

Path of Glory

Book One of Boundary's Fall
Electronic Preview

This excerpt of Path of Glory
features the first two chapters of the novel.
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Remembrance

Even from here I can hear the mountains.

Looking down from his vantage point high on a distant hill, the Mage stared north across the plains of Alrendria, silent but for his thoughts. His gaze swept over the army encampment below him.

Three encampments, he amended with a frown, his eyes focusing on the nearest. The tight cluster of tents belonged to the Elves. Few remained, so few that the Mage doubted the remainder could still be considered an encampment. The Elves had all but disbanded their army, and the majority of the Aelvin forces had marched back to their secluded forests.

The remaining Aelvin tents lay huddled together in a small, tight circle. The coloring of the material varied, from the deep green of the forest to a muted brown to a more vibrant blue, but the tents all shared a common, natural hue. They did not clash with the landscape around them. On the contrary, they accentuated the land, highlighting its beauty. Yet for some reason the ring of tents stood out to the Mage, appearing out of place, like an isolated copse of trees in an inhospitable landscape. The Mage scratched his brown beard, now streaked with grey, as he pondered his observation.

The remaining Aelvin tents belonged exclusively to *Ael Maulle*. The Gifted. The greatest and most powerful Aelvin Magi. Yet the Mage knew with absolute certainty that even *Ael Maulle* would have withdrawn with their countrymen, fleeing for the protection of the Great Forest, if not for their promises to High Wizard Aemon.

The Mage took a deep breath and allowed his perceptions to flow through the Aelvin camp. The Elves showed little motion within their tents, few signs of merriment. No figures ran from tent to tent; no musicians trumpeted victory; no soldiers sang songs of glory. Despite the lack of festivities, the Mage believed the Elves were celebrating. They had yearned for an end to this war as much as any.

The Elves can be so very reserved, mused the Mage, *so annoyingly controlled. They have such trouble letting go of their self-discipline and arrogance.* He wondered briefly if their sense of propriety was what made relating to the other Races so difficult for Elves.

The Mage directed his gaze north, to the next encampment. The stillness of the Aelvin camp contrasted nicely with that of the Garun'ah. Even without

extending his perceptions, the Mage could see the large warriors running among their tents arm in arm, sometimes accompanied by Human soldiers, though more often than not among only their own race. Other Tribesmen lounged around huge bonfires, sharing tales of personal triumphs and trying to outdrink their companions.

Even without the aid of his Gift, the Mage heard the wild songs of the Garun'ah on the winds. Birds of prey circled above the camp, while bears and wolves walked carefree through the tents, their bodies silhouetted in the bright afternoon light. *The Garun'ah certainly know how to celebrate a victory!* he said to himself. *We could all learn a lesson or two from them.*

The tents of the Garun'ah, like those of the Elves, had a range of shades, from earthy browns and greens to vibrant reds and warm yellows. Though the Aelvin tents had a similar size and shape, the Garun'ah tents varied as much in form as in color, and while the Elves' tents lay clumped together, the Garun'ah arranged theirs in a seemingly haphazard way.

The Mage extended his perceptions through the maze of tents. Five tents clustered in one place. Another sitting alone. Six arranged in a cross surrounded by a circle of tents. Using his perceptions to travel the camp, the pattern seemed to make little sense. Only when he pulled his perceptions back and viewed the encampment from a distance did the reason for the randomness become apparent.

Taken as a whole, the encampment all but disappeared into the surrounding landscape, the tents arranged in perfect harmony with the land around them. To one unaware of its presence, the Garun'ah camp would be virtually invisible.

A third encampment lay north of the Garun'ah's, closer to the mountains than the others. The Human tents were uniform in size, shape, and color; constructed from a drab, cream-colored canvas, heavy but durable; and arranged in perfect lines, every squad of Guardsmen separated by a uniform distance. Though the camp was neat and orderly, the Mage found the Human camp unsightly, a blemish in an otherwise beautiful landscape.

He muttered a curse, scolding himself for the inappropriateness of his thoughts. *These are men of war, not men of art. Their profession is battle, not aesthetics.* He could not hate them for being what they were; for he, as much as any, was responsible for their necessity.

The Mage pulled back his perceptions. He looked at all three camps together, comparing and contrasting them. *So much can be learned from a people by the way they organize themselves,* he observed. *The way the Races think is obvious even in the layout of these camps. They show our differences, and yet ironically, they show how alike we are.*

Though to the naked eye these camps appeared quite different from one another, under the surface they all served the same purpose. They were camps of war, dedicated to preserving the peace and protecting Madryn from the

Darklord. So too, did the Races themselves appear different on the surface, but, despite their differences, the Mage believed the four Races were very much alike. Perhaps more alike than they were willing to admit. He wished fervently that their camaraderie would continue throughout the winters to come.

We have been at war so long. Please let this peace be a lasting one! The Mage made this request of no one in particular. It was a plea to man as much as a prayer to gods.

The camps below were celebrating their great victory over the Darklord Lorthas, though one would not have thought so if watching the silent encampment of the Elves. The festivities had been continuous, in varying degree, for the last ten days. Things had not yet returned to normal, though the revelry had lessened since those first, frantic days immediately following the victory. Despite the work remaining to be done, the Mage was reluctant to stop the celebration. *These men deserve some happiness, some respite from the last few seasons. From the last few centuries.*

The Mage watched the Guardsmen carousing through the camps. He listened to the snippets of song that drifted to him on the winds. Though the Humans and Garun'ah often congregated in separate groups, and the Elves remained all but invisible, the Mage knew more than one friendship had been forged among the Four Races during the long winters of war. *If only those friendships last!*

Some movements below did not belong to the celebration. Though they had won a great victory, these were still camps of war, and certain duties must be performed. The Mage saw the slow, graceful movements of soldiers; the faster, sporadic dashes of messengers; the frantic parries and slashes of trainees. More than everything else, the steady, weary plodding of refugees caught the Mage's eye. And rent his heart.

Refugees had streamed into the camp from all directions, except north, since the Boundary was raised two score days past. Though Aemon and the Magi counseled them to leave, these bedraggled people insisted they had nowhere else to go. They believed this collection of tents was the safest place in all of Madryn. The Mage was not so sure he agreed with them.

So many people. Where do they come from? How did they get here so fast?

North of the encampments stood a small collection of tents, which served as the command post for the allied armies. Eventually, those tents would become the mighty fortress of Portal. For now, broken piles of rock covered the plains, rock with which they would construct a great citadel. Piles of timber arrived daily, cut from the nearby forests.

Engineers worked tirelessly to design the massive stronghold and its battlements. Even now they prepared to start full scale construction, nearly half a season ahead of schedule. The Mage watched as masons, carpenters, and laborers began to lay the foundation for the greatest fortification in Alrendria—in all of Madryn. The Mage turned his eyes to the Boundary.

In the distance, the mountains trembled.

After forty days—forty long days—the mountains still move.

The Mage spared a glance east, toward the tiny dust cloud of the departing Aelvin army. No one expected the alliance to hold forever, but many—especially the Mage—had hoped a greater peace would emerge. In his heart, the Mage had hoped for a better understanding between the Races. *Is that so much to ask?* he wondered, casting his eyes to the heavens.

Please let this alliance lead to a unity among the Races, he prayed to the Five Gods, *the first true unity.* Yet it seemed his prayers would again go unanswered. Already the factions were reforming, already the Races were dividing, and already the Elves beat a hasty retreat back to their precious forest.

When he questioned the Elves, they placed their faith in the Boundary. Trust in the Boundary. The Boundary will hold. Because of the Boundary, we have nothing to fear. More to the point, the Mage knew they feared the Boundary. They feared what the Boundary was and what it symbolized.

The Mage smiled sadly, finding it difficult to be angry with the Elves. For creatures as intertwined with magic as they, the Boundary must be a terrifying thing. A barrier against magic. A wall no creature of magic could pass.

Ael Maulle, the Aelvin Magi, would be in the vanguard of that retreating host if not for their promise to Aemon. The Mage's smile broadened as he mused that, given the option, most Human Magi would willingly have left with the Elves.

In many of them, being this close to the Boundary caused great dread. Like *Ael Maulle*, they remained only at Aemon's request. Only at his command. The Mage wondered how long this makeshift alliance would last without the support of High Wizard Aemon.

The Boundary. Magic's greatest achievement. Mankind's only hope.

What have I done?

The Mage turned around, his gaze roaming over the fields to the south and west, his eyes focusing on the last battlefield of a long and bloody war. A battlefield he had disregarded since that fateful day an eternity ago. He had other things, more important things, to do than grieve.

Thankfully, they had removed the bodies, their gear reclaimed, their remains given a decent burial. The unexpected spring rains washed away the blood, dampened the smells, hid the scars. Eagles and hawks spiraled in lazy circles over lands that, not too long ago, were black with carrion birds. Time had already washed away the physical reminders of that grisly battle. Time could never remove the memories.

How many people were lost in this war? wondered the Mage. *How many friends dead?* A single tear filled the Mage's eye, threatening to fall. *I will never understand how they stand the pain. The BattleMagi . . . the Healers . . . even the MageSmiths. Despite their Gifts, I'm thankful I do not suffer their weaknesses.*

The Mage returned his gaze to the north. He could not spare any more time on the past. The present had more immediate concerns, the future more dire

ones. From horizon to horizon stretched a vast range of mountains where forty days ago none had existed. Mountains, stark and black, ran like a razor's scar across the lush, rolling plains of northern Alrendria. The groaning was only a fraction of what it had been, the tremors had virtually stopped.

The Mage's tear, which before only threatened to fall, now did so.

He could forgive himself for his crimes against man—for all the death, destruction, and suffering his pride caused—but he could not forgive his crime against nature. What he did was terrible. *I did not do it alone*, he said to himself, hoping to find some solace in the thought. In the end his guilt was too strong. *I may not have acted alone*, he admitted, *but it was my idea . . . my plan . . . my orders the others followed!*

Raising the Boundary went against everything he had been taught, everything he loved. To desecrate nature with this abomination—this Boundary—was so unnatural, so alien to his beliefs, that, for an infinitesimal period, he wished he had let the Darklord win. Anything would be better than this betrayal of nature. Of himself.

Better to have let Lorthas win! Better to have let us finish destroying ourselves, an avocation the Four Races seem to enjoy so much.

This thought lasted only an instant. It was the only time in the Mage's long life he entertained such a thought. A single tear. It surprised the Mage to discover he had one left to shed. Slowly, he stood, not remembering falling to his knees. He brushed the dirt from his grey robes and wiped the tear from his cheek.

The air shimmered in front him, silver speckles appearing in a vertical line. Slowly, the line widened, the sparkles swirling outward as the Gate opened. With one last shuddering breath, one violent exhale of emotion and self doubt, the Mage turned and stepped through the Gate.

Lord Aemon, High Wizard, Master of Magi, Commander of the Armies of the Four Races, emerged in the center of the Alrendrian camp, which would later be the site of Portal Keep. The Guardsmen on duty betrayed no surprise at his sudden appearance. During the MageWar, they had become accustomed to Magi materializing out of thin air. At Aemon's arrival the Guardsmen jumped to attention, their already tense bodies becoming even more rigid.

The Mage smiled as he thought, *Saying that these Guardsmen jumped to attention is like saying the sun burns a little hotter today, or that a starving man feels hungrier now than this morning. It's only a matter of degree.* A lifetime of war had conditioned these warriors to never let down their guard.

The Guardsmen bowed formally to Aemon, calling out greetings in reverent tones. Aemon was not pleased with the formality, nor was he happy with the stares that followed him. The fear or awe that most people now harbored for him filled the Mage with anger. Despite a great effort on his part, the arrival of High Wizard Aemon, the Savior of Madryn, produced these effects in more people of late. Aemon silently wished it did not become a habit.

He acknowledged the Guardsmen and summoned a messenger, handing him some documents to relay to Lord Keryn. After the man disappeared, running south at full speed to carry out Aemon's commands, the High Wizard walked north through the construction. North, toward the Portal. Toward the Boundary.

A scream attracted his attention. Aemon turned left, diverting himself from his goal to investigate. Picking his way through the rubble, he spotted a lone Guardsman walking toward the main body of the Human encampment. The Guardsman carried a bundle of rags under one arm and stumbled across the ground as if drunk. Aemon watched in confusion, unsure of what he had heard, until the bundle of rags burst to life, arms and legs thrashing about, voice screeching in terror. Sighing inwardly, Aemon decided to intervene.

At his appearance the Guardsman stopped dead in his tracks. His head snapped to attention, but he kept a tight grip on his bundle. Aemon paused in front of the man, a dark-haired fighter with eyes tired from the long war. He waited patiently for the Guardsman to explain himself, but, when the soldier remained silent, he prompted, "What have we here, Guardsman?"

"A thief, High Wizard," answered the Guardsman in a deep baritone voice, as if that were explanation enough. At Aemon's impatient glare he hurriedly added, "She was caught stealing from the north larder. The punishment for stealing, first offense, is a night in the cage. That's where I was taking her, Sir, when she broke free of my grip and ran off. She was a tough one to catch."

"Set her down, Guardsman."

"Yes, High Wizard." The Guardsman hurried to comply, setting his burden on the ground. When the rags settled, Aemon saw the thief was but a child, seven winters at most. The girl—Aemon thought the Guardsman was correct in calling the child a girl, though all the dirt made it hard to tell—stood defiantly, shoulder length black hair blowing in the afternoon breeze.

The girl's appearance did not attract Aemon's attention; her eyes did. They were bright, almost luminescent blue, full of strength, but lacking the innocence most children possessed for many more than seven winters.

"Who are you, little one?" asked Aemon, taking a step closer, his arm extended to caress her shoulder. The child kicked him smartly in the shin, sending a burst of pain up his leg. In an instant, she was running across the rubble, trying to make an escape. Aemon swallowed his pain, banishing it to a distant part of his mind, and seized the child with his Will. The girl felt the air solidify around her; her muscles froze and would not respond. Try though she might, she could not pull herself away.

A simple trick, considered Aemon, though I doubt it will be so easily used on this child for long.

Aemon and the Guardsman walked toward the refugee slowly. She stared back with a look of complete and utter fear. Aemon reached out and grabbed her by the arm, simultaneously releasing her with his magic. In as calm and

comforting a voice as he could manage, he said, "We will not harm you, little one. Tell me, where is your family?"

"Dead." A simple word, spoken quietly and without emotion, but it pulled hard on Aemon's heart. Some things he could not fix, but maybe this time he could help a little.

"Are you hungry, child?" he asked. The girl nodded, her dark hair bobbing slowly, though she still looked suspicious.

"I think, Guardsman," Aemon said with a sarcastic twist to his lips, "we can forego the cage in this instance, don't you?" The Guardsman nodded, swallowing hard, fearing the displeasure of the High Wizard. Aemon smiled. "Good. Take the child to the Magi."

At this, the Guardsman's eyes widened. In a hesitant voice he stated, "Lord Aemon, no one goes to the Magi's camp! Not Guardsmen. Not prisoners. Not even Lord Keryn! The Magi come to you."

Aemon did not have time for formality. "They will not turn you into ash for entering their tents," he replied, regretting his words when the man's eyes widened in unfeigned fear. "Just tell the Magi to have her cleaned and fed. If anyone questions your presence, tell them you are there by my command. You will stay with the child personally and watch her until I return." The Guardsman swallowed and saluted Aemon fist-on-heart. He took the child by the hand, this time a little more gently, and led her south.

Satisfied that the Guardsman would carry out his orders, Aemon continued north. He wished he could Gate to his destination, but knew it was impossible. The Boundary deflected, or destroyed, all magic used near it. The closer to the Boundary, the harder to control the magic. Three Magi had died trying to Gate directly to the Boundary.

Three more dead because of my ignorance!

Once again, Aemon cursed himself as a self-pitying fool. *Their deaths were just one of the many unforeseen consequences of my actions*, he reminded himself. *What I did, I had to do. There's no way I could have known, and certainly no way I could have saved them.*

Nevertheless, they had intended the Boundary to be a block against magic. Its purpose was simply to prevent anything of magic from crossing, thus trapping Lorthas and his armies. That the Boundary would pervert any magic used near it had never occurred to Aemon, nor to any of the other Magi. Yet the Boundary not only affected magic in its vicinity, but for a distance of nearly a league from its actual location.

Aemon called out to a Guardsman, ordering the soldier to bring him a horse. When it arrived, he mounted with the casual dignity of one who has spent a great deal of time in the saddle. Before he could ride off, a voice called out behind him. "Are you going to the Boundary, Aemon?"

Aemon turned to look at the speaker, a tall, middle-aged man with long blonde hair pulled back in a loose ponytail. The man had a sword sheathed

across his back and wore shining silver plate armor. Around his neck was a circle of beads from which hung a silver pendant, glistening in the afternoon sunshine. He regarded the High Wizard with icy blue eyes.

He nodded his head in answer. "I am indeed."

Tyre scratched his chin thoughtfully. "I have heard that people walk the far side today. It may not be safe to go alone. Would you care for some company?"

Aemon laughed out loud. "Most of the Magi are grateful I do not make them go near the Boundary. Why are you different, Tyre?"

Tyre looked north. He was slow to answer. "There is nothing for me to fear," he replied at last. "I am grateful for your Boundary, Aemon. For the first time in decades the pain has gone away."

Aemon gazed compassionately at his friend. He reached out a hand and placed it on Tyre's shoulder. "Get some rest, old friend. There's nothing for me to fear out there either."

Tyre shrugged his massive shoulders. "Suit yourself, High Wizard," he said with a smile before turning around and walking back to the camp. Aemon watched him walk away, his tall form silhouetted in the bright sunshine. When Tyre's form disappeared in the distance, Aemon turned his horse north, heeling the mount to a walk.

He passed the foundations of the Wall, which would eventually become the highest and thickest fortification in Alrendria. In the whole of Madryn. Masons were hard at work preparing the foundation. They hauled the huge stone to their final location, using the nearly-limitless supply of refugees as laborers.

As Aemon passed the Wall, he felt a tingling sensation in the back of his mind, which he knew was the first indication that he drew near the Boundary. He would no longer be able to sense anyone using magic around him, though he did not consider it much of a threat. Very few would risk using magic, even this far from the Boundary.

Aemon spurred his horse to a gallop, eager to get this chore done with as quickly as possible. The Wall behind him, he continued north. He watched as the mountains flowed closer together, towering thousands of hands into the sky. When it was complete, the Wall would form a half-circle around this area, completely enclosing and restricting all movement through the portal.

Aemon rode into the portal, the only connection between what remained of Alrendria and *Ael Shataq*—the Prison. That was what the Magi called the lands enclosed by the Boundary. Aemon could not think of a better name.

To his left and right, approximately seventy-five hands to either side of him, the mountains came to an abrupt stop. They did not dwindle to nothingness, as do most mountain ranges, but simply stopped. Sheer cliffs of rock stretched into the heavens; high enough no man could climb, smooth enough to minimize the danger of avalanche or rock-slide. The Portal would force an attacking army from *Ael Shataq* together, making them an easy target from the battlements of Portal Keep.

Aemon continued through the Portal and the tingling in his head gradually grew to a buzzing. The buzzing, he knew, would soon become pain. A way to stop the pain existed, but Aemon was hesitant to use it. He wanted to study the effects of the Boundary on Magi, particularly how proximity to the magical barrier affected a Mage's ability. *Besides*, he admitted to himself, *the remedy is little better than the pain*. Aemon sighed, knowing he needed all his wits about him, and focused his Will.

The buzzing immediately receded to a mild tingling, almost nonexistent. The rest of the world became brighter. Colors were sharper, details finer, sounds louder, smells more fragrant. Aemon felt each muscle in the horse beneath him, saw eagles circling high overhead, felt the weariness and worry melt from within. Under normal circumstances, Aemon would relish this feeling. Few things were more pleasant to a Mage than focusing his Will. Focusing made normal life seem bland. If the dangers were not so great, Aemon suspected most Magi would walk the world in a constant state of focus.

Yet this time the feeling brought with it a tightness to his chest. To let go of his Will now would cause unimaginable pain, compliments of the Boundary. He could not use his Gift, could not use magic. Releasing his Will might cause pain, but any attempt to use magic this close to the Boundary caused a greater pain, though one of the spirit, not the body. Attempts to use magic this close to the Boundary did not go wrong, the magic was neither deflected nor destroyed. One simply could not use magic close to the Boundary, as if it did not exist. Yet another unforeseen consequence of his actions.

These unexpected consequences put the Magi in a very unusual, and uncomfortable, position. They suffered great pain if they did not focus their Will near the Boundary. Focusing relieved the pain, but brought with it the realization that magic could not be used. Aemon could think of no worse punishment for a Mage. *Taking magic from a Mage is the most frightening thing imaginable to them*, he thought. *It's like telling a smith he could live in his forge, so long as he never struck hammer to anvil*.

In other words, it was eternal agony. Aemon understood why the Magi hated and feared the Boundary, why the Elves were in such a hurry to leave. He sympathized with their feelings. He shared them. Yet he knew what must be done, must be done. There was no escaping duty. That was why every day since the Raising he rode to within arms reach of the dreaded Boundary and sent his perceptions along it as far as he was able. All along the border of *Ael Shataq* other Magi did the same. They needed to be sure the Boundary had no holes. No weaknesses.

Aemon reined in his horse and dismounted. He stood, arms outstretched, and closed his eyes. He extended his perceptions until he felt—nothing. That was the only way to describe it. Though he could open his eyes and see objects before him, as far as his perceptions were concerned, the universe ended at the Boundary. When a Mage extended his perceptions, he reached a point where

he could no longer sense anything accurately, but he always felt something. The emptiness Aemon had come to associate with the Boundary was something new. Something unexpected.

He extended his perceptions up the wall, high into the heavens. He reached deep into the ground. To the east and west, as far through the mountains as he could penetrate. In front of him he felt nothing. Which was exactly what he hoped to feel. It meant the Boundary had no breaches; their armor had no chinks. Aemon smiled as he remembered the fear on the faces of the Magi when they learned they could not sense the Boundary with their magic. *Sometimes they can be so childish*, he thought, *so convinced that without magic they are worthless!*

A voice called to him, snapping Aemon back from his musings. "I am impressed, High Wizard," the cynical voice said. "I never thought you had the courage to do something like this."

The voice sounded pleasant, yet hearing it nearly caused Aemon to lose his focus. To lose his grip on magic this close to the Boundary would be dangerous, perhaps fatal. Struggling to maintain control over his Will, Aemon opened his eyes.

Before him stood a man in long, white robes. He was tall and thin, almost emaciated. Bones and tendons were clearly visible on his hands and face, the only parts of his body exposed to the elements. His hair was white, nearly a match in shading for his robes, and it hung over his shoulders in long curls. His skin was pale, not quite pure white, but with little pigmentation. Yet it was his eyes that attracted attention, the eyes that have *always* attracted attention. They were not the pink of the common albino. These eyes glowed red. Burned red. All in all, the figure appeared more an apparition than a man.

"Lorthas," spat Aemon, the name coming out a curse. The vehemence surprised even Aemon. "I would not think you had the courage to come this close to me."

"Why not, High Wizard?" replied Lorthas. "You are as dangerous to me as I am to you. As it is, this is my first visit to your—what do you call it? Oh yes, your Boundary. I have been taking care of things on this side, but the reports I received fascinated me, and I just had to experience this for myself. I assure you, it is pure luck that brings me here at the same time as you."

Aemon stood silently. He had no desire to banter with this demon. Lorthas took a step toward the Boundary, hand outstretched. Then he took another. As he neared, small blue sparks began jumping from the air, arching toward the Darklord's fingers. When the first one touched, Lorthas flinched, but he took another step forward.

Lorthas' actions both intrigued and confused Aemon. He wondered what the Darklord hoped to accomplish. With one final step, Lorthas' hand contacted the Boundary. Blue lightning arched up and down his arm. His head snapped up; his eyes bulged in pain, their color now a deeper red, like molten

iron. With a final flash, Lorthas was thrown nearly thirty hands from the Boundary, landing in a crumpled ball. He lay motionless, and Aemon found himself wishing Lorthas dead.

He felt disappointed when he heard the Darklord groan. Struggling back to his feet, Lorthas offered Aemon a bow of his head as he brushed dust from his robes. "Most impressive, High Wizard," he said with an evil grin. "An interesting experience, though not one I care to repeat."

Convinced Lorthas was not a threat to Madryn from that side of the Boundary, Aemon turned to walk away. He only got a step or two before Lorthas called, "Aemon!"

The High Wizard turned around slowly, furious that this man dared to call him by name, a right reserved for only his friends. When he was sure he had the High Wizard's attention, Lorthas said, "You realize your mountains have caused a surprising change in the weather on this side of the Boundary. I'm sure you're experiencing similar events."

Aemon shrugged, well aware that weather patterns were going to change. That was one consequence of this project he had been aware of from the start. In the days since the Raising, increased rainfall had caused new streams to form on this side of the Boundary. In a few seasons, a new river would exist in this part of Alrendria.

Aemon began to turn again, but Lorthas' next question stopped him cold.

"You are familiar with the Jemallin Sea, are you not?" Lorthas asked, his face adopting an amused expression.

Aemon faced the Darklord, his look one of confusion. "You mean the Great Plains of Jemallin?" Lorthas did not answer, shaking his head sadly. The Darklord did not have to wait long before understanding dawned on the High Wizard. Understanding and guilt.

Lorthas pursed his lips in the semblance of a pout, his face tilted to one side. An attempt at sympathy, Aemon assumed. "Unfortunately, no," Lorthas replied with an evil grin. "Raising your mountains ruptured a rather large aquifer. The resulting flood completely covered the plains. Sadly, I was otherwise engaged at the time, and could not spare anyone to save the nomads of the plains. I believe a handful on the edges managed to escape, though I hear they run screaming whenever they see even a glass of water." Lorthas laughed wickedly at the thought.

Suddenly, the laughter stopped and the Darklord's face became more contemplative. "Though I must admit, Jemallin makes a beautiful inland ocean. I am considering building a castle there." When Aemon did not take the bait, Lorthas' smile faded. He spoke in a colder, more formidable tone. "How many are going to die, High Wizard?" he asked. "How many lives condemned just to see me imprisoned?"

Aemon squared his shoulders. He spoke with all the authority of the High Wizard. Lorthas found himself stepping back from the thunder in Aemon's

voice, a thunder that came from his heart, not from his magic. “. . .How many would have died had we left you free?” Aemon replied angrily. “When I declared war on you Lorthas, it was complete. When I said that I would use whatever means were necessary to destroy you, I did not lie. ‘Though it may cost the world, I will see him defeated.’ Those were my words exactly. I would not change any of my decisions, and I have but one regret. I wish I had never accepted you as my apprentice.”

Aemon turned and walked to his horse. As he mounted, he added, “I would have torn this continent apart piece by piece—executed every living soul on it personally—before giving you free reign. I will never bow to another Darklord.” With that Aemon turned his horse and began to walk back through the Portal with a casual, unconcerned dignity.

From behind, Aemon heard Lorthas call to him. Though he still spoke pleasantly, Aemon heard the undertones of anger and hatred. Aemon heard the threat. “You have not won, High Wizard!” laughed the Darklord. “Your Boundary is nothing but an obstacle for me to pass. Though it may take a thousand winters, or even two, it will not stand forever. I will not be idle in the meantime. When your Boundary falls, I will be ready, with a formidable force and a desire for vengeance.

“Will you be equally prepared? I doubt you can keep your pitiful alliance alive for a season, let alone millennia! Time is not an issue to me, Aemon! I am more eternal than even you, old man! Better for you if you had bowed to me today. I will not be so merciful when next we meet.”

Aemon continued to ride away, refusing to defend himself. To do so would show weakness, and above all else, Aemon could never show weakness. *Not to him! Not ever!* Lorthas’ taunts echoed through the pass. “Your Boundary *will* fall,” he yelled after the retreating Mage. “Alrendria will not be ready for me. They will have forgotten me, or think me only a legend. You know how short a memory they have! You have done nothing but prolong the inevitable. We are meant to rule these creatures, not serve them!”

When Aemon did not respond, Lorthas could no longer control his rage. His words thundered down the Portal. “You know this Boundary will not last forever! I know you do. We will meet again, High Wizard! Only death can save you from me now!” Lorthas’ laughter followed Aemon down the Portal. Aemon suppressed a shudder. He wished Lorthas were wrong.

Why can’t Lorthas be wrong?

Chapter 1

What is he doing? Jeran wondered, peering down from his hiding place above the stream. From his vantage point, he had a beautiful view of the surrounding countryside. In the distance, the mountains of the Boundary stretched across the horizon, their dark stone absorbing the afternoon light. Sunlight glinted off several snow-capped peaks, the brilliant white contrasting nicely with the dark mountains. South of the Boundary, the land rolled. The season's first wildflowers dotted the hills, which were green with new spring grass.

A stream snaked through the hills, twisting back and forth through the valleys. It passed below Jeran, cutting a line of blue through the otherwise green landscape. From his hiding place, he could hear the quiet babbling as the waters flowed southeast to join the mighty river Alren. Jeran had been coming here to swim when he stumbled upon the stranger.

Below him, lying motionless along the stream's near bank, was a boy. Not just any boy, but a boy Jeran did not recognize. Living as he did in a small farming village close to the Boundary, Jeran did not often see people he did not know. Seeing anything new at all was rare. Squinting his eyes, he crawled forward, trying to get a better view.

The stranger lay at the edge of the stream, bare-chested. His head hung over the water, his left arm submerged nearly to the shoulder. He was motionless, so still that Jeran thought him asleep, or perhaps dead. After a few moments, the stranger jerked his arm, splashing water high in the air. He scanned the nearby bank frantically, but did not find what he was looking for. Uttering a quiet curse, the first sound he had made in all the time Jeran had been observing him, he resumed his original, immobile position.

The stranger intrigued Jeran. Finding a stranger in this part of Alrendria was rare enough, but finding one doing something so peculiar was rarer. Jeran was desperately curious to learn what was going on. He leaned far out over the edge of the embankment. By the time he felt the ground giving away beneath him, it was too late to do anything about it. In a shower of dirt and pebbles, he fell down the hillside.

The fall was not a long one, nor was the slope so steep that he risked serious injury. Nevertheless, overwhelming fear filled Jeran. Before, he had been

a silent observer, watching from the safety of concealment. Now, his presence betrayed, he no longer had the security of anonymity. The stranger had certainly heard the ground crumble above him, and he must have seen Jeran tumble down the hillside.

Not having met many strangers in his life, Jeran had only stories on which to base his opinions. The strangers in stories were trouble more often than not.

Jeran finally stopped his descent, arms flailing desperately as he regained his balance. Rolling quickly to his feet, he found himself standing only eight hands away from the stranger. The young man no longer reclined along the bank of the stream, staring into the water. He was now on his feet, crouching low, a stick grasped tightly in one hand, as if preparing to attack.

The stranger was head and shoulders taller than Jeran and more heavily muscled. Long ribs ran down his dirt-smeared breeches, and the once-white shirt on the ground was in a similar state of disrepair. The stranger's hair was golden-brown, and though unkempt, it hung to his shoulders in tight curls. Its color matched his almond-shaped eyes perfectly. Those eyes stared warily at Jeran.

A large scar was visible on the stranger's shoulder. It looked like a burn, and, as Jeran stared at the injury, it seemed to take shape, appearing like a bird in flight. For a brief instant, he wondered if burns, like clouds, often had shapes you could see if you looked close enough.

Jeran cursed himself a fool, overwhelmed by another wave of fear. He swallowed, trying to work saliva back into his mouth, focusing his mind on the danger at hand. Keeping close watch on the stranger's movements, Jeran shifted his eyes back and forth, searching for some means of escape. The stranger looked both faster and stronger than him, but Jeran had a better familiarity with the area. At least, he hoped he did.

Jeran tensed, ready to turn and run for the village, his lungs filled with air so he could scream. He was not yet so much a man to feel ashamed by screaming for help. The stranger's eyes delayed his flight. They looked wild, almost savage, but they did not appear menacing or dangerous. Instead, fear filled them.

Jeran could not understand this new revelation. The strangers in stories were sometimes mean and sometimes nice, but they were never afraid. Jeran had no illusions; he knew he was not particularly threatening. If the stranger were afraid of him, he decided that he had no cause to fear the stranger.

Raising his arms slowly, to show he meant no harm, he took a step forward. He swallowed again, forcing a smile onto his face. "My name is Jeran Odara," he said in a voice that only quavered slightly. "I was watching you from the top of the hill." Jeran pointed to the top of the hill, speaking slowly and clearly, hoping to reassure this unfamiliar boy of his good intentions. "And I . . . Well, I guess I lost my balance. I didn't mean to frighten you."

The stranger did not move, nor did his wild eyes leave Jeran's face. "I just wanted to know what you were doing," Jeran continued, but the stranger still

showed no sign of understanding. "Are you from around here?" Nothing. "Did you come from Portal?" Nothing. Jeran asked a few more questions, but the stranger remained unresponsive.

With the stranger's continued silence, Jeran's fear returned. He stammered, unable to speak clearly, his chest tightening. His hands began to tremble, and he decided that now would be a good time to take his leave of the stranger. "I'm sorry I bothered you," he apologized. "I'm going to go now."

Jeran turned around slowly, keeping his eyes on the stranger as long as possible, ready to run at the slightest movement from the stranger. A voice suddenly growled, "Dahr." Jeran flinched at the sound. His nerves were so on edge that, for an instant, he thought the sound had come from a wild animal.

Then he realized it was the stranger who had spoken. He turned around, once again facing the boy. "What?"

The stranger took a slow, deep breath. "My name is Dahr," he said, his voice a pitch lower than Jeran's, "and I was catching fish."

Jeran scanned the bank of the stream. "Where did you put them?"

"What?" Dahr replied, his face scrunching in confusion.

"The fish you caught," Jeran explained, looking around. "I don't see any."

"Oh," Dahr said, looking embarrassed. He shrugged his shoulders guiltily. "I haven't caught any yet. Some days I do better than others, and today hasn't been one of my best." Dahr straightened from his crouch, visibly relaxing.

"Would you show me?" Jeran asked curiously. He had never heard of catching fish without a pole.

Dahr's eyes brightened. "Sure!" He looked at the stick clutched in his right hand. Laughing, he dropped it to the ground and returned to the stream bank. Lying on the moist earth, he explained the procedure to Jeran. "All you have to do is lay next to the water and put your arm in as deep as it will go. You stay very still until a fish swims over your hand, then jerk your arm and toss the fish out of the river. Watch!"

Dahr resumed the position he had been in prior to Jeran's fall down the hillside. Jeran stood behind him, watching with interest. Time passed, but nothing happened. After a while, Dahr frowned and said, "There don't seem to be many fish around here right now." He sat up, picked up his dirty shirt, and used it to dry his arm. "There were plenty here before!" he lamented.

Jeran thought about it. "Maybe they were scared away when I fell down the hill," he guessed. "I'm sure they'll come back if we wait a while." Jeran's stomach growled, and he put a hand over his belly to quell the noise. Blushing, he asked, "Are you hungry, Dahr?"

The boy nodded eagerly, and Jeran said, "I know of a clearing not too far from here where there are berries. Most aren't ripe, but there should be enough to make a quick snack. By the time we're finished, maybe the fish will have returned. Would you like to join me?"

Dahr nodded again, his own stomach growling at the prospect of food. "Thank you," he said. "I haven't eaten since yesterday morning. I was hoping

to catch some fish for breakfast," he added with a laugh, "but since it's well past midday, you can see what kind of luck I've had." Good luck or bad, Jeran was impressed. He could never have sat along the stream bank all morning without being terribly bored.

The boys scrambled up the hill side by side. As Jeran led them through the brush, he asked Dahr a long string of questions. "Which farm are you from? Maybe my uncle knows your parents. I thought I knew everyone around Keryn's Rest—there aren't many people here—but I've never seen you before. Are you from Portal? I've seen Guardsmen from Portal before. They stop in Keryn's Rest on their way to and from the castle. Every now and then, Lord Talbot himself comes to the village to order supplies and talk to the village council. He usually stays at our farm. He and my uncle served together in the Tachan War. Sometimes traders stop in our village as they travel, but I've never met anyone normal who lived in Portal before. What is—"

"I don't live in Portal," Dahr interrupted, "and I'm from far away. My parents died a long time ago and I was . . ." Dahr's eyes grew momentarily distant, "raised by someone else." Dahr shook himself, looking down at Jeran with a smile. "I left home at the beginning of winter. I've been on my own since then."

"You've been by yourself all winter?" Jeran asked incredulously. It was now early spring. He doubted he could have survived an entire season on his own, especially one as cold as this past winter. His estimation of Dahr improved greatly with the boy's admission. "I'm sorry about your parents," Jeran told him. "My parents died a long time ago too. I've lived with my uncle since I was a baby."

"It's okay," replied Dahr. "I don't remember my parents. They died a few months after my fourth Naming day. For the last eight winters, I lived on a large estate in eastern Rachannon. It was hard work, but I guess things could have been worse."

As Dahr finished his last statement, disbelief quickly replaced Jeran's concern. He looked his companion up and down skeptically. "That can't be true!" Jeran exclaimed. "You *must* be older than twelve winters!" Dahr towered over Jeran, nearly as tall, and broader than some, of the adults in Keryn's Rest.

Jeran shook his head back and forth, all but convinced that Dahr lied. "It's not possible!" he insisted. "My Naming Day is during harvest, and this was my fourteenth winter, but you're more than two hands taller than me and muscled like an ox! You have to be older than twelve winters!"

Jeran regretted his words instantly, sensing they had hurt Dahr. The boy's brow lowered indignantly, and the muscles of his jaw tensed. His eyes hardened, taking on that wild look again. Stopping, he put his hands on his hips forcefully, and in an angry voice snarled, "I'm not wrong! And I'm not a liar!"

He stared at Jeran a long time, and Jeran tensed, half-expecting Dahr to hit him. Finally, the larger boy shook himself, taking a deep, calming breath. "I'm sorry," he said meekly. "I didn't mean to get angry. I know why you don't believe me. I'm just bigger than other people my age, that's all!"

Jeran did not look convinced, so Dahr asked, "How do you know you're fourteen winters old?"

The question caught Jeran by surprise. He frowned in confusion before saying, "How do I know? I just am! My uncle told me. What has that to do . . . Oh!" He had the decency to look embarrassed. "I understand. I guess I don't really know I'm fourteen winters any more than you know you're twelve."

He looked apologetic as he stared into Dahr's golden-brown eyes. "I didn't mean to doubt you, Dahr. I don't think you're a liar. Besides, who would say they were younger than they really were anyway?" Dahr nodded in agreement, neither considering that someday being younger than their actual age might not seem such a terrible thing.

Jeran looked Dahr up and down one more time. "But you're so big!" he exclaimed, unable to fathom someone so young being Dahr's size.

Dahr's cheeks grew red. "I just grow fast," he said sheepishly. Then, with a smile, he added, "Maybe I'm the normal one. Maybe you and everyone else are just small!" The notion was so ridiculous that Jeran started to chuckle. Soon, both boys laughed uncontrollably.

Jeran waved Dahr forward, and they continued down the forest trail at a run. They were still chuckling when they reached their destination. They were in a small clearing, surrounded by tiny bushes, each dotted with red berries. Dahr plucked a berry from the nearest bush and looked at it suspiciously. "How do you know they're safe to eat?" he asked cautiously.

"My uncle told me these were okay," Jeran replied. "Besides, I've eaten them before!" He reached out, picked a berry, and popped it into his mouth to prove to Dahr they were not dangerous. Dahr frowned, still inspecting the berry he held in his hand, sniffing it gingerly from time to time. Finally, after a long hesitation, he bit the small fruit in half. His satisfied grunt indicated that he was pleased with the sweet taste. The boys fell silent, greedily shoving handful after handful of berries into their mouths.

A while later, their hunger temporarily satiated, they returned to the streambed, eager to try their luck at fishing. After another long period of wasted effort, Jeran discovered the flaw in Dahr's technique. "Look, Dahr!" he said, his voice full of excitement. "From where we're laying, our shadows fall into the stream." He pointed at the dark, cool waters. "See how the fish are swimming around that area? Maybe they know we're here because they can see our shadows! We'll have better luck if we find some place with more shade!"

Dahr nodded and stood, allowing Jeran to lead him downstream. Eventually, they found a more secluded and naturally dark section of water. Dahr glanced at Jeran hopefully as he pulled off his shirt and dropped to the bank. Jeran followed suit, separating himself from Dahr by ten paces. Not long after, Dahr shouted in joy. Jeran looked up to see a large river trout flopping about on the ground behind Dahr. With a smile, Jeran focused on the stream and redoubled his efforts.

By the time the sun was sinking in the west, they had a reasonable catch, though most of the fish were Dahr's. Jeran was not as patient as his new friend, and his eagerness often warned his prey of his approach, giving them ample time to escape. Jeran watched the sun as it fell toward the horizon and decided he should start back to the farm. He did not want his uncle to worry.

They divided the fish and were about to part company when Jeran had an idea. "You should come home with me, Dahr!" he said. "At the very least, Uncle Aryn would share dinner with you." He looked at the bundle at his side. "After all," he admitted, "you caught most of the fish. Besides, Uncle Aryn might be able to find some work for you. He's always complaining about how much work we have to do. Maybe you can stay with us, since you have nowhere else to go.

"That is, if you want to stay," Jeran amended. "If not, he can tell you where to go. Uncle Aryn's been to a lot of different places. Before I was born, he and my father fought in the Tachan War."

"I-I think I would like to come . . . at least for dinner," Dahr answered, surprised by Jeran's offer. He was not used to such kindness; not from the people he knew, and certainly not from strangers. Smiling, Jeran crossed the stream and headed north.

Dahr followed Jeran along the winding path. The Boundary lay ahead of them, and though the mountains were still far away, a hard day's ride on horseback, Jeran could never look at them without feeling a stab of fear. They turned at a bend in the path, and the mountains came into view. Jeran shuddered, and the unexpected motion caught Dahr's attention. Jeran laughed at his foolishness. "I always feel a little scared when I see the Boundary."

Dahr's face was blank. "The boundary of what?"

Jeran looked at his new friend in utter amazement. He pointed to the vast range of dark rock rising before them. "The mountains!" he said, excitement causing his voice to rise in pitch, "That's the . . . You've never heard of the Boundary?" Everyone knew what the Boundary was.

Dahr hesitated for a moment before he spoke. "Well, I've had an isolated life," he responded carefully, "and I grew up far from here." He lifted his head and looked Jeran straight in the eyes. "Besides, I've lived near mountains all my life. They're just large piles of rock! These seem to be no different from any other, so why should I be afraid of them?"

Realizing that Dahr had no idea what stood before him, Jeran stood dumbfounded. He took it upon himself to educate his new friend. As they walked north along the trail, he told Dahr every story he had ever heard about the Boundary, both what he knew to be true and what he had only heard as rumor, oftentimes allowing the different stories to run together. As he told the history of the Boundary, he kept his voice low, as if he were afraid of what might be listening.

Behind those mountains, the evil wizard Lorthas was imprisoned. Lorthas, who had tried to take over the world. Lorthas, who stood twenty hands tall,

with long, curving horns growing from his head and razor sharp claws on his hands. Lorthas, the Darklord, who would have enslaved the Four Races if High Wizard Aemon had not rallied them together to fight the Darklord's armies.

Jeran diverged from his tales of the Boundary to tell Dahr about the MageWar. The MageWar was the long, bloody battle between the armies of Lorthas and the nations allied under Aemon and his Magi. The terrible war raged across the continent of Madryn, lasting more than three centuries. The stories say the war would have lasted longer, except Aemon convinced the other Magi to raise the Boundary.

Jeran admitted that he did not believe that particular story. Aemon could not have rallied the four Races at the beginning of the war and then raised the Boundary three centuries later. Unlike the immortal Elves, Humans did not live that long.

The Boundary extended around the northwest of Madryn, and it was not just a range of mountains. The mountains kept Lorthas' armies entrapped, thus ending the fighting, but the real purpose of the Boundary was something altogether different. Deep within the dark mountains was an invisible barrier through which nothing of magic could pass. This barrier caused great pain, and sometimes death, to anyone who tried using magic near it. This magical wall was the actual Boundary, created to keep Lorthas, and those Magi foolish enough to follow him, imprisoned for all eternity.

Jeran's stories fascinated Dahr, who had never heard them before. He looked to the north again, and this time, his face betrayed a vague feeling of uneasiness. After a while, Jeran fell silent, his knowledge of the Boundary waning. To fill the void, Dahr shared some of the tales he had heard while growing up. Jeran listened attentively at first, then the two boys began trading stories, taking turns reciting the many legends they had collected.

Dahr had grown up in northern Rachannon, not far from the wild lands where the Garun'ah lived. The Garun'ah were a race of giants, he told Jeran, their bodies covered with thick fur. They had sharp claws and long fangs and hunted everything, killing animals and people alike for sport. They were a vicious, primitive race who did not build houses, preferring to sleep out in the open.

Jeran had heard different stories about the Garun'ah. The Garun'ah were an honorable and proud race. They and the Humans had been allies for thousands of winters, ever since they had freed themselves from their bondage to the Elves. The Garun'ah lived in tribes and constantly fought with each other to decide which tribe was the most powerful. Every Garun'ah could speak with animals and most had lions or bears or wolves for pets.

Dahr talked about the reclusive Elves, of whom Jeran knew little. The Elves were about the same height as Humans but smaller and weaker. They were immortal, and their Emperor had been alive since the dawn of time. They lived high in the trees of their forest, far to the north of Dahr's homeland. The Elves

were powerful Magi, and could make themselves invisible at will. They were uncomparable archers, the worst of them better than the best Human. Blindfolded, they could shoot the center of a cherry at a thousand paces!

They talked of the Lost Race, the Orog, though neither knew much about them. The Orog were supposedly giants, larger even than the mighty Garun'ah. The Orog hated anything magical, since they had no control of magic themselves. That was why they betrayed Aemon during the MageWar. Aemon had utterly destroyed them for their betrayal, sealing the few who survived on the far side of the Boundary with Lorthas and his armies.

Jeran told Dahr about Portal, the monstrous fortress guarding the one pass through the Boundary; the sole means into and out of *Ael Shataq*. For centuries, ever since the Boundary had been raised, the Human lands had banished their criminals and traitors through the portal. He told Dahr of the most famous: Turas the Swift and Fayrd the Betrayer; Hralla of the Drekkra tribe; and most recently, Tylor and Salos Durange, princes of Ra Tachan, who were responsible for the destruction of the Magi nearly twenty winters ago.

The boys had barely scratched the surface of their combined knowledge of myth, legend, and folklore when they left the forested trail behind and arrived at the southeastern edge of Jeran's village. Jeran gestured around him with pride, welcoming Dahr to Keryn's Rest. Together, they walked down the main thoroughfare, and Jeran told Dahr about the village.

Keryn's Rest had nearly four hundred inhabitants, including those farmers living outside the village proper, making it virtually a city in this part of Alrendria. The only place within a score of days with more people was Portal Keep.

Though only one road went through the village, and it just hard-packed dirt, Keryn's Rest boasted a small inn; a Chandler; a cooper; a fletcher; and not one, but two, blacksmiths. Many artisans and craftsmen lived in the village.

As they walked through town, Jeran recited some of the village's long history to Dahr. Keryn's Rest was named in honor of Lord Vaso Keryn, one of Aemon's commanders during the MageWar. After the war ended, he and his troops stopped in this area while returning to Kaper. Lord Keryn, exhausted from many seasons of battle and relieved that the war was finally over, ordered his army to make camp, thinking his troops deserved some rest before the long march home.

The Guardsmen, however, thought they deserved some celebration. The festivities that began here lasted over two winters. People came from all over Madryn to join in the merriment. The King of Alrendria even made an appearance for the midsummer celebrations. Suffice it to say, little resting was done during their stay. "In fact," Jeran told Dahr, "My uncle tells me that in other parts of Alrendria, 'Going to Keryn's Rest' means you're going to a party. Most people don't even realize Keryn's Rest is a real place!"

Jeran continued his story, explaining how Lord Keryn fell in love with the area and eventually resettled there. The village square was supposedly the site

of Keryn's original cottage. The village's original inhabitants consisted of Lord Keryn; his family; and four other small cottages, all belonging to his subcommanders.

Since then, Keryn's Rest had grown into a prosperous farming community. Most of the village's business came from supplying goods to the mighty fortress of Portal. The village made wares of excellent quality, good enough to keep it flourishing. Though the villagers used to carry their wares to Portal, the Guardsmen now traveled south to buy Keryn's Rest goods, often joking that the Resters were the most industrious people in all Alrendria. They said they would feel guilty if they took the townsmen away from their work for too long.

Besides its goods, the area around Keryn's Rest was known for its fertile farmland. Jeran's uncle was one of the village's farmers. He too had fallen in love with the area while serving in the Alrendrian Guard, and like Lord Keryn more than seven centuries before, decided to move here after the Tachan War ended.

He and Jeran lived in a modest sized farm just north of the village. Finding a farm situated so close to the village proper was unusual, but Uncle Aryn had been head of the village council since Jeran was a small child. He always assumed that his uncle built the farm close to Keryn's Rest so he could more easily conduct council business.

They drew many stares as they walked through the village. While visitors were not unwelcome in Keryn's Rest, they were far from common. The presence of a stranger was often the subject of gossip for days. Even when Lord Talbot came from Portal to order supplies and talk to the village council—something he did once or twice a four-season—the townspeople talked as if his visit were the most amazing event in their lives.

"Did you see his sword?" and "Is that the current fashion in Portal?" The fashion in Portal is and always had been full armor. "Has there been any trouble in the pass?" The Portal was quiet, just as always. "Lord Talbot looks remarkably well, doesn't he? He hasn't aged a day!"

In this case, the stranger was someone the villagers had never before seen, and a child at that, if a large one. Jeran was sure his new friend would prefer to avoid the attention, but more than likely, Dahr would be a topic of conversation for at least a season. He put a reassuring hand on Dahr's shoulder as they neared the village square.

Jeran waved to the villagers as they passed through town, calling the younger people by name. The villagers often waved back, sometimes calling out a greeting of their own. Though their words were for Jeran, their eyes never left Dahr. Sweat beaded on Dahr's forehead, and he looked uneasy under all those eyes. Jeran understood his friend's feelings; he would not have liked a bunch of strange eyes on him either.

They made it to the center of the village without incident, pausing to drink from the well. They rested for a few moments, until Dahr regained some measure

of calm. Jeran nudged Dahr in the shoulder, signaling that they should continue walking. Dahr nodded and they started north again.

"What have you got there, little Jeran?" called a loud, crackling voice from out of nowhere. "Did you pull him out of the river with those fish, or did he come from somewhere else?" The two boys jumped at the unexpected sound. Dahr pivoted, his eyes wild, his breath coming in short, ragged gasps.

The speaker was an old woman. She was short, the top of her head barely reaching Dahr's chest. She walked hunched over, which made her appear even shorter. In her left hand she carried a gnarled, oaken stick, which she used to support her weight. She spoke with the gravelly, severe voice of one who has seen a great many winters. Her hair was thin and white, and she wore it pulled back in a tight bun. Her eyes were vibrant blue, but cloudy around the edges.

Despite her appearance, the old woman had a strength that belied her diminutive size. She commanded such a presence that she seemed to tower over them. She stared at Jeran, a small, amused smile painted on her lips, as if she knew more than she cared to let on. Jeran bowed his head respectfully. "Good evening, Greise Alwen," he said. "This is my friend, Dahr. I met him by the stream. He helped me catch these fish and I invited him to the farm to share dinner with us. He has no home, and I thought Uncle Aryn might be able to find some work for him."

Jeran silently chastised himself. He had not wanted to tell Greise Alwen so much, but hiding the truth from the old woman was difficult. She had a way of getting the answers she wanted, sometimes without you even realizing it.

She stared at Dahr, barely sparing a second glance at Jeran. So intense was her gaze, her eyes seemed to glow with their own light. They roved from his head to his toes, her gaze boring through him. She examined him like a horse trader would appraise a stallion or a soldier would study a fine weapon.

Finally, her inspection finished, she locked her eyes with Dahr's. His expression became one of pure terror. "I have not seen one of you in a long time," she began, speaking slowly, as if unsure whether or not Dahr would understand. Or perhaps weighing her words carefully, so as not to offend him. "A very long time. Not since long before anyone in this village was born."

She paused, and her eyes acquired that appraising quality again. She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "But I do not feel you are a threat. You have your secrets, but I suppose everyone, even a child, has secrets. Do not cause trouble here," she cautioned, wagging a finger in his face, "and do not bring trouble to this village, else I will make you wish you had not."

The old woman's statements confused Dahr. He opened his mouth, but before he could speak, Greise Alwen turned her eyes to Jeran. "You, little Jeran," she added, "must be more careful in what you choose to bring home. Life is not a game, although the young often believe it to be, and it does not last forever. Perhaps you have conveniently forgotten, but strangers are often dangerous. Slavers have stolen more than one child since I have lived here."

Jeran felt his stomach tighten at the mention of the slavers. Dahr dropped his head and visibly shuddered. The slavers were another group, like the Darklord, used to frighten children into obedience. Jeran did not think anyone had been abducted from Keryn's Rest since he was born, but Greise Alwen had lived here much longer than he had.

"You were lucky this time," she added, leaning in close, "for I do not believe your new friend is a threat. But someday, even your luck may run out." She stood there silently, her eyes shifting between the two of them. "Now be on your way," she ordered, "before your uncle starts to worry!" She turned, surprisingly quickly, and began to hobble away.

They stood silently, gaping at her. Without turning around, she yelled back, "Did I not tell you to be on your way?" As one, Jeran and Dahr turned and ran, Greise Alwen's cackling laughter following them through the village.

They did not stop until the north end of Keryn's Rest was far behind them. As they rounded a sharp bend in the road, the Odara farmhouse became visible in the distance. Slowing to a walk, Dahr asked between panting breaths, "That woman . . . Who was she?"

"Her name is Alwen," Jeran explained, hanging his head low to help him catch his breath. "She's one of the oldest, and scariest, people in the entire village. Uncle says she's lived in Keryn's Rest a long time. She's the only one who's been on the village council longer than him. She's old, no one knows how old for sure, but I don't think she lied when she said she was born before anyone else in this village. Not even old Timian, and he was alive when King Mathis' grandfather was king."

As they drew near, Dahr looked at the farm. To the left of the house was a large barn, its back nestled against a steep hill. On one side of the barn sat a pen where pigs rolled noisily in the mud. From the far side of the barn came the sounds of chickens and turkeys. Several small gardens lined the hill, ordered rows of plants dotting the steep incline. A fence ran along the top of the hill, outlining the edge of the plateau. East of the house grew larger gardens and a huge field of golden wheat.

The house itself was large, larger than it needed to be for two. It was large enough for a real family. The townspeople often complained of such a large house being wasted on Jeran and his uncle. "Uncle Aryn used to claim that he wanted a larger family," Jeran explained, "and he built the farmhouse with that thought in mind." It was three stories tall, though the third floor was an attic, and had a root cellar too.

After Jeran's father died, and Aryn had taken him in, he changed his mind. "One child is enough!" he had said on numerous occasions. "You're more trouble than I can handle by myself, and I doubt I could find a woman willing to live with either of us, let alone both!"

Jeran was sure there was more to the story than Uncle Aryn was willing to tell, but he loved his uncle dearly and never questioned him on the subject. Any

number of the village women would marry Aryn if he showed any interest, with or without Jeran. Jeran did not care whether or not his uncle was inclined to marry. He was more than content to have the farm, and Aryn, to himself.

Jeran led Dahr through the front door, calling for his uncle. At this time of day, Aryn would often be cooking in the kitchen, or writing at his desk. Jeran had never seen a farmer write as much as his uncle. Aryn wrote at least two letters each season. One letter always went to Lord Talbot in Portal. Jeran had once asked why his uncle wrote to Lord Talbot so often. "Gideon Talbot and I fought together in the Tachan War," Aryn had explained. "We've remained close friends since those days." Aryn was more tight-lipped concerning the other letters. Jeran tried time and again to discover to whom his uncle wrote. Despite his efforts, Aryn never divulged the identity of his other friend.

Aryn kept a journal, which he wrote in every day. He had been writing in his journal since long before Jeran was born. Five or six large volumes lined the shelves of the library, each filled with Aryn's flowing script. Aryn had forbidden him to read the books, and Jeran knew better than to go against Aryn's wishes. He assumed his uncle wrote so much because he was head of the village council, but as far as he knew, none of the other council members wrote at all.

Jeran opened the door to the library. Several hundred books sat in neat rows on the shelves, making this library the largest in the area, except perhaps in Portal Keep, the center of House Odara.

Aryn sat at his desk, busily writing in his journal. Jeran's uncle was tall and broad of shoulder, thickly muscled, a common occurrence when you spend your life working on a farm. Aryn had blue eyes, lighter than Jeran's, and blonde hair where Jeran's was black. He had a prominent nose and well-cut features.

"Uncle," Jeran said, entering the chamber, "I met a boy by the stream today. He helped me catch some fish, and I thought he should share them with us for dinner."

"That's fine, Jeran," Aryn said in a deep, friendly voice. "Just make sure his family knows he's here." Aryn did not look up, but when he noticed Jeran still there, said, "I need to finish this, Jeran, so if you don't mind . . ."

"Uncle, Dahr isn't from around here," Jeran tried to explain. "He has no family. He's been on his own for over a season now. I know you're always complaining about the amount of work we have to do. I thought maybe you could find something for him to do on the farm."

Aryn frowned, and Dahr took a step back. Jeran put a restraining hand on Dahr's arm. In a quiet voice, Dahr said, "If you have no work for me, I understand, Sir. Maybe you could tell me where I can find some. Jeran says you used to travel a lot."

Aryn's frown deepened, and he looked up from his writing. Jeran had expected his uncle to frown, Aryn often frowned while thinking about some-

thing, but he was not ready for his uncle's reaction when his eyes settled on Dahr for the first time.

Aryn stood so quickly that his chair fell over behind him, clattering loudly as it hit the floor. In an instant, he had a knife drawn and held it toward Dahr as if expecting a fight. From the look on Aryn's face, he would have drawn his sword if it had not been locked in a trunk upstairs. Jeran had never seen his uncle's eyes so hard and expressionless, nor had he ever heard Aryn speak in a voice so cold and commanding.

"What do you want here?" demanded Aryn, his eyes never leaving Dahr's. "This is a house of peace, Hunter. I do not wish to kill you, but I will defend my own." Jeran did not understand his uncle's words, but he more than understood the tone.

Dahr looked as if he were about to bolt through the door. His eyes danced wildly, and he trembled in fear. Just then, the wind blasted through the chamber, slamming the door shut and cutting off their only means of escape.

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