and squeezed his hand, "All females are born devious," she replied lightly. "It is the only way we can secure ourselves a mate."

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"She is as wonderful as I ever dreamed her to be."

The two Guardsmen had barely walked from the garden before Darven's enthusiasm burst out.

"Yes, you certainly did not let the grass grow under your feet," Aran commented dryly. "What in Andur's name did you say to convince her to change her mind about you in so short a time?"

Darven laughed happily his dark eyes shining, "As you suggested I talked of horses. I also told her I came from Eastling...but that did not move her. I was ready to give up when I decided to throw caution to the winds, and confessed that for months I had admired her, but did not have the courage until now to talk to her."

Aran stared at his friend in wonderment, "That was a risky move! What did she say to that?"

Darven replied with a quick grin, "She immediately gave me a delighted smile and confessed that she had felt the same way about me. That she had felt shy around me, and was waiting for me to make the first move." He shook his head in mock dismay, "To think that I had been torturing myself all this time thinking she did not care for me...in Andur's name Aran, sometimes I can be such an idiot."

Aran clapped his friend on the back, "Congratulations! So when will you see her again?"

Darven smiled happily at the dusk sky, "We are going riding together tomorrow afternoon." He turned to Aran in joy, "I believe I must be the happiest and most lucky man alive."

Aran laughed, "I believe you are too."

*

Aran had finished dinner and was spending a quiet evening in the barracks with the other Guards, for they had all gathered in the communal area around the fireplace. The men were standing talking quietly, or sitting comfortably on the stools and bench seats, stretching weary muscles and warming toes before the fire. Of the leaders only Darven and Caldor were present. Captain Taran and his deputy Morel were presumably still in conference with the mages and Councillors in the hall of the internal Keep, so the conversation was uninhibited in their absence.

Aran yawned, and began to think about heading off to bed, when the doors of the barracks swung open and Captain Taran and Guardsman Morel stepped inside. The conversation died at their entrance, and the Guards quickly stood in the presence of their leaders. Taran indicated that they should all sit and walked quickly to the fire to warm his hands against the

chill of the night. Gazing about him he seemed to reassure himself that all were present, and then he turned his back to the fire to face the combined company. “There will be no training tomorrow,” he said abruptly, “Archmage Maran would like to address the Guards. We have been asked to present ourselves in full armour in the great hall directly at ten bells.” He waited for the excited conversation to die down, “I understand that it has something to do with what is happening on the border.” He smiled suddenly, “It looks like we’ll soon be seeing action lads. So no sleeping in for I don’t want any latecomers.”

*

A little later Aran was just about to hop into his bunk bed when there was a low knock on the door. Pulling on his hosen and hastily lighting a candle he opened the door and peered out into the darkness.

“It’s just me, Aran,” called a low voice.

“Alissa, you’ll surely catch it from your father if he knows you’re here,” Aran warned her whilst snatching a tunic and throwing it over his bare chest.

Alissa walked into the light of the candle, “He’s deep in discussion with Morel and the Company Leaders. Can you spare a moment, I need to talk.”

Aran nodded, “Not here...let’s go up to the battlements. It’s private but not as compromising as my quarters.”

He saw her nod in agreement.

“So what’s this all about?” Aran asked pulling the heavy wool tunic closer about him against the night’s chill.

Alissa stood gazing out over the parapet watching the sea and stars. “I’m worried about tomorrow” she admitted finally, turning back to Aran.

Aran was incredulous, “Worried...in what way?”

Alissa shrugged expressively, “I don’t know, but I am catching something off father. I am certain there is more to this meeting than just organising the Guard to do some border patrolling. There is something deeper happening and frankly it scares me...”

Aran stared at the young woman opposite him, “It is unusual for the Archmage to travel outside Glaive, especially in company with the highest ranking mages of that island.” He gnawed his bottom lip, “Not to mention the presence of the Councillors at the keep. I agree that there is more to their visit than meets the eye...”

He looked at the apprehension in her eyes, “You think we should be worried?”

She nodded, and shivered as an unseasonably cold wind blew across from the mainland. Aran walked up and stood near her, attempting to block the wind. Gratefully she leant into his warmth and unconsciously Aran’s arms crept about her again. Turning her to face him, he gently lifted her face with his hands and kissed her for the second time that day. Despite her earlier words professing only friendship, Alissa opened her lips to his and accepted his hard embrace joyfully, molding her slender body against his...for a moment the young couple were lost in the wind and the dark, then it was Aran’s turn to regretfully pull away—fighting his obvious need for her.

Alissa turned away, her face shadowed. Belatedly she realised that despite the brave words she had said earlier that day it was going to be extremely difficult to maintain only a friendship with Aran. Finally she turned back to him her green eyes concerned, “Aran...promise me you’ll not rush into anything tomorrow,” she suddenly blurted out.

Aran was puzzled, "Rush, in what way?"

She gazed at him unhappily, "You're not a Guard, Aran. You're not even yet a fully trained Warriormage. Promise me you won't rush off to fight on the border with the Guards."

"I'm considered one of the best fighters," he snapped, suddenly and inexplicably angry. "Do you mean to hold me back, tie me to the Keep whilst others go to defend our land?"

Alissa spun away her temper flaring, "Never would I hold you Arantur of Leigh...I am not one of those women who would dictate terms to her man."

Aran held up a hand to settle her down but she would not be appeased, "You misunderstand me Arantur. I am thinking only of your own welfare. Typically you cannot see that!" she flared.

"In what way is it my welfare to be kept back at the Keep when my fellow Guards go off to risk their lives," he growled.

She stared at him green eyes blazing with raw emotion, "Because you have a destiny. The province would lose greatly if the last Warriormage died in some unnecessary skirmish on the border."

Aran stared at her, his uncharacteristic and unreasonable anger slowly ebbing away, "You believe my personal destiny is more important than the freedom and security of our province?"

She nodded, her eyes frosty green.

"You are certain of this? That it is not for light reasons alone that you ask this of me?" he questioned directly, abruptly.

"I believe it to the very depths of my power," she said at last, as her quick temper faded.

Aran sighed, "Then for your sake I will weigh my decision before I make it."

Alissa sagged against the stone battlements, "That is all I ask," she replied her anger gone.

Aran nodded and turned to stare out at the sea, finally he turned back to her, "Forgive me my temper," he said simply, but he found himself alone on the battlements. Alissa had gone.

*

It had taken most of the early morning for the Guards to get fully armoured. Finally they were all gathered in the training yard, nervously making last minute adjustments to buckles and ties. Despite the conversation last night Aran felt excited to be part of such a company, and looking about, he watched the sun reflect off the dozens of steel clad soldiers. Darven, almost unrecognisable in mail and highly polished steel, joined Aran and the others of Wolf Company as they clustered at the base of the Keep stairs.

"Is everyone ready?" he asked quietly, his eyes scanning the clustering men of his company.

There were a few nervous nods and he grinned, "Form into ranks. It is time."

Quickly the Guards divided into the two companies, organising themselves swiftly into ranks of three abreast. As the newest recruit, Aran found himself at the very end of the company, shoulder-abreast with Ban and Told, the youngest of the Wolves. "I've not slept a wink for excitement," Ban whispered confidentially to Aran. "To think we may be soon on our way to the first battle in over three hundred years."

"Aye," interrupted Told, who to Aran's eyes looked barely old enough to be parted from his mother, let alone fight in a battle. "We will surely be advised today when we are to march. Why else would the mages and Councillors be gathered in such solemn enclave?"

Why indeed, echoed Aran to himself.

Slowly the column ahead of him moved and it was a moment or two before it was their turn to march up the stairs and through the Keep to the second floor great hall.

The Guards marched quietly, but the noise of dozens of steel-clad feet echoed and rang through the enormous Keep, dislodging centuries' old dust from the hangings and banners on the walls and ceilings.

"We ought to be quieter," whispered Ban, "Otherwise the Keep may collapse upon us."

Aran watching the spiralling dust, could only nod in agreement. Someone, further up the head of the column sneezed as the soldiers were enveloped by the falling cloud. Slowly they marched up the narrow spiral stairs, until finally they paused outside the massive oak doors of the great hall. Darven waited at the head of his column until Bear Company appeared at the top of the stairs, and then indicated that the Wolves should enter into the hall. The oak doors swung inwards at his touch, and Wolf Company marched in, and arranged themselves around the left-hand inside walls of the great hall with Bear Company on the right.

Standing silently with the others, Aran could see that the casual groupings of bench tables and seats had been cleared away with only the long high table remaining at the far end of the hall. The table he could see was occupied by Archmage Maran, and the other mages from Glaive seated at the middle. At one end sat the Councillors, the other end was reserved for the Guard Leaders. Aran watched as Captain Taran, Deputy Captain Morel, Wolf Leader Darven and Bear Leader Caldor took their places at the ends of the high table. At a nod from the Archmage, they all sat. Aran looked around for Alissa, and finally spotted her over to one side of the hall, sitting quietly with another young woman whom he had heard was the daughter of one of the Councillors. Seeing that all was quiet and held in readiness, Archmage Maran stood at the table and addressed the gathered Guardsmen.

"Welcome Andurian King's Guard to this extraordinary gathering," he began his voice ringing out across the company. "For today is the day we will present to you the new High King of Andur!"

Aran felt, not heard the shockwave as it moved through the great hall. To him it seemed almost as if every heart had stopped beating, and then suddenly started again, all at the same time. Once the shock was past there was a groundswell of murmuring, then raised excited voices as everyone tried to put into words the shock and amazement they were all feeling. Archmage Maran waited until the low conversation died down then put up his hand for absolute silence.

"We can understand your surprise, for until last night only a dozen people in the province knew that a new high King of Andur was destined to reign again here at the Keep." He looked around at the assembled gathering, "Only the High Circle at Glaive knew that a High King existed. That secret was kept for his safety, and the security of the province."

Archmage Maran moved out from behind the high table, "In order for you as the King's Guard to understand, I must first give you a history lesson," he began. "I am certain all of you know that the Serat assassinated the Andurian line here in Andur's Keep itself. High King Alexi, Princes Brin, Atren, Kleven and Princesses Asia and Candice were murdered as they slept. Queen Darnice's body was never discovered, and it was assumed at the time that she also was murdered and her body thrown into the sea."

Archmage Maran looked out at the assembled Guard, "They assumed wrongly. Queen Darnice was not in her bed when the attack occurred. She was feeling unwell and was

walking within the old section when the Keep fell to the raiders. Fearing for her life, she escaped the fortress by the little known seaward route, taking advantage of a small sailboat that had been previously left there by the murdered young princes. Queen Darnice in an act of pure courage took to the sea and escaped the assassins.”

He paused, “She was carrying an unborn son, the last of the Andurian line.”

He held up a hand to quell the murmuring before it could begin again.

“After many days sailing alone she came to Glaive. Exhausted, dehydrated, famished, and close to death, it took the strength of our most powerful Healmages to pull her and the unborn child back from the final darkness.”

He paused to gather breath and Aran realised that he was holding his breath too.

“A few months later a son was born. He was named Greve—for the tragedy that had befallen the Andurian line.”

Archmage Maran cleared his throat, “Queen Darnice never fully recovered from her ordeal, and one day, on the anniversary of the death of her husband and children, she succumbed and passed into the final darkness.” The old Archmage sighed heavily, “So the last of the Andurian line fell into the guardianship of the mages of Glaive.”

He paused as if to somehow fortify himself for the next part of the story.

“We at Glaive,” he continued, “Are often accused of being remote from the world, lost in our plans and power. Never was such an accusation so accurate for years later we lost the last Prince of Andur.”

Aran, like everyone else was caught in the story, and his heart momentarily paused as he heard those awful words.

Archmage Maran shook his head sadly, “Because of his youth and for his safety, Prince Greve was never told of his inheritance. We wanted to wait until he was a grown man and able to bear the heaviness of kingship before he was to know the truth. We admit that we erred in this. Greve did not possess any sort of Ability, he had no power, and he felt uncomfortable and alienated on Glaive. In our stupidity and shortsightedness we did not understand his problems, and were therefore taken unawares when he stowed away on one of the regular trading vessels that visited Glaive. Prince Greve had already lost himself on the mainland when he was reported missing on Glaive. The last of the Andurian line was at large, and we did not know where to start looking.”

Listening to the Archmage speak, all Aran could think was that Sen was right. Sen was the missing heir—all those years the King was at the Keep as a Guardsman, and no one had believed him!

Archmage Maran sighed and walked back to his seat at the high table. “You would not believe how big the province can be when you are looking for one lone youth. We turned each of the main cities inside out looking for him but Greve had disappeared as effectively as a fish in the ocean. It is Glaive’s endless shame that we lost the Andurian line.” Archmage Maran signalled to the mages and two immediately left the table and brought from behind them a long, low wooden box which had been brought to the Keep strapped on the side of a pack horse.

“With the loss of the Andurian line this became useless, a mockery to our hopes and plans,” Maran cried, opening the box and lifting out a sword similar in style and shape to the one hanging by Aran’s own hip.

“The King’s Sword,” Ban whispered by his side “How is it that the Archmage is not consumed?”

“The King’s Sword,” Archmage Maran echoed Ban’s words. “Useless except to the Andurian line... lifted only by a descendant of Andur or an Archmage enveloped by arcane spells of protection.”

“So that is how he holds it!” Ban breathed again.

“Shhh,” hushed Aran, “He is leading to something... let him speak.”

“We know that the Andurian line did not die for if it had, the power and link would have gone from the King’s Sword, rendering it merely base metal...a sword like any other.” Maran continued his narrative, “So we waited, biding our time until the fates realigned showing us the location of the Andurian line. We waited four generations until we discovered, quite by accident the location of Andur’s seed...”

“And he has waited for just this moment,” a voice burst out from the ranks of the Guard, “I claim my inheritance and kingship!”

Aran’s was not the only head to turn in shocked surprise to the direction of the voice. Every man and woman in the Great Hall had turned startled to the right wall. It did not take long to identify the speaker, Sen himself stepped from the ranks of the Bear Company, loudly proclaiming himself the missing heir. Aran’s startled gaze flew back to the high table where the Archmage and those assembled were staring at the man in confusion and astonishment.

By Andur! Aran thought, Sen is delusional. The mages are not recognising him.

“Give me the sword mage,” demanded Sen, “I am the rightful king of the province!”

Captain Taran stood as if to speak, but he was immediately pulled back down by one of the mages. The look that passed between them was obvious to anyone who chanced to see it. Obviously the mages would not tolerate any usurper, that the sword would brand him, if he proved so to be a false king.

Maran sighed in impatience and sadness, “You believe yourself to be of the Andurian line?” he asked Sen.

“Aye,” the Guard confidently walked up to where Maran was cradling the ancient, deadly weapon.

“Then take the sword if you believe it to be so, for only a true seed of Andur can hold the sword without injury.” He stared at the Guardsman pityingly, “Know however that if you persist and take the sword it will surely destroy you. Are you still of this mind?” he asked finally of Sen.

The tall blond Guardsman nodded and held out his gauntleted hand.

Maran bowed his head and held out the weapon. “Then consider well your actions for we cannot redeem you once the burning has begun.”

“I have no fear mage,” Sen replied, “I will safely hold the King’s Sword.”

The Guardsman reached forward and grasped the ancient hilt in his gauntleted hands. For a moment, he stood triumphant, and then the sword caught alight in a blaze seemingly more brilliant than the sun itself. Immediately the fire left the sword, and in one fell movement totally and instantly consumed the man holding the weapon. For one awful moment Sen stood triumphant, the next his body was just a pile of blackened ashes upon the floor of the Great Hall, with the sword glinting darkly upon the awful remains.

“Such is the vengeance of the sword upon any who falsely raise it,” Maran spoke quietly, chillingly. “We regret his loss, but only the true line of Andur can wield this weapon.” He looked about the room, “Does anyone else here dare such an act?”

The occupants of the Great Hall held their breath. No one dared move, each felt as traumatised as the next person about what had happened to Sen.

Maran bent over and picked up the quiescent sword from the remains of the Guardsman.

“That is a pity,” he replied wryly, “For there is one here who can rightly and justly raise it. One who is of the lost line of Andur.”

‘Who, who?’ the question raced around the hall, whispered on the lips and in the eyes of each member of the Guard.

Maran cradled the sword and began to walk past the Guardsmen. Each soldier that met his eyes either immediately averted his gaze, or stared straight ahead, pretending not to see the terrible face of the Archmage. As Maran walked his slow march around the hall, Aran suddenly felt his stomach knot with a deep and terrible apprehension and misgiving. As the Archmage drew closer, he began to reluctantly understand the real reason for Glaive’s continuing interest in him, and at last realised why he had been fetched from Leigh. His head bowing with heavy anger and trepidation, he began to finally understand and to tie together all the odd and ill-matched patterns and weaves of his life. At last he saw the terrible destiny of which Maran had alluded to in the past, and if he had a choice Aran knew that he would have been out of that place and far away from Andur’s Keep.

‘Did he really have a choice?’ Aran thought desperately as he watched the Archmage draw nearer. At every turn his life had been changed, turned upside down, wrenched from simplicity into complexity. Every time he felt settled, happy, events would transpire to cast him into deeper waters, requiring from him even greater maturity and wide-ranging decisions. It was all so terribly unfair he thought unhappily, regretting yet again his association with the mages. Deep in despair, Aran nevertheless felt no great surprise when Archmage Maran finally stopped his slow pacing to stand directly in front of him. Through the grey haze of his misery, Aran saw that the Guardsmen stared openly at him in amazement and shock, and not for the last time heartily wished himself back in Leigh.

“Arantur of Leigh,” Archmage Maran’s voice was quiet, yet it seemed to fill the Great Hall. “You are rightfully born of the line of Andur. The sword is yours.”

Aran swallowed, and gazed about him. He quickly met Darven’s eye, the young Wolf Leader inclining his head as if he was addressing his king. Aran searched out Alissa by the far windows. Desperately he sought her face she too smiled sadly and nodded.

‘Take the sword brother,’ a quiet voice drifted in by his right ear, ‘It is your destiny. No one else has the right and the province has the need of a king.’

‘What about my dreams, my lifepath?’ he questioned his sister.

‘This is your true lifepath, Arantur,’ she whispered back, ‘Any other would be false and wrong.’

Aran stared at Archmage Maran angrily, deeply hurt because yet again he had to choose.

“You led me to believe I was to remake the sword for a new lineage,” he accused the old man.

Maran shook his head, “No Arantur...that was your own belief. You instantly recognised the sword of your family, but your conscious mind could not accept it, and instead made excuses and found another, less treacherous lifepath to follow.”

“So I am Andur’s heir,” he said and the words came out as a statement of fact, not a question.

“Aye Arantur,” Archmage Maran dropped to his knees. “I implore you...take the sword. There is no other alternative for you or for the province.”

“What if you are wrong?” Aran demanded. “What if I am consumed by it? How then will you live with my death?” he asked.

Archmage Maran looked up and met his fierce gaze, “It will not harm you. Like calls to like, blood to blood, you are the seed of Andur...as I am,” he added softly.

Aran rocked back on his heels in shock, “Who are you mage?”

Maran spoke gently, softly. “Once, a long time ago I was known as High King Maran. My father was Andur of which we are both descended. I renounced my throne for Glaive as soon as my first-born son Trenor was old enough to be crowned. Since I gave up my kingship, the sword no longer recognises me; even now, and after all this time I cannot explain why that is so, perhaps only a Metalmage full in his power could tell me. I can only safely wield it if I wear the arcane protection spells, and even then it is costly to me—he held out one hand, and Aran saw that the Archmage’s palm was blistered with topical burns. You are now the only one the sword will recognise, it calls to your blood, the blood of Andur—take it and restore the line of Andur to our province.”

“Then there is no other way?” Aran asked heavily.

Maran inclined his head, “Take it if you love your province and wish to protect her from enemies gathering. Take it only if you wish to follow your right and true lifepath.”

Aran sighed, “That has been my only wish all along.” He looked into the grey eyes of Maran, “Very well Archmage,” he sighed heavily, wishing otherwise but knowing that that there was no otherwise. “I will take up this sword.”

Maran nodded and smiled, “Then discard the weapon you now wear. The King’s Sword is jealous and will tolerate no other in the hand of its king.”

Aran unsheathed the other ancient blade and laid it gently on the floor. Slowly he held out his hand and accepted the cool hilt of the King’s Sword from the Archmage. He waited to be consumed but he stood untouched. The sword itself felt light to wield and the hilt curved within his hand in such a familiar way, that he knew that there would be no other sword for him. Conscious recognition burst forth from the hidden memory of his lineage, and the sword blade began to glow gently with a cold light reminiscent of the stars at night. Aran stood alone whilst the whole company fell down upon their knees before him. The line of Andur was whole, the line of Andur had at long last returned to the Keep.

“Long live the High King!” Aran heard Darven’s voice as if from a great distance.

“Long live the High King!” The cry was picked up by his fellow Guards and given full voice.

Aran stood holding the glowing King’s Sword in wary amazement, and knew that nothing ever would be the same again.

End of Book One

The second title in the 'Riothamus' trilogy is called 'The High King'.

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