

Arantur

Book One of the 'Riothamus Trilogy'

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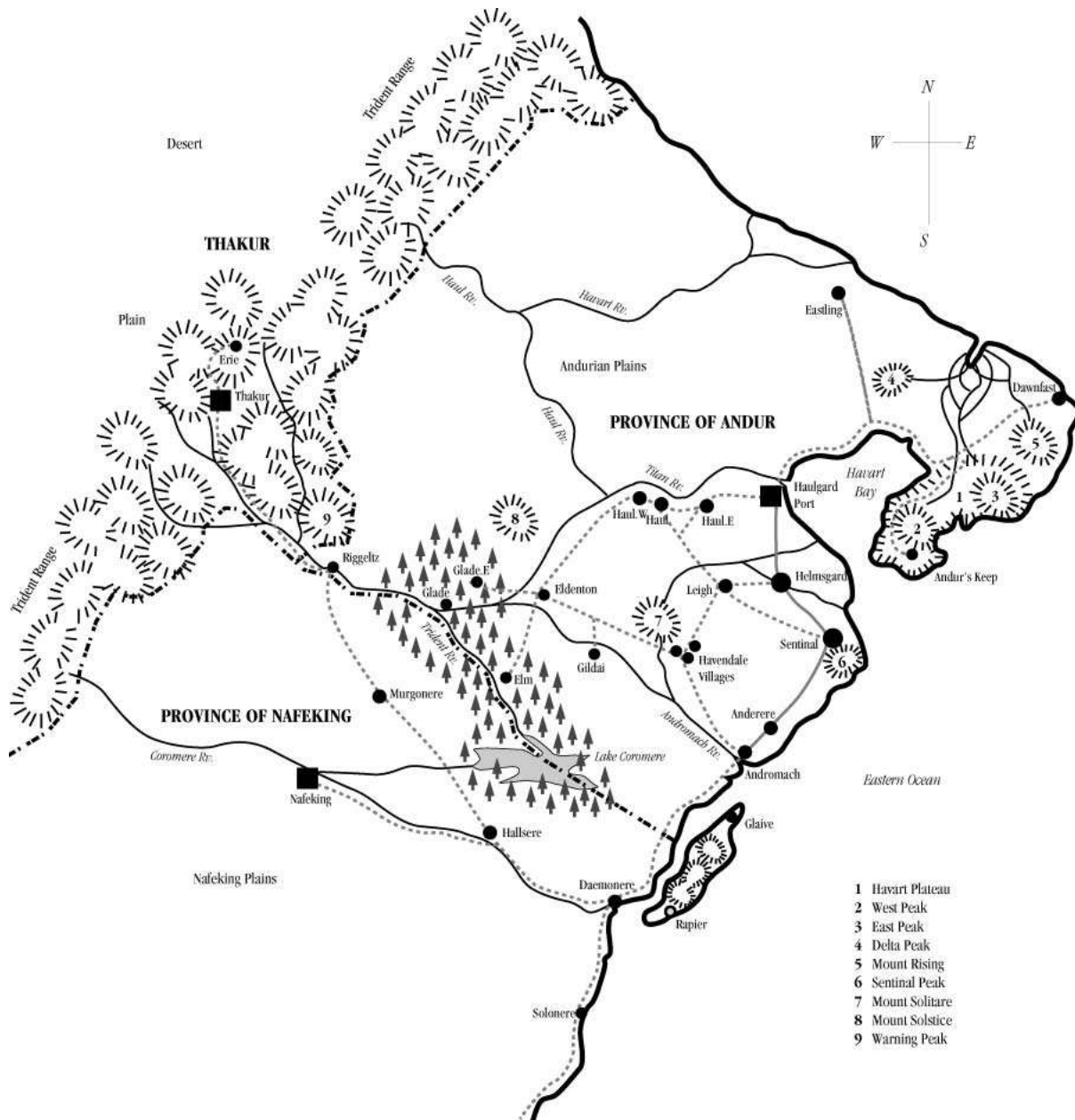
*I'd like to dedicate the 'Riothamus' trilogy to a number of people who have helped
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- 1 Havart Plateau
- 2 West Peak
- 3 East Peak
- 4 Delta Peak
- 5 Mount Rising
- 6 Sentinel Peak
- 7 Mount Solitaire
- 8 Mount Solstice
- 9 Warning Peak

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. Warily 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

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