

Sword of Honor

Book Two of Boundary's Fall

by
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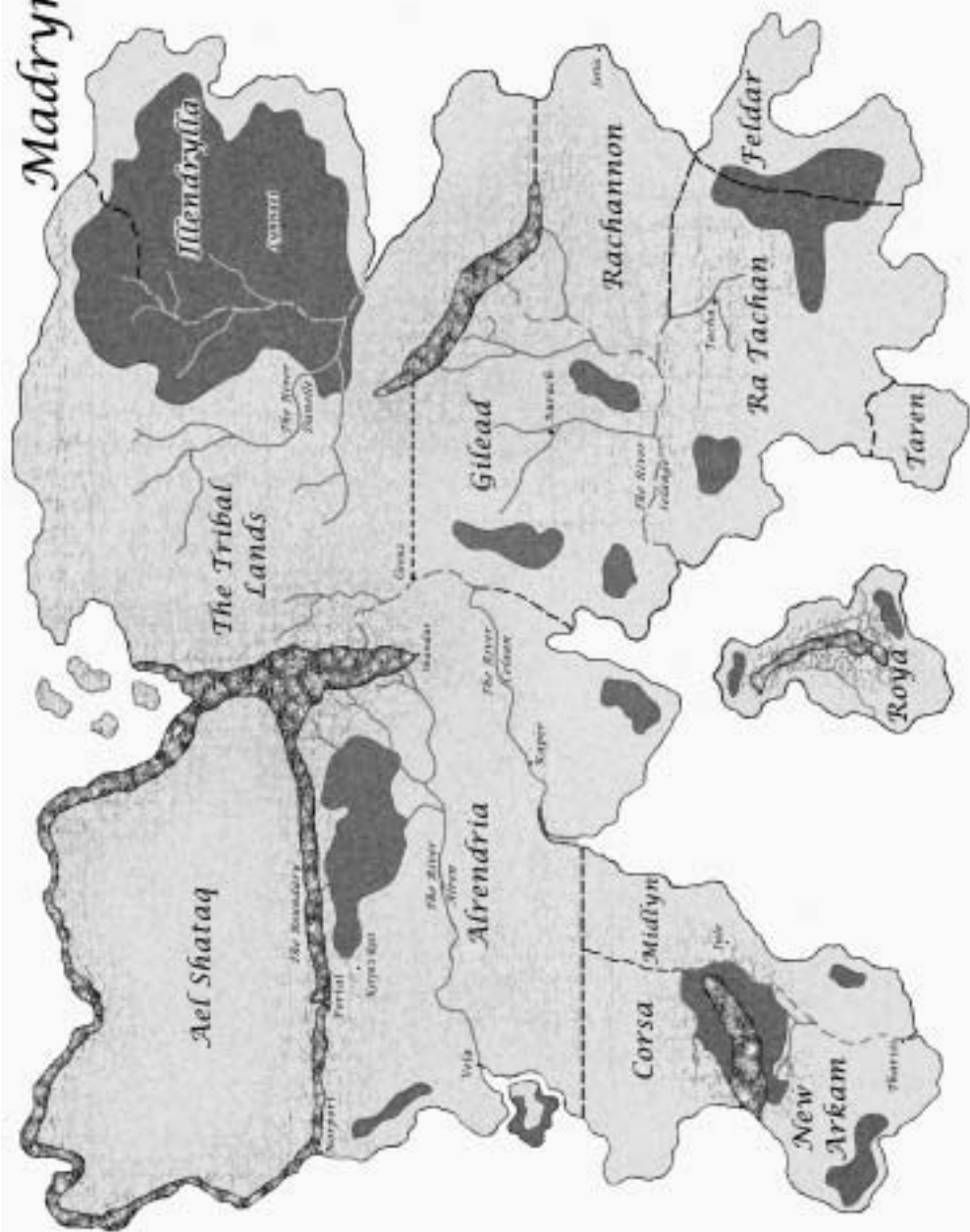
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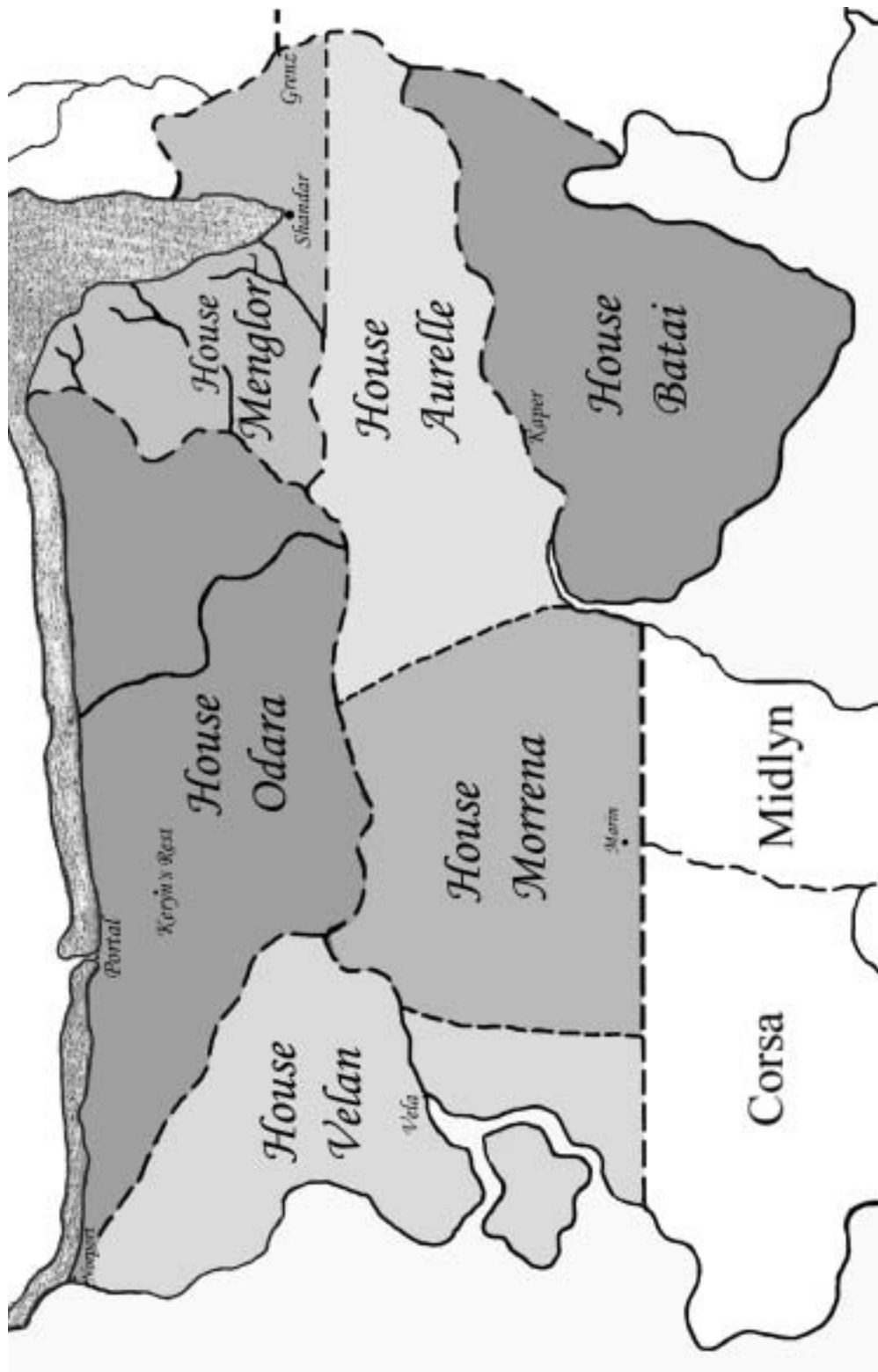
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Madryn





“To me, honor is a sword. A sword is forged to defend one’s life. To defend the lives of others. So it is with honor. Honor protects us. It protects others. If a man understands honor, it can be wielded with deadly accuracy. If it is not understood, if it is not wielded properly, honor can hurt not only the innocent, but also those who would use it as a weapon.”

– Tyre, the BattleMage

Remembrance

Whack! The blow caught the young boy across the face, nearly knocking him from his feet. He staggered, but caught himself, and used the momentum to pull away from his assailant. His heart pounding in fear, he started to half run, half stagger down the stone-paved alley.

“Come back, freak!” cried the bully, and the sound of footfalls followed the boy.

The boy turned onto a larger avenue, sprinting until it opened into a market square. A few people were visible, setting up their stalls and wagons, and relief flooded through him; perhaps someone would notice his plight and offer help. To his great dismay, no one did. Other than the curious, startled stares he received as he darted past, he was ignored.

Cursing between gasps of air, the boy scolded himself. Had he waited a little while longer before leaving his room, the streets would have been crowded enough for him to escape.

He risked a look behind, then wished he had not. The three bullies who had cornered him in the alley were gaining ground. Swallowing hard, the boy ducked under a wagon and darted across the center of the square. A vendor screamed when one of the bullies plowed into her cart, spilling melons across the market.

The boy did not dare turn to look. Instead, he darted down another alley, turning left at the first crossing. Left again, then right, never looking back and praying his blind flight would be enough to lose his pursuers. Already his lungs burned from the exertion, and he knew he could not keep up the pace for long. He had to find a place to hide soon. If he slowed, the bullies would catch him, and he was not strong enough to stop one of them, let alone all three.

He turned another corner, and was surprised to find himself in another square. The plaza, this one full of people, offered safety, but the boy hesitated, afraid to step into the open. The stores across the plaza beckoned, but the square was open to the light, and he felt more comfortable in the shadows.

The rapidly approaching footfalls forced him to move. Suppressing a shudder, the boy ran into the open, praying to the Five Gods that he make it across the market unnoticed. He dodged between two moving carts, and the horses drawing them came to an abrupt stop. Angry cries followed his passage, and the boy called out apologies, tears streaming down his face.

When he reached the north side of the market, the boy tripped and tumbled behind a wagon, scraping his knees. He stopped himself from crying out and huddled behind the cart, panting heavily. Slowly, brushing the hair away from his eyes, he turned and eased his way upward, peering out over the top of the wagon.

Across the square the three bullies were fanning out, searching for him. The boy ducked down lower, until only his eyes poked out from behind the wagon. Whenever one of the boys looked his way, he crouched behind the large, ripe melons.

"What are you doing, boy?" came a cry from behind him. "Hands off my wares! Turn around!" Silencing a frightened gasp, the boy slowly turned, keeping his head bent low.

A hand pulled him away from the wagon. "What's one as young as you doing out alone this early?" asked a kind, womanly voice. "Not a thief, are you?" The boy shook his head frantically. "Then you've nothing to fear, child. No need to hang your head." A hand cupped the boy's chin and lifted it slowly. He fought for a moment, then met the vendor's gaze.

She was an unremarkable woman, of average height and thinly built. Her hair was a rich brown and her eyes were kind, though they widened in fear when she looked upon him. The vendor stepped back, withdrawing her hand as if she had touched fire, and drew in a hissing breath. "Wh... Wha... What are yo—" She was unable to finish the sentence.

The woman's reaction drew attention, and soon, several more sets of eyes were on the boy, though everyone kept a discreet distance. The boy backed away from the people, from their whispered comments and terrified stares. As he stepped from the wagon, he lost its protection, and one of his pursuers spotted him.

"There he is!" came the triumphant cry. The boy turned toward the sound, and he saw the bullies start in his direction. One of them waved a large stick menacingly. Fear welling within him, the boy pushed through the throng of people, dashing toward the safety of yet another alley.

He ran blindly, oblivious to the carts he upset and the people he bumped into. The havoc he wreaked slowed his pursuers, but also left a trail easy for them to follow. Arms reached out to stop him, and he flailed wildly, biting down on a finger that happened to touch near his mouth. He heard a muffled cry, but neither glanced back nor called out an apology. Finally free of the market, he entered the more comfortable shadows of an alleyway.

Away from the crowded market, his footfalls echoed painfully loud, but he dared not slow. Turning at every opportunity, he hoped against hope that he would outdistance his pursuers before his pitifully weak body failed him yet again.

After only a short sprint, his breath came in quick, ragged gasps. Bright, white lights flashed before his eyes, forcing him to drop his gaze to the road before him. He turned down a dark alley, unaware of the dead end until his head contacted the hard, white stone.

The boy crashed to the ground, pain pounding through his head. Dizzy, he dragged himself to his knees, knowing his luck had run out. He saw a few discarded boxes to his left. Slowly, he crawled toward them, hiding behind their wooden frames. Settling against the wall, he put a hand to his near-fevered brow, comforted by the touch of his cool, clammy fingertips.

Footfalls reached his ears, and the boy ducked down, trying to keep out of sight while simultaneously watching the entrance to the alley. He hoped it was a Guardsman. Or a beggar. Anyone but the bullies. He muttered another quick prayer to the Five Gods, though he had long since stopped believing in them.

Once again his prayers were not answered. The three young men appeared, walking slowly and deliberately toward him, their eyes searching the shadows. All three were now armed with makeshift cudgels. “—must be around here,” said one of them. “He couldna run fast.”

The boy’s eyes darted to the ground, and he saw a small piece of wood, much smaller than the clubs the others carried. He grabbed at it anyway, knowing every advantage he could gain might be the difference between life and death. “I saw him turn down this alley,” the second boy said. “I’m sure of it.”

The leader waved irritably. “Quiet!” he hissed. “If he’s here, we’ll never find him with you two making so much noise. Spread out.” The three boys fanned out and continued down the alley, their eyes filled with hate.

The boy cringed in the shadows, certain he would be found. He drew his knees to his chest, gripped the small chunk of wood tightly in his hand, and lowered his head, trying to stifle his sobs. He willed himself to silence, hoping by some miracle that the three would not notice him.

After several tense moments, two of the boys turned toward each other. One shrugged. “I guess he turned down the next street,” the other said. “Let’s go back.”

The larger boy cuffed his friend on the shoulder. “We’ll go back when I’m ready!” He walked to the end of the alley, stopping several hands from the boy’s hiding place, and peered into the shadows. The boy felt angry eyes pass over him, and he waited for the bully’s excited cry.

Finally, after what seemed an eternity, the bully turned and started back toward his two friends. “Let’s go,” he said. “We’ll take care of that freak some other time.” The boy let out a silent sigh; relief flooded through him. He lowered his hand to the ground, and felt the coarse fur of a rat beneath his fingers. The rat squealed in fright and scuttled away, and the boy jerked his hand up, the stick he had held clattering to the ground.

Three sets of eyes turned toward him. The lead bully leaned forward, and a wicked smile played across his face. “There he is!” he said happily. “I knew this was where he was hiding.” He advanced, urging his friends to follow. “Come on out, freak!”

The boy climbed to a crouch, stepping forward only slightly. He reached for his stick, gripped it so hard that his knuckles turned white. "Leave me alone," he said weakly. "I did nothing to you." Tears threatened to fall, but he blinked them back.

"You're a monster," said the bully, "and Lord Peitr says all monsters should be destroyed." He swung his club back and forth.

"I'm not a monster," the boy insisted, almost hysterically. He had heard those words before, on many occasions, but their sting never lessened. "I'm just different."

"You *are* different, freak," agreed the bully. "That's what makes you a monster. Don't fight us, and it won't be so bad. I give you my word." The bully took another step forward; his friends were a half-step behind.

The boy moved away, but his back smacked into the wall. His breathing was again quick, but now anger had replaced fear. His whole life he had been called names. Freak. Monster. All for things over which he had no control. His free hand tightened into a fist.

"If you fight," the bully reminded him, "this'll be more painful."

"Maybe," the boy hissed. "But it might be more painful for you as well." His eyes burning with the fires of his hate, the boy charged, swinging his stick wildly.

It slammed into the bully's shoulder with a loud crack, and he fell back, his eyes widening in surprise. The boy tried to force his way past, but the bully recovered quickly. His eyes narrowing to thin slits, he swung his own club in retaliation.

The blow knocked the boy to the ground. His stick flew from his hand, clattering across the stone-paved alley. He scrambled back to his feet and lunged at the leader, ducking under the larger boy's swing and darting between his legs. One of the other bullies made a grab for him, but missed, and the boy sprinted down the alley, hope surging through him.

A sharp blow to the head dropped him to the ground again. Bright lights flashed before his eyes. The third bully stood over him, laughing.

Crouching down, the bully grabbed the boy's shirt and hauled him to his feet. His hands scrabbled over the ground desperately, searching for something to use as a weapon, and one closed on a chunk of stone, rounded on one side and jagged on the other. With a grim smile, the boy swung the rock with all his might.

The stone smacked into the bully's head, and a loud, pained scream resounded down the alleyway. Released from the bully's grasp, the boy dropped to the ground a third time; the jarring impact knocked the wind from his body. The bully landed at his side, blood flowing in a river from his temple.

The bully's pitiful cries brought a wild feeling, a feeling of exhilaration, to the boy, who tried to continue his flight. More rough hands seized him, though, and he was thrown against the wall, his head smashing into hard stone. Blackness surged over him, but he remained conscious. He stood, wobbling slightly, and watched as the two remaining bullies approached.

One bully, quivering with suppressed rage, picked up a stone and threw it. It hit next to the boy's shoulder, driving chips of stone into his cheek. "You made a big mistake, freak," said the leader. Snarling, he ran forward, his fist drawing back to punch.

The boy ducked the swing, and the bully's fist smashed into the wall. He screamed in pain, and the boy felt a surge of joy. He had to restrain himself from laughing. When the bully's second punch caught him in the midriff, his smile faded. Doubled over in pain, he gasped for breath.

The other bully joined his friend, their blows falling rhythmically. His strength gone, the boy collapsed, and for a time, the two bullies took turns, one holding him up with the other punched. After a while, the boy could hardly feel the pain. He knew he was going to die, and his only thought was to wish that he had been able to hurt more than just the one.

One particularly nasty blow knocked him from his captor's grasp, and the boy fell to the ground, landing amidst slime-covered refuse. Spitting out blood, he pushed himself to a seated position and leaned back against the corner of the wall. Through swollen and tearing eyes, he eyed his assailants, and they watched him with amusement, enjoying their sport.

Anger rushed through the boy in a torrent. His eyes glowed with hatred, and his body filled with power. He tried to scream, but the sound came out as a gurgle; more blood and spittle ran down his face.

"Look at the monster now!" cried the leader joyfully. "Let's put him out of his misery." With a shared laugh, the two started forward.

The boy's face flushed with warmth. Suddenly, his pain was distant. He still felt it, even more than he had a moment before, but it was far away, inconsequential. The alley lit up, and he saw details he had never before noticed. The smell of blood and fear surrounded him, and a dirty, unwashed odor emanated from the bullies. He raised a hand at their approach, as if to ward them off.

"He's still trying to fight!" laughed the second bully, running forward. An unseen force threw him backward. He crashed into a pile of broken, rusty tools that lined one side of the alley. Standing, he looked at his partner and asked, confused, "What did he hit me with?" The other boy shrugged, and they both advanced again.

Fire erupted behind them, and the bullies turned, jumping back when they saw another stack of boxes go up in flames. They exchanged shocked glances, and the leader licked his lips nervously. "The monster's a Mage!" he said finally, his hand trembling. "Lord Peitr says that Magi are the worst kind of monsters. He says they'll enslave us all."

The bully stooped to pick up a large rock. "He's weak now, and confused. We should finish him off before he can harm others with his powers." The other boy nodded again and picked up his own rock. In unison, they screamed, "Die Mage!" and snarling in rage, they drew back their arms.

"Enough!" said a voice from out of nowhere, full of command and radiating power. Both bullies whirled, shocked expressions on their faces. Their stones clattered unused to the ground. A man stood behind them, dressed in the dark grey robes of the Magi. He was of average height, with piercing blue eyes, thick brown hair streaked with grey at the temples, and a matching, close-cropped beard. The Mage stared at the ruffians with both anger and resigned sadness.

"Leave him be," the Mage said, lowering his voice. "The boy has done you no harm, and he's a menace to no one."

"But he's a monster, Lord Mage," stammered the leader. "Look at him!" When his reasoning gained no sympathy, he resorted to a different tactic. "He hurt Naykma!"

The Mage cast a cursory glance at the crumpled form on the cold, hard stone of the alley. Then he returned his piercing gaze to the bullies. "And what would Naykma have done to him, had he not defended himself? Likely much worse."

The Mage closed his eyes and took a slow, calming breath. "Yet if it is concern for your friend that spurs you to this dishonorable act, then perhaps I can help."

The Mage walked to the fallen boy and knelt beside him. He looked at Naykma for a moment, then lightly cupped his hands on the boy's head. Closing his eyes, he focused his Will. His talent for Healing was not strong, but he believed it would be sufficient to speed this young man's recovery.

After a moment, Naykma's eyelids flickered, and he let out a weak groan. The Mage stood up, brushed the dust off his robes, and looked at the others. "Your friend will have a headache," he told them, "but is otherwise well. I suggest that you help him to his feet and leave this place. Now." When the bullies made no movement, the Mage hardened his gaze. A small fireball formed above his hand. "I will not allow you to harm that child. Leave now, or fight me."

The leader swallowed his fear and glanced uncertainly at his companion, but the other boy was staring in awed silence at the Mage. Grabbing the other boy's shirt, the leader started toward Naykma, but his eyes never left the Mage. Together, the two bullies dragged their now-conscious friend to his feet and backed slowly out of the alley.

When they reached the cross-street, the leader yelled, "It won't be long before you and your kind are taken care of, Mage! Lord Peitr says so!" Their footfalls faded in the distance.

The Mage sighed, but offered no reply. Instead, he turned his attention to the boy who crouched in the corner of the alley. At the Mage's approach, the boy's eyes widened in fear, and he pushed back with his feet, as if he hoped to push himself through the wall.

"I will not harm you, my boy," the Mage said gently, dropping to his knees. "I give you my word." Extending his hand slowly, the Mage cupped

it over the boy's cheek and focused his Will, once again using his limited abilities to heal.

The boy shuddered; a tingling warmth flowed through him. When the Mage removed his hand, the boy reached up and touched an eye that was no longer swollen. His bruises were smaller, too. They barely caused him pain. "I'm not skilled enough to remove your injuries entirely," the Mage said with a sad smile, "but you should heal in a day or two."

"Thank you, Lord Mage," the boy stammered, fighting back tears.

"You're quite welcome," the Mage replied politely. He rose, once more carefully brushing the dust from his robes. "Stand up, my boy," he said, "so I can have a look at you." As the boy struggled to his feet, the Mage asked, "Why were they chasing you?"

Once on his feet, trying not to look as dizzy as he felt, the boy answered, "They were chasing me because I'm a freak. A monster."

The Mage's laugh brought spots of color to the boy's cheeks. "A monster? I think not. You're different than most, my boy, in more ways than one, but you're no monster. It's best not to let others convince you otherwise."

The boy nodded at the Mage's words, and the old man looked him up and down. The boy was twelve winters old at most, very young to be able to use his Gift, and thin, almost emaciated, though poor diet was likely at fault for that. His white, almost alabaster skin looked as if it had never been touched by the sun.

The Mage crouched down to look at the boy's face. His hair was white, too, so white it made his skin dark in comparison, but it was the boy's eyes that held the Mage's interest. They were red, a deep red like the coals at the center of a fire. They blazed, as do many of the Gifted's eyes, shining with their own radiance.

The Mage looked deep into those eyes, lost in thought. Sensing that the child was growing nervous, he attempted to relieve the tension. "Did you know that you have the Gift?" The boy's blank expression was answer enough, even without his tentative head shake. The Mage smiled. "That you could use magic?" he prompted. "Did you know that?"

Understanding dawned in the boy's eyes, and he shook his head more emphatically. "Magic? Not me, sir. Though I thank you for what you di—" The boy cut off in mid-sentence. He swallowed hard. "You didn't set fire to those boxes?" The Mage's smile broadened, and he shook his head. The boy started to tremble. "You mean, it was... That I ..."

The Mage laughed. "Yes, you have the Gift. With training, you could be a Mage." The Mage rose from his crouch and gestured for the boy to follow. "Have you a family?"

The boy shook his head. "Never knew my father, sir. My mother died last winter. My brothers and sisters are all gone, dead or taken in by someone else. I've been taking care of myself."

The Mage looked at the boy, dressed in tattered rags, with unkempt, dirty hair. "Yes, I can see that." As they walked down the alleyway, the Mage scratched his beard. "You could come with me, if you'd like. I can take you to the Mage Academy, and there you can train your Gift. You'll have a place to live. Food to eat. In several winters' time, you might even become a Mage yourself."

The Mage paused for a moment to let his words sink in. "If you're not interested, I can take you to a place where you might find work. Perhaps as a stableboy. I know some people in the city."

The boy looked into the older man's eyes. "I could be a Mage?"

The Mage nodded. "If you're so inclined. Are you?" The boy nodded eagerly, and the Mage's smile broadened. "It's settled then." They walked a few more steps before laughter once again echoed down the alley.

"Have you a name, my boy?" the brown bearded Mage asked. "I can't go around calling you 'my boy' for the rest of your life."

"Lorthas, sir."

"Lorthas," repeated the Mage. "That's a fine name. You may call me Aemon. Once we get to the Mage Academy, I'll introdu—" The Mage stopped when he realized that the boy was no longer next to him. Confused, he turned around.

Lorthas had stopped several paces back. His eyes were wide with shock, and his mouth hung open. At Aemon's confused expression, he fell to his knees and lowered his head in an overly respectful bow. "High Wizard!" he said in a quiet whisper, almost too low to be heard. "High Wizard Aemon. I'm not worthy of your attentions, Great One!"

Aemon rolled his eyes. "Stop that!" he said. "Stand up, Lorthas! Honestly, if I had known that being High Wizard would mean that people would be bowing and scraping to me for thousands of winters, I'd never have accepted." He reached out and pulled Lorthas to his feet. "Come on, my boy, we should be getting to the Academy."

Staring at Aemon with unhidden awe, the boy followed placidly. Together, they wove through the streets of Jule, past shops and markets, inns and houses. As they walked, all eyes were on Aemon. Lorthas heard whispered greetings to the High Wizard, and more than one person dropped to his knees at the Mage's passage. Aemon accepted their praise, but Lorthas heard him mumbling under his breath. Hardly anyone paid notice to the boy at Aemon's side, and Lorthas found the lack of attention refreshing.

They left the market district behind and entered the center of the city. The grand palaces and vast estates, more magnificent than any of the buildings in the poorer sections of Jule, amazed Lorthas. He stared slack-jawed at everything, but nothing so much as the Mage at his side. He finally worked up the courage to ask, "Are all the stories about you true, High Wizard?"

Aemon laughed, a warm, rich laugh, and looked down at Lorthas. "My boy, I doubt if one in a hundred of the stories I hear about me are true. And please, don't call me High Wizard. My friends call me Aemon."

"But Aemon..." replied Lorthas, uncomfortable addressing the most famous person in Madryn by name, "you're the greatest Mage alive!"

"Greatest?" Aemon repeated. "Likely not. Just one of the oldest."

Lorthas frowned at Aemon's humility, but did not gainsay the great Mage. Instead, he imagined what it would be like when he himself could wield magic. "Once I master my powers," he said triumphantly, "once I'm a Mage like you, no one will treat me as they did today. I'll be respected and honored, maybe even feared! No bully will push me around then! If they do, I'll make them pay!"

Aemon frowned sadly. "You have a great many things to learn, Lorthas. It's true that men fear what they don't understand. What is different from them. Oftentimes, they react violently to those things. They strike out in anger and fear, forcing their will onto others. When they do this, they make others fear them, and the cycle continues.

"Magi are not immune to such feelings. Millennia ago, the Darklords controlled much of Alrendria, and still they were not satisfied. They feared the Orog, whom their magic could not affect. They feared the Elves and the Garun'ah. They feared each other. If they had not been stopped, they would have destroyed all of Madryn with their fear, and all lived would have been their slaves."

Aemon put an arm around Lorthas' shoulders. "After the Darklords were vanquished, the Magi, even those of us who helped overthrow the Darklords, were feared. In time, the Kings of Alrendria created laws to prevent the Magi from ruling. Rather than dulling the fear, those laws keep fear of the Magi fresh. I had hoped that with the death of the last Darklord, all of humanity would come together in peace. Yet it has been thousands of winters, and the Magi are feared more than ever, especially in this part of Alrendria.

"Those bullies attacked because they hate you. Which makes you hate them. So you train very hard to become a Mage, and one day you attack back, to settle the score. That only confirms their fear of the Magi, whether you attack out of hatred or in self-defense. Thus the circle continues. Hatred and fear creating more hatred and fear.

"We Magi have a responsibility. We must strive at all times to use our Gift for the benefit of all. Sometimes it's difficult to do, other times impossible." Aemon smiled fondly. "But these are all things you will learn at the Academy. In time, the actions of these bullies will not seem as bad to you. You'll understand that their hatred stems from their fear, and their fear from their ignorance. At the Academy we will remove your ignorance, and then you'll find that there's nothing left to fear at all."

Aemon turned the corner and pulled Lorthas to a stop. "There," he said, pointing to the building in front of them, "is your new home."

Lorthas looked at the Mage Academy, his eyes wide in amazement. The building stretched high into the sky, its towers and minarets looking down over the city. He had seen those towers before, from a distance, but the brief glimpses he had from the market district had not prepared him for the building's majesty.

The main structure was immense, fully covering a block, and crafted from a light, rose-colored stone. Secondary buildings and apartments spread out to either side, each formed of a differently-colored stone. Windows of stained glass, each depicting a different scene, reflected the morning sunlight, and four towers reached into the sky. The towers were of lighter stone, the round columns stretching up from the corners of the building. On top of each tower flew two flags, the Rising Sun of Alrendria and the banner of the Magi. One tower, the tallest, flew the sigil of House Arkam, on whose land this Academy was built, and above the giant, oaken entranceway fluttered Aemon's banner, a golden eagle in a sky of blue, to signify that the High Wizard was in attendance.

A groan pulled Lorthas' gaze away from the Mage Academy. Aemon had fallen to his knees, a pained expression on his face. "No," he murmured. "It cannot be." Tears fell unabashed down his face.

Lorthas reached out, grasping the High Wizard's shoulder. "Aemon?" he asked tentatively, a note of concern in his voice. "Aemon, what's the matter?" When the Mage did not answer, Lorthas began to worry. He shook Aemon desperately. "High Wizard?"

Aemon suddenly recovered. "What? Oh Lorthas, I am well. Forgive me for startling you."

"What's the matter, High Wizard?" Lorthas asked, "Are you ill?"

Aemon shook his head, deciding not to chastise the boy for calling him High Wizard. "No, it's nothing like that. I just had a flash of Divining, that's all." At Lorthas' blank expression, Aemon forced a smile. "Divining is a Talent some Magi have. It allows them to see a piece of the future, and the results if a certain event is allowed to happen."

"What did you see?" Lorthas asked, already afraid of the answer.

Aemon shuddered as he remembered his vision. "Lord Peitr will march an army against Jule. He will declare war against Alrendria and will try to destroy the Mage Academy. He may already be marching here."

"Will you fight him?" Lorthas asked. "He could never stand against you! You're the great Aemon!"

"Your faith in my abilities is quite refreshing, Lorthas," Aemon said wryly. "But no, I will not fight. That is what I saw with the Divining. If the Magi stay to fight, we will be defeated. Peitr will conquer Alrendria, and the freedom we have enjoyed since the fall of the Darklords will be lost."

Lorthas swallowed. "What happens if you don't fight? Does Peitr lose? Will Alrendria remain free?"

"I don't know, Lorthas," Aemon said with a shrug. "Divining only shows what will happen if a certain action is taken. Sadly, it doesn't show the consequences of every path. If we abandon Jule to Peitr, he may yet win control of Alrendria. But if we stay and fight, he certainly will. I would take a chance for freedom over a certainty of slavery any day."

Lorthas trembled at Aemon's words, but he tried to hide his fear. Aemon put a reassuring hand on his shoulder. "Be calm, my boy. These things are rarely as bad as they seem. With a little help from the Five Gods, all will turn out well." Aemon looked at the Mage Academy, drinking in its beauty for what might be the last time. "Come, Lorthas. There's much to be done if we are to abandon the city before Peitr arrives."

Aemon started across the square, and Lorthas followed a step behind. Even though he would never have a chance to get to know his new home, he hated Peitr for destroying it. "Someday," Lorthas muttered under his breath. "Someday I'll make them pay for what they've done to the Magi. Once I learn how to control my Gift, no one will ever push me, or any other Mage, around again. This, I vow." Lorthas quickened his steps, hurrying to join Aemon as he entered the Academy.

Chapter 1

“Halt!” Lord Iban called, and the column reined in behind him, stopping in a small hollow carved out of the dark forest. “We will camp here tonight. Quellas! Varten! You’re in charge of the mounts. See that they’re well cared for. Nystra! Take half a score of Guardsmen and set up a perimeter.”

Iban turned to Charylla, the Aelvin Princess, and bowed. “I mean no offense, Princess, but these last few winters, there have been few opportunities for field practice in Alrendria.”

Charylla turned cool green eyes on the Guard Commander. Straight-backed in her saddle, her thin form outlined by a green silk riding dress, she seemed out of place in the saddle. Nevertheless, she maneuvered her mount deftly, and the horse danced sideways, bringing her around to face Iban. “No offense is taken, Lord Iban. We, too, are using this meeting to train our soldiers.”

Prince Luran rode past, looking even less comfortable in the saddle than his sister. Short for an Elf, Luran was broad and stocky, muscled more like a Human. “Besides,” he said with a sneer, “if our warriors wanted to enter your camp, it would not matter if you had all your Guardsmen looking for them.” He brought his horse to an ungraceful stop, nearly falling from the saddle. Embarrassed, he glared at Iban, then continued down the Path of Riches, signaling for his nephew, Treloran, to follow.

“It appears that I must once again apologize for my brother.” Charylla’s said, her angry gaze following the departing Elf. “He forgets his manners. There is no excuse for his behavior.” A squad of Aelvin archers walked past, all but ignoring the Humans.

“No apologies are necessary, Princess,” Iban assured her. “I’ve known others like him. Remind me, sometime, to tell you stories of Brell Morrena.”

A horn’s shrill note resounded through the dark trees of the Great Forest, and Jeran shivered at the sound. “Odara!” Iban called sharply. Jeran’s eyes jerked up from the ground, and he fixed his gaze on the grey-bearded commander. “To me, Odara. We have things to discuss.”

Jeran dismounted and walked toward Iban and Charylla, keeping his eyes averted. As he approached, Charylla said, “Lord Iban, there are things to which I must attend. If you will excuse me.” Without waiting for a reply, she urged her horse away at a fast walk.

Jeran stopped next to Iban, and the Guard Commander jumped from his saddle, landing lightly at his side. With a gesture, he signaled to a pair of Guardsmen, who came running. "Hand over your reins, Odara." He gave his own reins to one of the waiting warriors and headed toward the edge of the thick forest. Jeran followed, sighing deeply.

Iban sat on a fallen log, motioning for Jeran to join him. "What do you make of this?" he asked after a long pause.

Jeran frowned, considering the question. "Obviously, there are factions. The Emperor, and perhaps others, desire to open trade with Alrendria. Perhaps with all the Human lands. They do not want to remain apart from the world."

Two Aelvin archers, dressed in dark leathers, stepped out of the trees, walking past the Alrendrians on silent feet. Both Jeran and Iban started at their appearance, and followed them with their eyes. "How can they be so bloody quiet?" Iban muttered. "I should have heard something!" His lips pressed together in a tight frown, and he waved to Jeran. "Continue."

A flash of Reading, accompanied by a stabbing pain to his head, filled Jeran's vision. For an instant, instead of seeing the Alrendrian camp, he saw a long caravan, heavily laden with goods. Closing his eyes, Jeran forced the image away. "Luran hates Humans," he said. "He believes dealing with us is a mistake. He's angry with the Emperor for proposing these negotiations, and he's angry with his sister for supporting them."

Jeran thought about it a little more. "It would be a mistake to think he's alone in his feelings. Or even in the minority."

Iban nodded, absently scratching his beard. "And what of the princess and Treloran?"

"I have seen little of the princess' son. Outwardly he seems to share his uncle's beliefs, but there is more to him than unfounded hatred. Princess Charylla is the real mystery. She claims to see the merit in trade, yet she does not share the Emperor's faith in these negotiations. If we can win her to our cause, I suspect that we'll eventually find the Elves as allies."

Iban knew Jeran no longer spoke of trade, but he continued the charade. "Having Illendrylla as a trade partner would be a great boon to the economy." Another flash of Reading hit Jeran, and he squeezed his eyes shut. They popped open again when Iban asked, "How do you think we should proceed?"

"I doubt Luran would risk open confrontation, especially against the Emperor's wishes. However, the more Guardsmen we have patrolling the forests, the easier it would be to stage an incident. Keep our sentries to a minimum and instruct them to remain in pairs, in sight of the camp at all times. If we make no attempt to defend ourselves, the Elves will take it as a show of respect and trust.

"Besides," Jeran added, pointing to another troop of archers walking toward the forest. They disappeared into the thick underbrush almost immediately. "If the Elves wanted to attack, I doubt a camp this small could survive, even if it were on full alert."

Lord Iban clapped Jeran lightly on the shoulder. "You see the situation well, Odara. That's precisely what I've decided to do, and for the same reasons. You'll make a formidable commander."

Facing the Path of Riches, Iban's gaze settled on Charylla and Luran, who, despite their calm appearance and quiet tones, were locked in heated argument. "I will continue to ignore Luran and try my best to foster trust between Princess Charylla and myself. I agree with you. She's the key to alliance with the Elves."

Jeran hissed in a gasp as the view before him changed yet again. Since entering the Great Forest, his Readings had grown steadily worse, and it seemed he could do nothing to stop them. He put his hands to his temples, pressing hard. "Is all well, Odara?" Iban asked, showing concern.

In a whisper, Jeran answered. "Yes, as well as can be expected." He met the Guard Commander's stern, and confused, gaze. "It's a problem with my Gift. A result of my lack of training. I've been working with Jes, but so far our attempts to solve the problem have been unsuccessful."

Iban pressed his lips together. "I cannot afford you weakened, Odara. Especially now. I suggest that you spend more time with the Lady Jessandra." Standing, he put a hand on Jeran's shoulder. "I'll send her to you." Iban walked into the camp, calling out orders to the Guardsmen.

Jeran put his head in his hands, breathing slow and deep. Though the Readings came more frequently, they were usually little more than brief flashes. At times, when image after image superimposed itself in his mind, it was all he could do to keep from crying out.

Worse, there was no telling what would set off a Reading. Sometimes touching an object triggered his Gift; other times they appeared in response to a sight of striking beauty or the retelling of an old story. And sometimes, the visions came upon him for no apparent reason, in response to some stimulus of which he was unaware.

Jes had been helping as best she could, but she claimed to have little experience teaching, and even less with Readings. Thus her recommendation had been for him to suppress the visions, though she was not quick to tell him how to go about it. She had, however reluctantly, agreed to continue his training, though she was furious for the danger in which he had placed himself while helping Dahr rescue the slaves.

"Lord Jeran! Lord Jeran!" came a call from Jeran's right. Smiling, he turned toward the sound. Mika, one of the slaves he had freed, was running toward him. The boy, twelve winters old, had his mother's brown hair, cut in an imitation of Jeran's style; but in all other respects he favored his father, a man who Jeran had never met. Tall for his age and growing fast, Mika's blue-green eyes held a maturity far beyond their winters.

"Good afternoon, Lord Jeran," Mika said politely, stopping in front of Jeran. He stood with his back straight, like a Guardsman, and met Jeran eye to eye. Two Aelvin archers walked past. One whispered to his companion, and the other smiled at the comment. They watched Mika out of the corner of their eyes.

"Good afternoon, Mika," Jeran replied, lightly rubbing his temples. The sun was still high in the afternoon sky, but the dense trees blocked most of the light, giving the forest a twilight feeling even early in the day. "Is there something I can do for you?"

"Lord Jeran, you told me it was my responsibility to care for the children." Jeran hid a smile at Mika's serious tone and nodded as solemnly as he could manage. "The other children are restless. They're scared and tired of sitting around with nothing to do. If they're not allowed to run around until we reach the Aelvin city, then they'll grow...annoying."

Mika cast a glance to either side, to make sure no one was listening. "I know, Lord Jeran, because of my sisters. Whenever they're not allowed to play, they get into all sorts of trouble, and they usually drag others into it as well." Mika's slight blush told Jeran who they dragged into trouble the most. "Causing trouble around the Elves doesn't seem to be a good idea."

Jeran grasped Mika's shoulder warmly. "I'm glad you brought this matter to my attention. You're quite right; trouble with the Elves is not something we desire. What do you suggest?"

Mika's blush deepened at the praise. "I suggested that we play in the forest, just along the edge of it, but every time we near the trees, Aelvin archers appear. Then I suggested that we play on the road, back away from the camp, but my mother and the others don't like us out of their sight. Lord Jeran, I know they're only children, but..." Mika trailed off, unable to find the right words.

Jeran scratched his chin thoughtfully, then waved to one of the Guardsmen. "Bystral, I want you to escort the children. They need some time to play, and I think it best if they do it someplace where they won't be under foot. Take them down the Path of Riches and watch them play, but don't let them go into the forest. You may take two of the women with you, but no more. I want the children to have time to themselves."

Bystral, a large man with thick blonde hair and a matching beard, frowned at Jeran's orders. He looked at Mika for a moment. "With all due respect, Lord Odara, I'm an Alrendrian Guardsman, not a nursemaid."

Jeran stood slowly, his eyes locked on the Guardsman's. "Guardsman," he said in a cold, emotionless tone, "you will follow the orders I give. If it soothes your pride, consider yourself an escort, not a nursemaid. I'm not asking you to play with the children, though you're welcome to if you desire, but I need you to ensure their safety. If you think this too taxing a duty, I'm sure I can talk Lord Iban into making it a permanent assignment."

Bystral's eyes flashed, but he quickly suppressed his anger. "Forgive me, Lord Odara. I spoke out of turn. There's no need to trouble the commander. If I can have a moment to gather some things?"

He turned to walk away, but Jeran grabbed his shoulder. In a calmer voice, he said, "My apologies, Guardsman, for losing my temper. This duty is not so difficult, and I promise it will only be this one time."

Bystral bowed and walked away, but the heat in his eyes had dimmed. Jeran turned to Mika. "Will that be sufficient, do you think?" At Mika's eager nod, Jeran smiled. "Good. Then gather the others, but be sure to keep everyone out of the forest."

Mika saluted Jeran like a Guardsman, then ran off to join the other children. Liseyl watched her son pass, then approached Jeran with a steaming cup. "Here," she said in a soothing, motherly voice. "Drink this. It will help with your head." With her chin, she pointed at Mika's retreating back. "I thank you for humoring him."

Jeran took the proffered cup. "Humoring him? He's doing exactly what I asked. So long as he keeps the children happy, it's one less thing for me to worry about. That's a fine son you have, Liseyl. A credit to you." Jeran sipped the bitter, herbal tea. "Is it that obvious?"

"That you have a headache?" Liseyl responded. "You don't hide it that well." A wry smile touched her lips. "You're a little better at pretending you're not about to fall from your saddle, but I think an observant person would notice." Jeran took another sip of tea, inhaling deeply.

"As to why you get the headaches..." she added after a moment's pause. "I don't think many have figured *that* out. Maybe not even the prince."

Jeran's eyes widened. "I don't know what you mea—" He fell silent, unable to continue. Liseyl's expression told him that she would not believe his lies anyway.

"Lord Odara, you have nothing to fear from me. I know you have the Gift. Before the war, my parents helped smuggle the gifted out of Ra Tachan. I was only a little girl then, but I remember some of what the Magi could do. I watched you the night of the storm. How else could you have known where shelter was?"

Jeran's apparent anxiety forced her to continue. "No one else knows, my Lord; at least, none of the slaves do. I will never betray your secret, not for as long as I live. I owe you and Dahr a great debt. You gave me—you gave my children—their freedom. I just wanted you to know that you have my loyalty, Lord Odara, completely."

Jeran let out a sigh of relief. "Thank you," he said, drinking deeply, surprised to find his headache already fading. "Your son keeps me informed of the children, but what of the others? I did not expect to find myself in charge of twoscore people, and I'm afraid I know little about caring for them."

"They are frightened, my Lord. So am I. We're far from home, in a place known to us only in legend. Even the allies we have are strangers. The only person they fully trust is you. Dahr as well," she added hastily, "but he's no longer with us."

She offered Jeran a sympathetic smile. "The Elves have treated us well, though, and we expect to have a great story to tell when we return to the lands of men." Her calm assessment eased Jeran's worry. "They're tired, but they know that there'll be plenty of time to rest in the Aelvin city."

"For some," Jeran laughed. "For others, the real work begins when we reach Lynnaei." He drained his cup, hissing in a breath to cool the hot liquid. "Keep an eye on them for me, will you? Lord Iban has made it abundantly clear that you are my responsibility. If there's a problem, I expect you to tell me of it."

Liseyl bobbed her head. "Of course, Lord Odara."

"Please, call me Jeran."

Liseyl cocked her head to one side and smiled, glad that Jeran had recovered enough to remember his dislike of formality. "You're not like the other nobles, Jeran."

Jeran laughed again, this time louder. "I thank you for the compliment, my Lady. Tell me, what did you—"

Prince Martyn came running from the center of the camp, interrupting the conversation. "Jeran! There you are." The prince smiled his warmest smile, his teeth visible through the scraggily blonde beard he wore. "I've been looking all over for you. Some of the Guardsmen are setting up a practice ring. I thought you might like to spar." He looked at the cup in Jeran's hand. "Ah a drink! That's what I need." Martyn waved a dismissive hand toward Liseyl. "Find me something to drink."

Liseyl bobbed her head submissively, "At once, my Prince." She hurried into the camp.

Martyn sat down unceremoniously, his breath coming in quick gasps. He scratched his beard furiously. "No one ever said these things were so irritating. As soon as we reach Lynnaei, I'm going to shave it off!" Martyn took a few more deep breaths. "What say you?" he asked again. "A little practice before the evening meal?"

Jeran shook his head. "I think not. I'm not in the mood for swordplay. Besides," he added with a glint in his eye, "I thought you swore you'd never spar with me again."

Martyn rolled his eyes. "Not against me, you fool! The Elves! Guardsman Lisandaer actually managed to strike up a conversation with one of the Aelvin warriors. He seemed to think we might be able to talk a few of them into some friendly sparring."

Now it was Jeran's turn to roll his eyes. "That's all we need! You and the Guardsmen fighting with some hot-headed Elves. We'll likely end up at war!" Jeran laughed, and even Martyn smiled, though the joke was at his own expense.

"Not this time, Martyn," Jeran told him, shaking his head. "Especially without Dahr here to help keep you out of trouble." Seeing the hurt in the prince's eyes, he added, "Maybe tomorrow."

"Come on, Jeran," Martyn pleaded. "You're the best swordsman we have. None of the Elves would stand a chance!. If Katya were here—"

A new voice interrupted, and Martyn's sentence went unfinished. "Jeran will not be able to join you today, my Prince. He and I have matters to discuss."

Martyn looked at Jes. She wore a white riding dress, cut to accentuate her striking, well-curved figure. Silky black hair fell to the middle of her back, hanging in loose curls. Her blue eyes regarded the prince coolly.

The prince smiled, and feeling impish, he jokingly said, "Of course, Lady Jessandra. I know how important your time with Jeran is. The word among the Guard is that there may soon be a union between House Velan and House Odara."

Jes offered the prince a small smile and stepped toward Jeran. "You should not believe everything you hear, my Prince," she said, gently caressing Jeran's cheek, which instantly grew flushed. "Still, I have heard it said that there's an element of truth in every rumor." She let her hand slide down to Jeran's shoulder, where it remained.

Martyn's smile faded, and his gaze shifted from Jes to Jeran, back and forth. Licking his lips, he rose to his feet. "If you'll excuse me, there are things to which I must attend." In his haste to leave, the prince nearly tripped over his own feet.

Jes' laughter followed Martyn across the camp. "He bluffs well," she said, sitting beside Jeran, "but he does not know how to react when someone plays the game with him."

"The next time you decide to play his game," Jeran retorted, pursing his lips angrily, "find yourself a different game piece."

Musical laughter filled the forest. "Remember, Jeran, our courtship was your idea." Her voice was cool, but her blue eyes flashed with white-hot brilliance. "To provide us an excuse to spend time together. You can't be angry if I add to the illusion."

Jeran refused to answer. Instead, he looked away and asked, "Have you any word from Alrendria?"

"It is difficult here," Jes replied. "There are Magi around, though they take great pains to hide their identities. Under the circumstances, I felt a similar approach on my part prudent." Two brown squirrels ran by, not four hands distant. The animals stopped and looked at them, chittering wildly, then bounded off into the forest. "However, I had an opportunity to slip away this morning."

Jeran's eyes perked up. "What news then?"

"Mathis is in Gilead, meeting with King Tarien. The negotiations for the alliance are underway, and Mathis believes Martyn and Miriam will be betrothed as soon as we return from Lynnaei."

A stick cracked nearby, and Jes' eyes flicked to the noise, wary of an eavesdropper. Satisfied that they were alone, she continued. "There's been no word of the Durange, though none of the patrols sent by Lord Talbot have returned from the Boundary. He's preparing to send a larger force to look for Tylor's stronghold."

Jeran shook his head. "That's not wise. If Tylor does have a stronghold, he'll expect us to come looking for it. He likely already has a trap ready for

any incoming force." Tapping a finger to his chin, Jeran frowned thoughtfully. "If you have a chance to send a message, instruct Lord Talbot not to venture into the mountains of the Boundary. If he feels that he must, tell him to be cautious. Tell him it was I who said so."

"I've never known Gideon Talbot to be anything but cautious, but I will relay your message if I have a chance."

Jes' eyes darkened, and a frown marred her otherwise pristine features. Jeran discovered that he did not like it when Jes frowned. "I don't know why I'm telling you this," she added, "except I feel that I should. There was an altercation at the Mage Assembly."

Jeran's brow furrowed. "An altercation?"

Jes nodded, though it was quite a while before she spoke. "Yes. Aemon counseled the Magi—as he always does—to offer their aid to Alrendria. Some of the Isolationists, a radical group within the Assembly, insisted that we leave the affairs of Humans to Humans. The argument in the Assembly grew heated, and it ended with one of the radicals using his Gift against another Mage."

Shock and disappointment were evident on her face. "The offender was quickly subdued, and rather strictly punished, but the message behind the action is clear. There are those in the Assembly who feel very strongly against fighting alongside Alrendria. Some are willing to fight to prevent it. By the time the Assembly agrees to offer its aid, I fear it will be too late."

"That is dire news indeed," Jeran said, though his tone lacked conviction.

"You don't sound surprised. Or overly concerned."

"I'm not," Jeran answered with a shrug. "It's a problem for another day. We have more immediate concerns." Jes' gaze bored into his very soul, prompting him to add, "It may surprise you, but King Mathis never counted on the Magi. They've never factored strongly into any of his plans."

"Have things changed so much?" Jes asked, shaking her head sadly. "There was a time when no Alrendrian war was fought without the advice of the Magi."

She took a moment to compose herself. "No matter. As you say, this is a problem for another day. You are still having Readings?"

Jeran nodded. "They're coming more frequently, though they rarely last more than a moment."

"What do you see?"

"Sometimes nothing. Sometimes it's just a sound, or a fragrance, or a flash of light. At other times, the landscape changes around me. I see caravans, or Aelvin patrols, though they're dressed differently. A few times I saw Humans, and Garun'ah, and what I assume are Orog."

Jeran put a hand over his eyes, as if merely discussing the visions made them reappear. "The worst is when there are multiple visions overlaid on top of each other. Or when the visions last for more than an instant. Sometimes it's difficult to tell what's real and what's only in my mind."

Jes put a hand on his shoulder. The touch was light, but Jeran felt a warmth suffuse him. "We will fix this, Jeran," she said, her tone comforting. "We'll find a way." Standing, Jes looked around the camp. "There's too much noise here. Let's find a place back in the trees." Beckoning for Jeran to follow, she walked into the forest, making little more noise than the Elves.

Jeran stayed a few paces back, his eyes fastened on Jes. The light breeze that blew through the trees caught her raven black hair, blowing it out in billowing waves. Her dress clung to her body, and despite his best effort, Jeran's eyes were repeatedly drawn to the sway of her hips. When he looked at her, his heart raced, and he had to remind himself that she was not several winters his senior, as her appearance suggested. She was a powerful Mage, one who had been alive since before the Boundary was raised.

They stopped in a small, secluded clearing less than three hundred hands from the Path of Riches. Jes sat and motioned for Jeran to join her. Her gaze flicked suddenly to the left. "We mean your forest no harm," she called out. "Nor will we attempt to escape into the forest. We merely desire a little privacy." Jeran looked in the direction she spoke but saw nothing. Another moment passed, and Jes added, "I assure you, we need no chaperone."

There was a sudden movement at the edge of the clearing, and an Aelvin archer stepped from the trees, all but invisible before he moved. Jeran sucked in a whistling breath and looked at Jes in shock. The archer smiled slightly, offered Jes a respectful bow, and walked off to rejoin the main Aelvin force.

"Now that we're alone," Jes said, "clear your mind." She took several slow breaths, relaxing herself. "I want you to reach for your Gift, but as soon as you seize the slightest flow, I want you to let go. Is that understood?"

Jeran nodded and slowed his breathing, clearing his mind of thought. "Once you touch your Gift," Jes continued, "I will aid you in releasing it, but the more you seize, the harder it will be to let go. Remember what happened in Grenz. If you seize too much magic, I won't be able to stop it."

"If that's the case," Jeran asked, "then why do we risk this?"

"Because you need to be able to touch your Gift, if only slightly. A Mage can extend his perceptions even if he holds a tiny bit of magic. If you can touch your Gift, you will be free of the danger you put yourself in when freeing the slaves."

Jes inhaled deeply, continuing the mediation. "And learning marginal control might make it easier to control your visions." She did not sound convinced of the last, but Jeran was hopeful.

Jeran took another breath, then opened himself to magic. As always, he could feel the flows of energy around him, but every attempt he made to seize them failed. He knew what he had to do. If he surrendered, the magic would come to him on its own. Jes swore it was impossible, but Jeran knew it to be true.

The problem is, how can I surrender to only a small portion of magic? Jeran knew that was the key, if he could discover how to do it. Time passed, but every attempt Jeran made failed. Sweat soon beaded on his forehead, but Jes was relentless, forcing him to try again and again.

Panting after yet another failed attempt, he opened his eyes. "It's no use! I can't do it."

"Nonsense," came Jes' reply. "You almost had it that time. I could feel the magic ready to rush into you. All you have to do is make sure you take only a small part."

Jeran nodded and tried again. He imagined the flows as individual strands, and he tried to imagine himself surrendering to one of them. Suddenly, he felt his body tense as a small jolt of energy rushed into him. He gasped, reveling in the warm feeling that suffused him. "Good," Jes said. "Now release it. I will help."

It took all of Jeran's effort, with Jes aiding him, to release even that tiny amount of magic. Any more would have been impossible. "It is a step," Jes said at last. "Though a small one. Again." Once more, Jeran allowed a bit of magic to enter him, and again it took all his effort to force it away.

"I've never seen magic fight so hard before," Jes told him. "Even if you seize a small amount, the rest tries to follow it." Jeran did not argue with her; try though he might, she would never believe that he surrendered to the magic, instead of forcing the magic to surrender to him.

"Again," she ordered.

They continued well into the evening. When the sun neared the horizon, and the dim gloom of twilight fell over the forest, Jes finally said, "Good. I think you're getting better. This time, extend your perceptions, but only for a moment. Then bring them back and release the magic." She wiped sweat from her own brow. "I think we'll stop after that. We've made a lot of progress."

Jeran surrendered to his Gift again, reveling in the feeling. As he had done before, he extended his presence from his body. He could still see Jes sitting before him, but he could also see the land around him. He rose up, high above the trees, and looked out over the Great Forest, which stretched as far as he could see in every direction. Birds of prey sailed the air above, wheeling in lazy circles. Below, the white line of the Path of Riches snaked its way through the forest.

Jeran lowered to the ground and moved through the trees. A glow attracted his attention, pulsating from behind a nearby tree. Curious, he approached, and he realized that he was looking at an aura, yellow tinged with green, that belonged to an Aelvin archer. Looking around, Jeran saw other auras, all of a similar color. The Elves kept themselves so well concealed that he never would have noticed them without the benefit of his Gift.

He continued on, emerging on the Path of Riches. The children stood before him, running back and forth, playing some game. Bystral watched

them, a small smile on his face. His aura was gold and white, infused with a reddish hue. Two women were with him. One stared at the Guardsman, her aura colored deep red, the other watched the children; streaks of blue and gold danced around her.

Bystral called out, "Children, it grows dark! We must return to camp!"

Amidst a chorus of lamentation, Jeran moved toward the Alrendrian camp. He looked at everything, knowing that he only had a moment or two before he had to return to his body. He passed by a small party of Elves that included Treloran and Charylla. The Aelvin nobles were talking in their own, fluid tongue, and though Jeran could not make out the words, he was fairly certain that the princess was chastising her son. If the expressions on their faces had not been evidence enough, the angry, blood red spikes flaring through Treloran's aura would have convinced him.

Suddenly, Charylla stopped speaking, and she turned toward Jeran. Frowning, she squinted, as if looking for something. Jeran sucked in a panicked breath and hurried away.

He was about to return to his body when he saw Martyn talking with some Guardsmen. He drew closer, smiling to himself as he listened to Martyn retelling the story of the time he, Jeran, and Dahr had wandered into the catacombs below the castle. It had taken them a full day to find their way out again.

Jeran was about to pull himself back to his body when he noticed a figure standing at the edge of the woods. This man was different than the others; his aura was muted, the colors harder to see. Jeran moved in to investigate.

As he neared, he realized that the figure's aura had the yellow and green shared by most Elves, but the colors were surrounded by a thin haze of black. As Jeran watched, the Aelvin archer lifted a bow from his shoulder and drew an arrow from the quiver on his back. Confused, Jeran turned, but the only thing he saw was Martyn.

Gasping, his body tensed, but he felt it only in the back of his mind, as if it were another person's body. Jeran quickly withdrew his perceptions, returning to his body. "The prince!" he yelled, jumping to his feet and leaving the clearing at a run. He did not have time to explain matters to Jes.

"Jeran! Wait! You have not released—" The rest of what Jes said was lost to him. He ran through the trees, praying to the Five Gods that he did not arrive too late.

Bursting onto the Path of Riches, Jeran knocked over an Elf and shouldered his way through a cluster of Guardsmen. He ignored the angry cries from behind, thinking only of reaching Martyn before it was too late. His tenuous hold on magic was breaking, but he paid it no heed.

Reaching the center of the camp, he spied Martyn, still standing amongst the Guardsmen, oblivious to the danger. He tried to call out a warning, but as he opened his mouth, his hold on magic slipped, and the

flows rushed into him in a torrent. He choked on his words, and tensed. Pained flared throughout his body.

Ignoring the stabbing lances of pain that shot through his body, Jeran forced himself to run. He looked to the trees, to where he knew the archer was waiting, and saw the dying sunlight glint off the head of an arrow. The magic continued to pour into him, filling him, and he knew he had to find a way to release it or the consequences would be dire.

The arrowhead disappeared, and Jeran, his head pounding with the power of his magic, sprinted the last few hands and dove toward Martyn.

Everything happened at once. Jeran felt his hands grasp Martyn's shoulders. Pain seared through him, originating in his shoulder and spreading in waves through the rest of his body. The pressure inside his head released and he hit the ground. Jarred by the impact, he lost consciousness. Around him, the forest erupted in flames.