

# RIOTHAMUS

## WARRIORMAGE



Rosemary Fryth

# Warriormage

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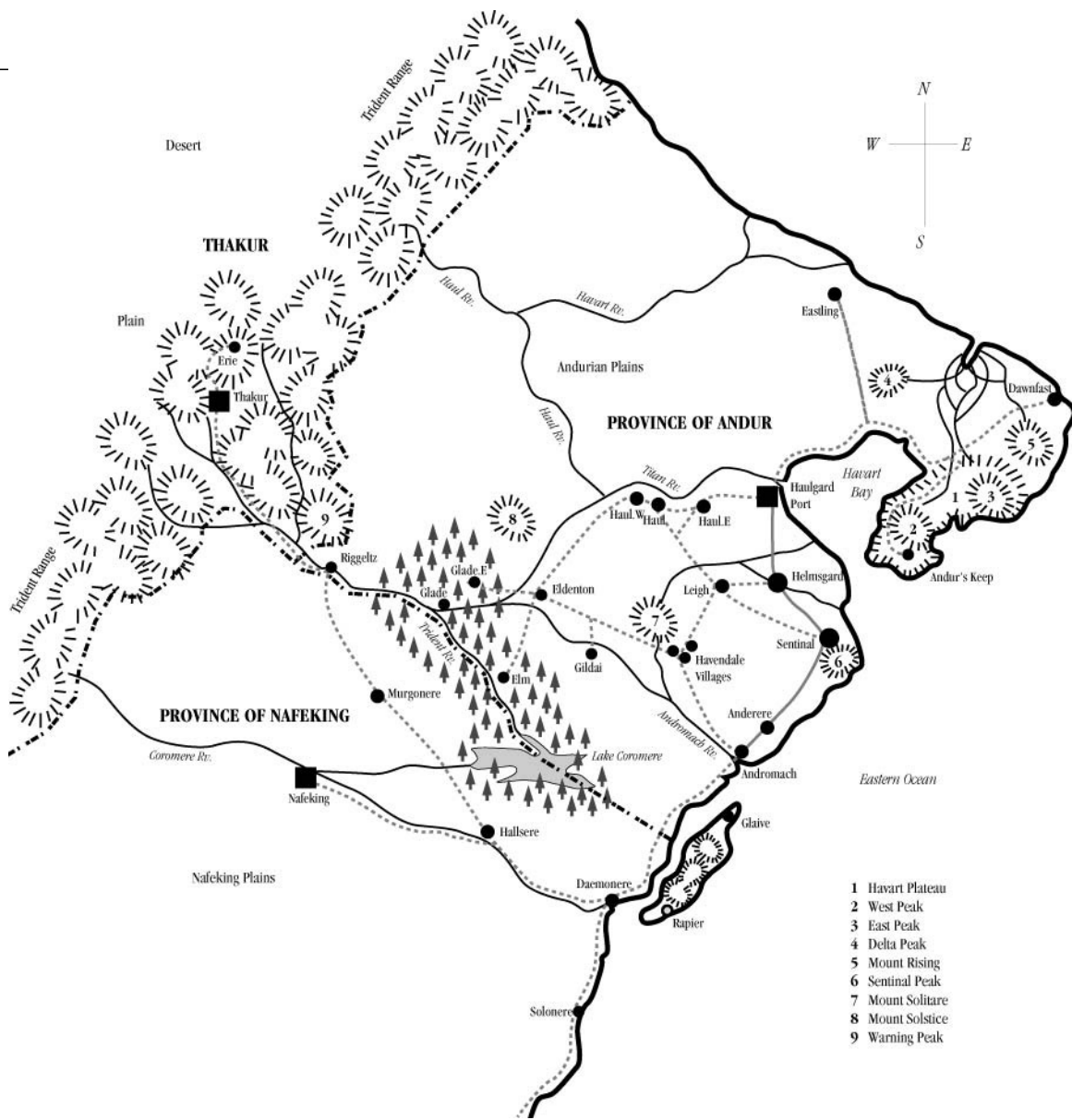
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*I'd like to dedicate the 'Riothamus' trilogy to a number of people who have helped  
(either deliberately or inadvertently) in the creative process.*

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- 1 Havart Plateau
- 2 West Peak
- 3 East Peak
- 4 Delta Peak
- 5 Mount Rising
- 6 Sentinel Peak
- 7 Mount Solitare
- 8 Mount Solstice
- 9 Warning Peak

## Chapter 1—The Ritual of Making

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From the previous book 'The High King'

*“My lord King Arantur,” Archmage Maran said gravely and formally, “I am most saddened by the leave taking.”*

*Aran’s lips quirked imperceptibly at that, but nevertheless he courteously inclined his head, “My lord Archmage, we go to do battle against our greatest enemy,” he replied equally formally. “Will you give us the Blessing for the Road?”*

*Maran nodded, “I shall, but first you must know that the mages of Glaive have not been idle over the past few hours.” He pointed over to the pack horses, “You will find already secured all necessary backpacks, furs and equipment that will ensure your survival in the mountains. There is fresh food packed that will see you through to Glade, and for the mountains we have prepared in especial sealed and oiled packages, portions of dried meats, vegetables and fruits that you will be able to either heat or eat as they are.”*

*Bini spoke up, “My lord...my aim with the bow is true. We will feast every night on wild fowl and any other game.”*

*“Plainsman, there will be little game in the winter mountains,” Drayden interrupted, “So we will not feast, but instead dry your kills for later meals.”*

*Aran saw Bini shrug at that.*

*“Glade will also supplement your supplies,” Maran went on, ignoring the interruptions. “Out of the fibres of their plants they make some of the lightest and strongest ropes. Ropes you may well need when you reach the walls of Erie.”*

*Aran nodded, “The small leather emergency tents have already been packed. They will accommodate two, besides each man has an oiled, leather groundsack in which to sleep.”*

*He then turned to stare at the distant Trident Range, “We will take as much as we can carry into the mountains, if it proves to be too much then we will have to dig caches in the snow to off-load any unnecessary gear.”*

*“Then there is little else I can do to assist you,” Maran said at last. “I am so sorry that it has come to this, but by the Goddess it is the only way the Province will be ensured peace.”*

*Aran nodded and stepping up to the Archmage, firmly clasped his shoulder.*

*“Then wish us well and all speed.”*

*Maran returned the clasp, “Ride a safe road, and May the Goddess and Andur’s name protect you all.”*

*“And everyone here” intoned Aran formally, “Look for us in the spring!”*

*Then, with sudden and swift motion, the group of sixteen soldiers and mages mounted their horses. Looking about and seeing that everyone was at last ready, Aran held out his arm to indicate all should ride on. With scarcely a word or even a backward glance, the group rode from the Legion camp. Silently, the remaining Guard and legio watched the small group leave the relative protection of the fort. Few knew of their mission, although most guessed where they were bound. Those who knew muttered prayers for the safekeeping of those bound on that perilous western journey.*

And so the story continues...

Once clear of the diggings and fortifications around the Legion camp, the small group spurred the

mounts to canter easily across the hard and wintry ground. Ahead of them, the northernmost expanse of the forest was like a dark smudge on the otherwise featureless vista of the plains. The green-black heaviness of the forest gave lie to the whiteness of winter's grip that elsewhere cloaked the land. Leading the group was Aran, with Drayden at his shoulder ready to scout the way, once they drew into the forest itself. Behind the two leaders rode Darven, Alissa and Bini, and behind them were the knights of five mages mounted on a rag-tag collection of horses. At the rear of the group, were the volunteer Guardsmen riding three abreast in well-drilled military formation. The elite soldiers were cheerful and laughing, happy to have this break away from camp, and eagerly anticipating future action behind enemy lines.

Within an hour's easy canter, the first of the great boundary trees were sighted, and before long the party was drawing up amongst the pioneer species that the forest was sending out into the vastness of the plains beyond.

"Wildings," Drayden murmured, gazing about him at the dozens of oak, elm, ash, and beech saplings that dotted the grasslands that edged the woodlands. "Every year Nay Forest creeps ever northward, given time it will surely engulf even Mount Solstice."

"It will not gain any of central Andur," Aran replied confidently. "I know the farmers will not give up one acre to the trees." He grinned, "Many generations have farmed those lands. They will be loathe indeed to give an inch of their land away."

Drayden peered into the heavy, green darkness, "Despite the denseness of the trees, I sense paths and clearings through which we may easily travel. The forest will not hinder our route."

"Shall we go via East Glade?" asked Alissa, nudging her black mare forward. "I have heard there is a well-maintained path that joins Eldenton to that forest village."

Drayden shook his head, "That settlement is far to the south of us. It will be quicker for us to go into the forest here, than to travel south then bear west again." He looked around and then abruptly motioned for the rest of the party to ride up. Seeing that everyone had gathered, he quickly called for silence.

"As you can see we are now on the outskirts of Nay Forest," he began. "Given the season, this will not be a perilous time to journey into the deep woodlands, however..." and he looked up to make certain everyone was paying attention. "For a non-Earthmage, the deep forest does have its dangers and it should not be taken lightly. For the safety of the party I will urge you all to ride together, and not lag behind. In fact to make certain of this I will lead the group myself, and I will ask Mage Thea to ride rear guard to make certain we don't lose anybody."

He smiled at the nodding faces and continued on.

"Most of the paths I will be taking will be the native ones favoured by the beasts of the woodlands, so riding will be necessarily single-file. I will take advantage of any clearings that lie upon our route so the horses may feed, and it will enable us to take meal breaks or prepare overnight camps. Although the Trident River does flow through the very heart of this forest, other small streams are infrequent, so I ask you all to conserve your water and to drink sparingly."

"How soon to Glade?" asked Jede, a young, but serious-faced Guard belonging to Wolf Company.

"Three days," said Drayden confidently. "There will be two overnight camps."

"What about the wolves?" asked Guard Kunek. "I have heard they can be a trouble to travellers!"

Those of Wolf Company sniggered at that comment from a member of Bear Company, but Drayden shook his head when he saw the guardsman unconsciously fingering his sword.

"You can put that sword away soldier," he replied abruptly. "There will be no killing of wolves today, or any other day whilst we are in Nay Forest. Whilst Earthmages ward this group, no wolf

would dare attack any member. However,” and he glanced at the guardsman again. “I cannot vouch for your safety if you fall behind or become separated from the group. The Abilities of the Earthmages are only effective at close-range.”

Guard Kunek glanced towards the frowning face of Wolf Leader Darven and swallowed hard.

“Don't worry Mage Drayden,” replied Darven smoothly. “I can vouch to you right now that the Guards here will not make one step away from the group without your permission.” He smiled dryly. “Despite their obvious enthusiasm for hunting, they know that it is more than their life is worth disobey a direct order from one of their commanders.”

Aran turned around and frowned at the guardsmen, “See that you do so,” he said shortly. “Whilst we travel through Nay Forest, any Earthmage's word or command carries as much weight as mine, as does Wolf Leader Darven's. See you obey it without question.”

At that comment there was unanimous agreement and nods from all members of the Guard.

Earthmage Drayden turned back to his contemplation of the forest. “So now there is little more you need to know,” he said at last. “You will soon see that this is a primal oak forest, but there are other dominant species present, such as beech, ash, hazel, elm and sycamore.”

Alyssa rode up her eyes on the nearest tree, “Drayden, something's been irritating me since we've been in sight of the forest and only now have I worked it out.” She waved her arm vaguely at the forest, “This is obviously a deciduous forest, why are the trees still leafed? I mean most trees I am familiar with have lost their leaves by this time of the season.”

Aran nodded at that, “That's true. It hadn't occurred to me until Alyssa just mentioned it.”

Drayden smiled enigmatically, “This forest is a living, breathing Entity. Indeed there are aspects to it that are unique and little understood.”

“Still people live within it?” Bini asked wonderingly. “I understand possessing oneness with nature and all life, I mean the plainspeople live by that law every day of their lives, however you say the forest has a consciousness?”

Drayden nodded, “It is a simple and rudimentary consciousness; but yes, it is aware of everything that moves and happens within the living energy of its whole.”

Aran shook his head in amazement, “So that is why the Thakur did not strike through it.”

Drayden nodded again, “Exactly, the forest has ways of protecting itself and all the animals and people who live within it.”

Darven surveyed the trees apprehensively, “Are you so certain this forest will be safe for us?”

“Of course,” Drayden replied smoothly. “The Sages have an agreement of sorts with the forest Entity. Besides there will be no harm extended to a party which is warded by Earthmages.” He glanced briefly at the guardsmen who returned his gaze with nervous grins, “Just so long as we stay together, and no one tries to take any pot-shots at game.”

“So how will we hunt?” Bini frowned, whilst furtively fingering his bow, “I mean we must eat.”

Drayden stared at the young warrior, “Every time we hunt we must ask permission of the forest.” His brow creased suddenly, “Which reminds me, it is vitally important to remember that fires must only be lit in the clearings and glades, and any timber collected for burning must be deadwood from the forest floor. To do otherwise would exact sudden and terrible retribution from the forest Entity.”

Drayden spoke a soft word to his mare, who immediately stepped into the dark verdant shadow. Hurriedly the others urged their mounts forward, eager not to be left behind.

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The group was not a hundred yards into the trees, before Aran was clearly noticing that the forest itself seemed to be opening up hidden pathways and tracks under the will of the High Earthmage. Each



time Drayden seemed to lead them into a tangle of bramble, holly and hawthorn, the way would suddenly open out, and the forest would allow them easy passage even deeper into its dark, green depths. Despite the season, and the bitter early winter-cold of the plains, the temperature amongst the trees was milder, warmer, even late summerish. Aran reached out with his mage sense, and immediately felt a gentle heat emanating from each gnarled tree trunk, and the leaf-strewn forest floor beneath his horse's hooves. If this warmth was an instinctive reaction by the forest Entity to protect itself against the cold, then Aran could readily understand why the deciduous forest was still heavily in leaf this close into winter. As they rode through the darkness of the woodlands, Aran could hear in the distance heavy crashing as a large beast smashed through the underbrush; and then later, gazing overhead he could hear the piping of birds, and see occasional movements of the canopy as wind gusts penetrated this vast, leafy domain.

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"We are being observed," said Alissa suddenly into the group's silence.

"The forest is aware of us and will not hinder our way," Drayden answered.

"And it is closing the path behind us," called out Theaua from the rear of the column. "Mind we stay together, it would not be an easy matter searching out an errant horse and rider in this heavy brush."

Aran looked up and down the column and did a quick head count.

"Do not be concerned Earthmages," he said quickly. "We are all here and none of us are lost."

"Ah, but the Lady Alissa is correct, we do have company my lord," Drayden said pulling his horse to an abrupt halt. "Stay still and be quiet everyone, there is a Presence near us."

Aran reined in, and immediately sat still on the nervously twitching Spirit, whilst carefully casting his farsight out to the forest about them. For a moment only he did sense an alien awareness, then the contact was lost into the rapidly rising warmth generated by the forest itself. Suddenly there was a brief rustle of foliage off to one side, and an enormous she-cat walked unconcernedly into their very midst.

'I am curious, the Elder Forest has never before seen such a gathering of other-mages,' the cat commented clearly and suddenly to the astonished party. 'Is this to do with the evil-over-the-horizon?' she asked.

Drayden bowed awkwardly from the saddle, "Greetings Mother, and yes, it is everything to do with the evil."

The large black rock cat sat down on its haunches, and purposefully began to wash its face. Suddenly it looked up, and its green eyes seemed to stare directly into Aran's own.

'Your leader-male is here. He has done much killing.'

"He has the old Abilities, Mother," Drayden replied gently.

'Ah, so the land-force rises,' she growled. 'This was not unexpected given the presence of the evil-over-the-horizon.' She stared long and hard at the others who were trying to calm equally nervous mounts.

'He is not alone in the old Abilities!' she said abruptly.

Drayden nodded, "We know Mother, and we suspect others will be found."

'Look close,' she advised calmly, going back to her grooming.

Finally her chore finished, she looked up at Drayden, 'So what do the outside-men do about the evil-over-the-horizon?'

"We go to do it battle, Mother," the Mage said.

The she-cat inclined her black head at that.

‘Then it is good that there are others of your kin here,’ she said directly, first looking at Theaua then at Alissa and finally Bini. She stared long and hard at the startled plainsman, ‘It has been many generations since the people of the plains came into the Elder forest. Tell me, what brings you here young one?’ she asked.

Bini glanced towards Drayden, his mouth opening and closing without words coming out.

‘Cat got your tongue?’ she asked archly, and there was the hint of a smile in her words.

‘Never mind,’ she said taking pity on poor Bini. Suddenly she stood up, and her movement was supple and lithe, ‘Go inwards to the forest mages,’ she said addressing Drayden one more time. ‘They will give you aid.’

Drayden nodded and bowed again, ‘We go directly to them Mother.’

‘Good,’ she said, and then in one fluid motion, leapt upwards towards the startled horses. In the flicker of an eyelid, the cat dissolved into a swarm of bees which immediately disappeared into the green darkness.

‘That, I assume was the forest Entity,’ said Aran dryly, once he had recovered his voice and his equilibrium. ‘Although I guess that wasn’t its true shape.’

Drayden nodded, ‘You are correct in your assumption my lord. The Entity is formless; it must create the likeness of a creature to converse with a sentient race.’

‘Good likeness,’ Bini chuckled nervously.

‘And the forest mages are the Sages,’ asked Trenny interrupting coldly

Drayden nodded, ‘They are.’

The old Weathermage shook his head in annoyance, ‘I am more than a little angry that the Earthmages should keep the knowledge of such a Power to themselves. Surely all mages should know of the existence of such an Entity.’

Drayden rounded on the other mage in sudden exasperation, ‘What would you have done with that knowledge, High Mage? This is of no consideration to the other disciplines on Glaive, in fact outside the Earthmages, only the Archmage himself knows of the Entity’s existence, and even then his knowledge is usually lost with his death.’

‘Control yourselves, mages,’ Aran growled, his own quiescent anger rising again in sympathy.

He turned to Drayden, ‘So what is this Entity?’ he questioned shortly, reigning in his temper.

Drayden turned, ‘What do you think my lord?’ he asked abruptly, forgetting in his anger to who he spoke. ‘Can’t your Warriormage awareness extend even that far? To tear apart the framework of the Entity and lay Her reality bare.’

Aran frowned at the anger apparent in the Earthmage’s words, and then with an effort of will to control his temper, mentally shrugged it aside.

‘I cannot,’ he admitted.

‘Then it is unknowable,’ said Bini quietly, trying to diffuse the emotionally fragile situation.

‘The Entity must be an aspect of the Goddess,’ said Alissa suddenly, turning to Drayden for confirmation. ‘Perhaps it is an aspect that is intrinsically linked to the woodlands, and the life within it.’

Drayden nodded, his own anger abating, ‘Lady Alissa is correct, although it usually only an Earthmage who can perceive and commune with this aspect of Her.’

‘Alissa has the latent Earthmage Ability,’ Aran replied.

Drayden nodded, ‘Of course! I remember now the Archmage telling me of this, stupidly I had forgotten.’

He turned to Alissa, ‘Welcome to our ranks Lady.’

Bini gazed worriedly at the place where the Entity had sat.

“I am supposed to be Earthmage. Why did I not sense her?”

Drayden looked back at the plainsman, “That is easy to explain, warrior. Each Earthmage has particular talent within his or her own Ability. Yours, I expect is to do with living creatures, with leaning towards horses especially, I expect? Lady Alissa’s is obviously to do with all growing things. My own talent is like yours, I have an affinity with living creatures,” he smiled to himself, “Although some of you may be aware that I do prefer birds.”

“So the forest Entity can really only be sensed by an Earthmage attuned to plants,” puzzled Aran.

Drayden nodded, “My lord, in the old days we used to have a titled separation of the Earthmage discipline into animalmages and forestmages. We no longer use the separate titles, although the natural talents still seem to cling to the old ways.”

“But you confess yourself to be an animalmage,” said Darven, edging his horse forward. “Yet you sensed the Entity too.”

“That is true,” Drayden replied. “However, I am a High Earthmage, and those years of study, spellcraft and research have enhanced my Ability to take in the entire range of Earthmage talents. Besides, I have been in this forest in the past and have um...encountered the Entity before.”

Alissa glanced back to Theaua sitting quietly at the rear of the column, “And what is Mage Theaua’s preference?” she asked.

“Like me, she is animalmage; her preference however is to all carnivores, cats in particular.”

“Did you expect to see the Entity today?” Aran asked finally.

Drayden shrugged, “Perhaps, I didn’t know. Normally she does not show herself to the other disciplines.” He shrugged, “We have a large number of mages in our party. It was obvious that she sensed the concentration of magepower here and so manifested herself as a she-cat.” He grinned suddenly, “Like any cat she was curious, that’s all!”

Aran nodded and then glanced about. “The morning wears away Drayden; shouldn’t we be getting on?”

Drayden nodded, agreeing, and then called out, “If everyone can fall back into their positions in the line, we can continue our journey.”

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The rest of the day did not bring the group any more surprises, except for watching the almost uncanny way the High Earthmage seemed to open ways through the seemingly impenetrable forest ahead of them. Brambles, vines and dense scrub cover, seemed, with a twist of leaves and branches, to open enough space to allow passage of the column of horses. Even the great trees, all at least several hundred years old, seemed to shrug or flinch aside at a word, or even a glance from Drayden. Looking back, Aran did not see the end of the column, but remembered Mage Theaua’s words about the forest closing behind them. Happy chance led Drayden to a small stream, and they took this goddess-given opportunity to water their horses, replenish their flasks and eat a simple midday meal of bread and fruit. Keeping an eye on the advancing day, Drayden soon urged them all again into the saddle, and then with a quick head count to make certain all were still in the party, the group rode off again.

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Drayden turned to Aran, “Lord, there is a clearing up ahead. I’ve been sensing it for a while now.”

Aran nodded glad that they would at last be stopping.

“We need to get some fresh meat,” he reminded the mage. “It’s getting late and if we don’t do something about this soon, we’ll have to try and bring something down in the dark.”

“As soon as we get to the clearing I’ll take Plainsman Bini and one of the Guards out with me,” said

Drayden. “As an Earthmage I have taken vows not to personally hunt any animal. However, I doubt that any other in the group, excepting Mage Theaua, has taken any such vow. I expect Bini will be the most competent hunter of the entire party.”

“Take Guard Bennek of Wolf Company with you,” said Aran. “He’s only a few years older than me but I know him to be a sensible, level-headed soldier who will follow your directions, and not do anything rash or stupid out there, and I’ve heard he is a good bowman.”

Drayden nodded, “As soon as we get to the clearing, I’ll take them out.”

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After many hours of riding through the close, heavy confines of the deep forest, it was with lifting hearts that the others saw ahead the verdant green brightness of a clearing, lit by the long slanting rays of the late afternoon sun. With a brief movement of his hand, Drayden opened out the tight, thorny tangle of dog-roses which bordered the clearing, and led the long column into the openness and bright clear air.

Aran, riding the dun mare into the clearing, fully expected to feel again winter’s edge. However, it seemed that even here in the clearings the forest was extending its vital energies into moderating the extreme cold of the season, and maintaining the life within its borders. The group quickly dismounted and unpacking the gear, let the unsaddled horses wander and graze where they would in the acre-wide clearing.

“They cannot go far,” Darven said, marvelling at how the thorny dog-rose seemed to have provided this place with a natural briary wall. “And they need to feed, there has been little grass growing under the dense forest canopy.”

Drayden walked up with Bini and Guard Bennek at his heels. The two soldiers were both armed with light bows and quivers full of arrows, and had canvas game-bags slung casually over their shoulders. Bennek had shed his heavy mail armour, and was clad only in a dark grey-green wool tunic and leather leggings, whilst Bini was dressed in his customary plains-cured leather and bronze armour.

“We shall not be long,” said the High Earthmage to Aran and Darven. “I have asked permission and the Entity knows our need and will send us suitable game.”

Darven nodded, “Then we’ll get the camp set, and the fires lit in your absence. There seems to be enough wind-blown fallen branches for us to collect without having to venture into the deep forest again.”

“Ask Mage Theaua to escort any who need to collect any wind-fall wood from under the canopy,” Drayden said.

“When should we look out for you?” asked Aran.

“We should be returned by dusk, lord,” Drayden replied.

Aran and Wolf Leader Darven watched as the three men disappeared through a break in the thorny wall, and into the dark lushness of the forest beyond.

“Come on,” said Aran, placing his hand on his friend’s shoulder. “Let’s get this camp set up.”

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“There...” Drayden whispered, “Can you see her?”

Bini and Bennek peered through the dense undergrowth, and saw a mature roe deer standing hesitantly in a late-afternoon shaft of light. The animal lifted its head and sniffed warily, then sensing no intruder, limped heavily a few steps away to chew on a moss covered tree-trunk.

“She’s injured!” whispered back Bini. “The back leg seems to be fractured.”

Drayden nodded, “It is the will of the Entity that we hunt only the aged or infirm. The law of nature is implacable, and only the healthiest and strongest of the forest creatures are allowed to survive here.”

Our need to hunt for meat serves the Entity well, and it is by our weapons that we cull the weakest.”

Bini glanced at the Guardsman, “You take the shot Bennek,” he offered. “Already I have brought down these half-dozen hares.”

The dark-haired man nodded, and then taking his bow, he carefully selected a straight and true arrow, turned and sighting expertly, swiftly and silently shot an arrow deep into the chest of the deer, striking it cleanly into the heart. The deer toppled over without even a sound.

“Good shot,” congratulated Bini. “No fuss. No mess. No wounding...”

“And little pain,” added Drayden approvingly. “We hunt for food, not for sport, and it is always good when the animal is killed cleanly and instantly.”

The three men stepped forward to collect the body of the fallen animal.

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True to their word, the hunters returned close on dusk to a camp already erected and cook fires were lit. Bini immediately co-opted the remainder of the Guard into skinning and butchering the deer and hares. Some dried vegetables, and a small portion of the fresh meat was put aside for the night’s stew, the rest of the strips of meat were placed onto a wire framework over a slow fire, and cooked and dried for the journey ahead. The deer and hare skins were scraped clean, and cut into squares into which the cooked meat would be wrapped prior to travel.

“We will need to hunt again tomorrow afternoon,” said Bini, staring at the rows of meat. “This might look a lot, but we’ve a good number in our party, and game will be scarce in the mountains.”

Drayden nodded, “I will ask the Entity to send us another deer. At first those hares looked fat, but in truth they were old and skinny and had little meat on them.”

Aran wandered over, his interest caught by the unmistakable aroma of roasting meat.

“I see you did well,” he said, “Venison for dinner tonight?”

Bini shook his head, “No, hare. In my experience venison keeps better and is more palatable dried than hare meat. We’ll be eating hare for the next few nights; the other meat will be kept for the mountains.”

Aran nodded, “I think everyone is more than ready for dinner. Will you be much longer here?”

“No my lord, we are almost done. The fire is well banked and the meat strips can be left now to continue their slow cooking.”

“Good,” Aran glanced back at the others now resting by the cook fires. “This is quite a place you have led us to Drayden! I think everyone is thankful that they are not sleeping in the snow!” He grinned, “If word gets out, the forest will be inundated with people looking to build homes in a place that has no winter.”

Drayden shook his head at that, “They will certainly regret their decision once the wolves have tracked them, and the grey snakes are active again. No, the forest has its own defenses against unwelcome intrusion. You forget that our presence here is tolerated only.”

Aran frowned, “That I do not forget. Many years ago when I was just a child, my sister was lost to the grey snakes. Indeed Trevan and I happened upon one on the road south from Sentinal.”

Drayden pursed his lips at that piece of information, “Are you certain it was a grey snake?”

Aran nodded, “I have never before seen one, but Mage Trevan seemed certain of its species.” He smiled in sudden memory, “Indeed my mount was so startled by it that I was almost unhorsed.”

Drayden frowned again, “This is most unusual, I have never heard of a grey snake being seen beyond the confines of the forest. I must speak to Mage Trevan immediately...”

Bobbing his head distractedly at Aran, he hurried off to the small enclave of mages.

“I wonder what all that was about?” said Bini, whilst cleaning his sooty hands on the grass.

Aran pulled a face, "To tell you the truth Bini, I'd rather not know. I have troubles and worry enough without becoming involved in every little upset the mages seem to dream up."

The plainsman nodded, "I am told I have this Earthmage Ability, but yet I am reluctant to become a mage. I understand only the weaponslore, the plainslore and the horselore. Beyond these three I have no desires. Yet there is something that eludes me still..."

Aran sat down on the grass beside the leather-clad warrior, "What is it Bini?" he asked.

The plainsman shrugged an eloquent shrug, "It's hard to explain my lord, but I feel both watched and led ever since coming into this place of many trees."

"The Entity?" asked Aran.

Bini shook his head, "No...something else, something even more basic and elemental than the foremost aspect of the Goddess. Something calls to me, and there is a part of me that wishes only to follow that call."

"Then restrain it Bini," Aran advised. "Else the wolves will be making a meal of you."

Bini grinned at that, "I would sting their hide with more arrows than you could count before they tasted my flesh! But do not worry my lord, this yearning and calling is only a formless thing, and I have endured far worse in my life on the plains."

Aran clambered to his feet, "Let me know if it gets too much to endure, Bini, I am certain that Drayden will be able to help out."

Bini nodded, "I will remember your words, my lord."

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Later that evening, and after dinner, Aran and Alissa lay side by side in a sheltered hollow, staring up into the star-filled, endless vault of the night sky. Around them, everyone else had rolled themselves into their blankets and prepared themselves for sleep. The cook fires had been extinguished, so aside from the stars, there was no relief to the utter darkness of the night.

"This is a fair place," Alissa mused, "Fair and yet cruel like nature at its most elemental."

Aran turned on his side and frowning stared at Alissa, "You too?"

Alissa stared at the bright hard winter stars and finally nodded, "Who else senses this thing?"

"Bini," he answered. "He speaks of something basic and fundamental that is calling him to follow. Do you too hear the call?"

Alissa shook her head, "No, there is no call for me, just a reaching out and an empathy with all the growing life. Yet there is something elemental at work here."

"Something bad," Aran asked frowning.

Alissa shook her head again, "No, not bad, just something very, very old. Listen, can you not hear that it is already at work amongst the group!"

Aran strained his senses out and immediately heard the snores coming from the mages. Then beyond that the heavy drowsiness of the Guard, and then, on the very extent of his awareness, he heard the faint yet unmistakable laboured breathing of couples in the depths of passion."

"Who?" he asked.

"Drayden and Theaua," she whispered, "And Mage Hela and a Guardsman..." She strained her own awareness out, "The one who went hunting today, Bennek, I believe."

Aran was more than surprised, "Perhaps I am blind, but I never knew, nor even guessed that there were any attachments formed during this campaign."

"I think they surprised even themselves," said Alissa dryly. "I've long suspected that Theaua had a fondness for our friend Drayden, but this pairing off I believe is woven by the deep powers of the woodland."

“Will such attachments last?” asked Aran, as embarrassedly he tried to pull his awareness back to just both Alissa and himself.

“Who can tell,” she replied. “I don’t think Drayden will be too unhappy with Theaua’s interest, and as for Hela and Bennek? Well, there have been stranger love partnerships before, although this night may be only lust driven by the vital forces of the forest. Come morning we shall see how things eventuate.”

Aran frowned, “I think Bini is involved too. He is sensing something, wants to be drawn to it, but his training and self discipline is overcoming...”

Then Aran’s voice trailed off mid-sentence as he immediately became aware that next to him was a beautiful and desirable woman whose feminine scents were even now tantalising his already heightened senses.

“Come woman,” he growled pulling her to him. “Everyone else is asleep or otherwise distracted, it is a good enough time and I want you now!”

\*

Their lovemaking, compared to the other languid nights back at camp, was quick and explosive, leaving them both panting. As soon as they got their breath back, Aran felt the urgency rise within him again and he immediately turned to caress Alissa. Their mating was again quick and explosive, as the latent energies of the forest were fuelling their desire.

“This is more than I can stand,” Aran gasped out after the fourth consecutive time. “I don’t mind lovemaking, but I prefer to wait between bouts.”

Alissa nodded exhaustedly, however she knew full well that they could do little but obey the urgent desires of the forest.

“There are others caught too,” she whispered as Aran’s hand yet again wandered across her body. “The Earthmages are still deep in their lust, and even Hela is at it again...and with a different Guardian too! He seems to be one from the Bears this time. I do believe she intends to be with all six tonight.”

“It will be an ‘interesting’ morning,” predicted Aran.

Alissa turned to her lover with an urgent groan, and welcomed yet again his insistent embrace.

\*

The disembodied Entity watched in deep interest as the mating couples sank time and time again into passionate embrace. This Ritual of Making was the very essence of the energy of the forest, and there was nothing it could do to prevent or stop the time-old movements taking place. Soon enough the mages in the group would discover how to ward themselves, and their companions against the intrusive powers, but right now all that mattered was that the Ritual of Making was successfully completed. The Entity’s awareness flitted yet again over the group, pausing only to regard the blanketed, knotted, dream-haunted figure of the plainsman. This man was warded well, it thought amusedly whilst at the same time sending out a tickle of awareness into the golden-haired warrior’s dreams. He too had the Earth-Awareness, but had guarded himself well against succumbing to the forest’s deep emotions and desires. The Entity smiled to itself. It was a pity that the golden-haired woman had vowed herself only to the Warrior-Awareness-lord. If there had not been that vow, then the mating of those two plainchildren would have been energetic indeed. No, that outcome could not be so there were deeper plans yet in store for the plainsman....

\*

The dawn brought an early waking to the camp, and it was with much yawning, and groans of protest that figures started emerging from rumpled bedrolls and blankets. Aran stood and stretched, noting the pale dawn light that already the mages were deep in huddled conference, their voices inaudible.

even in dawn's quiet stillness.

"I see Hela and Theaua got back to their own bedrolls sometime before dawn," Alissa grinned, as she dragged a wide bone comb through her sleep-snarled locks.

"The mages are deep in conference," said Aran. "I don't think the night's activities went entirely unnoticed by Trevan, Trenny and Genn. Perhaps they are figuring out what caused it?"

"You don't need to be a mage to know what caused it, love," replied Alissa. "It's obviously the energies of the forest at work. I just hope this won't happen every night whilst we are in the forest."

She smiled fondly up at her betrothed, "It's not that I don't like making love to you Aran, but we are all on a vitally important quest, and have other, more important duties ahead of us."

He nodded, "The mages know that too. Perhaps they are trying to find a way to prevent it from happening again."

Alissa grinned, "It's not that we humans need an excuse for lovemaking, but there is a time and place for everything, and really the forest Entity ought to just let nature take its course." She eyed the knot of guardsmen who were giving each other slightly embarrassed grins, and furtively glancing towards Hela, whose curly blond head could only just be seen behind the other taller mages.

"I wonder who from the Guard Hela will choose as her companion?" mused Aran, following Alissa's gaze over to where the elite soldiers were rolling up their blankets. "If in fact she does choose at all. It's blatantly obvious that last night she was with them all at one time or another. However, for the sanity of the Guardsmen and the peace of the group she must either choose one or none."

"I will have a word with her," Alissa stated. "We cannot have this blanket-hopping happening every night in this accursed forest."

She turned to Aran, "Will you have a word with Darven so he can say something to the men. I think they must guess that the forest Entity was behind last night's activities. However they must understand that Hela cannot be coerced into any formal relationship. Last night was an aberration only...if she chooses a Guardsman, then well and good, if not then they will have to accept her decision and live with it."

Aran rolled his eyes, "The things I have to do as King," he groaned only half seriously.

She gave him a little shove towards where Darven and Bini were rounding up the horses, "Go on Aran, once we are travelling there will be little opportunity for private conversation."

\*

"Interesting night..."

Aran looked up from where he was tightening Spirit's girth to encounter Mage Drayden's unsettling golden-eyed gaze.

"Hmmm," Aran replied. "Is what happened last night a usual occurrence in the forest?"

High Earthmage Drayden actually blushed, "I think it must be, for I had a similar experience when I was last here."

Aran stood up and turned to face the other man, "Really! What happened?"

The mage's face reddened, "You remember I said that I had encountered the Entity once before."

Aran nodded.

Drayden smiled in supreme embarrassment, "Well that day many years ago I was alone in the forest and making my way to Glade, when I met a young woman. She said that she had become lost from the main paths, and could I guide her to Glade..." He shrugged, "What could I do? I had no idea that the forest Entity could assume human as well as an animal shape. I thought she was as human as you are. I..."

He paused to frame his next words, "Well that night, one thing led to another and we mated..."



grinned at the memory, "Several times in fact. Indeed she was quite insistent and demanding in her wants and desires." He shrugged again, "I saw no wrong in what we did, she was more than compliant and I was a virile young man new to my mantle, and on my Quest to meet the Sages. It was only at the last time, just before the dawn that she pulled away from my embrace to stand over me and open to transmute herself into the form of a great grey she-wolf. To say I was shocked does not describe the horror and embarrassment that came over me at that moment. I was mortified that my companion for the night had been the Entity itself, and that our mating had been what is termed a 'primal haunting'."

Aran grinned, "I can just imagine, but getting back to our little dilemma, did you not think that you would have the same problems once we entered the forest?"

Drayden shook his head, "No, I thought I was vulnerable to its power because I was alone, and alone is an Earthmage on Quest."

"And do all other Earthmages travelling in the forest have similar encounters?" Aran asked.

The mage shrugged, "An Earthmage does not normally speak to others of what occurs whilst he or she is on Quest. It is a private and intimate journey which has much spiritual significance to each individual Earthmage."

"Yet you speak of it now," Aran said bluntly.

"I had no choice," Drayden replied. "We cannot afford to have a repeat occurrence of what happened last night."

Aran nodded, "I agree wholeheartedly."

He paused and stared at the other man, "Have the other mages been able to do something about this?"

Drayden nodded, "Master Healmage Genn seems a young, virile man, but for some reason he was unaffected by last night's primal hauntings. He has an idea of how to ward the group tonight, and once he has determined and tested the ward, will teach it to the other mages."

"Good!" Aran turned back to his chore. "We have too great a task ahead of us to be bothered or delayed by these kinds of unique distractions the forest is throwing at us."

"I hate to trouble you my lord, but there is another problem," added Drayden unhappily.

With a frown creasing his face, Aran turned back to the mage.

"What kind of problem?"

Drayden shook his head, "It seems that last night Mage Hela was uh... 'intimate' with all the Guardians except for Wolf Leader Darven and Plainsman Bini. Despite her knowing that she was 'driven' by the energies of the forest, she is still deeply ashamed of her actions, and does not know what to do or say to the Guard if they should approach her."

Aran laughed at that, his face reddening, "Tell her not to worry. I have spoken to Darven, and he has told the Guardsmen not to coerce her into a...a...repeat performance."

He grinned again, "Do you know her mind in this Earthmage? Will she choose a soldier from the Andurian Guard as her companion?" His grin broadened, "Just as Mage Theaua has made her choice in you..."

The mage blushed again, "I thought we were very quiet."

Aran placed a hand on the Earthmage's shoulder, "My friend, you two were groaning enough to keep the entire camp awake."

The Earthmage's face reddened even more.

Aran laughed at the other's discomfiture, "Don't mind me Drayden, I am teasing you only. In truth it was my lady Alissa who alerted me to what was going on...despite my Warriormage awareness, she really can be terribly dense at times."

"Lady Alissa must have the hearing of a hound," Drayden said blandly. "Although I must say that"

am relieved to know that we were not noisy in our activities.”

“And of Hela?” asked Aran. “Do you know her mind in this?”

Drayden shook his head, “I will tell her what you told me, after that it is up to Hela to figure her own way out of this mess. Personally I hope she chooses none of them. She is too new to her mantle and apprenticeship to become entangled in a relationship with an Andurian Keep Guardsman.”

“And what does her master, High Weathermage Trenny think of all this?” asked Aran pointedly.

Drayden pulled a face, “He says little, but I get the clear impression that he is distinctly unimpressed. In fact he seems to blame me entirely for not being able to prevent the primal hauntings from happening.”

Aran shook his head, “I would pay him no heed Drayden. I guess that he is only jealous that he is too old to be affected by these ‘primal hauntings’, and regrets his lost youth and virility!”

So, with some resolution gained, the company stood to eat a hurried meal of fruit and rye bread. Anxious now to quit the now quiescent clearing, eager hands gathered and stored the cooked, smoked and cooled strips of meat, then quickly repacked gear to begin day two of the journey. With these chores complete, the company gathered their horses and all were soon mounted. Aran, riding directly behind the High Earthmage, looked back and saw that to a man, all the party seemed more than glad to quit that night-haunted clearing, and follow the reassuring figure of Mage Drayden back into the verdant depths of the deep forest.

\*

After the upsets of the night before, travel that day was marked only by the close and narrow trails which opened itself up at Drayden’s command, and the endless repetition and variety of trees that grew in Nay Forest. Constrained only to a walk, the horses were fretful and disobedient, eager only to break out into a headlong gallop. It took the considerable skills of their riders to settle their mounts down again.

“They long to run, my lord Aran,” said Bini, as he settled yet again his corn-coloured mare.

“I am not surprised,” replied Aran, craning his neck back so he could talk to the plainsman. “Horses are grassland animals. They dislike this closeness and heaviness of vegetation.”

Bini grinned, “I don’t blame them. I know that I for one will be glad to get out of this forest, and into a place where I can see the horizon again.”

“That I trust will not be long,” replied Darven from further back in the column after overhearing the conversation. “Then instead of all this green closeness, we will instead have to contend with having to avoid Thakurian patrols. I fear that it will be a hard, swift, and dangerous day’s ride across the plains before we have gained any kind of shelter in the foothills of the Trident Range.”

“Drayden has promised me that these mysterious Sages will be able to help us across,” Aran replied frowning. “I only hope he is right, for it will mean that we shall be crossing the plains too close to Riggeltz for my liking.”

“They will help,” replied Drayden from the very front. “They are under oath and vow to do so.”

\*

By mid-afternoon Drayden was able to locate within the depths of the forest a smaller clearing that would accommodate all the horses, and be a temporary camp for the night. Unerringly he led the column to it, and despite the hauntings of the previous night, the group was well pleased to be out from under the trees and into open air, and seeing unbroken blue sky above. As soon as the horses were unloaded, Drayden called Bini and Bennek to him, and the High Earthmage took the two hunters back into the depths of the forest to see if they could enlarge the group’s meat supplies.

“I hope it will be a quieter night tonight,” said Alissa as she dumped onto the ground her sleeping roll.

and blankets.

Aran leant over, letting the chainmail hauberk noisily slide off and onto the grass. He hunkered down and began to inspect the links for any signs of rust. Finally he looked up.

"I believe the mages have worked out some kind of ward," he replied, "However it is not perfect so must be maintained during the night, and that will involve a series of one hour watches by the mages

"Are you going to join them?" she asked.

He nodded, "They're going to need anyone with an Ability, even a latent one, so that means the Darven, Bini and even you will need to stand an hour watch on the group."

Alissa nodded, "I don't mind. Do you know what's involved?"

Aran glanced about at the others who were gathering wood for the cook fires, "I understand the Master Healmage Genn is setting up the initial ward, and then the rest of us will be reinforcing during the night."

"I have never applied my Ability in a conscious way before," said Alissa frowning. "Do you think that the latent mages can do it?"

Aran nodded, "It will be very simple. Just a matter of keeping awake for the duration of the hour, there will be no words, thoughts or motions to memorise, just a conscious mage through which the power of the ward can be channelled."

"Sounds easy," replied Alissa in some relief. "I only hope I don't fall asleep!"

"Walk for the duration of the watch," advised Aran. "It's very difficult falling asleep if you are standing up, besides I want you and the other latent mages to take the first watches. It will still be relatively early, and Drayden seems to think that the forest's power increases with the darkening of the night."

\*

An hour or so later, the hunters returned with the freshly killed carcasses of a young hind, and an adult boar. The hunting had been impossibly easy since both animals had been slowed by previous injury, and in the case of the hind, had also been blind from birth. Immediately everyone took a hand in the skinning and preparation of the meat strips, and it was not long before a cook fire was banked and the meat placed on the wire framework over the coals.

"This will be enough to last us a week or two only," said Bini. "I hope there is game in the mountains."

"Animals will be scarce," answered Drayden. "But enough will be found to sustain us. Besides we have the food parcels prepared by the mages, and I know that Glade will not let us leave empty handed. Also, once we are in Thakur we can send out raiding parties into their cities and settlements to bring back food!"

"I wonder how the Thakur sustain themselves during winter?" asked Aran walking up and overhearing the conversation. "I mean it's not like Thakur is overly fertile."

"They have great goat and sheep herds on the lower slopes of the Trident Range," Drayden replied. "When I flew over Thakur I saw for myself the massed herds of these animals. However when winter comes they slaughter most of their flocks and salt the meat for storage, leaving only a few small breeding herds to provide next season's young."

"And what about their fruit, grain and vegetables?" asked Aran. "No people can sustain themselves alone on meat."

"There are small fertile valleys in the range which are wholly dedicated to massed farming," Drayden replied, "Otherwise I believe they trade the minerals and riches of their mountains for grain and foodstuffs from Nafeking Province."

“Then it is no wonder they lust after our lands,” Aran stated. “For Nafeking too is mostly grassland and has not the fertility of our soils. Although I believe they do have great grain fields that stretch as far as the eye can behold.”

“We too have great trading agreements with Nafeking,” added Drayden. “What they cannot grow they trade, besides they have a much smaller population than ours.”

Aran pursed his lips, “True enough, I wonder if sometime in the future they would be amenable to the idea of merging of our two provinces.”

Drayden shrugged, “I don’t think they would like the notion my lord. They govern themselves very strangely, and have no sole authority.” The mage smiled, “That is why they have called themselves ‘Nafeking’. They do not believe in a sole ruler, instead they prefer to have some kind of elective governing group, one that is changed every five years.”

Aran shook his head, “The Andurian Council has acted in such a role during the absence of the Andurian line from the throne. We have seen all too well that such a method of government is weak and divided, and has no power, especially with the threat of invasion or raid.”

“Yet the people of Nafeking seem happy with their lot,” replied Drayden. “It may be because they know little else, but we must not be too quick to say that our way is the only way.”

Aran nodded, “Yet it suits us, and seems to keep Andur stable and economically strong. I think that once this war is over I shall increase our diplomatic missions to Nafeking. We may have great trading agreements, but I cannot remember last time we sent envoys south beyond our borders.”

“It *has* been generations, lord,” agreed Drayden. “It would be well in our interest to reinstate our affiliations with Nafeking.”

“Then I will do it!” Aran replied firmly. “I wish this war would end so we can all get back to our interrupted lives. Already I have thought of a dozen or more projects that will require my immediate attention once we have returned to the Keep.”

“The lot of the Riothamus is never an easy one to bear,” murmured Bini. “The plainspeople too would gain much benefit from closer links with the rest of the province. It has not done our two peoples well to be so distant from each other.”

Aran nodded, “We are still waiting for your leaders to make up their minds as to if they are going to assist us in fighting this war.” He frowned, “I hope they will not tarry too long in their decision making, for we will need their aid soon!”

\*

Much later Aran felt a gentle tap on his shoulder and he woke to see the dim outline of a figure bending over him.

“My lord king, it is your turn to watch.”

Aran shook his head clear of sleep and his eyes finally registered the outline of Mage Trevan.

“How goes the mage watch?” he asked softly.

“Well,” Trevan replied in a low voice. “The ward seems to be holding, and there has been no repetition of the primal haunting of last night.”

Aran nodded, “Good, do you know who takes the next watch after me?”

“Your replacement will be Mage Theaua, followed by Mage Drayden for the deepest part of the night. There is a candle lit by the mage camp,” Trevan continued. “Its side is marked for the ten hour duration of the mage watch. When you think your watch is ending, check the candle and it will give you proof.”

Aran stood stiffly and shrugged himself into his heavy fur lined cloak.

“Get yourself some sleep Trevan,” he advised kindly. “I will keep this watch.”

\*

Aran shivered and pulled his cloak closer about him. This close to midnight the air was cold indeed and he thought briefly of returning to his saddlebags and hunting out his felted wool cap. For some reason it was much colder this night, indeed his breath frosted in the air before him. It must be the work of the mage ward, Aran figured. Not only was it warding this clearing against the primordial hauntings, but seemed to be also warding it against the warmth and energies generated by the forest keeping winter at bay. Aran stamped his feet against the grass, and prepared to pace again the perimeter of the clearing.

\*

Aran paused, and stared intently into the dark and heavily overgrown forest. He was certain he had seen movement there only a moment before, but now the woodland seemed quiet and sleeping. Aran turned away, and in the turning his eyes caught the flicker of movement again amongst the trees. Immediately he turned and scanned the underbrush.

“If you are there Entity, then show yourself,” he said in a low voice. “I dislike this skulking!”

Silently a grey coated she-wolf detached itself from the confines of the forest, to walk out and stand directly at the warded borders of the clearing.

‘I can come no closer,’ the wolf stated. ‘Your people have this place warded well.’

Aran stared at the animal which was no animal, “Do you wonder, after the problems we experienced last night.”

The Entity seemed to shrug, ‘It is the Ritual of Making.’

“That is no answer,” Aran replied.

‘It is the only answer that can be given to you. The Ritual of Making is the very life force of the forest. Only the wards of the mages can temper its influence, and I am wholly controlled by the Ritual.’

“But you are the Goddess,” Aran said. “Can you not place yourself above such energies?”

‘I am nothing,’ replied the Entity. ‘I am an Aspect only. There are many other Aspects of the Goddess, but I have been marked and empowered in order to be the contact with the other sentient races.’

“Then why are you here?” asked Aran. “Our wards contain you to the forest borders, and there is no wilful energy in this clearing.”

‘I have come as envoy only,’ the Entity stated. ‘There are two here who wish to have speech with you.’

“Who?” asked Aran.

The wolf turned away and walked back into the darkness, ‘You will see. The energies of the forest allow them to come, but your wards contain them only to the forest.’

Aran watched the wolf disappear, and then strained his eyes to detect more movement. Finally he perceived a faintly glowing figure move out from between the trees.

‘Brother?’

“Sarana”

Aran stared at the young girl-child who stepped towards him, whilst pausing only at the very edge of the grassed clearing.

‘I can come no further, brother. There are invisible walls here.’

“Wards, Sarana,” Aran explained. “We had some problems last night with the forest energies.”

The girl-child nodded, ‘I know, the Entity explained it to me. You need not have worried the energies are not malevolent, just ancient only in its desires.’

Aran nodded, "We guessed so, but it is distracting to our purpose and could have caused problems within the group."

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Aran stared at the serious faced girl-child with the long straight blond hair, who was dressed in a paragon robe of indeterminate type and style.

"You must think my memory poor, Sarana," he confessed, "I have little recollection of your features when you were alive."

'We were small children only,' she said. 'The memory of a very young child is unformed like raw clay. It is no wonder that you cannot bring me to mind.'

"Are you well?" he asked finally.

Sarana smiled wryly, 'As well as any disembodied spirit, brother. Yet I watch over you and those who gather about you. I am glad that you have come to yourself again. I worried about you, and was certain you meant to take your own life after that great battle.'

Aran nodded sadly, "It was a bitter and learning time for me," he admitted. "Thank-you again for your presence that day, I was a hard and difficult man to be around, but you were my greatest comfort during those terrible hours."

'I am glad only that I was taken young by the hand of the Goddess,' Sarana said softly. 'I would not have made a good queen...I know my own weaknesses, and you have the greater purpose and strength of us both.'

"That may well be so," Aran replied, "but you are my only kin, and I have missed not knowing you as a sister."

Sarana turned her head back to the forest as if she was hearing a voice.

'I must go now Arantur,' she said. 'I came only so you could see me, and have memory of my likeness. However there is someone else who craves admittance, and he grows impatient with his waiting'

"Who?"

'Our kinsman.'

Then she turned back to Aran.

'Before I go, I must let you know that the Entity tells me that I may be with you soon in a more 'tangible' way. Look for me Arantur; you may soon know my presence.'

Aran was confused, "How? Tell me Sarana!"

But the girl-child only shook her head, and faded back into the forest.

\*

Aran huddled closer into his cloak, and stamped his feet against the grass to get some feeling back into his toes. He did not know how long this next visitor would take, but he hoped that it would not be long.

\*

'I am glad that you and my son have resolved your differences.'

Aran looked up and saw his dream-memory of Warleader Andur walk out from between the trees to stand directly at the edge of the grass bordering the warded clearing.

Aran dropped to his knees in bowing supplication.

"Great lord," he acknowledged.

'Get up!' Andur admonished the young king. 'You and I are equal in rank. I will not have you bowing to me.'

Aran got unsteadily to his feet, and stared disbelievingly at the crowned, and tall blond-braided figure dressed in archaic style clothes and weaponry."

‘I see you carry my sword,’ Andur said at last, staring meaningfully at the King’s Sword at Aran’s hip. ‘You use it well, better in fact than I ever did!’

“You had the Warriormage Ability, lord,” Aran asked. “Why did you not use it?”

The figure of the Warleader grinned mirthlessly, ‘I did not know I possessed it until the mages came to me before the fall of Seawatch Keep. Then it was a little late to explore my talents on the battlefield, and after the war there was no need to use the Ability.’

Aran had to smile at that, “I agree that it has little application during peacetime.”

‘Just so,’ Andur replied. ‘Yet I have come to this place to bring you news.’

“What news?”

The Warleader fingered the ghostly replica of the magecrafted weapon at his side. ‘The horsetribes have seen their omens. Even now they ride to the aid and enforcement of yon encamped Guards and Legions on the plain.’

Aran let out a sigh of relief, “At last! I feared they would not come in time.”

‘They will be a strength to your armies, kinsman,’ Andur said confidently. ‘They helped me greatly during that last great battle of the Uprising.’

He glanced across to the sleeping figure of Bini. ‘I see that one already rides with you.’

“Bini Stardreamer,” said Aran. “He is a true companion.”

‘I too had a plainsman as a friend. His name was Erike Strikefast,’ Andur remembered. ‘He was my right hand man in all things, and as straight and true to our cause as an arrow’s flight.’

Aran stared at the older man with sad eyes, “I have come to this kingship suddenly and without preparation, lord. I know little about how a king ought to behave, and it would have been reassuring to have guidance along the way. Why did you not come to me sooner as Sarana has?”

Andur’s gaze dropped to the ground, ‘My death has been separated from your life by many long centuries. Only the vast, dreaming powers in this place allow my spirit to rouse itself to converse with you now. However, I have come to you once before. Do you not remember?’

Aran nodded, “I had a vivid, unsettling dream the night after we returned from the ambush. I thought it was only a fancy seeded from the horrors of the battlefield.”

Warleader Andur shook his head, ‘Apart from this place, it is only in dreams that the living and the non-living may meet. Even then the will of the Goddess allowed only that one brief contact and reassurance.’

“As a king, have I erred too much?” Aran asked finally, quietly.

‘You are greater into your kingship than I ever was,’ Andur admitted. ‘I was Warleader only during the Great Uprising. The mettle of my kingship was never tested by the vagaries of Glaive, and the Council was too indebted by my victory ever to try my patience fully.’

“Your son Maran has been difficult to deal with,” Aran said bluntly.

Andur smiled wryly, He is stubborn to a fault, and too much like me in character...as you are to young Arantur. I deeply regret the heritage we have both passed onto you. The Andurian temper alone is a heavy burden, without the added weight of the Warriormage rage to bear as well.’

“It is proving difficult, but I believe that I am learning self-discipline,” Aran stated. “However I am indebted to my queen-to-be Alissa, for she has hammered and tempered my raw-iron rage into steel.”

‘You have chosen well,’ replied the Warleader. ‘Baranta was a fine, good woman, but she had not the inherent strength of your lass.’

Aran glanced across to the sleeping figure of Alissa, “I will tell her your words come morning.”

Aran looked back, and saw that the glowing figure of his ancestor was beginning to fade.

“Tell me lord” Aran asked hurriedly. “Will we have a chance against the Thakur? Will I defeat them?”

Warleader?”

Andur half turned to the forest as if he was obeying a greater summons from within.

‘The future is closed to me,’ he said at last. ‘However, I believe your decisions have been sound ones.’ He paused and his voice began to fade also, ‘One last thing, kinsman. The old Abilities grow daily in the land, look to those who camp also in this place, you will find others who have the seeds of the Warriormage Ability deep within them!’

“Wolf Leader Darven I know of!”

‘Others too,’ whispered Andur, his voice as quiet as a gentle breeze wafting in the canopy of the forest. ‘Look for me in your dreams, kinsman. I will aid you when the Goddess wills.’

Then the form of the Warleader turned, and faded back into the black denseness of the woodlands.

\*



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