

The Wisdom of the Ages

‘Today we will study the schism between Colaye and Esro.’ Miss Ashbur stalked across the raised platform, her gown as black as the chalkboard behind her.

She never stood behind the brass-bound lectern. If she did, no one would see her. Her head didn’t top her shortest student’s shoulder, even with that greying crown of plaits lending her height as well as authority. Well, there was always the split leather strap hanging beside the framed map on the wall.

Gillart still wondered if she would really use it, if the students chose to ignore her one day. Like him they were all grown men, or as good as. Some even had whiskers.

If their fathers had been craftsmen or shop-keepers, they’d have been working for their families’ benefit these past two years. Since they were merchant born, their mothers had ambitions. They’d be educated as befitted future councillors and guildsmen. In the mornings at least, before spending their afternoons among ledgers and storerooms.

‘Master Herste.’ Miss Ashbur raised her voice above the murmur in the lecture hall. ‘Distribute the artefacts.’ She gestured to a box on the table below the map.

The youths sat up, straight backed, attentive on their tall stools. Once the rows of desks had been scarred with pen nibs through lessons’ endless tedium. Now all that had changed.

Herste shivered as he picked up the box. So that was an artefact too. Gillart watched Herste hand out trinkets to the first row. Buttons, guild tokens, a silver-gilt tiepin, a loop of woven cord to secure a neckerchief. That same frisson ran through the boys as they received the relics.

Gillart flinched when his turn came, seeing Herste about to drop a musket ball into his hand. Herste had never liked him. At least the lead was undamaged. Miss Ashbur wouldn’t allow a pupil to handle something dug out of a dying man’s flesh.

The shock was still bad enough. As the sphere rolled in his palm, Gillart could see the autumn field churned by scrambling boots. He smelled black powder tipped down the barrel, felt the cold ramrod driving home wadding, musket ball, more wadding. The crack of the shot deafened him in the silence of his own head.

His blood surged with the passions of that long-dead soldier, grandsire to one of his classmates’ grandsire, if he had lived through the battle. The man was fighting for Colaye, for their share in this newfound shore. Esro’s scoundrels couldn’t claim the best harbours and the most fertile land. They had all crossed the ocean together, escaping the crowded squalor of Yanmor. That alliance was at an end if Esro’s thieves sought only their own profit.

By the time the noon bells sounded, Gillart’s head was ringing. Every time he exchanged an artefact with another pupil, another man’s hopes and hatreds assaulted him.

‘Think on all that you’ve learned.’ Miss Ashbur smiled thinly. ‘Tomorrow we continue with journals and letters.’

‘Journals?’ Kenthe grinned as he slid from his stool. ‘How quaint.’

No one kept journals now, not since The Charm had been perfected. Why bother to commit your thoughts to paper when words were so awkward and imprecise? The Charm meant your every impression, your innermost emotions, could be instantly understood by whoever held something which you’d once owned.

Gillart managed a meaningless smile before he forced a way through jostling boys to the sunlit spring air.

Would he ever get a chance to ask Miss Ashbur? Why were the tales from journals and letters so often at odds with the visions that The Charm drew from them? He knew the usual answer. People would hide behind words. They’d paint a more flattering self-portrait or downplay danger or shield deceptions. That’s what The Charm stripped away, revealing the

past's true essence through the unguarded thoughts of those who'd lived it.

Gillart began walking home. He longed to dispute that. Weren't words chosen and polished, written after calm reflection, worth far more than hasty first impressions? Couldn't one man's reasoned conclusions reveal more fundamental truth than a dizzying panorama seen through a thousand incomplete glimpses? Perhaps he would speak up tomorrow even if it earned him a stinging leather slap.

He paused before crossing the street, to allow a laden dray to go past, wheels grumbling across ruts dried hard in the muck. He wasn't the only person standing still. In front of shop fronts hung with everything from sides of bloody beef to little baskets of fresh apricots, men and women would pause. Their eyes grew distant as they reached into a pocket or to some jewel at wrist or throat. It was so commonplace that no one remarked on it.

Gillart fumed. What fool had first claimed that The Charm didn't merely convey visions? That artefacts could actually respond to unspoken questions? Were these people truly stupid enough to believe it? Why couldn't that woman in the green worsted cape decide whether to dine on lamb or veal without appealing to her grandmother's ring and trying to find the answer in some random image?

A rattling carriage approached. As Gillart let it pass by, he looked up to the forested mountains. They framed this broad, sheltered bay where Colaye's founders had first made landfall. Gillart had seen it for himself; the ground as yet unmarked by spades and ploughs now sanctified by The Charm. They'd all seen the gradual growth of the town from clustered wooden homesteads ringed with pigsties, chickens and vegetable plots to these broad thoroughfares with the merchant guilds' stone halls standing proud amidst workaday brick houses.

What lay beyond those peaks? More forests, granted. Miss Ashbur once brought a box of buckles and straps and flints from gunlocks carried by hunting parties. Gillart had felt their uncertainty, those men searching the trackless trees for deer or boar. Valuable meat in Colaye's markets. Nearly as valuable as any Esro spies they might get wind of. If they didn't get their own throats cut first. Undoubtedly brave men, the hunters would nevertheless be glad to get safely home.

They always came scurrying back. It infuriated Gillart. What lay beyond those far forests? Hunching angry shoulders, he shoved his fists into his jacket pockets as he strode across the street. His knuckles struck his keys, cold and hard.

Charmed sensations assailed him. His grandmother's love for hearth and home as she locked her spice cupboard. His uncle's satisfaction as he secured his strong box. Some nameless ancestor's resolve as he bolted the door that defended his family from wolves or worse prowling down from the heights.

Gillart snatched the bunch from his pocket and hurled it into a steaming heap of horseshit. He was sick of being told to revere such guidance, ordered to yield to the judgment of those who'd gone before him. Those people had lived in such different days. Why must he let these echoes of past lives shape his own hopes and dreams?

Worse still, Gillart was convinced, The Charm stopped people thinking for themselves. Why should he detest every man of Esro, just because he'd held a musket ball fired by some frightened footsoldier three generations ago?

Gillart began walking. Not heading for home. He fixed his gaze on the mountains and took whichever road led most directly that way.

By the time the sun was sinking, he'd left Colaye far behind. Walking through the densely leaved forests had been such hot and thirsty work that he'd nearly discarded his sturdy twill jacket. Now he was glad of its warmth, scrambling up these rocky slopes.

He paused to cup a handful of water from a spring moistening a crevice. Gillart sat on

the dusty ground and contemplated Colaye far below. The first lamps looked like distant fireflies. With sunset nearly here, could he make it home before dark?

Twisting around, he contemplated the cliffs. He couldn't scale those but surely that tree-lined cleft was a pass? Could he get that far without a hunter's equipment or supplies? Not before he lost the daylight. But if he went home to fetch what he might need, Gillart knew that would be the end of it. He'd be paying the price for disappearing this afternoon until midwinter at least.

Could he possibly go on? He searched his trouser pockets to find a grimy kerchief and his grandfather's folding knife. That was one Charm he valued. Gillart smiled as he heard the old man's voice relating one of his youthful exploits.

Grandpa had been a boat builder and trader. Well into his old age he'd shaped furniture for his sons and daughters now that his wealth had shaped their futures. Gillart had watched and learned and heard all his thrilling stories time and again.

With a sharp knife and common sense, a man could always survive, so Grandpa had always said. Gillart resolved to go on, at least far enough to see what he could see beyond the mountains.

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