

THE ANTALUM SAGA

THE TAIN OF AUREDEUS

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Chapter 1

The Intruders

It was raining in the small village of Baav. This was not unusual: the odd weather had arrived about five years ago and had apparently forgotten to leave. The quiet villagers didn't even seem to notice any more, let alone wonder why this mysterious local and above all *enthusiastic* precipitation occurred. Baav did not have many attractions for passing travellers, but merely a few houses, a building that may have passed for a church and a large amount of farm-land. It was a mostly self-reliant village due to the treacherous passes and ravines that surrounded its green borders, and did not see many visitors.

However, tonight the village had two uninvited guests. These two men were specifically uninvited by the owners of Gybal House, which was the building they were currently breaking into. Had an observer been present, their first glance would have noticed nothing but darkness. A more detailed inspection would have revealed a set of indistinct darker shapes within the shadow, and a tiny and dim light, moving slightly. Any further inspection by the observer would have led to a quick and silent death.

Very little noise was made as the men worked. Occasionally a small metallic scratching noise could be heard, and once there was the sound of a quiet curse from one of the men as something went *plink* slightly more loudly than expected. Finally there was the sound of a sash window being lifted and the two shapes disappeared from the otherwise empty street. The window was lowered silently behind

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them.

Inside the room the smaller of the two men lifted a small lantern. Its dim light did not illuminate much, but what it did illuminate looked expensive. Vases, gold-plated candle sticks, framed pictures and other paraphernalia covered the room to the extent that the surfaces they rested on were no longer visible. However, these men did not touch these objects, but instead proceeded with cat-like stealth to a door on the other side of the room.

Here the taller man applied a small amount of oil to a cloth and dabbed at the hinges, kneading the oil into the gaps with the air of a man who did this regularly. Meanwhile the smaller man ascertained if the door was locked by slowly twisting the handle and opening it a fraction. Once the larger of the two men was finished the smaller man swung it slowly open.

A hallway was presented to them. It was lit by a lantern that hung just outside the door, the stained-glass window in the door casting odd shapes into the room. Beside the stairs was a door that presumably led to the servant's quarters and the kitchens, but the men seemed more interested in the stairs. They seem to be studying them, as if they were studying an enemy for a sign of weakness. After a long pause, the smaller one spoke very softly, yet clearly:

'Stairs are a bastard.'

The bigger man shrugged. He seemed to make a decision. Advancing forward, he placed one of his large padded boots at the far side of the third stair from the bottom, where the carpeted wood met the wall. Gripping the banister, he lifted himself slowly and with considerable effort, raised himself onto the sixth stair. No noise was made during this manoeuvre. He turned to look back at the smaller man.

'You're a bastard too,' said the short one spitefully. He visibly sagged, but approached the stairs the same way the larger man had done. He placed his right foot on the second stair due to his shorter legs, and hoisted himself into the air. The banister wobbled danger-

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ously, and his unsteady grip started to slip on the wall. With a grunt he used what momentum he had left onto the fifth step, but immediately began to topple backwards. The big man's hand shot out and grabbed the smaller man's collar, stopping him from falling head first to the ground.

'Thanks Dante,' muttered the short man.

The man named Dante didn't reply, but merely studied the rest of the stairway. It suddenly felt like a long way to the top. One of the problems with stairs, he considered, is that no matter how *new* they were they tended to creak, and in their current situation noise was not desirable. The other problem with stairs was you only had one or two boards to choose to put your foot on for each step. If a step was creaky, it *would* creak, you could guarantee it. All you could do is hope that it wouldn't be so loud as to alert the occupants of the building. He really wished that they could have entered through the upstairs window, but there was too much risk of being seen in the street, and also from inside the window. The curtains were open, so the sight of a man in a black hood standing in mid-air outside the window would be bound to cause comment from the occupants.

Eventually they reached the top stair. There were only three rooms on this floor, as this level was smaller than the ground floor. Their quarry was in the room across the small corridor, and the door was closed. Upstairs passages also had a tendency to creak, but they were trained in ways to overcome this. The trick was to move *with* the floorboards. Creaking was caused by the boards rubbing against other boards in response to pressure, so the obvious solutions were to either make as little pressure as possible, or to apply pressure to boards that were loose and not in contact with other boards. Unlike stairs they had more choice in where to place their feet. This process did not entirely eliminate noise, but reduced it to levels that could be passed as the normal creaking of any building. The rain and wind helped, too.

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When they reached the end of the corridor, they swapped positions so that Dante was at the back, looking down the corridor in the event that they were interrupted.

'There's a key in the lock,' muttered a voice behind him. This was followed by a tiny click and the sound of a latch.

'Be quick, Seth,' he whispered over his shoulder, but the man had already gone. A small time later he heard a scream of a girl before it was quickly muffled. Something heavy hit something wooden, and Dante winced. This noise did not seem to cause the other occupants of the house to wake, however, for which Dante was grateful. It sounded like the girl was putting up a struggle, but handily they had accounted for this. Soon Seth appeared around the door.

'The stuff worked,' he announced quietly. 'She's out of it now. We'd better grab some of her things and get out of here.' He tucked a black cloth back into a sleeve. 'Cor, that whiffs,' he added, half to himself.

Dante turned and slid into the room behind Seth. He saw the silhouette of a girl sprawled on the bed, breathing slowly. He could just make out her long, dark hair in the moonlight from the window. The room was rather bare, though what was in the room looked well maintained and polished. It was a tidy room, but it looked like a kind of enforced tidiness that is kept under duress, rather than general housepride. It was obvious that she had been kept in here for a long time, and she was seemingly governed by very strict rules. Books lined the surfaces, and paintings covered the walls. An easel sat in the corner along with some paints, a selection of brushes and a stool. She looked like she was well provided for at any rate.

'She sounded like she put up a fight,' Dante whispered.

'She nearly kicked everything off that dresser. It's lucky for us that she missed,' said Seth, hurriedly. He was grabbing what he hoped were essential 'girl things' from the dresser and stuffing them into a sack. 'You grab her, I'll take her stuff. This time we're taking the damn

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window.'

Dante did not argue, but merely opened the window. The frame had a small lock on it, but locks were generally a minor inconvenience to people like Seth and Dante. He uncoiled a rope from his waist, and lowered it down to the street below. He secured the end to a grapple and attached it to the sill. Soon he departed with the girl over his massive shoulder.

Two minutes later the room was empty, and the rain in Baav finally stopped.