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*Living on Re Annan was like another universe. A loving family and happy childhood: what more could a man want or need? I wish I was there still.*

*But fate set another path for me to tread.*

*Today, mothers use my name to frighten their children; criminals whisper it and pray I am never set on their trail. I pride myself on efficiency and effectiveness.*

*This is the beginning of my journey from farmboy to Imperial Bounty Hunter, by Appointment to the Markan Throne.*

*My name is Sallis ti Ath.*

## **Chapter 1**

### **The Healer**

Romand lifted the linen from the boy's forehead and winced. Dry already, so the fever had not broken. Barely conscious, the boy burned. The infusions were having little effect. Whatever caused this fever was killing the boy as surely as an arrow through the heart.

"He's getting no better," said another voice.

"Of course he is." Romand smiled at the boy's father. He dipped the linen cloth in the bucket of fresh water and wrung it out, before returning it to the boy's forehead. He stood, put an arm around the father's shoulders and led him out of the small room.

"Why do you lie to me?" Emotion put a tremor in the other man's voice.

Romand looked over his shoulder; they should be out of earshot now. "He can hear us, Hayland," he said. "Such things should not be said when the patient can hear, or he will believe it."

"But he's getting no better."

Romand pursed his lips. He gave Hayland ti Ath a level look. Hill farmers were tough people, so he decided to be brutally honest. "No, but we are doing all we can. Keep him watered and cool."

"The Father has ignored our prayers so far." Emotion cracked Hayland's voice again. "There is nothing more to be done?"

"There is one thing." Romand's blue eyes were devoid of any emotion. "A touch-healer can save him."

"Sounds expensive."

"It is."

Hayland turned and looked across his farm. Three thousand sheep, a little arable land, plenty of water and a rather large house he had built himself. "I'll find a way to pay," he promised. "Send for this... touch-healer."

Romand smiled. "I already have."

Hayland gripped the other's shoulder. "You are a good man," he said. "You have my gratitude."

Romand looked embarrassed. "Save the gratitude until he's better," he replied. "Just in case we are too late."

Hayland returned to his sick son and sat in the chair beside the bed. He gently lifted the boy's arm and held his small hand in one of his own. "Come on Sallis," he whispered, "break out of it." Renewed faith, rather than emotion, firmed his words now.

A touch-healer was coming.

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Hayland's wife Cellin gave mixed reactions to the news. Pleased to hear something could be done to save their son, she now worried how a touch-healer, usually the preserve of the rich, might be paid. She did not air her doubts because hope overcame fear. For the moment.

Busy before the large black range, she kneaded dough and, from the smell, pies were already in the oven. When building the house, Hayland had ensured plenty of room for his wife to work; her popular baking raised important additional income.

"Romand says only a touch-healer can save him," said Hayland. "The fever should have broken by now."

Her hands paused briefly before she began to furiously knead the dough. *Don't cry*, she told herself. *You'll ruin your pastry*. A small problem, in the face of paying a touch-healer.

"We will manage," said Hayland, knowing what caused the silence. "Somehow."

Cellin forced a smile. "We always do," she replied. "Somehow." She turned her face to him and pecked his cheek. A quick kiss of reassurance. "Whatever it takes; he is our son."

Four girls: youngest eight, oldest twelve and twins almost eleven, piled into the baking room, slings left outside.

"All's well out there," said the oldest girl, Merta. "No sign of foxes."

"Keep looking," her father told her. "Where we have newborns, there are always foxes. And watch the sky for buzzards. They'll take a lamb if you're not careful."

"How's Sallis?" asked Tendra, the youngest.

"Sick, but he'll be better soon."

The girls glanced at their mother, perhaps expecting a different reaction. Cellin shrugged.

"Sit yourselves and have some stew before going out again."

The girls obeyed, but none looked convinced that their brother would be better ever.

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Re Annan was a small island, which would take a cart four days to travel from north to south, and two days east to west. Not too heavily populated, farms were large and poverty rare, but everybody needed to work hard for what they had. Because so few lived on the island, there was little surplus for an army, so the people were the army. Every household had a sword, bow or ax, and even children could handle slings and staffs.

It meant the islanders were tough, independent and well used to looking after themselves. But Re Annan's best defense was the sea, even against other island nations who occasionally cast greedy eyes on their smaller neighbors.

The island had two towns, one pretentious enough to call itself a city. That "city" was Leynx and home to the council that ruled Re Annan.

The official ruler was the Papan, but he was advised by his council and rarely dared step out of line. Raised from the council, the Papan's life might be very short if he developed ideas beyond his station.

Councilors were elected by all, but only the rich few, who controlled the island's trade, ever stood for election. Despite this, the people were happy, and for the most part, ruled wisely. Fertile land produced plenty of food and, while some were certainly richer than others, nobody starved. Or wore rags, or begged.

Half the island was forest, carefully managed so every felled tree was replaced with a fresh seedling. Except for fishing boats, few ships were built on Re Annan, but wood was needed for building houses and making furniture. The Council knew only fools would deplete their forest and lose the source of their wood.

Although Re Annan furniture was sold overseas, the island's main export was wool, the tough hill sheep producing fleeces in demand throughout the other islands and even beyond, on the distant mainland.

The best land for arable crops was along the coast, on a fertile plain that ran right around the island. Much of the rest of Re Annan consisted of low-lying hills, dotted with most of the sheep farms. Those hills also boasted known deposits of iron, copper and, in the far north tin, but nobody had exploited them. Most metal products were still imported.

That was part of the downside of there being so few people. The Council often talked about encouraging miners to exploit the minerals, but they had spent three or four centuries making noises and never following up with action.

Another mine produced light crystals, but these were not exported. Every household now had crystals, so the mine was shut, though it was maintained and reopened whenever someone needed another crystal. The revenue from that went straight into the Council's coffers.

So, Re Annan was peaceful and prosperous, its people content. Even better, it was far enough east to avoid the troubles that plagued the mainland.

A good place to live.

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The house was still. The girls slept, and their parents banked the range to keep the fire alive until morning. Cellin had the first watch tonight, in case Sallis woke in the night.

Hayland had watered the boy and ensured the linen on his forehead was wet. The fever felt no different and the cloth still dried out with frightening speed.

"No fever anywhere on the island," said Cellin. "Where did he get it from? What if it spreads?"

Hayland nodded. "He might have picked it up from anywhere; children his age do."

"Never seen anything like it," continued Cellin. "Three days and still not broken."

"It'll come." Hayland did not want to think that the longer the fever lasted, the less chance of Sallis surviving.

"I'm going up." Cellin stood, wrapped her blanket around her shoulders and left the room.

Hayland stared at the range in silence, alone with the light crystal glowing white in its lantern. His most important thoughts were for Sallis, but a new worry concerned the touch-healer.

How would - could - he pay?

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Sallis ti Ath drifted through dreams and half-dreams, nightmares of dark monsters the size of houses chasing him through forests. Tree branches tried to seize him and snuff out his life. Beautiful dreams of lush meadows and sun warming him as he basked on hilltops, skylarks singing far above.

Dreams of his barely remembered grandmother, no longer old and wrinkled, but young and beautiful. She hugged him and marveled at how he had grown. Still

smiling, she stood back, and told him that he should not be here, that it was not yet time.

He longed to stay and cried out as she turned and walked away, without even a backward glance.

A recent dream, or one days old?

Or no dream at all?

Sunlight warmed him, yet he felt heavy. But it was an uncomfortable heat. Something damp pressed against his head and a voice cajoled him to wake. He burned; he was on fire! What sort of terrible place was this? He should stay with his grandmother. That place was beautiful and real; a home he was already missing so badly that he ached from the separation. This place was... horrible.

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"He's calling for Mother." Cellin shook her head. Her mother was four years dead and as Sallis was so small when she died, she was amazed that he even remembered her.

"Just the fever speaking," muttered Hayland.

Romand grimaced as he laid a hand on Sallis's forehead.

"It's getting worse," said Hayland. That was not a question.

Romand looked over his shoulder, towards relative darkness where the sun did not reach.

Another man stepped forward, hands held strangely before him. A surprisingly deep voice came from him.

"Time for me to try," said the stranger.

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Sallis ti Ath blinked a few times. Despite sunshine streaming in through the open window, he was in bed for some reason. Shouldn't he be working? There was always work on a farm.

Home, this was home.

But why was he in bed?

He started as a man leaned over him, blue eyes twinkling, a startling sight on ti Ath's brown-eyed island.

"Who are you?" he demanded, his first word coming out strangled. "Where are my-?"

"Sallis." His mother leaned over him, but he could not understand why she looked on the very brink of tears.

Sallis stared at his father. He *never* cried. Why were tears running down his cheeks?

"We thought we'd lost you," continued his mother, "but Elvallon saved you."

Elvallon? Sallis assumed that was the owner of the blue eyes. Romand - at least the healer was familiar - rested a hand on Sallis's forehead.

"The fever is gone," he said, voice awed.

"Of course."

Sallis blinked at the timbre of Elvallon's voice. The man's long brown hair was tied back with a cord - at least that was normal - and he stroked a neatly trimmed brown beard. That was not normal and was the first beard Sallis had ever seen, although his father often had stubble. Usually at lambing time when he might go two or even three nights without sleep. Then exhaustion would roll him under and he would then repeat the performance until lambing was over.

"Have I been ill?"

"Very ill," replied Romand.

Sallis had a vague memory of collapsing at the sheepfold, but even that seemed dreamlike, as if it had not really happened.

"How do you feel now?" asked Cellin.

"Strange," replied Sallis. "Tired."

Elvallon smiled. "You must eat and drink." His features grew sterner. "And plenty of rest." The twinkle returned. "You will be very weak after fighting the fever."

"I thought you cured him," interrupted Hayland.

Elvallon turned his head. "The strength for that came from the boy. And he did well to survive so long." His attention returned to Sallis. "A day, maybe two, and you'll be running around again as if nothing had happened."

"Strange thing," Romand was saying, "but there is no fever anywhere else."

Elvallon shrugged, a merest movement of his shoulders. "These things can happen any time," he replied.

"We spoke of price," said Hayland.

Elvallon smiled again. "*You* spoke of price," he replied, gently. "I said cure first and then speak of price."

"Whatever is in my power to give is yours," said Hayland.

"A dangerous offer," replied Elvallon, looking at Sallis. "Very well. My price is the boy."

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## Chapter 2

### Decision

Hayland and Cellin stared at the touch-healer in consternation.

"Our son?" Hayland was aghast. His hand gripped Sallis's shoulder.

Romand stared at the floor and looked embarrassed.

"Anything in your power to give." Elvallon's blue eyes twinkled.

Hayland shook his head. "For the love the Father, why Sallis?"

"Why is a good question; perhaps you should have asked that one first."

Elvallon smiled. "Sallis is Gifted."

Romand lifted his head and realization dawned in his eyes. He looked at Sallis with increased respect.

"Gifted?" echoed Cellin.

Elvallon nodded and lifted his hands. "What I used to cure Sallis is the Gift. Very few are born with it. Your son is one such and he must be taught. That is my price."

"Sounds like you are putting us deeper in your debt," muttered Hayland.

Elvallon turned his head sharply. "Hardly. Many times he will wish it had never happened to him, and to be normal like almost everybody else, but he must be trained. It is a duty."

"You are sure?" Cellin stared at Elvallon. "How can you tell he has the Gift?"

"I knew the moment my hands touched him. If he was a little older, it might be sensed from, oh, twenty paces or so."

"He's nothing out of the ordinary," protested Cellin. "Just a little boy who's naughty now and then, but dutiful most times."

"He must be taught how to control the Gift, or it might kill him," added Elvallon.

"It's *dangerous*?" Hayland's eyes widened.

"All improperly controlled power is dangerous," countered Elvallon. "And there is worse."

"Such as?" Hayland sounded almost aggressive.

"The other side." There was no twinkle in Elvallon's eyes now. "They seek children with the Gift as assiduously as I. The Gift comes from the Father but they will corrupt it. This way, Sallis will be under my protection."

"Where will you take him?"

"My home near Leynx. Of course, you are most welcome to visit me and he will still come here for breaks away from training." The healer leaned forward. "In many ways, he will need you even more now."

Hayland and Cellin looked at each other.

"Is anybody going to ask what *I* want?" piped Sallis. "This is about me, after all."

All four adults turned to look at the boy, still on his sickbed.

Hayland gestured with a hand.

"If I can do whatever has just been done to me, isn't that a good thing? Helping people?" Sallis sounded eager.

Cellin sat on his bed and held his hand. "We need you here," she said. "We will miss you."

Elvallon smiled. "I can arrange his time here to coincide with your busy spells," he promised.

"On a farm, the busy bit lasts from midwinter to midwinter," countered Hayland. "Specially with a few thousand sheep."

"I want to go," said Sallis.

"We could not cope without him," said Cellin.

"We will rely too much on neighbors; they may feel put upon," continued Hayland. "All well and good that-

Sallis raised his voice. "I want to go!"

Silence fell.

Elvallon wore a secretive smile.

"If this Gift is dangerous to me, it might be dangerous to you too." Sallis stared defiantly at his parents. "If I can heal, then we will be richer when my training is finished. The farm will still be here."

"A wise head on young shoulders," said Romand. "A rarity indeed."

Hayland and Cellin exchanged another look.

"When will you take him?" asked Hayland.

"Not yet." Elvallon's blue eyes were serious again. "Another year, perhaps two."

"That long?" squeaked Sallis. "Thought you meant today."

"I'll keep an eye on you," Elvallon assured him. "But you stay here until I know you are ready."

"What if this... other side... finds him in the meantime?" asked Cellin.

Elvallon's smile returned. "Now I have my eye on him, they will never find out," he said. "That I promise."

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### Chapter 3 Waiting

A year is a lifetime to a small boy, and two an eternity. Sallis continued to learn about sheep and arable crops - not that his father had much arable land. Hayland usually traded for arable food in the nearest town, Hendrek, and if there was any spare cash, he usually spent it on books.

These exotic items were imported, quite rare and usually expensive. Sallis squabbled with his sisters over who got first turn with any new books Hayland might bring home from his market trips and shared their disappointment if there were none.

Cellin ensured all her children got some measure of education; at least they were all literate and numerate. Hayland taught them to fight with a quarterstaff and improved their skills with the slings. Everybody hoped they never needed these weapons, but the world was a dangerous place and it was always best to be prepared.

Sallis never forgot Elvallon, nor his wish to learn and help others, but if the touch-healer kept his eye on the boy, nobody ever saw him. His parents, and to a lesser extent his sisters, hoped they never saw Elvallon again. They did not want Sallis to leave and, after his initial bravado, even he had second thoughts.

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When he was nine, Hayland let Sallis come with him on the autumn drove. Local farmers took it in turns to act as drover, and this year was Hayland's turn. Sallis had never left the farm before, except to help at neighboring farms, so this was a new adventure for him. And a great honor; taking part in a drove was almost a rite of passage into manhood.

The drove was not the world's greatest trek, an overnight walk to Hendrek where the stock would be sold. But Sallis relished his relative freedom from the farm. After all, walking was a lot easier than many of his other chores.

The autumn weather held good and Sallis guarded the drove's rear on the narrow track. He was supposed to stop sheep from straying, but the piebald dog Penlow was the real shepherd, keeping the sheep together almost instinctively. The other dog, white with sharp-edged brown stripes - appropriately named Slash - stayed near the front.

Hayland led, his cries of "Heiptro ho!" echoing about, warning other farmers to gather their livestock to prevent any being inadvertently swept into the drove.

Sallis reveled in it all. The air was still warm and wild fruits begged to be eaten. Although the main track was clear, fronds of bracken and fern waved above the low walls on either side of the drove road, an ancient track used for this purpose for centuries. Pastureland abounded and, in one or two places, ripening crops swayed in the gentle breeze. All around, the hills presented a glorious display of purple heather and the occasional tough tree with leaves starting to change color.

He and his father might as well be the only people in the entire world.

When they stopped for the night, Hayland showed Sallis how the large enclosures worked, to prevent sheep from wandering away while the humans slept. Penlow and Slash lay across the enclosure's entrance, deterring both adventurous sheep and hungry foxes, while Hayland and Sallis prepared their bedrolls to one side. Father showed son how to bend and secure fern fronds to keep the weather off, should there be rain during the night.

A cold meal of flatbread and cheese was washed down with water, before they settled for the night.

"Get as much rest as you can, lad," said Hayland. "It's been a long day."

Sallis believed he was too excited for sleep. Tomorrow, he would see his first town, or at least something bigger than a clutch of farms. He poked his head out from his makeshift shelter and stared at the stars.

So many, filling the clear night sky, most faint, but many bright. And that white strip was no high cloud, but a band of densely packed stars. He began to name constellations and stars, hoping the Ark Star might put in an appearance. He listened to the night sounds and decided to stay awake, until...

...until Hayland shook him awake at dawn.

"A quick breakfast, then we move on," said the older man.

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Hendrek awed Sallis. Hayland tried not to laugh at his son's wonderment.

Four roads entered the town, and all met at a central square, where the droves congregated. Not only sheep, but cattle, goats, pigs, geese and chickens filled every available space.

Buildings hemmed in the roads and intriguing alleys crisscrossed between the main thoroughfares. Most buildings were limewashed, but there the similarity with home ended. Houses were three, four and sometimes five levels high. Instead of the thatch Sallis expected to see, every building was roofed with slate.

And the people!

Sallis had never seen so many in one place before. Women wore long gowns and the girls knee length dresses. Boys and men wore breeches and billowing white shirts, the younger boys in breeches that barely reached the knee. Children went bare-headed, but women wore headscarves and the men either flat caps like his father, or tall affairs that looked like short chimneys.

"We want this way." Hayland had to raise his voice to be heard over the racket of the square. "There's our pen."

Sallis was amazed that they did not lose a single sheep, more due to the watchfulness of Penlow and Slash than any skill he or his father showed. Rams showed interest in ewes they had never met before, but they were herded into their pen with varying degrees of willingness.

Men and women, dressed in far grander clothes than Sallis had believed could exist, wandered through the throng, making offers and exchanging tokens.

Sallis stared all around and listened to the hawkers.

"Meat pies! Fresh today and still warm!"

"Cures for sheep rasp! Remedies for distemper and mange!"

"Fresh fruit! All picked today!"

He stared at the meat pie seller and licked his lips.

"Take care, lad," said his father, in a low voice. "Many of these street vendors lie like tooth-drawers."

"He says the pies are fresh."

"Aye, the pies maybe. But what about the meat that goes into 'em? You wouldn't be the first to suffer a bellyache. Be careful."

Sallis ignored the vendors after that. He listened as his father haggled with the buyers, eventually settling on twenty sceyts a head for the sheep.

"Is that good?" he whispered to his father.

"Not bad," replied Hayland. He shrugged. "Only a little less than last year, so maybe prices will recover soon."

Hayland exchanged tokens, so he could collect the contracts later.

"How do the other farmers know we won't tell them we got less and pocket the difference?"

Hayland gave his son a level look. "You are beginning to display a dishonest streak," he told him. "This is why we have the contracts, so everybody can see what we got for them."

"Is it safe to carry all that money about?"

Hayland laughed. "That's why it stays here. Every centage goes into the bank and they look after it for us, until needed."

"Is that why you come here so often?" Sallis was curious.

"It is. A necessary evil."

"Can I come with you next time?"

Hayland ruffled his son's dark hair. "Of course you can. Travel broadens the mind. And you might be better than me at finding new books."

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Sallis managed one more trip to Hendrek with his father before winter descended. This was one of those rare winters when snow and ice lay thick on the ground for weeks at a time and the large black range in the kitchen burned day and night.

He and his father made a sledge for collecting firewood, as their huge stack depleted very quickly. Foxes grew bolder and were ever harder to drive away; they struggled to survive too.

Everybody waited eagerly for the first signs of spring: lengthening days, and the white snowdrops and yellow sunbursts showing that winter's iron grip was finally slipping.

This was the year when Sallis would be ten years old. The first year he could help his father with the lambing unsupervised, ensuring the ewes were fine and that there were no complications. And that all the lambs were properly looked after too. Ewes sometimes rejected their offspring.

The winter proved more resistant than normal to spring, so ewes and their lambs needed rather more care than usual, at least in the early days of the lambing season.

After two days and a night spent on the hills, Sallis and his father returned to the house, hungry for fresh stew, where he found his mother and sisters at the range, all looking solemn.

A man stepped from the shadows, a familiar twinkle in his blue eyes.

"Good morning, Hayland," said Elvallon. "I trust all is going well? I have come for the boy."

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## Chapter 4

### About the Gift

Elvallon's cart rattled along the road and eventually crested the last pass. Sallis leaned forward and his mouth dropped open. Hills reared to both sides and behind, although pastures had already given way to arable fields. This had not caught the boy's attention, but the vast plain running to the sea. From the road, Sallis stared at converging rivers and the wide estuary below.

The land was not completely flat; small hills rose above the plain, mountains compared with anything around them. Farm buildings topped every hill. Afternoon sunshine bathed the hills in a warm glow.

The large carthorse - Polless - snorted and shook his head with a jingle of brass, as if pleased with this unexpected rest. He lifted one hairy-fetlocked leg before stamping it down.

"The river floods now and then," said Elvallon. "That's why the farms are built on higher ground. And the floods help keep the plain fertile. And the waste from over there also helps." He gestured inland.

At the head of the estuary, built where higher ground sloped to the plain, squatted the largest town Sallis had ever seen. At first he thought a small forest grew beside the city, before realizing he was looking at ships' masts.

"Leynx," said Elvallon. "Capital of Re Annan."

"And largest city," added Sallis.

Elvallon said nothing to that, but stroked his short beard thoughtfully as he regarded the boy.

"Do you live there?"

"Nearby," replied Elvallon. "There is not enough room in the city for me to grow my herbs and food."

"You live on a farm?"

Elvallon laughed, a rich deep chuckle. "Nothing so grand. Perhaps a cottage garden is a better description. I must still buy some of my food, and I keep no animals, other than Polless."

"Why do you need herbs if you just touch people to make them better?" pressed Sallis.

"Because not everybody needs to be touched to be healed. Some only need a few herbs to make them feel better, because they convince themselves they are ill when in fact they are not."

"They waste your time?"

The twinkle in Elvallon's eyes grew. "When people pay for my time, they are not wasting it. Remember that, young Sallis, your first lesson from me."

"I don't understand how touching someone can heal them," said Sallis. He had mentioned this every day since leaving home.

And received the same answer. "You will learn how soon enough," promised Elvallon.

"I hope nothing goes wrong with your crops while you are away," said Sallis, still staring at Leynx. "Are they looked after by magic too?"

Elvallon's laughter boomed again. "Someone looks after my crops when I'm away. When I'm home as well."

"A neighbor?"

"Better than that." Elvallon clicked the reins. "Come on Polly, else we'll never get there."

Polless shook his head and snorted again, before starting the cart with a slight jerk.

Elvallon turned back to Sallis. "Nearly there now."

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Elvallon's home stood on the estuary, downriver from Leynx. The healer had not lied; his home really was little more than a cottage, though not quite as small as he had intimated. Sallis was not too disappointed to miss Leynx, because he could look to the city from Elvallon's cottage and admire the fine buildings there. The town sprawled across higher ground, with few tall buildings, and Sallis could see the ships' masts.

"The ships have to pass here to get to sea," Elvallon told him. "They're always heading up- or downriver. Depending on the tide, of course."

Seabirds were much in evidence and Sallis watched those circling overhead, or pecking hopefully on the mudflats. Mostly gulls and terns, though there were some strange birds with long orange beaks that were new to him. He sniffed at the air.

"I read you can smell the sea when you're close to it," he said. "I smell nothing different."

Elvallon laughed.

"Is it untrue? Or is something wrong with my sense of smell?"

"On Re Annan, we're never far from the sea," smiled Elvallon. "You're just used to the smell already."

"Oh."

"Let's get Polless sorted and then you can have a look around."

Once the carthorse was comfortable in his stall, tucking into oats, and his tack had been dumped in one corner ("Don't worry about that," said Elvallon, "it'll get sorted later."), the healer showed Sallis around.

Unlike his family home, Sallis saw that the house was all on one level, with the stable attached. The whole thing was thatched and the outer walls were limewashed. As they went inside, Sallis saw one end of the cottage formed a large living area, with a smaller version of his mother's black range to one side. A round wooden table with four chairs, a workbench with herbs spread over it, more benches for preparing food and rows of kitchen utensils took up one side of the room.

On the other side, the slate flagstones covered with a scrap of rug, sat two large chairs, badly needing new upholstery, and three long shelves full of books. Sallis had never seen so many in one place before.

A peculiar smell hung in the air that Sallis didn't recognize. He said nothing, but could not make up his mind if the smell was bad or not. Or perhaps merely unusual. Certainly not Elvallon's scent.

Two doors led to storerooms, where Elvallon kept his food out of harm's way, and crushed herbs were preserved in glass jars. Another door led to a narrow corridor with three rooms leading off.

"Thought we'd put you in here," said Elvallon, opening the middle door.

Sallis stared.

Bright sunshine filled the room and Sallis guessed the rooms all faced south to catch the sun as much as possible. There were shelves and storage areas for clothes and his other effects - not that he had brought much with him. Mats covered the floor, made from some marsh plant or other, that Sallis guessed he would have to change regularly. Walls and ceiling were painted yellow. A proper bed instead of a pallet took up one wall, already made up as if he was expected.

"Feather mattress?" he asked.

Elvallon nodded. "And feather pillow and brushed wool blankets," he added. The bedroom window was large, with outer and inner blue shutters he could close for privacy. It looked towards the estuary. Sallis grinned; this was a good room.

Elvallon led him back into the corridor and pointed to a fourth door at the far end Sallis had not noticed. "Washroom and privy. We've got plenty of water; a spring rises under there, supplies the wash basin and flushes the privy."

Sallis nodded, but his attention was not on the privy. "One of these is your bedroom, but what about the other one?"

"The other two doors are private," said Elvallon. "This one is mine. Keep your room tidy and we will respect your privacy; we only ask that you respect ours."

"We?"

Elvallon smiled. "Have you seen outside? Let me show you around my herb-garden."

Outside, Elvallon explained how much exercise Polless needed.

"I lend him out at ploughing time, which he *hates*."

Sallis laughed. "He's just a horse."

"I can tell you don't own any horses at home," grumped Elvallon. "If you were more familiar with them, you'd know they've all got personalities of their own. You just try getting mine to do anything he doesn't want to."

Sallis stared.

Behind the house, Elvallon showed his new charge where the estuary flowed past. A small wooden quay - empty - led across mud to deeper water.

"You don't have a boat," pointed out Sallis.

"Yes I do," replied Elvallon, leading the boy back around the house. "You've just not seen it yet. Right, here's where I grow my herbs..."

Sallis could not hide his yawns.

"Ah, you must be tired." Elvallon smiled. "A quick bite to eat and then an early bed, so you will be fresh in the morning."

"What will we eat?" asked Sallis. "I smelled nothing cooking."

The other's smile broadened and he leaned forward. "Time for your second lesson," he whispered.

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"Cold broth?"

Sallis looked at the two bowls on the range in disappointment.

"Hot broth," corrected Elvallon. "With bread rolls."

"That is not hot."

"It will be in less than a minute." Elvallon smiled. "Every day, you have asked me about the Gift and what it is. Here is your first demonstration and explanation."

Sallis stared.

"The Gift grants ways of making things happen, that otherwise could or should not. It is the power that led to the creation of everything we see. The world, stars, everything. It's within everything, including us, only most can't touch it. But without it, we would not be, because nothing would exist."

"How come some people can touch it?" asked Sallis.

"A skill granted by the Father, or Siranva."

Sallis's eyes widened. "Mother says it is bad to name... Him."

"Over-familiar perhaps." Elvallon shrugged. "But not bad."

"You will make the broth hot, but how?"

"As I said, this power is in everything, so it's a matter of using the Gift within me to connect and change the Gift within that." Elvallon gestured to the broth.

"That's how I touch-heal. The Gift within me connects to the Gift within the sick person, but *I* manipulate that to make that person better again."

"But it is really the Gift within the sick man doing the work?"

"A quick study." Elvallon gave him a look of increased respect. "That's why you felt so tired afterwards. And why sometimes I must use herbs, if the other person is very weak. The very best of touch-healers can use their own strength to heal using the Gift, but I am not so exalted."

"Oh."

"On the other hand, you have the potential to be among the best."

Sallis blinked again. "You said this broth will be hot in less than a minute."

"It is hot now."

Sallis stared at the bowls. Vapor rose gently from the broth. "You didn't touch it!"

"I don't have to. It wasn't the broth I heated, but the air around the bowls. I *am* touching that."

The smell of the broth reached Sallis now and Elvallon nodded. He wrapped a cloth around his hands and carried both bowls to the table, where Sallis broke the crusty bread roll.

"That bowl's hot," warned Elvallon.

Sallis nodded. "Why can't the Gift be learned?" he asked around a mouthful of bread.

A shadow flickered in the other's blue eyes. "Sadly, it can."

"Why is that sad?"

"I'm impressed; you are asking the questions today. Sad, because when the Gift is learned, it is not granted by the Father. We call it sorcery then, because it is inspired and controlled by the evil side. The Malefic Sephiroth hates the Father and everything he stands for. I seek those granted the Gift to train and teach them about the Father and the Benefic Sephiroth. Sorcerers also seek out those granted the Gift assiduously, but they try to turn them to the Malefic Sephiroth, to evil."

Sallis's eyes widened. "That is why you brought me here?"

"To teach, nurture, and also protect you."

Sallis looked around the large room. "Am I safe?" Another thought came to him. "What about my family?"

"They won't harm your family." Elvallon gave the boy a reassuring smile. He hoped he spoke the truth. "I reached you before the Gift began to flow in you, so the evil side will not have heard of you."

"Would they if you had not come?"

"Eventually yes. I will not hide the enormity of your Gift from you Sallis, nor the struggle we are all part of, unwittingly or otherwise. It is a responsibility few wish to shoulder, unlike the poor deluded souls who learn sorcery. They only discover the truth when it is too late."

"I don't understand why I am Gifted," said Sallis. "It isn't in our family; I never heard of it before meeting you."

"That's because it doesn't work like that," replied Elvallon. "The Gift is granted randomly, it's the best protection the Father can give. Else, the other side can just eliminate those families who display the talent. And believe me, they would do that if they could predict who might produce a Gifted child."

Sallis shuddered. He thought of evil people coming when he was still a baby and killing his sisters, his father and his mother... Just because of the Gift.

"I'm not sure I want it," he said.

"Good," replied Elvallon. "None of us do. We begin by fearing it and grow to resent being set apart from our fellow people. But once granted, it cannot be undone."

Sallis sighed.

"Come, finish your broth. I will explain more about the Gift tomorrow. You need sleep."

Sallis hid another yawn. "I will probably lie awake worrying about what will happen next," he said.

"I doubt that." Elvallon grinned. "Sleepwell stalks are in your broth. I guarantee you a good night's sleep."

Sallis yawned again. "You could have warned me."

"Hurry up, or you'll be asleep before you've finished eating."

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## Chapter 5

### Lyssan

As he drifted in the half-world between sleep and waking, Sallis had a strange feeling that he was being watched and woke with a start. As his eyes opened, he only just managed restrained a yell as he realized that watcher's face was only incas from his own.

A pair of eyes, silvery gray irises flecked with gold, stared dispassionately into his own. And what eyes! Their color was not the only oddity: the black pupils were slit vertically. A blue face topped with silvery gray hair told Sallis he was stared at by a creature he had believed only existed in stories.

He flinched and pushed himself back on his pillows before sitting up. The smell he had noticed in the living area was stronger now and it emanated from the strange being who, it appeared, was anything but pleased to see him.

"So this is your new find, *enya*." The owner of those eyes straightened and looked over her shoulder at Elvallon. "He is Gifted?"

Sallis almost yelled again when he saw that not only did the creature's earpoints push up through the silvery hair, but that they moved as she spoke. Right now, they slanted forward, hinting at doubt or perhaps apprehension. He thought.

"Yes he is," replied Elvallon.

The creature's attention returned to Sallis. "I hope you do not expect me to clear up after him." She wrinkled her nose. "He smells."

"You're a fine one to talk," growled Sallis, recovering some of his composure.

Those earpoints shot upright for a moment, before relaxing some. The creature smiled.

Elvallon chuckled and moved forward. "Sallis, meet Lyssan, my sylph. Don't worry, she is not as bad as she likes to pretend."

"Sylph?" echoed Sallis.

Lyssan gave a sniff of disapproval, and her earpoints wilted slightly. "This is an empty land," she told him, "but there are one or two of us about here. Tell me, are you a cave-dweller?"

Sallis looked confused.

"Come along, Lyssan, let the boy get up in privacy." Elvallon's attention returned to Sallis. "Get dressed and breakfast will be ready the moment you are."

Once out of bed and dressed, Sallis padded through to the main room. There, the sylph passed across a wooden bowl and spoon. He stared at the white contents and noted that breakfast consisted of finely crushed oats cooked with milk. Cooked properly, and not heated using the Gift. He ate quickly and mechanically, realizing that he had been allowed to sleep in. Elvallon and Lyssan had probably eaten hours before.

Hungry, he pitched the food in quickly.

Lyssan turned to Elvallon. "The boy will eat everything in sight," she complained, earpoints slanting forwards briefly. "We will not be able to catch enough fish for him."

"Fish?" asked Sallis. He thought the sylph looked silly, waving her ears about all the time, but wisely decided to say nothing. Lyssan was easily half as tall again and, despite being thin, she looked quite sinewy.

"We take it in turns," said Elvallon. "We fish in the estuary, or put pots down."

"You can't be very good at it," remarked Sallis, jerking a thumb at Lyssan. "She looks so skinny that she must be hungry all the time."

Elvallon smiled while Lyssan shook her head, earpoints stiffly upright again. Sallis finished his breakfast and stood to cross the room. The stone sink must be where to clean the bowl and wooden spoon.

Lyssan almost snatched them out of his hands.

"You said you wouldn't clear up after me," said Sallis.

Elvallon laughed.

Sylph earpoints twitched, but Lyssan gave him a level look. "Everything must be cleaned and dried properly," she said, which hardly served as explanation.

"Right," said Elvallon. "Lovely day out there. Sallis, your lessons can begin outside, while Lyssan clears up in here."

"And it is your turn to fish," said the sylph.

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Sallis saw that today, a boat was tied to the small quay behind Elvallon's house. It was quite long, despite only having one pair of oars. There was a seat at the back of the boat and another across the center. Four wicker pots that smelled strongly of salt water, some rope, weights and bladders took up most available space in the bottom of the boat.

"Get yourself into the stern," said Elvallon. "We'll begin your lessons as we lay the pots." He sniffed and looked at the water. "We'd best get a move on, the tide'll turn soon."

Moments later, Sallis stared as Elvallon rowed them across the estuary. "Best place to lay the pots is on the far side," explained the older man. "Plenty of lobsters and scampi gather over there. And we must keep out of the way of the ships, who must stay in the channel or run aground."

Sallis nodded.

Elvallon pointed over Sallis's shoulder. "You can see where the River Adan enters the estuary," he said.

Sallis twisted around to look.

"That marks the boundary of my land on that side," explained Elvallon.

"Do you let Lyssan come over here by herself?" asked Sallis.

"Of course. She's an excellent oarsman and an even better swimmer.

Sometimes, she's gone with the boat for two days." Elvallon began to row more slowly. "Nearly there now," he said.

"Why is she so grumpy?"

Elvallon said nothing for a few moments. "She's worried that you will replace her. Give her some time to get used to you."

He looked around a few times, finally nodded in satisfaction and pulled both oars across the boat.

"Right, those weights and bladders are already tied to the pots, but let's just make sure everything's running free..."

Sallis's first lesson was to check the pots and lines were free and not tangled in anything.

"Ropes have a nasty habit of twisting into knots or around things whenever your back is turned," remarked Elvallon, although nothing was knotted or tangled.

Elvallon hefted one of the pots and showed Sallis which was the bottom - that had a short line leading to the weight, the line just the right length to maximize the catch. The top had a longer line that led to the bladder, which acted as marker and as something to catch hold of to haul the pot into the boat again later.

They spent the first hour laying the four wicker pots in likely spots.

"Sounds like you're not altogether sure," remarked Sallis.

"I'm not. Nobody ever can be. Except perhaps Lyssan; sylphs seem to have the Gift when it comes to finding fish. Though she prefers to use a rod."

"Me too," said Sallis, who thought Elvallon's was a strange household.

"Well," announced Elvallon, once happy with the way the pots were placed, "we may as well begin your lessons."

"Oh good," said Sallis leaning forward on his elbows.

"For now," continued Elvallon, "I'll talk and you listen."

Sallis nodded impatiently.

"The universe," began Elvallon, "is the work of the Creator. Whoever or whatever the Creator may be, the universe was wrought when he smashed the cosmic egg. The stars and worlds, benefic and malefic sephiroths; everything was created in that instant. And it was done using the Gift."

Sallis blinked, but remained silent.

Elvallon leaned forward. "We believe, or think we know, that the Gift is what holds matter together. It is the glue that holds everything in its proper place in reality. Those who can manipulate the Gift, affect reality. They can change things - for a few practitioners that includes themselves - for better or worse. I gave you a small demonstration with your meal last night."

"So if the Father created the universe, who created the Father?" asked Sallis.

Elvallon laughed. "The Father did not create the universe," he replied. "The Creator is responsible for that."

Sallis's mouth dropped open and he almost stood upright, before remembering that he was in a boat that might suddenly become unstable if he moved.

"The Father is part of this universe; he and the sephiroth to which he belongs were brought into being by the Creator's action. And for that matter, so was the malefic sephiroth, the side we fight and struggle against."

"I was taught that there is only the Father," countered Sallis.

"Effectively yes." Elvallon smiled. "So far as we know, the Creator plays no part in the universe now."

"Why not? And how did the Creator come to exist?"

"Those are philosophical questions to which we have no clear answers. Whatever lies outside or beyond this universe is transcendental to it and there is no way of learning about that this side of the grave. If even then."

"What made the cosmic egg?"

"Another philosophical question. What we do know is that the act of creation brought about the benefic sephiroth and the act of destruction - of the egg - wrought the malefic sephiroth. Creation also destroyed the equilibrium that existed before. Ever since, the universe and everything in it, has sought to restore that balance, and has not yet succeeded."

Sallis shivered. "The Gift was created at the same time?"

"The Gift was already there; it was *used* to create," corrected Elvallon. "The traces of that are in everything and it is those traces that *we* use to affect things around us."

"Scary." Sallis shrugged. "I'm not sure I understand."

Elvallon sighed. "Few do."

"So if everybody has the Gift, how come everybody can't use it?"

"Because not everybody can unlock its potential within themselves," replied Elvallon. "A few are born with this ability, and that is granted by the Father. Others seek it, usually for their own gratification, and that greed is exploited by the malefic sephiroth, who are only too happy to recruit fools for their cause."

"What is their cause?"

"To recreate creation in their own image. There is something of both sephiroths in all of us, though some tend more one way or the other. Some species lean more towards one or the other. Only the ilven belong purely to the benefic sephiroth."

"Ilven?"

Elvallon laughed. "Forgotten on Re Annan already. Ilven are the sephiroths' warriors, the blunt end of the struggle. Well, the adult ones are anyway. Like the young of any species, they are quite winsome during their childhood, which is the part they spend here."

"Do they have a choice which side to fight on?"

"Of course not, boy; ilven are born *into* one sephiroth or the other. Those on this ilvenworld are benefic ilven, watched over by the Father. This isn't the only ilvenworld, just the one we know about. We share it with the ilven."

"There are bad ilven?"

"Malefic ilven, yes."

"Oh."

"They are not here, and you can thank the Father for that." Elvallon smiled. "But ilven aren't our worry. Other people are."

"Those serving the malefic sephiroth?"

"You *are* a quick study." Elvallon nodded in approval. "Not easy to spot them - not easy to spot a fellow Gifted for that matter - but it comes with practice. We tend to cause... fluctuations that others can sense. Sylphs are especially sensitive."

"*Sylphs* are Gifted?"

"No. The Father offered, but they refused. They can sense the Gift and sorcery however, whenever it's used near them."

"Why can't we?"

"*We* can," corrected Elvallon.

"Those who aren't Gifted cannot," pointed out Sallis. "So why can sylphs, who aren't Gifted either?"

Elvallon narrowed his eyes. "You see deeply, for one so young."

"Me and da used to talk about all sorts of things," replied Sallis. "He says sensible questions are good."

Elvallon tried not to laugh at the qualification. "Sensible questions," he echoed. "Wise man, your father."

"And he also taught me to see when someone is trying not to answer a question. I'm not five years old."

"Wise indeed," muttered Elvallon. He shrugged. "Perhaps sylphs have some talent for the Gift, but we don't really know. They just can."

"Is that why you have Lyssan?" pressed Sallis. "So she can tell you if enemies come near?"

"I have Lyssan, because someone must look after the place when I'm elsewhere healing sick boys. She works hard for her keep."

"But she can also tell you when enemies come near?"

"It's more likely that I would sense them first," replied Elvallon. "Now, you settle down a bit and we'll begin with some exercises."

Sallis settled down.

Elvallon looked all around, to make sure they had not drifted too far. "The pots can wait a little longer," he said. "These exercises are designed to prepare you

for actually touching the Gift. Eventually, they will come naturally, but for now, it will be slow. Take your time. Empty your mind of everything and think of nothing. Let your mind drift..."

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