

LEGENDS OF THE REALM • BOOK 1

# EMISSARY



THOMAS  
LOCKE

  
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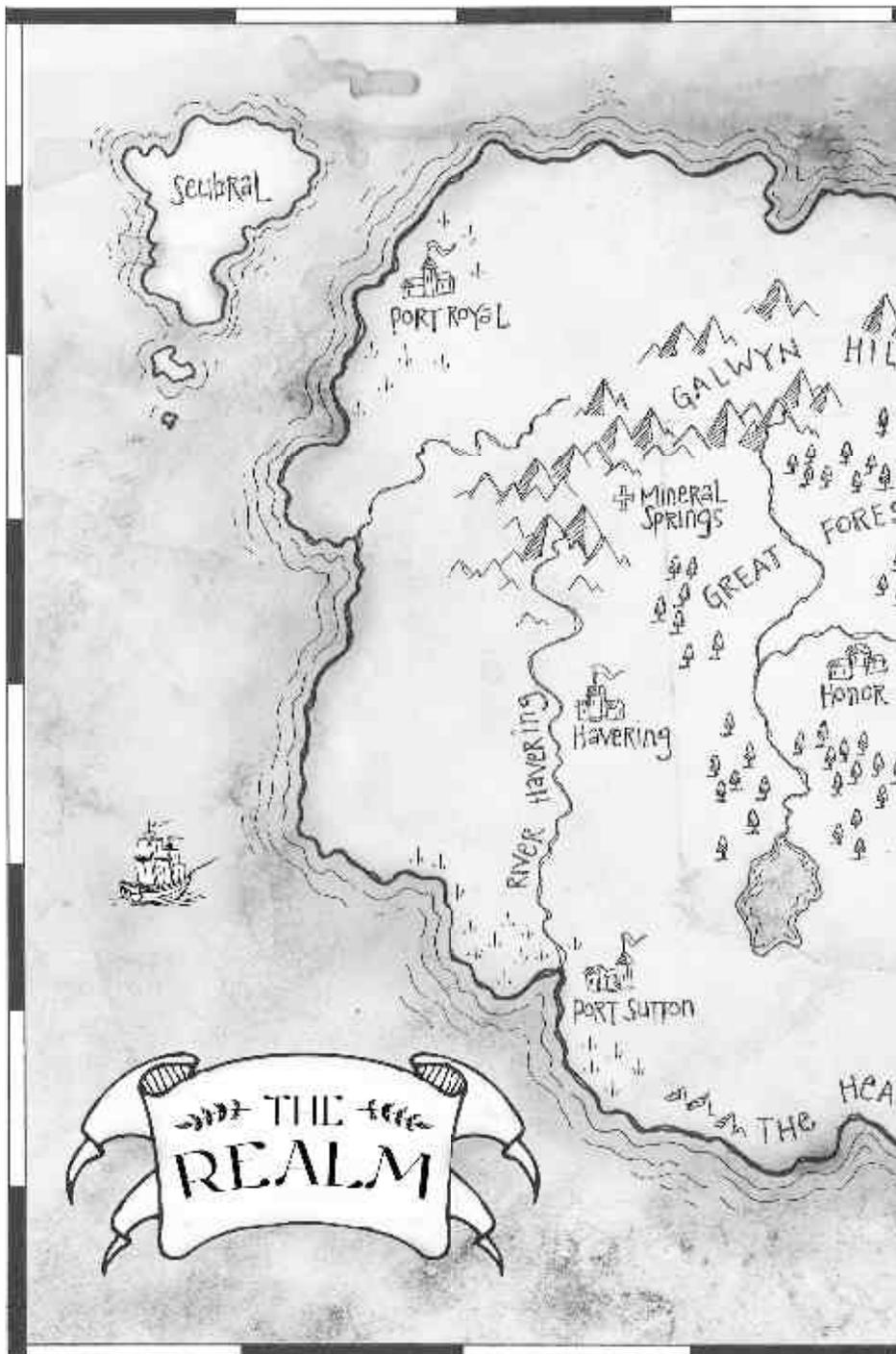
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*This Book Is Dedicated To*

*Nicholas Burgess-Jones*

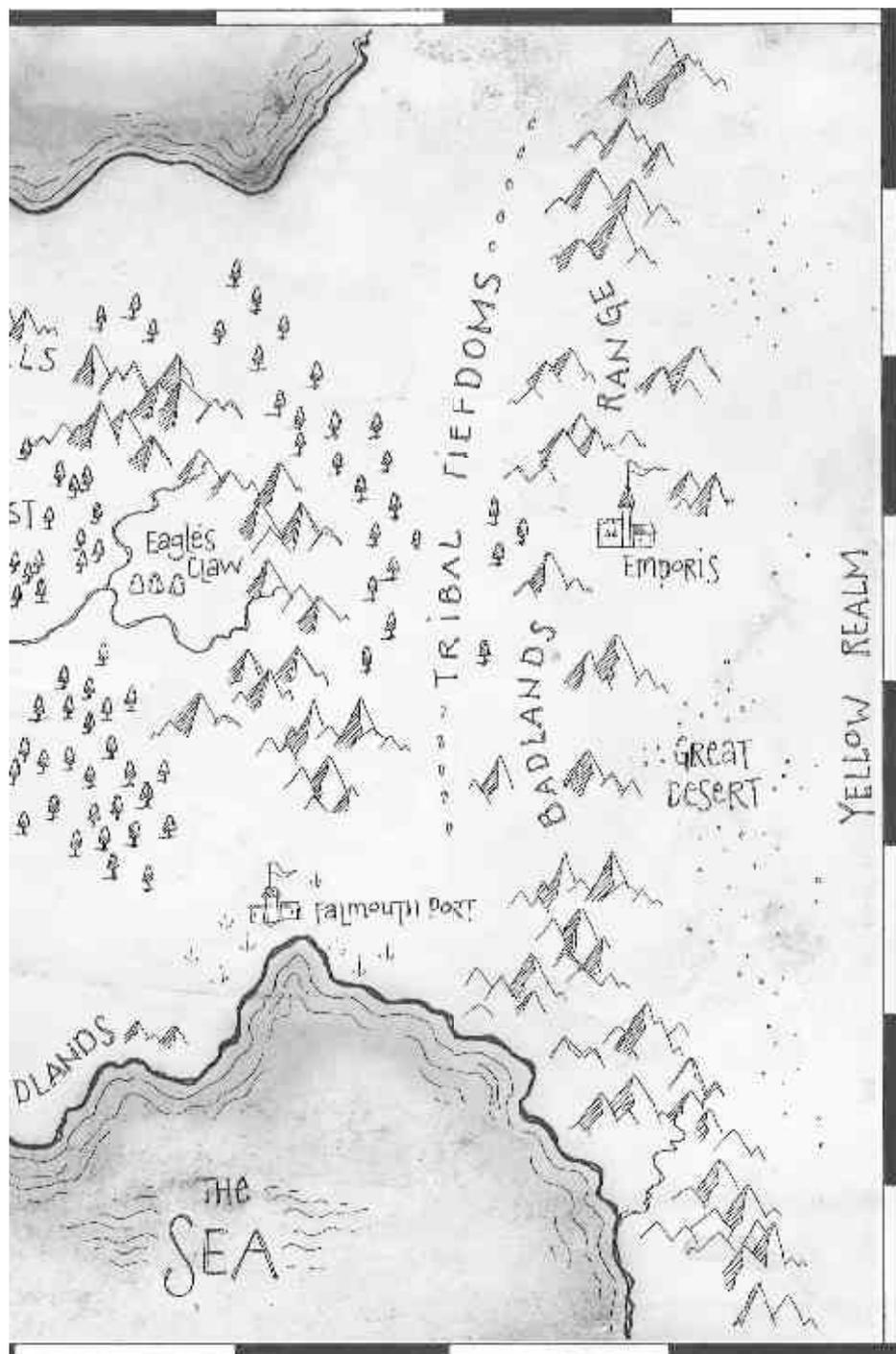
*Who shares in the vision*

*And the quest*



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# 1

Most people were given a new world for their twenty-first birthday. Coming of age meant celebration and beginnings and vast horizons. Any man or woman could join with the partner of their choosing, claim a profession, leave their apprenticeship, or even take a different name. Hyam was given one choice, which of course was no choice at all. He was invited to walk away from everything he had ever known.

His mother had been ill for almost a year, and the village healer could do little save bar pain's specter from her chamber. Which was an immense boon, Hyam knew, because the agony his mother did not feel was etched deep into her features. The hurt might be banished, but the wasting still ate at her.

Two nights before her son's adulthood began, the lady breathed her last. There was a palpable sense of relief in the village, for his mother had been much loved and the ending had been too long in coming. Hyam's first act as an adult

was to help lower his mother into the ground. He said the proper words, he allowed the village women to embrace him and weep, and he heard anew his mother's final request. Her softly whispered entreaty had carried such a sense of repulsion he almost refused. But in the end Hyam packed the six meals he would require for the journey, as he was not allowed to hunt upon this trail, and took the lonely route east, rimming the forest, over the knob, along the forbidden ridgeline, and into the wizard's vale.

The journey proved an immense gift, for Hyam had always been private with his thoughts and his emotions. He wept over his loss. He stamped and fought the trail, and bemoaned his lonely fate, and worried over what would become of him. He was free to shout his rage. None heard him. The trail only led to one place and was busy just during the festival seasons. Hyam was safe, he was isolated, and by the time he reached his destination, he was almost comfortable with the burden of grief.

The region's Long Hall was larger than his village. All such places bore the same name, right the world around. For centuries all magic save the healing arts had been banned from the realm. Only within communities known as Long Halls was magery still taught and practiced.

From a safe distance, the hamlet was beautiful but austere. The stone dwellings were precisely laid out, the surrounding walls rising and falling with the hills. The community overlooked the same stonewashed river as his village. As far as Hyam was concerned, that was the only thing they shared.

He pulled the leather cord, and the bell by the commu-

nity's only portal rang a lonely note. He shivered against the onslaught of memories. When the small barred gate opened, he said to the old man, "I am here to see a wizard of the Long Hall."

"How is this one known?"

"Shard."

"There is none here by that name."

"I don't understand. Shard is my father. I was here as an acolyte myself for five years."

"How are you called?"

"Hyam."

The portal clicked shut. Hyam did not ever recall having seen that face before. But most of the community was barred from the acolytes. He turned his back to the door and resisted the urge to simply walk away. Perhaps the elders received a second name at some point. His father had been renamed when he became a mage, signifying one who was only complete as part of a greater whole. Such naming was part of the Long Hall tradition, all of which Hyam roundly despised.

The portal's lock rattled, and the door creaked open. A white-haired woman stood before him. "One who is expelled from these walls may not enter again."

Hyam did not need to see the blue band rimming the woman's cowl and sleeves to know he stood once more before the Mistress. He might despise the place and the secrets they jealously guarded, but there was no future in riling one so powerful.

He bowed low. "I came at my mother's request. She wished for me to tell her husband—"

“There are no husbands here. Nor wives. Nor children. Nor vows recognized by the outer world. We are our own realm.”

Hyam recognized the words as part of the lessons he had been forced to endure. The memories returned with a rush of old regret. “I should not have come.”

The woman caught his bitterness. “You hated it here so much?”

Hyam saw no need to respond.

She seemed to find the answer she sought in his silence, for she stepped through the portal and led him to a stone bench overlooking the river. “Sit with me.”

Hyam hesitated, wanting only to be away. But there was nothing to be gained from rudeness. He sat.

“I remember you. Your task was languages, was it not?”

Acolytes were only permitted to study tiny hints of the arcane arts. Their time not spent performing chores was given over to lessons in one specific area, which the senior mages saw as the avenue they might follow the rest of their lives.

“For my first year, I watered the fields and fed the animals and carried stones from the quarry. Languages came after.”

“What did you study?”

“Ashanta. Milantian.” He found it hard to utter the third name. “Elven.”

“A worthy task.”

He turned and inspected the seamed face. Acolytes were not permitted to look directly at any elder save their teachers. “To force a child to learn a language dead for over a thousand years and beat him until he bled when he erred—I would not call this worthy.”

She might have shrugged. “You were also a hunter.”

“Arrow and knife.” His one outlet, his one chance to escape. For brief periods.

“You learned the forest ways.”

“Some of them.” From a taciturn man who smelled like a goat and spoke less than his father.

“And then you were passed over.”

He smiled at the recollection. “My finest hour.”

She was untouched by his satisfaction. “Did you ever wonder why you were not invited to join with us?”

“No, Mistress. I was too glad to leave you behind.”

“And yet it is strange, is it not? You were an excellent pupil. You were adept at all your lessons. Your ability with the languages was astonishing.”

“I do not recall my teachers ever using that word to describe me.”

“Astonishing,” she repeated. “Even with Milantian, which some claim can only be truly used by one of that race.”

“I have returned because it was my mother’s last request. Please tell the one called Shard that his former wife is no more. I thank you for seeing me and bid you—”

“Shard passed away four years ago.”

Hyam settled back onto the bench and absorbed the news. And felt nothing. “So I am an orphan.”

She looked at him then, with eyes of smoky brilliance. “You have been that for far longer than these few days.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Shard did not sire you, the woman who raised you did

not birth you.” The leader of Long Hall spoke with a calm firmness. “You know who we are. You know I do not lie.”

He met her gaze and recalled more of the reasons he loathed this place. “You and your kind already stole five years of my life. You will not take my birthright as well.”

She watched him rise and asked, “Your mother’s dying bequest means so little?”

“You just said she was not that.”

“I said she did not birth you. The love she gave, the home, the nurturing, what does that make her if not your true parent?” She patted the stone bench. “Sit. Please.”

When he remained standing, she said, “You were brought to your parents by a Traveler.”

Hyam laughed out loud. “Why not a wolf? Carried in his great fangs and deposited—”

“A Traveler,” she repeated.

“That is a legend more dead than the Elves.”

“They live, they are, and this happened.”

“A wandering wizard dropped a baby boy on my parents’ doorstep.” Despite himself, he was drawn back down to the bench. “And what, they just happened to think it would be a nice idea to raise me?”

“Your father was against it. Your mother insisted. The argument lasted for the first six months of your life. Then the mages’ ability woke within him and he came here.” She showed him a vague smile. “Many who join us bring such tales of loss and woe.”

“She never told me why he left.”

“Why should she?”

“I drove my father away.”

“You served him well, as he would have told you, were he still with us.” She hesitated, then added, “There is something you should know. Perhaps it is the real reason you were drawn here this day. So that I might inform you that you are not human.”

The wind sighed through the trees on the narrow valley’s other side. An emerald slope descended to the sparkling river below. Wildflowers shivered and danced in the cool breeze. Overhead ships of froth and mist drifted in a blue realm.

“What are you saying?”

“We think Milantian. But we cannot be certain. There is a powerful veil cast over your heritage. To have your blood tested would have meant alerting officials of the realm. And you know what they do to Milantians.”

The world and the day no longer seemed capable of holding him. Beyond the forest, his village was busy with the spring planting. New homes were being raised to hold the families that would soon grow and claim their place among their clan. There would be the season’s first feast. There would be music and laughter and a sense of belonging. Maidens would weave flowers into their hair and laugh over which man might claim the dance, the kiss, the night. And here he sat. Learning that there was indeed a reason for why he had never belonged.

“Milantians are killed on sight.”

“Throughout the realm,” she agreed. “They are safe from no one. They are the scattered people. Only a few remnants survive of the mighty warrior clan who once brought havoc and woe to our land.”

“But you don’t know for certain I’m—” He arched back so far he would have toppled to the earth save for his frantic grip on the stone. “The language.”

“No one save a Milantian can learn their tongue.”

“That is only a saying.”

“None of our scholars can speak more than a few words, even after studying it for years. And yet you gobbled it up. You learned all the elders had to teach in weeks, and you raced through all our books and scrolls in a single winter.”

“Then you took that from me as well.”

“We could not risk word slipping out that we harbored an adept. Because that is what you most certainly were. A child gifted in the forbidden tongue. None could ever recall such a feat. So we hid you the only way possible. We forbade you to ever speak it again.”

Old anger formed a cold fist in his gut. “And forced me to learn Elven.”

“We did. Yes.”

“The Milantians destroyed the Elves.”

“So our history says.”

“I don’t understand. What’s more, I don’t want to understand.”

Once again she showed him a gaze of crystal smoke. Her eyes held no guile and less remorse. It was the gaze of a woman who could consign a child to the misery of useless lessons and beat him until he succeeded, without a moment’s hesitation or regret. “Some say Milantian is not so much a language as a means of drawing power from beyond. Which is precisely how the ancient texts describe Elven. Our elders

hoped one tongue might eventually balance out the other in you. Or grant you the wise usage of both.”

The logic assailed him, as did the wizard’s utter absence of concern over the distress Hyam had known. “No one ever told me any of this.”

“You were a child. You did as you were ordered. It is a child’s place to obey without question.”

“What happens now?”

“Milantians are said to come into their powers in their twenty-first year. If this is indeed your blood, you will know soon enough. If you need to know more, there is a scholar at our community in Havering. A historian named Trace. Tell him I sent you.” She rose and gathered her hands within the folds of her grey robe. “If your horizons are to grow beyond the safety of this valley, you should know that war is coming. Your new powers will challenge you in ways you cannot fathom and most certainly will not find either comfortable or pleasant. Nonetheless, it is time for all who cherish peace or truth to prepare.”

She left him without either farewell or backward glance. The door clicked shut, sealing him out. He remained where he was, trying to rejoin with the wind and the sunlight and the world beyond the forbidden portal. Only when he hefted his pack and started back down the trail did he realize that he had neglected to ask her name so he could tell this Trace who had sent him. Then Hyam decided that it did not matter. He had no intention of speaking with another member of any Long Hall. For as long as he lived.