

Wyvern

Wyvern Series, Book 1
Ryallon Chronicles, Book 4

John H. Carroll

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This book is dedicated to nicci. May you find your existence to be much longer and more wonderful than you expected.

The Chronicles of Ryallon In Reading Order

Dralin Series (Set in time before the Willden trilogy)

1. *Dralin*
2. *Ebudae*
3. *Pelya*

The Wyvern Series (Parallel to the Willden Trilogy, set in time after the Dralin Trilogy)

4. *Wyvern*
5. *Liquid*
6. *Cloudswept*
7. *Sidetracked*

Willden Trilogy (Written first)

8. *Rujuun*
9. *Anilyia*
10. *Kethril*

The Crazy Series (All previous series merge here)

11. *Liselle*
12. *Bounty*
13. *To be announced (Coming 2019)*
14. *To be announced (Coming 2020)*
15. *To be announced (Coming 2020)*

Stand-alone Ryallon Novella (Occurs before Cloudswept, book 3 of the Wyvern Series)

Rain Glade

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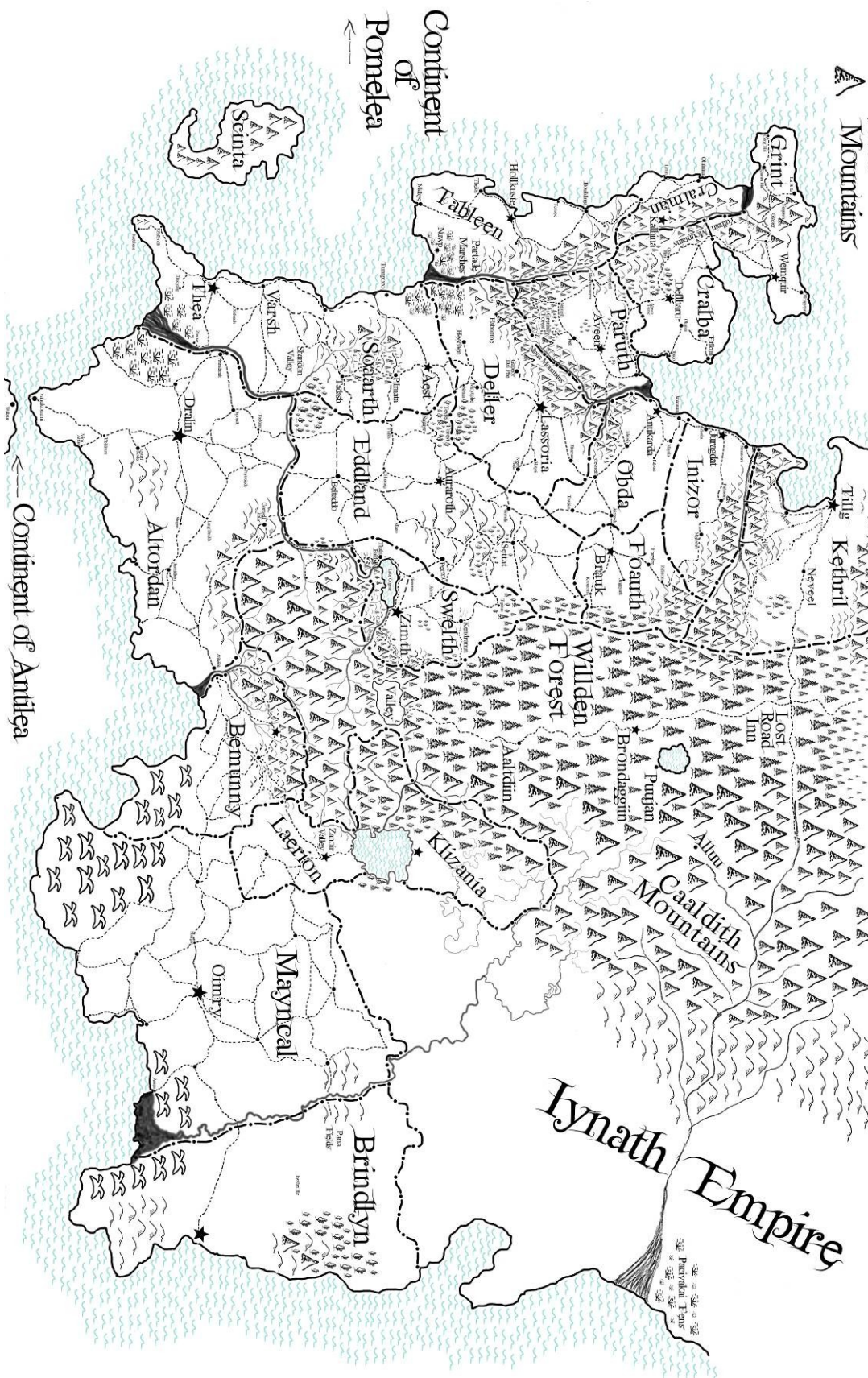
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Map of Nulanea

- Forest
- Jungle
- Wetlands
- Hills
- Mountains

Northern Wastes

Ryallion
Continent of Nulanea



Map of Eddland



Chapter 1

*Year 1389, Fifth Age
Being six days after the events of Pelya*

Pelya's sapphire-blue eyes sparkled in the heavy afternoon sun. She slouched in the saddle, studying the village at the intersection of two insignificant roads that cut through the endless farmlands of Altordan.

Sounds of a few industrious townsfolk and children at play drifted above the maddening buzz of insects that had dominated her hearing since leaving Dralin. A mild breeze alleviated the worst of the fall heat and rustled tomato vines that dominated the landscape.

Altordan was a large country existing primarily to protect and provide for Dralin, its capital. Well-maintained highways spoked outward like a jagged wagon wheel from the city to other countries, but Pelya was avoiding those. They were crowded and she wanted peace and solitude to think.

Honey, her beautiful chestnut warhorse with blonde mane, flicked a tail at biting flies. A disinterested packhorse tethered to Pelya's saddle nosed a bit of grass that had grown in the middle of the rutted road. It whinnied, probably wanting a true meal.

A family wearing simple clothing and wide-brimmed hats collected ripe tomatoes among the vines in the distance to Pelya's right. They kept glancing in her direction as though worried she would steal their livelihood.

It wouldn't be hard if she were so inclined. Pelya adjusted the chain-reinforced leather sword belt around her waist. She was a master with the pair of enchanted swords that rested in sheaths at her hips.

She wouldn't steal from the worried family. Pelya had spent her entire life in the Dralin City Guard learning that it was important to protect people, not harm them. Her father, along with more than a thousand Guardmembers she called her aunts and uncles, had raised her.

She didn't wear that uniform anymore. Now, a form-fitting black tunic and dark-blue pants, both with intricate designs of mystic silver thread, covered her powerful, six-foot frame. She looked down at the priceless clothes. Even after days of dust and mud on the road, they were spotless thanks to enchantments Ebudae had sewn into the clothing.

A twinge of distress twisted Pelya's heart. More than anyone, she missed the impudent and powerful wizardess who had been her best friend. Pelya tugged at her long, jet-black braid with a gloved hand to knock the feeling away. It didn't help, so she gave Honey a gentle nudge with polished boots and continued toward the village.

Six days had passed since her banishment from Dralin for killing a chancellor of the High Council. The events kept looping through her memory. She and others had uncovered a plot to overthrow the High Council and create a new god. A battle in the ruins below Dralin had destroyed the god and foiled the plot, but even that couldn't save her from banishment. To make matters worse, Pelya had been having nightmares about the battle and the yellow-eyed monks who had been possessed by the god.

Pelya rode into the quaint village. A hodgepodge of small businesses, the largest of which was a two-story inn, surrounded the main intersection. Pelya was grateful for its presence. She had camped under the stars since leaving, and while her clothes might stay magically clean, her body didn't.

A burly blacksmith with cropped hair stopped hammering on a plow as Pelya rode past. She waved at him and received a surprise smile and wave of his hammer in return. There was also a tanner's shop, a woodworker and a small market she might visit the next day to resupply. The well-maintained buildings were colorfully painted.

A group of elderly women wearing bonnets and long, pastel dresses sat in a shady area under thick-trunked trees full of autumn leaves. They stopped their sewing and stared at Pelya for a moment. She greeted them with a wave as well. They briskly nodded in return before going back to work. Pelya ignored the way they huddled together and whispered. It was what old women did.

Across the intersection from the inn, a soldier came out of a small building. He was straightening the chain shirt he had just put on before taking his sword belt from an apprentice who hadn't quite reached manhood. The apprentice was wide-eye and unsure in his steps as he brushed aside too-long hair while checking his own sword.

Pelya dismounted as she reached the intersection so she would be eye level with the men and not so intimidating.

The soldiers approached with determination. The elder of the two had a great deal of grey in his carrotty hair and a hitch in his self-important step. The muscular arm he held up in greeting belied his advanced age. His vibrating, tenor voice carried through the quiet air "Hello traveler. I'm Sergeant Pifflin of the Altordan army. What's your business here?"

"Just passing through, Sergeant." Pelya hoped he wouldn't be too friendly. She wasn't in the mood for conversation. "I intend to spend the night at your inn and then be on my way. You'll get no trouble from me."

"See that we don't!" Sergeant Pifflin puffed out his chest. "I may not be in my prime, but I can still hold my own." He stepped forward as though to intimidate Pelya. "I've got the might of Altordan behind me too. Anything happens to me and you'll have the army to deal with."

Pelya was half a foot taller and could have taken him even when he was in his prime. She had just finished killing a god, so the threat of an army didn't impress her. Instead of telling the man that, she merely repeated herself. "You'll get no trouble from me."

"Ah, well, good then." Sergeant Pifflin hooked his thumbs in his belt. "Where do you hail from?"

"I'll be at the inn, Sergeant." Pelya led her horse around him and toward the stables.

The man stared after her for a minute before turning to his apprentice and shrugging. The apprentice shrugged back.

As Pelya entered the inn's stable yard, a chipper young woman in her mid-teens came out of a stall, brushing hay off durable pants and a light shirt. Her voice was as lively as her manner. "Hi! I'm Terry. Would you like your horses cared for?" She pulled on strands of her ponytail to tighten it in the string that bound it.

"Yes, I'll be spending the night. Do I pay you or the innkeeper?"

"You'll pay my pa. He's the innkeeper." Terry took the reins Pelya handed her and looked at Honey in admiration. "She's a beaut!"

Honey nuzzled the girl's neck.

"Her name is Honey. She's the finest steed you'll ever meet." Pelya detached her saddlebags and slung them over her left shoulder. They had her most valuable possessions.

"I'll take the best care of them both. Shall I bring in the rest of your bags?"

"After the horses are cared for." Pelya handed her a silver coin.

Terry took it and then tried to hand it back. "You'll want to pay pa inside. He handles the money."

Pelya shook her head. "I'll pay your pa. That's for you."

Terry's jaw dropped. "A silver? For me? I can't." She tried to hand it back, but Pelya was already walking away.

Upon entering the bright common room, Pelya stood for a moment and looked around. The shutters were open on the windows to let fresh air circulate. Straw littered the floor to soak up mud and spills. The stools and table were sturdy wood, likely made by a local artisan. Four old men stopped talking to stare at her from a table near an open window. She nodded at them and they nodded back.

Near the stairs, Terry's pa sat behind a counter that served as the bar and the hotel desk. He was a stout man with clean clothes and short, tangled hair. He waved Pelya over with a hairy hand. "Can I help you?"

She went over. "How much is a room for one night and meals? I also have two horses to be stabled, one of which is a warhorse. The other is a packhorse."

The innkeeper stood in alarm. "A warhorse?" He looked toward the door Pelya had come in. "Terry . . ."

"Is fine," Pelya reassured him. "Honey likes her. How much?" She pulled out her coin purse and undid the strings. She had more coin and gem pouches hidden within her shirt.

The innkeeper looked at the door again before sitting back down. "It'll be three coppers for the room, two for the meals, not including ale . . ." he noticed the quality of her clothes, ". . . or wine if that's what you prefer. I've got a few bottles, but they're expensive. Not much call for it out here. The warhorse is another three coppers and the packhorse two, so . . ." He did the math in his head. "Ten copper pieces, or one silver."

It was much less than Pelya, used to city prices, had imagined. No wonder Terry had been so surprised by the tip. Pelya fished out two silver, hardly lightning the pouch at all. She pushed them forward on the counter. "I'll want a bath as well. Keep the extra."

The innkeeper picked up the coins with an expression of surprise on his face. "Thank you. That's more than generous."

Pelya considered for a moment. "I should let you know that I also gave Terry a silver piece. I don't want you thinking she came by it dishonestly."

Surprise became astonishment. "For a girl?"

Pelya leaned forward intimidatingly. Her voice gained an edge. "Yes. For a girl. Where's my room and where can I get the bath?"

The innkeeper shrank back. "Your room is the last one on the right. It's the quietest. I'll send someone when we have the bath ready for you." He composed himself. "Will you take meals down here or in your room?"

"I'll take dinner in my room and breakfast down here." Pelya moved to the stairs.

He called after her as she climbed. "Did you want to use one of our locks? It'll be no charge for you."

"I have my own." A moment later, Pelya reached the second floor and headed down the narrow hallway. There were six plain doors on each side and a second stairway at the opposite end with a rope blocking it, likely for servants.

Pelya entered her room and set the saddlebags on the lone table. The bed had a straw mattress and clean sheets with a pillow and a crocheted blanket. A nightstand had a candle, a pitcher of water and a bowl for washing up. Two chairs were the only other things in the room.

Pelya went to the window and opened the shutters. There were a few houses lining the street behind the inn and a group of young children playing. She wondered what it would have been like to be raised in a village like this.

She sat at the edge of the bed and stared blankly at the wall until there was a knock at the door a while later. Pelya groaned from stiff muscles as she stood and went to open it.

Terry stood there with Pelya's bags. "I have two more trips, but it won't take me long at all. Oh, and your bath is ready."

"Thank you." Pelya took the bags. "I let your father know that I gave you a silver, so don't hide it from him." She closed the door, leaving Terry to stare wide-eyed. Pelya's hunch had been correct. She opened the door again and saw Terry slipping under the rope of the service entrance. "Where is my bath?" Pelya asked.

Terry unhooked the rope. "It's down here in the back. I can take you."

"One moment." Pelya retrieved her lock from her saddlebags. She closed the door and hooked the lock on the latch made for that purpose.

She didn't think anyone would try to steal her things, but to be on the safe side, she cast a simple alarm ward on the door. It was something Ebudae had taught her. A few loose strands of braided hair gusted around Pelya's face as the magical breeze of casting swirled. It wasn't a strong spell, or the breeze would have been fiercer. Terry's jaw hung open when Pelya turned to her. "What's wrong, Terry?"

"You're a wizard? I thought since you wear swords . . ."

Pelya moved past her and headed down the stairs. "I'm not a wizard, but knowing the occasional spell is convenient. No more questions now." At the bottom of the stairs, she stepped aside to let the girl take the lead again.

Terry stopped and opened her mouth to ask another question, but Pelya's warning glance was enough to shut it.

After a long bath, Pelya retired to her room. When dinner came, she ate without tasting. She locked the door from the inside after finishing and putting the wooden tray of empty dishes on the floor of the hall.

Pelya sat on the bed, brought her knees up and broke down into quiet tears. The young woman was beginning to feel the burden of being alone. She missed her father. She missed Ebudae. She missed the Guard and all her aunts and uncles.

She was supposed to be heading off to a life of adventure. She would get to meet new people and go exploring. It should be fun, but depression seemed to darken her mind a little more each day.

Pelya longed for the sounds and smells of the chaotic city. There was always danger in Dralin. Staying alive was a vague proposition on the best of days. She missed the adventures with Ebudae into the ruins underneath the city.

Now she was out in the world farther than she had ever been before, resting in a quiet little inn. There was no danger. Anyone with a silver piece was rich. At times in her travels, there wouldn't be a building or a person in sight. She could stand on a rock and stare for miles in every direction. It was unnerving.

Pelya dozed off a few times in between fits of crying. It was terrible to be alone.

She was not handling it well.

Pelya saw fear in the milky-yellow eyes of the god. He wore a brown robe spattered with iridescent gold. His arms reached out for her.

Then it switched to a different face mutated by anger with eyes of yellow fire. The robes were violent red. Its arms flailed as though scolding her.

A woman's face rotated into view. Her robes were a riot of colors that pained the senses. She had no eyes and her hands were clasped to her chest in despair and confusion.

A thousand monks surrounded Pelya. Their yellow eyes blinked in unison.

Pelya sat upright in a cold sweat. She threw aside the covers and scanned the room. To her relief, there were no monks, nor a Crazy God.

The floor was cool under her feet as she moved to the window. In the east, a touch of morning light lined the horizon with the promise of another clear, warm day. At one of the houses, the silhouette of a woman yawned and stretched on the front step in anticipation of the day.

Pelya sat on the bed and buried her face in her hands for a moment, trying to find the willpower to make it through another day. Eventually, she gathered her bags and heading downstairs.

The morning innkeeper, a young man who was probably the innkeeper's son, served her porridge for breakfast. He didn't notice her glum manner as she ate quickly and slipped out of the empty common room.

Terry was sleeping in the stables next to Honey's stall. She jumped up, startled when Pelya dropped the saddlebags noisily. "Huh? Oh! I was hoping to catch you before you left." Terry wiped the sleep from her eyes. "I wanted you to know that I took the best care of both horses. I bathed them and had the blacksmith come and check their shoes."

"That is exceptional service. Thank you. Can I trust you with these saddlebags while I get the rest of my things?"

"Let me get them for you! Then I'll get your tack and gear on the horses. You sit and take it easy. Have you had breakfast?"

"Yes."

Terry waited, expecting more of an answer. "... Oh. Can I enter your room or is the lock still there?"

"You can enter. There is no lock and I've removed the ward." Pelya greeted Honey, who snorted and bumped her cheek over the gate of the stall.

"I'll be done in a bit then." Terry ran off.

Pelya went out to the empty yard. She decided to stretch and exercise.

It didn't take Terry long to bring down the bags and pull the horses out of their stalls.

After stretching, Pelya felt limber, so she drew her main sword. As with almost any weapon purchased in the City of Dralin, it had magic. This was partially because there were so many mages and their apprentices to enchant them, and partially because a person needed one to be effective in battle against the wizards that populated the city. The sword was made of light steel and darted through the air like a hummingbird while she practiced with it.

She drew her secondary sword and did a cursory examination. It was shorter than her main, but much more deadly. The blade was the width of two fingers at the crossbar. Its sharpened edges tapered gradually to the point. The metal glistened in the dawn light, showing no runes even though it held powerful magic. The blade didn't look like steel, silver or any other metal she had seen, it was softer somehow. Pelya stepped back and hefted it. It weighed next to nothing and the braided hilt fit nicely in her hand.

Pelya rolled her shoulders and spun the blades. She moved her legs and began the drills that would keep her sharp and ready for battle. Each thrust and parry was precise. Normally, she exercised every morning to stay limber. The last few days had been an exception and she could feel it in the tightness of her muscles.

When Pelya stopped, Terry cautiously came forward. She had been watching for a while. "Your horses are ready. Honey is eager to go."

Pelya saw the warhorse stomping energetically. She would have to give her a run to work off the extra energy.

"I've never seen anyone move like you do." Terry fidgeted with a horse brush in her hands. "Who are you?"

"I'm no one." Pelya sheathed the swords and went to Honey. She put her foot in the stirrup and mounted effortlessly. Looking around, Pelya saw that they were alone, so she leaned over and slipped Terry two more silver pieces. "I haven't told your father about these. If you ever leave, go anywhere *but* Dralin."

Pelya retrieved the lead of the packhorse. As she left the stables and inn behind, she realized she had never learned the name of the village.

Chapter 2

Pelya ran through the barracks halls, away from the possessed Guardmembers chasing her. Suddenly, more blocked her way.

Their yellow eyes blinked as one.

She dashed through a door to her left and pushed it closed with her back. Pelya scanned the office she had entered.

Commander Duuth stood behind a desk in the center. He cackled madly and pointed. "You shall be whipped." Then he spun, showing another face. The face was angry, but it was still Duuth. "Whipped!"

Pelya screamed.

Even though it was pitiful in reality, the sound of the wail coming from her throat woke Pelya. She scrambled out of her bedroll and looked around frantically.

There were no yellow-eyed Guardmembers. Duuth was nowhere to be seen.

The tree she had camped under rustled its leaves in the late morning breeze. Tall grasses waved rhythmically and obscured the surroundings, but there was no one near. Pelya's packhorse whinnied at her in the hopes of fresh water from the nearby stream.

Pelya wiped sleep out of her eyes and shook her head. She had camped well after midnight without a fire. After the nightmare, she regretted sleeping at all. Her muscles were cramped, so she stretched. It would be smart to do her drills, but she just didn't want to. She wasn't hungry either.

The packhorse whinnied again. Pelya spent time caring for the horses before heading back to the road.

The remainder of the day passed with the endless drone of insects as she contemplated how badly she missed everyone back home.

She looked up a few times. At some point, she should stop feeling sorry for herself. She was alive, she had a small fortune in her belongings and the potential for a bright future. Between nightmares, exhaustion, being in a foreign environment, and loneliness, depression continued to choke her heart.

The next night, the combined light of Ryallon's moons, Siah-ray and Pioh-ray, cast a lavender glow over Pelya's fitful sleep.

Eventually, she woke up, stoked the fire and stared at it until morning. If not for the health of the horses, she would have continued her journey through the night.

The next few days of travel faded into each other. On the rare occasions she did sleep, there were always nightmares waiting for her. The yellow eyes of the monks she had fought in the ruins now possessed everyone in her dreams. The entire population of Dralin stared at her with yellow eyes.

Blink.

Pelya shook herself awake and shifted in her saddle. Honey ambled forward under the hot sun. Pelya's thoughts sank into oblivion as she forced her eyes to stay open.

Pelya rode toward Ebudae. The young wizardess was sitting on her bed cutting stripes into her bare arms with a knife, a habit Pelya hated.

"You need to stop that Ebudae. Please stop."

Ebudae looked up and blinked yellow eyes. Her mouth cracked open and an ear-piercing shriek came out.

Honey whinnied as she reared and struck out with hooves. The action threw Pelya to the ground with a thud, knocking the air from her lungs.

Another shriek shattered the sky. Pelya saw a large shape silhouetted by the dim, blue-green light of Siahray. Wings flapped violently above the striking form of Honey.

Pelya couldn't breathe and her back was in agony from the fall. She rolled over onto her stomach and tried to get to her feet.

Honey reared up and struck out again. A thud and squeak sounded at the impact. Honey stepped back a few paces, careful not to land on Pelya. The fearful whinnying and stomping of the packhorse tied to Honey's saddle hampered the war steed from full battle.

An intricate tattoo covering the left half of Pelya's torso grew hot. She was able to breathe again and the pain began receding as it worked healing magic. At the age of eleven, she and Ebudae had saved a baby dragon. Its mother, Hezzena, had given them dragon marks as a reward. The magic of the mark prevented Pelya from remembering it when it wasn't active though.

She jumped to her feet and drew her sword.

The creature hurtled into Pelya's chest, driving her back to the ground. The blow of a rough wing knocked the sword out of her hand as the heavy beast landed and scratched at her gut with a claw. Its heated breath smelled of rotted carrion.

Honey whinnied in rage as she tried to reach the monster.

Pelya's clothes protected her belly from the claws. However, they didn't protect her face as the creature's jagged teeth pierced her chin and cheek with a gruesome crunching sound.

Pelya screamed in agony and terror. Unconsciousness threatened to take over, but she fought it off with a warrior's instincts.

One of the claws wrapped around Pelya's left thigh. The monster's wings beat as it began lifting her in the air.

In desperation, Pelya managed to draw her secondary sword and slash upward as it came out of the sheath. The blade struck true, gutting the wretched creature.

The monster released Pelya's face to screech in mortal suffering. Its blood and bowels sprayed over Pelya's chest.

Pelya's head hit the ground hard, but the wounded creature grabbed her leg again and dragged her, refusing to give in to its injury.

Spots filled Pelya's vision and her stomach churned from the stench and anguish. With extraordinary effort, she slashed at the creature's talon, slicing it completely off.

The monster crashed to the ground and flopped around toward Pelya.

Pelya scrambled to her feet and vomited instead of attacking. Bile stung the wound in her face. It took everything she had not to think about the way her jaw was hanging loosely or the slick feeling of blood spreading everywhere.

The dragon mark burned down to her bones as it tried to repair the damage done.

Honey whinnied and stomped in anger, frustrated by the burden of the panicked packhorse struggling at its tether.

The light of the moon revealed that the monster was a defbat bigger than Honey. Webbed wings spread out in a nightmarish vision. Beady red eyes stared at Pelya from an oversized head. With another ear-splitting shriek, it lurched forward.

Pelya also lunged, swinging her sword overhead with all her might.

The supernaturally sharp sword won, cleaving the monster's ugly head in half.

The defbat's forward momentum slammed Pelya back to the ground with a thud.

Pelya frantically shoved at it until she was free. Its blood mixed with hers and she couldn't tell which was which. She scrambled to her feet and ran screaming until she stumbled into a cornfield at the side of the road and fell to the ground, looking up at the uncaring moon.

Her face didn't fit. She held blood-covered hands over it, but didn't want to touch the wound.

The burning tattoo became unbearable as it stole energy from her bones, energy she would have to replace with excessive food and sleep.

Pelya's jaw painfully shifted back into place with a ghastly crunching sound, causing her to scream in horrified anguish and dig her heels into the ground. That pain receded quickly though. It took minutes for the rest of her bones, muscles and skin to move into place and knit together. Throughout the terrible process, Pelya screamed and writhed on the ground.

Finally, the torture stopped.

Pelya curled up in the cornfield and sobbed uncontrollably at the horror she had suffered.

Honey arrived a few minutes later, trailing the agitated packhorse behind. She nuzzled Pelya to get up.

Pelya crawled to her feet and threw her arms around Honey's neck.

Finally, the tears and panic subsided enough for her to pick up her secondary sword and sheath it. Pelya entire body shook as she wiped a sleeve across her tender, but whole, face to wipe away tears and snot. She trudged back to where the defbat was and retrieved her primary sword. The entire time, she watched the lifeless form to make certain it didn't move.

Honey followed and watched just as nervously.

When Pelya remounted, she buried her face in Honey's mane and gave the warhorse its head. They rode hard through the terrible night until exhausted.

It was much later when they finally reached a stream. Pelya flopped into it and frantically scrubbed the creature's blood off. She made camp soon after and collapsed to the ground.

Honey stood watch.

Eight more days passed on the road, each blurring into the next. After the incident with the defbat, Pelya had slept for two days, only waking to devour all her supplies as her body recovered. After that, she camped each night for the health of the horses while she sat staring at the stars, too tired to start a campfire. Each time she nodded off, the nightmares would come and she would jump to her feet before sinking too deep.

Pelya's hair matted around her face as time passed. She hadn't taken the time to wash or braid it for more days than she remembered. There was no reason to do so. Her enchanted clothes remained clean, but *she* felt dirty. With the exception of one stop to buy food, Pelya skirted villages and their inns because she didn't want to talk to anyone. There were occasional streams to wash in, but she passed them. Bathing felt like too much work.

She lifted her head from exhausted thoughts of her father, Ebudae and life in Dralin.

Light misty rain tapping the ground was the only sound besides the plodding of her horses. Even the bugs had gone into hiding. The sky was grey with dreary low clouds over the endless flatlands. The sun had peeked through once that morning as though checking on her. It disappeared quickly, finding misery it could not bear to watch.

Pelya wrapped her oilslick cloak tightly against the cold drizzle and looked at the road behind. Shrouded silhouettes of three sinister men on horseback stalked her, biding their time. Travelers had been rare on the country roads. She noticed these three shortly after breaking camp a couple of hours ago.

Who they were, or why they were on the road remained a mystery. Pelya undid the tie-downs on her swords and loosened them in their scabbards, believing the men wouldn't wait much longer to pounce on a lone traveler. Fighting on horseback was not her best skill though, even with a warhorse as fine as Honey. Pelya wasn't willing to risk the steed against a threat she could handle herself.

A few minutes later, she saw a small campsite in a semi-circular copse of trees and bushes in off the road. The firepit was empty and muddy and the sitting logs looked lonely for company. Pelya rode in, dismounted and quickly tethered Honey and the packhorse to a tree behind the camp area.

As she held onto Honey's reins, dread caused her stomach to rise into her throat. This kind of fear was a stranger to her. If the men chose to fight, it would be to the death. Pelya had no squad to back her up. Ebudae wouldn't be there to cast spells.

Pelya had never felt so alone.

She set aside her emotions and used the horses to shield herself from the sight of the approaching highwaymen. With a gesture and a word, she cast a precise spell taught to her by Ebudae. Casting wind swirled around her, lifting the edge of her cloak, even though it didn't move the tiny drops of drizzle so much as an inch. Pelya's mind became sharp and secure from mystical entrapment, though it didn't ease the fear that threatened to bubble to the surface.

Next, she cast a small ward against hostile spells. It wasn't her favorite, but took little energy. Lastly, she cast a spell that hardened her skin without hindering movement, protecting her better than any chain shirt, even though the enchantments in her clothing would turn aside most weapons.

Even though the spells were efficient, Pelya was too tired and hungry to be casting them. A wave of supernatural exhaustion drained her strength and dulled her mind.

She mentally kicked herself as she suddenly remembered that she had countless runeballs to help in situations like this. They were secure in one of the saddlebags though and it would take too much time to retrieve the right ones. The fact that she hadn't pulled them out before reaching the camp was a mental error that could become fatal.

Hoof beats entered the camp and stopped. Pelya moved away from her horses and warily walked along the perimeter of the camp, studying the men.

Unshaven and travel-worn, the brigands slouched in their saddles and stared back at their prey with hard, eager eyes. Mud and dirt stained their ragged cloaks. Underneath were leather jackets and pants that would provide some protection should they have to battle instead of sneaking up on their victims as they likely preferred.

They dismounted as one and loosened their swords in their scabbards. One man, the smallest of the three, quickly gathered all the reins and looped them over a low-hanging branch at the edge of the road. He had a scraggly black beard and a scar across his forehead. His tongue constantly flicked along cracked lips as he squinted in her direction.

Pelya's breath puffed out noticeably in front of her. Her heart pounded faster than she ever remembered and it vied for attention with the ragged sound of her breathing. Pelya realized she had reached the middle of the clearing and was in a battle ready stance, waiting for something to happen.

The other two studied Pelya as they slunk into flanking positions. The one on the left was the leader. He wore a stained, cream-colored shirt under a dirty red jacket. Calculating grey eyes darted over every inch of Pelya's form, making her skin crawl.

The men didn't want to fight her. They had far worse things in mind.

Pelya took a step back and a whine escaped her throat. She mentally cursed herself for weakness.

The last man was missing the top of his ear, probably from a past battle. His unkempt black shirt was half-tucked into filthy pants. Pelya wanted to retch at the way he kept scratching himself.

The leader spoke.

Pelya's mind was dull from exhaustion and the words held no meaning. Her battle training deserted her and the world became a surreal nightmare.

The man spoke again.

His companions laughed.

Pelya didn't *want* to know what they said. The wicked meaning behind their words was clear enough.

The drizzle became colder, wrapping around Pelya like a blanket of ice that ignored her cloak. To her surprise, a few flakes of snow mixed in with the misty rain. They danced in-between Pelya and the ruffians, mocking them in anticipation of impending violence.

The trees surrounding the clearing seemed gathered as though to watch a show.

Pelya could see that the men were positioning themselves, one in front and two flanking. She could see their leering faces and bloodshot eyes.

The ruffians made comments back and forth to each other. Their tongues danced across rotting teeth as they laughed. They were close now, almost in range.

Pelya's breathing and heartbeat began to level in battle readiness as though her body was eager to go through the finely tuned motions of fighting.

Underneath the unanticipated new calm was fear that things wouldn't go well. That fear grew in Pelya's chest. What if she lost? What was death like, or worse, not dying in this situation?

The brigands noticed the rising panic in her. All three drew their swords and stalked forward eagerly.

Pelya realized she hadn't drawn her own swords. She turned and ran eight long strides away from the men.

The men jumped forward to chase.

Pelya spun with swords in hand.

The man missing part of his ear stumbled while trying to stop his full speed. It cost him the other ear as Pelya's secondary blade flashed. Blood sprayed, tinting the rain and snow red as it fell to the ground.

I must control myself. If her wild swing had been accurate, he would have lost his life, evening the odds. She was hardly fighting like the swordmaster she was.

Honey whinnied in anger and stomped a hoof at not being able to join the fight.

The other two rushed forward.

Time slowed for Pelya. She saw the breath mist from each man as though something choreographed. *How did they all manage to let out a breath at once?*

She blocked sword strokes from the other two men, one with each blade. The earless man regained control and attacked. Pelya's panic was rising again.

No. There was no time for that. Pelya shoved aside emotion and focused on her training.

It was fascinating the way her enchanted swords met their mundane blades, cutting into the steel. She could see sparks as their blows were deflected while her feet danced between the men and through to the other side.

Their swords had missed Pelya.

Her swords repeatedly clashed against the ruffians' as she tumbled for position. She fought defensively, waiting for a clear advantage.

They weren't going for the kill. They wanted something else.

Panic rose in her throat once more.

No. That would not do. Fight them. Make them pay, regardless of the outcome.

The leader was the best.

The one now missing *two* ears was the worst.

Two quick moves. Two more. Earless was dead.

The other two didn't capitalize on the tiny opening she had left. Pelya could now be more aggressive.

The brigands began to realize that she would fight to the death, whether it be hers or theirs.

Pelya was warm for the first time that day. She brushed aside her cloak and shook her hair out of her eyes. The blue in them sparkled with a life that hadn't been there a moment before.

Dodging and parrying, she took stock of the two highwaymen. They were not as good as she. They had weaknesses and were making mistakes. Pelya's lips curved in a cruel smile.

It was *they* who felt panic rise.

A little footwork. Pelya got the leader to commit.

A dodge to the left, parry with the secondary sword and she attacked his companion.

The bearded man was injured, blood rushing down his side. He would be in shock for a moment.

Dodge again and Pelya fended off the leader. Fast footwork. Pelya tested him. Her main sword turned away an overhead blow. He panicked.

A surprise spin and a thrust in the other direction with Pelya's secondary sword and the bearded man died.

The leader frantically backpedaled, realizing he was outmatched.

Finish the leader. A quick twist and Pelya was behind him. Her main sword cut upward through the man's leather jacket like it was warm butter.

He died with a whimper.

The world rushed back in. Pelya heard her breath once more as it misted in front of her.

I survived.

I won.

She heard another noise. It wasn't her heartbeat this time, though that was flying rapidly in her chest. No, it was something else, a sobbing sound.

Earless was not dead.

He was *going* to die. His wounds were severe. He looked up at her, crying, begging her not to kill him.

Pelya couldn't move. She looked at the bloody sword in her right hand, and then at the men lying on the ground. Each had expanding pools of blood underneath.

Earless cried and begged helplessly.

Pelya *hated* killing no matter how good she was at it. She looked up at the sad sky. The raindrops and snowflakes fell past her face, judging her on their way to the ground.

Two steps forward. A sharp thrust in and out of his heart with the main sword. Earless was released from his misery.

Three men lay dead at Pelya's feet.

Dread crept in. There was no witness to the truth of what happened. This should be reported, but to who? The bulk of the Altordan army didn't do well at patrolling lonely roads. Even if they did come here, they probably wouldn't believe her story.

Pelya darted towards Honey in panic, determined to escape as fast as possible.

She stopped halfway. Her main sword still had blood on it. The secondary sword stayed magically clean.

Breathe for a moment. Stop panicking. Clean your sword. That's the first thing you do. Then you double-check yourself for wounds.

With effort, Pelya laid out the bodies next to each other. She would leave them there. Someone would come along eventually. If it were soon enough, maybe they would be able to bury the brigands. If not, then they would find bones picked clean by scavengers.

Pelya left their weapons and coin pouches. She wouldn't steal from the dead, even ones who had tried to kill her. It was the way of the adventurer to take from those killed, but she didn't need the money.

She took the horses so they wouldn't succumb to predators. As Pelya tethered them to each other and the packhorse, she decided she would sell them and give the money to a church.

Pelya mounted Honey and led the column of horses out of the camp while keeping distance from the dead highwaymen.

The drizzle became heavier as she rode away. It didn't take long for the campsite to disappear from sight.

Pelya believed she could still see the shapes of the bodies lying on the ground though.

They watched her leave.

Pelya was certain they were watching her.

Chapter 3

Beltaddo, the second largest city in Eddland, was known throughout the continent as a crossroads of trade. Each of the highways circling it was wide enough to handle six columns of wagon trains. Another wide highway cut through the city from north to south.

Prosperous merchants conducted trade from lavish offices within Beltaddo. Goods from all points of the compass were stored in vast warehouses around the outskirts. Food and livestock from rural Eddland and the Kingdom of Swelth arrived on roads from the east. The plains and hills in that direction were lush, supporting a large number of farms. To the north of Eddland were Deller, Obda and Foauth, kingdoms rich with ores and gems from the mountains.

Dralin, to the south, exported magical items, potions and various other goods of mystery. Books, both arcane and otherwise, were one of its larger exports. Countries such as Mayncal and Brindlyn to the southeast of the continent sent merchant trains through Beltaddo to the western kingdoms.

To the west was the kingdom of Soarth. One of its capital cities, Thea, was a seaport renown for greeting ships of every seagoing country in the world. Many exotic items came from that direction. Soarth also produced paper from fast growing plants called parthmellya, most of which was exported through its other capital, Aest. It was the only country known to have dual capitals.

Pelya and Honey were exhausted and needed to rest for a while. Two days after killing the brigands, Pelya had sold the other horses, including her packhorse, to a caravan master who had had one of his mounts flounder. Pelya bargained for as much as possible to avoid making the incident with the brigands feel casual or cheap, and received a better price than she had expected.

After that, the weather became pleasant and with another four days of journey, she had reached Beltaddo. She rode through city outskirts where houses, smithies, stores, warehouses, and livestock pens lined the highway for miles outside the city gates in a chaotic mix of color and size. The activity of people was music to Pelya's ears. She inhaled the odors of bodies, livestock, and the perfumes people wore in futile attempt to mask them. People in brightly colored clothing scurried across the highway or walked alongside. Stiff, rounded hats were popular for the men and flowery bonnets for even the poorest of women were in style. Pelya should have her head covered while traveling, but she had never liked hats.

The sun felt wonderful as it beat down on her shoulders, even if the air still had a chill to it. She lifted her face and closed her eyes, soaking in the warmth and atmosphere. Pelya looked forward to having a bath and good meals. She hadn't stayed at an inn since that first village an eternity ago.

Death and suffering weighed heavy on her mind. In Dralin, she had seen it every day. She had dealt death by her own blades. Pelya didn't realize she currently looked much like death itself. She had never cleaned up after the battle. Sleep had come in fits and ended with nightmares of dead people staring at her. Unbeknownst to her, the reason the caravan master had paid so much for the horses was due to Pelya's ghastly appearance.

A deep voice called out nearby. "Hey! You need to move!"

Pelya shook her head and stared at a mounted caravan guard in front of her.

Even in Eddland, most caravans had a few private guards for their wagon trains. This one was a stout man in a chain shirt and the red tabard of a merchant company. Concern shone in his features. "I don't want trouble, but you need to move out of the middle of the road." He waved

a thick arm at the heavy wagons coming. They would be difficult to stop and more difficult to get going again if she didn't move out of the way.

"Sorry." Pelya led Honey to the side and continued her journey.

The guard warily followed until the last of the caravan passed. Then he sat on his horse until she was a comfortable distance away.

She reached the wide gates of the city wall some time later. Urban sprawl had grown far beyond the gates due to a long period of peace, and they were permanently open. City guardsmen wore yellow tabards embroidered with green arrows in the paws of a fox. They carried pikes and watched the traffic going through, but made no move to stop anyone.

Pelya rode up to a group of guards. A tall sergeant with muscled arms emerging from a sleeveless chain shirt cautiously stepped forward. His hand was on the hilt of his longsword as he looked at her condition. Behind him, his men stood at the ready.

Pelya wondered at the caution, not realizing that the sergeant saw a motley woman dressed in fancy clothes. Her hair was caked with dirt and blood and hadn't been braided for a long time. The blood on her face had mostly dried and fallen off, but traces remained around the edges and under her collar. The dirt that covered the rest of her made her look hard and experienced. "I thought the Blue Wyverns protected the city," she said in a weary voice.

The guard tried hard not to roll his eyes and almost succeeded. "Everyone thinks that. The Blue Wyverns are busy keeping peace on the roads. Beltaddo has its own city guard to care for the safety of its citizens."

"Ah. Can you tell me of a good inn to stay at?" Her eyes were dull and she had lost the smile of the young woman she used to be.

"Well, if you're looking for an inn for travelers, I'd recommend the Dancing Blade," the sergeant said. "If you'd like to stay where Blue Wyverns are, I'd recommend either the Leather Hilt or the Blue Shield." After gesturing in the direction of each, the sergeant turned back to Pelya. He noticed a haunted look behind her eyes and took a step away from her. "Miss? Are you all right?"

Pelya didn't hear him. She stared ahead, trying to remember what he had just said.

"Miss! Are you all right?" Pelya felt the sergeant slapping her leg, trying to get her attention.

"Yes, I'm fine." Pelya's glove smeared dirt on her face as she wiped it with a tired hand. "Where did you say the Blue Wyverns are?" She felt a need to find company, friends, anything.

"Go to the Leather Hilt Inn. Mistress Chellsee Plumar will take good care of you there." The sergeant appeared relieved that she had finally responded. He gave Pelya directions and then bade her farewell.

Pelya turned Honey in the direction he had pointed.

The massive Leather Hilt Inn rose four floors high, dwarfing the shops across a wide, cobbled street. Two buildings stretched to the right from the main structure, appearing more like barracks than part of an inn. The entire compound, including a fenced stable yard, covered three city blocks.

Pelya didn't remember the ride through the city. She looked around at the bustling crowds on the street. Working men pushed carts or carried goods on their backs from one place to

another. A young woman sold cut flowers from a cart on the corner, trying to get the attention of passing men and women out to explore the shops of vendors who called from their steps.

Birds flitted from one straw roof to another, where they kept their nests under the eaves. Pelya stared up at puffy clouds drifting across the smoggy sky. The action caused her to tilt in her saddle and almost slide off. A pair of children pointed and laughed at her as they followed their mother into a potions shop.

Pelya dragged an arm across her sweat-covered forehead and rode toward the inn. An older, armed woman guarding the double doors of the main entrance pointed her in the direction of the stables to the left of the main building. Pelya rode past the wall surrounding the main yard.

The half-full stables were large enough to house a few hundred horses. A pair of young grooms rushed up to take Honey's reins. Pelya slid off the side of the horse and stumbled, barely managing to catch herself, even with the help of a groom.

"Are you all right?" the groom asked in a worried voice.

Pelya patted Honey's neck. "Her name is Honey. Treat her well." The words stumbled off her tongue. She fumbled for her purse and tipped each groom three copper pieces. They seemed happy about the amount, but looked at her with worried eyes. Pelya ignored the concern as she slung the saddlebags over her shoulder with their help.

On the walk to the main building, she noticed smaller buildings in the back that probably housed the innmaster and managers. Gardens with sitting areas were nestled between the buildings. A number of guests enjoyed them, either chatting or resting in the sun. Pelya entered the inn through the stable yard door.

The enormous common room looked capable of serving four hundred people or more. Fireplaces surrounded the room, but only one in the back corner had a small, crackling fire in it. Older men and women warmed their bones near it as they chatted in murmuring voices. Stone walls were clean, a sign of a well-tended inn. The high ceiling was made of fine hardwood with massive beams across it, each supported by two rows of stone columns. The second floor had a railed balcony overlooking the common area.

Welcoming aromas of food and ale mixed with bodies and armor in a combination that Pelya inhaled with pleasure; it reminded her of the barracks where she had been raised. The hum of voices and clinking of dishes gave a busy atmosphere to the inn.

At that moment, there were sixty to seventy people in the room. Many were armed women wearing the uniform of the Blue Wyverns, a dark-blue sleeveless tabard with light-blue wyvern insignia embroidered onto the front and worn over polished chain shirts. Other customers were dressed in casual clothes common to off-duty soldiers.

Women at nearby tables were studying Pelya intently. A few had hands on weapons as though they expected trouble.

A stout woman with graying hair rose from a round table to the left near the biggest fireplace and cautiously approached Pelya. She wore a utilitarian green blouse and brown trousers. Roped muscles lined her forearms below rolled up sleeves. The woman had a hand ready on her belt knife and looked as though she could handle herself in a fight. "Greetings, lass. Do you intend to take on the whole room by yourself?"

Pelya looked at the woman in confusion before glancing down to her own waist and seeing that she had partially drawn her main sword. She looked up in shock. There was absolutely no reason for her to draw it, especially not in such a welcoming place. Pelya realized that her body was numb.

The woman's brown eyes filled with worry as she studied Pelya. "Well are you just going to stand there, or are you going to draw that sword?"

A few customers stood and moved to defensive positions around Pelya.

The woman motioned for them to give Pelya space. "My name is Chellsee Plumar and this is my inn. People don't normally enter and draw their weapons, especially not in an inn full of Blue Wyverns."

Pelya was surprised by how guarded and paranoid she had become in such a short time, but she had no idea how to control it. She gulped and realized her mouth was parched.

"Come now, lass. You don't look well at all." Chellsee moved closer.

Pelya took a step back.

"You're a fright to behold, lass. Have you been dragged the length of the world?" Chellsee crossed an arm and rested the other on it while rubbing her chin thoughtfully. "What happened to you, lass?"

Pelya gulped. Everything swirled around her and tilted. She let her sword fall back into its sheath as she reached for balance.

Someone caught and steadied her. A woman's strong voice spoke next to Pelya's ear. "She's in a daze, Chellsee. She smells terrible too."

Chellsee moved to the other side of Pelya. "Help me out, Yatha. Let's get her to my table."

Pelya felt weak. Her legs wanted to buckle. The women half-walked and half-carried her to the table. They sat her down and someone else brought a blanket.

"She's shaking. Get her warm cider, soup and bread," Chellsee told a serving woman. To another, she said, "Light a fire here to get her warm."

Pelya felt herself sliding to the right. She was heavy and tired.

"Oh no you don't." The woman named Yatha caught Pelya, brought their chairs together and put an arm around Pelya's shoulders to keep her propped up. "You stay conscious for a while so you can get a bath. I don't know how long I can stand to be this close."

Chellsee brought a cup to Pelya's lips. Warm cider slid between them and down Pelya's throat. It helped a little.

"Can you eat some soup?" The innkeeper asked.

"Yeah," Pelya mumbled weakly. She took the spoon that was offered and instantly dropped it. Pelya tried to reach for it, but spots floated across her vision and darkness overwhelmed her.

Chellsee reached out and helped Captain Yatha catch the woman. "Is she still awake?"

"No." Irritation filled the captain's voice. "She's almost as weak as one of those new recruits sent out from Settatt."

"Let's lie her down on those furs in front of the fireplace." Chellsee wrapped her arms under the unconscious woman's while Yatha grabbed the feet. They set her on a bear pelt and watched her arms flop to the sides. "She's a mess."

Yatha snorted. "Unless you want a dead body on the floor of your inn, you'd better get your healer. Judging by the quality of clothes and swords, she can afford one." She squatted and grabbed the hem of the shirt between her thumb and fingers. "This has runes sewn into it. The pants do too."

Chellsee waved one of her staff over and said, "Get the healer right away. After that, find out if she came in on foot or horse and if she has any gear other than these saddlebags."

Captain Yatha's Chief Sergeant, Dina, came in from the yard. Seeing the captain, she stormed over, pulling on her short blonde hair in frustration. "Those recruits are hopeless, Captain! They'll get killed if we send them into battle." Light blue chevrons embroidered in the same thread as the wyvern insignia lined the left front shoulder of her uniform. Thin metallic thread was sewn into the embroidery so it would sparkle in the daylight.

"If they even make it to the battlefield," the captain retorted. "That one fool actually fell on her sword and nearly bled to death from the cut."

"They're truly that bad?" Chellsee asked.

Captain Yatha stood and brushed herself off. Her uniform was just as sharp as the chief sergeant's, only with Captain's bars lining the left front shoulder. "Worse. I don't know what's happening in Settatt, but the recruits coming out of there can barely walk in a straight line, let alone use a weapon. I've sent another complaint to the Battle Commander for all the good it'll do. We're going to have to leave tomorrow regardless of whether or not they're ready."

Dina stood over the unconscious woman, studying her. "What exactly did you do to this poor woman, Captain? Punch her because she smiled?"

Chellsee chuckled. Captain Yatha was known for having a short fuse.

Yatha crossed her arms. "Why do I put up with you, Chief Sergeant?"

"Because it's better than having to deal with the new recruits yourself." Dina squatted and pushed hair from the woman's face. "Blood is caked in with the dirt and sweat."

Chellsee exchanged worried glances with Yatha.

"You'd better disarm her," the captain said. "Judging by the ease with which she went to her sword, I'd say she's dangerous. Could be a brigand."

Dina continued her examination. "No piercings." She ran her hands along the woman's sleeves. "Muscular." She unlatched the swords before unbuckling the woman's belt. "Two swords, a specialization that requires years of training." Dina half-unsheathed each one. "The main sword has runes covering it, the secondary is an odd metal, but no runes. It's flawless. High quality equipment." She pulled the swordbelt off and checked the three knives. A low whistle emitted from pursed lips as she examined the runes on the main one. "I'd bet anything this is a wizard-killer."

"Do you have someplace safe you can put those?" Yatha asked Chellsee, concern rising in her voice.

The healer appeared and set his bag next to the unconscious woman's head. "What happened here?"

Chellsee folded her arms. "She passed out. We don't know why." To Yatha, she said, "We'll put her weapons and valuables in my safe, including the saddlebags. I'll have a couple of my staff get her cleaned up and we'll put her in the kitchen under close watch if she's not too injured or sick."

"Sounds like a good plan." Yatha pointed at the woman's boots. "Check for hidden knives, Sergeant."

Chellsee stared at the enigma on her bear rug, wondering where the woman had come from and what had happened to her along the way.

Chapter 4

The three brigands lie dead on the ground. Pelya jumped when their eyes opened. The pupils were a sickly yellow. They blinked.

Pelya jerked awake from the nightmare and sat up in a cold sweat.

A young woman's voice called out from nearby. "She's awake!"

Pelya tried to get up, but flopped to the side. Her body wouldn't obey. She closed her eyes and tried to figure out what was wrong.

"Come on, get it together." The young woman knelt by Pelya and began rubbing her back.

The sounds of a busy kitchen filled Pelya's ear. People were talking to each other or shouting orders. Someone was using a cleaver, the loud whacks rising above the hubbub. A mild breeze from an outside door swirled the aromas of baking breads and bubbling soups. Pelya's stomach rumbled with interest. She concentrated on breathing evenly and assessing her condition.

Booted footsteps approached. The young woman rubbing Pelya's back spoke again. "She's awake, Captain Yatha, but I don't know that she's any better."

Captain Yatha squatted next to Pelya. "Come to your senses, girl. You're not sick. The healer said that you're as healthy as anyone he's ever seen."

Pelya agreed with the assessment, but she *was* weak and didn't know why. She was lying on a straw pallet in one of the corners. "Yeah." She got to her hands and knees. The weight of her swords was missing. She sat up and looked around.

Captain Yatha was a brown-skinned, middle-age woman with short, dark-blonde hair. She wore a casual white blouse with green pants and a thin longsword at her waist. Her eyes were amber and had a spirited look about them. She reminded Pelya of an exotic tikra cat from the continent of Antilea that she had once seen at the zoo in Dralin.

"If you're looking for your swords, they're safe in the vault along with your packs. You have expensive equipment, girl. *Very* expensive. We didn't want them to be stolen." Yatha tugged at Pelya's spotless shirt.

The young woman who had watched over Pelya nodded. Her pixie-cut brown hair was cute, in sharp contrast to a nasty scar across the right cheek. A missing left arm indicated that she had suffered horrendous injuries in a battle. "That and we didn't want you to wake up and start slaughtering everybody."

Yatha sighed impatiently. "Hush, Talla." To Pelya, she said, "Talla's right though. I'm not too certain about you. Until you get your senses back, you're not touching your swords."

Pelya debated whether or not she could take the Captain's sword and fight her way through. Then she shook her head. In her current condition, she couldn't fight a fly. There was no reason to do so anyway. Pelya tiredly buried her face in her hands. "I'm sorry." The apology was sincere, if weak.

"Yeah. Just get yourself together." Yatha stood. "Get some food in her, Talla. If she comes to her senses, bring her to Chellsee and me. We have a lot of questions."

"Yes, Captain." Talla resumed rubbing Pelya's back after the Captain left. "She's a good Captain. Don't let her brusque manner get to you." She gave Pelya a dubious look. "And you *do* seem touched in the head."

"Yeah." Pelya's breathing calmed and she looked around. The kitchen was similar to ones in Dralin's Guard barracks. Rows of firepits had soups and sides of meat cooking. Cooks worked at prep tables while servers moved back and forth to get the food.

“Let’s get you something to eat.” Talla hooked her arm under Pelya’s and helped her stand.

Pelya steadied herself with Talla’s help. A table big enough to seat two was shoved up next to the wall near the pallet. Pelya slumped in one of the chairs. Talla had been using the other to sit on while watching over Pelya.

“Be right back.” Talla maneuvered her way to small barrels lined on a table. She grabbed a cup, filled it and brought it back to set in front of Pelya. “It’s orange juice. Eddland has orchards everywhere. I’ll get you food.”

Pelya sipped at the orange juice and stared at her clean hand. Someone had washed her. She felt her hair and noticed it was soft and light for the first time since she could remember. A quick search of her shirt let her know that her secret pockets were still secret.

She ate slowly after Talla came back with a heaping plate of food. Pelya didn’t want to do anything else but lie down in a warm bed and hide under the covers until her troubles went away.

Talla waited patiently, staring at Pelya the whole time. “I guess you were hungry.” Talla bounced up from her chair and grabbed the empty plate. “I’ll get more.”

Pelya ran hands down her stomach. She couldn’t remember the last time she had eaten. It must have been a day or two earlier, perhaps longer.

The plate appeared again. Pelya stared at it, not knowing if she wanted it or not.

“Go on, eat,” Talla encouraged. “It’s called food. You put it in your mouth and it goes to your belly, giving you energy for lots of things. You were doing it right just a minute ago.”

Pelya looked at the wry twist of Talla’s mouth and almost smiled in return.

“Hey! There. Try that again.” Talla pointed and grinned.

Pelya buried her face in her hands and tried to hide. She didn’t want to smile, talk or even eat.

“Hey. Don’t go back to that.” Talla came over and hooked her arm under Pelya’s, pulling her to her feet. “Come on. You’re going to talk to Mistress Chellsee.”

Pelya reluctantly let Talla drag her into the common room. The young woman was surprisingly strong.

They arrived at a table occupied by Chellsee, Captain Yatha and a few others. Talla pulled a chair out next to a woman with short, curvy light-blonde hair, green eyes and a wide smile.

On the other side of the chair was a man in orange wizard’s robes. A gnarled staff with a blue crystal at the top leaned against his shoulder. To Pelya’s surprise, he was clean-shaven unlike most wizards.

“She’s eaten and she’s doing better, Mistress Chellsee,” Talla said, “but she’s not talking.”

Yatha, on Chellsee’s right, looked Pelya over for a moment. “Are you ready to tell us about yourself now, girl?”

Pelya didn’t appreciate being called girl. She was unimpressed by tough women in general.

The green-eyed woman on Pelya’s left grinned. “By the look on her face, I’ll guess no.”

The comment drew laughs. Chellsee motioned for Pelya to sit. “Have more food. You need it. We’re in the middle of a discussion anyway.” After Pelya sat, Chellsee turned to a short, stocky woman on her left who had wiry black hair. “You were saying, Shiesle?”

The woman’s voice sounded like pebbles rolling against each other in a bucket of water. “There have been raids into the country from Soarth. We’re increasing patrols on the border.”

Chellsee frowned. “Sooth isn’t sending regular army units?”

Shiesle was about to take a bite of food, but stopped. “They’ve been going through bureaucratic changes at the top and the officers who knew what they were doing have either resigned or been released. Their army is a mess.”

Yatha continued so Shiesle could finish her bite. "It's disturbing. Soaarth has always been a well-run country despite having two capitals. Something is going on with the Senate in Aest though. It's as though they're *trying* to weaken the military."

The wizard spoke with a deep, warm voice. "The people have been angry about reports of abuse from soldiers along the coast."

"I still believe those have been exaggerated," Yatha said with a dismissive wave.

Shiesle pushed away her empty plate. "The coast of Soaarth is ripe with pirates. Of course they're going to complain about abuse."

The green-eyed woman clasped her hands to her chest and spoke in mock-angelic tones. "I was *arrested* for murder and piracy. Poor pirate me. This abuse must stop. Free the pirates." She grinned at the laughter she received.

Yatha became serious again. "It's the usual brigands and highway robbers. The problem is that they're better organized than usual."

Dina's eyes twinkled. "There is rumor of a new thieves' guild that may be trying to expand into Eddland from Soaarth."

Shiesle shook her head and frowned. "We don't go by rumors. It's a stupid one in any case. Who would take on the Wyverns? Absurd!" Shiesle's dark eyes showed nothing but contempt for such a rumor.

The Captain looked into her cup as though contemplating. Chellsee merely took a sip of her drink and said nothing.

Shiesle continued. "Whoever it is has been raiding caravans along our common border. They've been taking only the best things out of the wagon trains. Once they have the pick of what they want, they load it onto extra horses that they bring. Then the dirty brigands disappear quickly back into the wilderness."

Yatha broke in. "They also take the wagon horses and leave the merchants stranded on the road. The merchant masters are taking severe losses right now." Yatha shifted in her chair and leaned forward. "We've been sending more and more guards with them, but we can't have a full company for every train. If we only send two or four Wyverns with a train, then the raiders will still attack." Her jaw stuck forward in anger.

Shiesle was quiet.

Dina looked down at her long fingers. "We've lost more than a hundred Wyverns in these raids."

Chellsee gasped at this news. "I had heard rumors about casualties on the border, but I didn't realize that it was so bad."

Pelya quietly listened to the conversation while nibbling on the plate of food Talla had brought.

The wizard jerked a thumb at her. "Should we be talking about this in front of a stranger?"

"Good point," Chellsee said. "Tell us about yourself, lass, so you won't be a stranger to us anymore."

Pelya thought about answering the question, but her jaw had no desire to open. Words were too much work.

"Perhaps you should just get out of here if you don't want to talk, girl," Shiesle said.

Pelya stood. She *would* leave. She would get on Honey and ride away.

"Here now, sit down and talk to us," Chellsee said in a calm voice.

Pelya began walking away from the table. She didn't care about her swords, saddlebags or anything else. She wouldn't even take Honey if they gave her a problem about it.

Dina jumped up and intercepted Pelya. "Hey, hey, hey. What's going on with you?"

Pelya tried to step around her.

Irritation reached Yatha's voice. "Let her go if she's going to be like that, Chief."

Dina grabbed Pelya's upper arms and stood directly in front of her. "Come on. Tell me what's going on. Something's wrong. What is it?"

Pelya tried to shove her out of the way.

Dina was too adept. She pressed up against Pelya, wrapped an arm around her waist and gripped the back of her neck with the other. Dina hugged Pelya tightly while whispering, "Come on. Tell me what's wrong."

Pelya tried to restrain it, but a choked sob escaped. It dragged another with it. She clutched at Dina's back and strained to fight the feelings.

"There we go. That's it. Come on." Dina held her tight.

Pelya sobbed a few times. She stopped before it got too far because she could sense people staring at her in discomfort.

Dina took her cheeks in hand. "Is that all of it? Don't worry about these people. They don't matter at the moment."

Yatha snorted.

Pelya took a step back and wiped her face with shaking hands.

Dina stayed with her, not letting her get away. "Are you ready to talk? Because there's no way I'm letting you leave in this condition."

"Yeah." Pelya didn't look her in the eye.

Dina firmly took Pelya's cheeks again and forced her to look. "Hi. My name is Dina. What's yours?"

Pelya sank into the captivating green irises. "Pelya."

Dina's smile lit up the room. "Hi, Pelya. It's good to meet you."

"Yeah." Pelya almost smiled. She stopped trying to escape. "I'll talk now."

"Oh good." Dina wrapped an arm around Pelya's waist and led her back to the table. She sat Pelya down and moved her own chair close. Dina put an arm around Pelya's shoulders and her right leg over Pelya's lap, effectively pinning her. She turned to the rest of the table. "This is Pelya. She's going to tell us her story."

Chellsee grinned. "Hi Pelya. I'm Chellsee, the owner of the Leather Hilt Inn." She introduced the others. "You've met Captain Yatha. Chief Sergeant Dina Valmi is sitting on your lap."

Dina laughed and gave Pelya a playful shove, but didn't loosen her grip.

Chellsee continued. "Lieutenant Adjutant Shiesle Pavmar is to my left."

The lieutenant nodded.

"And the wizardly gentleman to your right goes by the name of Puriko. He's a bit odd, but useful in a fight."

Puriko smiled and nodded to Pelya. "So now that you've met us, tell us about yourself, Pelya. I must admit to being very curious by this point. You appear to be wealthy and I can see the enchantments in your clothing even if I don't understand half the runes."

"All right." Pelya stared at her hands and considered how much to tell. "I don't know where to start . . ."

"You've told us your name, now tell us who you are," Chellsee suggested.

That wasn't so easy a task. She felt that she could trust these people though. It was worth the risk. "I am Pelya Jornin of Dralin. My father is Frath Jornin." Tears burst from eyes, but she covered her face with an arm and forced them back in.

"I'm guessing your father has recently died?" Yatha said kindly.

"No." Pelya shook her head and wiped the tears with the heels of her palms. "He's alive, but I can never see him again because I've been banished from Dralin."

"Banished?" Shiesle remarked in surprise. "I don't know that I've ever heard of anyone being banished from Dralin."

Puriko was even more interested than before. "I'm from Dralin as well, though I've not been there in a decade. I've never heard of such a thing either. Who banished you?"

"The High Council."

Puriko whistled in surprise. "They don't normally interfere in the affairs of individuals. What did you do?"

Pelya didn't want to answer that question. She stared at her hands again.

Shiesle rested an elbow on the table and her chin in the hand. "You've *got* to tell us the answer to that one."

Yatha nodded. "Agreed. Being banished from the most dangerous city in the world by its ruling body isn't the sort of thing you can leave hanging."

"I killed a chancellor." Pelya didn't look up.

Silence fell over the table. The murmur from the common room continued, ignorant of the statement that had just been made.

Dina looked around. "I'm guessing that's bad?"

Puriko snorted. "Well yeah. There are twelve chancellors of the High Council. Each one of them is an Archmage of the highest power. I may as well be a charlatan next to any of them." He shifted his chair to face Pelya and crossed one leg over the other. "How and why did you kill him and why did the High Council banish you rather than executing you on the spot?"

"Are you a fugitive?" Yatha asked.

Pelya looked her in the eye. "I am not a fugitive. You have my word on that."

Yatha shrugged. "Your word doesn't mean anything yet, but you sound sincere. Go on."

Pelya wanted to leave. Then she considered how they must feel, knowing nothing about her. She closed her eyes, exhaled slowly and relaxed.

"There you go," Dina said. "You're doing great, Pelya." She lessened the pressure, but kept the leg over Pelya's lap.

Pelya turned to Puriko. "I killed Chancellor Brumbibble because he attacked my friend. I killed him by running my swords up through his ribs. The High Council banished me instead of executing me because I had powerful friends who stood next to me at my trial and forbade it."

Puriko was dubious. "I can't think of anyone powerful enough to stand up to the High Council."

"A few other Chancellors, the High Commander of the City Guard and a few Archpriests. We had just removed a threat to the city in which some of the Chancellors had tried to commit a coup." Pelya left out the part where they had fought a Crazy God. It was already a difficult enough story.

Puriko was about to speak, but Yatha held up a hand. "Let's go back to *who* you are, Pelya. I don't think that's been answered well enough for us to believe that you associate with such powerful people."

"Her clothing and equipment add credibility," Chellsee pointed out.

"I don't care whether you believe me or not, but I'll tell you my story anyway." At that point, Pelya was only going to tell them because she didn't think they'd leave her alone until she did.

"I'm done here," Yatha said to Chellsee in irritation. "If you want to humor this disrespectful little girl, so be it. I have a mission to plan." The captain stood and addressed Shiesle, Dina and Puriko. "We leave at dawn."

The three stood and saluted her.

Dina gave Pelya's shoulder a squeeze. "I have troops to prepare. Perhaps you'll tell me the tale someday."

Puriko and Lieutenant Shiesle said brief goodbyes to Chellsee before leaving too.

Chellsee sighed deeply. "Well, you really know how to clear a room, lass."

"I'd like my things and my bill now, please." Pelya stood. She wasn't willing to deal with the condescending attitude any longer.

Chellsee chewed on the inside of her cheek while considering the request. After a moment, she said, "I'm sorry."

Pelya narrowed her eyes. "For what?"

"For being such a terrible host. I forget sometimes that I'm running an inn." She folded her hands in front of her. "I'm not your mother to scold you, nor a warden to imprison you. I apologize for treating you as anything other than a guest."

Pelya saw that Chellsee was sincere. "Thank you."

"You're welcome. Now, I'll take you to the vault to get your things. It's all there. Your horse has been well cared for as well."

Pelya relaxed some more. "Thank you again."

"You're welcome. Also, there is no charge. I guarantee service and satisfaction to all my guests and you have received neither."

"You took excellent care of me even though I drew a weapon in your inn. You cared for my horse and you kept my things safe. I am both satisfied and well-served." Pelya gestured at the empty plate in front of her. She didn't remember finishing it.

"In that case, I'd like you to stay for a few days." She made a calming motion at Pelya's reaction. "I'm not insisting. I'll get your things right now and you can be on your way, but . . ." Chellsee raised a finger. ". . . you're exhausted and starving. Hearing that you've been banished and taken away from everything you've ever known clarifies why." She sat back. "You're in no condition to travel right now, so I'm offering you a room at no cost for a few days."

Pelya thought about it for a minute. A bed was the only thing she truly wanted. "I want my things in my room with me and I insist on paying for the room at least."

"Agreed." Chellsee stood. "Come with me. I'll take you to the vault and then the room."

Pelya stood and followed.

The innkeeper took her behind the hotel desk and into an office. She stopped at an ironbound wooden door. "Wait here, please."

Pelya sat in a chair until Chellsee came back with the saddlebags and sword belt.

The innkeeper set them down on the table. "I'd like you to check everything, please." She stepped back a few paces and watched closely.

Pelya drew her secondary sword first and examined it. It was the most valuable item she owned, probably priceless.

"It looks simple, but I don't think it is," Chellsee said. "I've never seen anything like it."

Pelya breathed a sigh of relief, satisfied that it hadn't been tampered with. She didn't bother answering Chellsee's unspoken question.

After inspecting the main sword, she put the belt around her waist and immediately felt better. A cursory examination of the saddlebags showed that the most important things were there, including the large pouch of runeballs.

Pelya took a coin pouch out of one of the bags. She opened it and took out two gold pieces. "I'd like to stay ten days or so and sleep in a comfortable bed. I'm tired. I just want to sleep." She handed the coins to Chellsee, who took them reluctantly. "Please just let me sleep, and if you need more, I'll pay. I have gems too, if gold isn't enough."

"You stay as long as you need. We'll discuss any necessary payment when you leave." Chellsee gestured at the bags. "Are you satisfied that everything is there?"

"I am. Thank you."

"You're welcome. I'll take you to your room now."

Pelya slung the bags over her shoulder and followed the innkeeper out. Chellsee told one of the valets to get the rest of Pelya's gear and then led her up to the fourth floor and a small suite. They entered a sitting room with a couch and large cushioned chairs.

"There's a dining table to the left." Chellsee pointed at the round, lacquered table with four chairs. "To your right is a private bath. Let the floor attendant know when you want one and they'll take care of it. Behind the curtain is the bedroom."

"It's perfect. How much do you normally charge for it?" Pelya knew that it would probably cost more than two gold for the stay if one considered food and service.

"Don't worry about it. Do you need anything else?" Chellsee asked.

"No, thank you."

There was a knock at the door. Chellsee opened it for two valets who brought in the rest of Pelya's bags.

"Set them down there," Pelya pointed at a corner just inside the door. She reached for her coin pouch.

Chellsee held up a hand. "Not this time. Tips are covered in the money you gave me. Get your rest. Let the floor attendant know if you need anything." She shooed the valets out and then followed them.

Pelya put her lock on the door, but didn't have the energy to cast a ward. She went to the bedroom, tossed the saddlebags on the floor and flopped on the bed. An instant later, she was asleep without even taking off her boots.

Chapter 5

A persistent knock sounded.

Pelya groaned and slid off the bed's soft comforter. She passed through the curtain to the sitting room and fumbled with the lock before opening the door.

A man wearing a green jacket and brown pants stood next to a rolling cart filled with covered trays of food. He spoke with a dignified voice. "I am Fritz. Mistress Chellsee sent food for you. She insisted that I observe you sit down and begin eating it."

Pelya stared at him with bleary eyes. "What time is it?"

"It is morning, a full day after you checked into the room." He tentatively moved the cart toward the door.

Pelya noticed the man glance apprehensively at the swords still on Pelya's hips. She stepped to the side and held the door open to let him through. While he set the table, she removed the swords and then sat down on the edge of the couch to take off her boots. For the life of her, she didn't even remember going to bed.

Fritz set the empty cart against the wall and closed the door. He gestured grandly. "Your table."

Pelya wiped her sleepy eyes and sat down. Her plate was filled with a variety of food and Fritz described each item with zeal. Good to his word, Fritz stayed until he was certain that Pelya was eating. "I'll be back at dinner and will clean up then. Enjoy."

Pelya stood to get her coin purse, but Fritz was already out the door. She collapsed onto the seat and went back to eating. When done, she dug a white cotton shirt and pants out of her saddlebags and sat down on the edge of the bed, holding them.

The cottons were standard issue guard clothing for sleep. She held them to her face for comfort and cried into them, wishing she could be back in the barracks.

Pelya curled up and cuddled with them on top of the blankets.

A knock on the door woke her again. Pelya stared at the bedclothes in her arms. After another knock, she set them aside and went to open the door. She realized that she hadn't put the lock back on. A quick glance let her know that her swords were still sitting on the low table in front of the couch where she had left them.

She opened the door wide upon seeing that it was Fritz. A few pieces of his hair were out of place, and his shirt had extra wrinkles as the result of a day's work. He still held his chin high as he rolled in the cart. A young woman followed him and curtsied to Pelya. Between the two of them, they cleaned up the breakfast dishes and set the table with dinner. Fritz held out the chair for Pelya.

"Thank you." Pelya sat down. "Fritz, after dinner, I'd like to get a bath. Can you . . ."

"I will inform the floor attendant."

"Thank you." This time, Pelya had her purse ready. She pulled out two silvers.

Fritz held up a hand. "We're not allowed to accept gratuities from you."

Pelya was a bit insulted by the statement. "Why not?"

"Our gratuities have already been covered. Mistress Chellsee did not say why." Fritz nodded at the coins. "I see that you are generous and I thank you for that. I ask that you respect our position though."

Pelya slowly put the coins back. "Thank you, Fritz. Dinner smells divine."

"You are very welcome. Enjoy." Fritz pushed the cart out, followed by the woman who shut the door behind them.

Pelya ate dinner and then sat at the table, staring at the empty dishes until a knock on the door caused her to jump. She opened the door and stood aside as a line of attendants rushed past with buckets of water.

An elderly woman wearing an apron over a long dress stopped next to Pelya. "Do you wish assistance bathing?"

Pelya folded her arms. "No, thank you. I just want peace and quiet."

The woman curtsied. "As you like." She gestured for Pelya to follow her to the bathroom.

Pelya collected her swords and followed. Inside, the woman held a magical heating stone in the water that the attendants poured into the tub.

"I will heat the water. If you'll tell me when it is a comfortable temperature?"

Pelya dipped her fingers into the water every few seconds until she was satisfied that it was hot enough. Little tendrils of steam rose from the surface. "That's perfect."

"As you like." The woman gestured at a shelf with small ceramic bottles. "Would you like oils in your bath?"

Ebudae always had rose petals for baths while raspberry oil had been the favorite of Pelya's mother. Tears stung Pelya's eyes. "Do you have rose petals and raspberry oil?"

"I have raspberry and rose oils, but no petals."

"That would be wonderful, thank you." Pelya nodded vigorously and wiped an arm across her eyes. She was a mess. At some point, she would need to get control.

The woman added the oils and shooed the others out.

Pelya put an arm out for them to wait. "Are you allowed to accept gratuities?"

"No. That has already been taken care of. Will there be anything else?" the woman asked.

"No, thank you." Pelya waited until they were gone and then she locked the main door. She noticed that someone had come in and cleaned up the dinner dishes as well.

Pelya set her swords on a small table and slid into the tub after stripping. The water soaked into her muscles and the scented oils brought much needed peace to her mind.

She thought about her behavior since arriving at the inn. It was atrocious. On her worst day in Dralin, she had never acted so terribly.

It wasn't just at the inn though. Pelya realized that her optimistic attitude upon leaving her father outside of Dralin had disappeared after a few hours. Her mood had become darker by the day.

Thinking back, Pelya realized she had stopped eating regularly after staying at that village inn. She couldn't remember how long ago that had been. Nightmares had been a constant since leaving Dralin.

It occurred to her that she hadn't had a nightmare since getting the room. For the first time in a long time, she could think clearly.

Pelya shouted at the ceiling, a primal, wordless yell. She yelled a few more times, releasing the emotions that controlled her. When she was done, much of her anguish dissipated. What was left lurked under the surface.

She was good and wrinkly by the time she got out. A little while later, she was in her nightclothes and under the covers for the first time. She fell into a peaceful sleep.

The next morning, Pelya woke before sunrise. After dressing, she braided her hair. It felt good to be clean. Her swords were at her hips and her boots were polished. She headed to the common room, hoping Fritz wouldn't bring her breakfast before she made it downstairs.

The common room was half-full of people. Many were women warriors, but tradespeople getting breakfast before work also sat at tables. She saw merchants and their guards as well. Between all of this flowed serving lasses and lads.

Mistress Chellsee sat at her usual table, occasionally speaking to various servers and staff that came to her with questions. She beckoned.

Pelya decided to join the innkeeper. Perhaps she could learn a little about the Blue Wyverns, in addition to apologizing for her behavior.

Chellsee smiled. "You look much better. I do believe good sleep and food did wonders." She gestured for Pelya to sit next to her. "Sit and talk for a while." Chellsee waved over one of the servers. "Don," she said to the businesslike man that came over, "Please get this young woman a full plate of food."

Pelya sat as Don went quickly to his task.

Chellsee turned to her. "In case you're wondering why I'm sitting around while everyone else does all the work, it's because I found out a long time ago that there is too much of this place for me to do everything." She waved a hand indicating the vastness of the inn. "I have Ninety-three people working for me. All of them are competent and do their job well, but there are always questions for me to answer, or problems that I have to take care of. It's easiest to sit in one spot and let them come to me."

"I've been impressed by how well your staff has cared for me, Chellsee. Thank you."

Chellsee smiled "You're welcome. I'm glad to hear it." She folded her hands on her stomach. "I'm glad to see a change in you too. When you first walked through that door, you appeared ready to take on every person in the world. It reminded me of myself when I was your age."

"Oh? You were my age once?" Pelya asked with an impish grin.

Chellsee burst into laughter. "Well now! You have a sense of humor after all. I like that."

Don returned with Pelya's food and set it in front of her. He made certain she didn't need anything else before going back to his duties.

Pelya put a napkin over her lap and poked at the food with a fork. "I've behaved badly, Chellsee."

She waved off the statement. "Don't you worry about it. You eat and I'll tell you a bit about myself."

Pelya did as she was told. For the first time in a long time, she actually tasted food and enjoyed it.

Chellsee's expression became introspective. "I learned the sword at a young age. My brothers all worked in the Beltaddo City Guard. They humored me when I wanted to practice with them." A wry look twisted her lips. "I never did learn how to sew or gossip like my sisters. My parents became worried when I didn't give the sword up, so they married me off to a merchant's son. I didn't know how to escape my fate and before I knew it, I was wed and bed to the idiot!"

"You don't sound happy about it," Pelya observed.

Chellsee chuckled. She gently shook her head at the memory of long ago. "I thought then that my world had ended. I cried for days. The idiot went with his father on the next business

caravan. They died about two months into the journey.” The innkeeper frowned. “I found out about it a month after it happened. I was the only living member of their family. Everyone else had been with the caravan.” A bemused expression crossed her face. “Suddenly, I was rich and powerful. I inherited this complex of buildings. It used to be their merchant compound, not an inn.” Chellsee shrugged and gave a weak grin.

“You’ve done wonders with it from what I can see.”

“Yes, but I didn’t want it then. I also didn’t want the suitors that were lining up at my door.” The innkeeper grimaced.

Pelya laughed at the face.

“I didn’t want to deal with another man trying to tell me what to do. The steward of my deceased husband’s estate was extremely competent as it turned out. I was only half serious when I told him that I wanted him to run things while I ran off to join the army.” Another bemused expression came to her face. “I was shocked when he said he would.” Chellsee laughed. “I can just imagine the look on my face at the time. It must have been priceless. He told me that I would have to check in once a year to keep the estate. He also told me that he would be disappointed if I left it completely.” Chellsee’s lightly wrinkled face became serious. “He meant it too. I began to realize that I had been selfish and I vowed never to be that way again. After signing papers giving him power to run things in my name, I left for the Blue Wyverns.”

“I thought you had the look of a fighter.” Pelya took a sip of orange juice. “I can see that you’re friendly to the Wyverns too.” She gestured at the customers with her cup.

Chellsee nodded. “I was in for fifteen years with quite a reputation of being a ferocious fighter.” A look of sadness crossed her face. “That’s when Franklin, my steward died. He enjoyed a good life and did right by me. I had kept my promise and came back at least once every year.” She took a deep breath. “I gave him a funeral fit for a lord. He earned it.”

“I’m impressed,” Pelya said. “Not many people would do that. So you came back and turned it into an inn?”

She leaned forward with her elbows on the table. “Not at first. I was walking around the compound one day, going over inventory. There was no one else to carry on with running things, but a few competitors wanted to buy me out. Two were actually threatening to do harm to the Blue Wyverns if I didn’t.”

“That sounds like a bad idea,” Pelya remarked.

“Oh yeah,” Chellsee said emphatically. “But there was one company Franklin had told me was a good and honorable company. I offered that company all of the wagons, most of the horses, and all of my customer contacts. In addition to that, I arranged discounts for supplies to the Blue Wyverns.”

“Nice.”

Chellsee snuck a biscuit off Pelya’s plate and tore it in half to butter it. “I set this place up as an inn. It was perfect for the Blue Wyverns. I gave them discounts when they stayed here. After a while, it became a favored place for taking time off. I have a library and I offer good rates for long stays. The Wyverns have even put a few scholars and arms masters here to do extra training or simple conditioning.”

“I need conditioning,” Pelya said. “It’s been too long since I’ve even stretched.”

“Well, you’re done with your meal, go stretch.”

“I want to let it settle for a bit before I do.” Pelya stretched her legs under the table. “I was born in an inn.”

“Oh?” Chellsee sat forward with interest.

“I was born in the Shining Shield Inn.” Pelya looked to see if she had heard of it.

“It doesn’t sound familiar.”

Pelya nodded. “It caters to knights. The owner used to be one, but took on the inn when he lost an arm. A couple of years before I was born, my father saved Albert from a group of thugs.”

“Your father is a warrior then, or perhaps a wizard?”

“He’s a member of the Dralin City Guard.”

Chellsee sat up straight and gave a low whistle. “From what I’ve heard, they’re some of the best.”

Pelya nodded. “My mother was a penniless farmer’s daughter who came into Dralin alone.”

“That’s a bad idea. Dralin is no place for, well, for anyone really.”

Pelya chuckled. “That’s the truth. She met my father and he took her to the Shining Shield Inn. Albert gave her a job. She and my father fell in love.”

“That’s a nice story. Does she still work there?” Chellsee took a bite of the biscuit.

“She died giving birth to me.”

“I’m sorry,” the innkeeper said through a full mouth.

“It’s all right.” Pelya waved it off. “My father raised me in the barracks. I became known as the Guard Brat.”

Chellsee raised an eyebrow. “You were raised in barracks?”

“Yeah. My father’s sergeant blackmailed his commander.”

“Wow.”

Pelya wished the innkeeper would quit interrupting so she could finish with the story. “The Guard’s weaponmaster took me under his wing and taught me a lot. Most of the other members of the Guard treated me as their mascot and I called them aunts and uncles. They would give me coppers all the time.” She gave Chellsee a pointed look. “Thousands of aunts and uncles giving me coppers every day of my life added up. That’s why I’m well off.”

“Wow. Maybe living in the barracks wouldn’t have been so bad,” Chellsee said with a chuckle.

Pelya shrugged. “I always felt loved.” She took a drink. “I also have a best friend who is a wizard and was born into wealth. My father saved her grandmother.”

“Does your father go around saving people?” Chellsee asked with a smirk.

“Yes. He does it all the time,” Pelya said seriously. “Anyway, I joined the Guard when I was old enough.”

“I suppose that makes sense.” Chellsee listened with interest.

“One day, my unit saw a woman being kidnapped. We rescued her, but I lost most of the unit in the process. The commander my father’s sergeant had blackmailed used the opportunity to expel me from the Guard.”

Chellsee shook her head in disgust. “That’s a shame.”

“It turns out the woman was the daughter of a chancellor.”

“Well in that case, you’d think you’d have been given a commendation.”

Pelya sighed. “The chancellor was the one who arranged the kidnapping.”

“Wha? . . . What sort of mother does that sort of thing?” Chellsee shook her head in disgust.

“A bad one.” Pelya took another drink. “She and a few other chancellors committed a coup against the council. A bunch of us foiled it, but I killed one of the other chancellors in the process and that’s how I came to be banished. I wasn’t executed because I had the support of the

new Commander of the Guard and a number of others who had contributed to saving the High Council.”

“Extraordinary.”

Pelya stood. “I didn’t plan on telling anyone the story. I only told you because I like and respect you. Now I’m going to go exercise.”

Chellsee stood and gave Pelya a hug. “I like you too. Thank you for telling me.”

Pelya returned the hug. It felt good. “You’re welcome.”

When she came in for lunch, every muscle in her body ached. She had used wooden practice swords and refused the arms master’s offer to spar, but her exercises were neglected to the point where even simple drills wore her out.

Chellsee wasn’t at her usual table so Pelya went to the host station. One of the young women there took her straight to Chellsee’s table. “Mistress Chellsee has informed us that you’re always to sit at her table. You don’t even have to ask.”

“Is that normal?”

The girl smiled. “Not at all. Would you like to hear the specials?”

Pelya sat. “Yes please.”

The girl listed them off rapidly and gave way when Don arrived to take Pelya’s order.

After giving it, Pelya stretched her legs and stared at the ceiling, trying to ignore the screams of her sore muscles.

“That’s quite the groan,” Chellsee said as she walked up and sat in her usual chair. “I take it exercise went well.”

“Yeah. My muscles hate me. Do you know where I can get a massage?” Pelya rubbed her upper arm as she stretched it.

“We have a masseuse on site. I’ll see to it that you get an appointment.” Chellsee waved Don over.

“Can I pay for it, or at least give a gratuity?”

“I’ll remove the order not to accept gratuities, and you can pay for the massage.” She gave Don a lunch order and told him to arrange the massage, then turned back to Pelya. “So what are your plans for the rest of the day?”

“I’m going to tend to my equipment and say hello to Honey.”

“Honey is that beautiful warhorse you rode in on, isn’t it?” Chellsee gave an approving nod. “I’ve received three offers for it. I didn’t figure you were interested though. How did you come by such a fine steed?”

Pelya’s heart skipped a beat at the news of offers. “She’s *definitely* not for sale. She was a gift from a dear friend the day I was banished.”

“That’s quite a friend!” Chellsee snapped her fingers and pointed at a server halfway across the room. The young man blushed and bent to pick up something he had dropped off a tray.

“He’s a good server, but he gets lost in his mind and doesn’t pay attention sometimes.”

Pelya noticed that most of the staff in the room had jumped at the snapping of the fingers and looked relieved when it wasn’t them.

“So who’s your friend?” Chellsee took a drink as her food arrived.

“Her name is Appana. She’s the Archpriestess of Reanna.”

Chellsee's drink sprayed over the table. It missed Pelya who stared at the innkeeper in bemusement. Don smacked the innkeeper on the back as Chellsee went into a coughing fit. Finally composing herself, she asked, "When you say Archpriestess, you mean the high, holy priestess of the entire worldwide church? That's usually what that means?"

"Yes." Pelya rubbed her other arm and wondered when she would be able to get that massage.

"How did you become friends with her?"

"The Knight Champion of Reanna was present at my birth. He was a mentor to me. I met Appana through him."

Chellsee studied Pelya as though looking for deception. "You're not a normal person and I don't know how or why you came to my inn, but I'm glad you did." She helped Don wipe up the last of the drink she had sprayed.

"Actually, it was recommended to me at the gate as being a place to learn about the Blue Wyverns. I'm considering joining them." Pelya's hands hurt so she gave up trying to work out the aches elsewhere.

"Not like that you're not." Chellsee gestured at all of Pelya with her fork. "The Wyverns implemented a new rule a few years ago that states candidates have to sacrifice their worldly possessions." She shrugged. "I'm glad it wasn't in place when I joined, but I can see the logic. There's no worry of one person claiming to be better than the others that way."

Pelya felt her heart sink. "My swords and Honey too?"

"Yup. Those too. Still thinking about joining?" Chellsee took a bite and raised her eyebrows questioningly.

"I don't really know much about the group other than they've become the main army in Eddland." Pelya sighed, not knowing what else to do.

"That's not entirely true. They oversee the army, but that's separate and mostly made up of men. The Wyverns are still a mercenary group by definition and primarily consist of women." Chellsee took another bite.

"Primarily?"

"Men who are skilled, such as the wizard Puriko, are welcomed in if they truly respect women. A review board makes those decisions." Chellsee pushed aside the plate of food. "I'm not really hungry. Would you like to hear the story of the Wyverns?"

Pelya leaned forward and folded her arms on the table. "I'd love to."

"Before the Blue Wyverns arrived three hundred years ago, Eddland was rife with bandits, rogues and thieves of every sort." Chellsee took a drink. "The Wyverns were started by eight women trained in the use of swords. They weren't able to find jobs with caravans, city guards, and definitely not in any army. The most they could hope for was adventuring or treasure hunting and even then, they wouldn't be treated as equals."

"That's improved a lot, but it's still like that in most countries from what I understand," Pelya said.

Chellsee nodded. "True. So they formed their own mercenary group and actively enlisted other women to join them. They believed many women would be willing to try bearing arms if it got them away from unwanted marriages or childhoods. They especially targeted younger women who didn't like what the future might hold in store for them."

Unlike Chellsee, Pelya knew how to listen to a story without constantly interrupting. She remained quiet as the innkeeper spoke.

Chellsee took another drink and continued. "The Blue Wyverns became powerful because they were good at their job and they were loyal once hired. They began establishing wayposts along the main highways in order to stop the bandits. A king of Eddland recognized their success, giving them authority and funding to establish a system of wayposts and fortresses with the primary function of keeping the roads free from bandits."

"Impressive."

"Very impressive," Chellsee agreed. "Now their leader, Settatt, had a small stone house in the northern hills of Eddland. She had run from it as a child when her parents were killed by a blue wyvern."

"Thus the name, Blue Wyverns?" Pelya surmised.

"Exactly." Chellsee pointed. "Settatt offered up the house and land it came with. After hearing the circumstances, the other seven felt that the name would honor Settatt's parents. Many young women go through tragedy and hardship to become warriors. By naming the group the Blue Wyverns, they could also honor that concept."

"That makes sense." Pelya had led a good childhood, but she supposed the death of her mother could be considered a hardship.

"Within a year, the group gathered nearly a hundred women. Settatt's house wasn't enough. As it turned out, the women were all willing to jump in and do their share of the work. Many did farm work. A few were able to hunt. Quite a number of them knew how to work with wood and stone to construct more buildings. The original eight were amazed by how well these women had paid attention to not only what their mothers would teach them, but also the crafts of their fathers, brothers, and husbands."

"They were surprised?" Pelya didn't think there was anything unusual about it.

"Dralin is more liberal in how women are treated," Chellsee pointed out. "In most countries, women tend the home, the children and not much more."

"Noble duties, but . . ."

Chellsee finished the sentence. "Not for women like us. So the eight original women named themselves the Council of Eight. It was tough going those first few months. Three or four new women joined each day from various areas all around the continent. Word had spread about the Blue Wyverns. In addition to the women, men would occasionally show up looking for work. Some were farmers with no land to hold, others were apprentice craftsmen that couldn't find a job in overcrowded professions for their city."

"It would be stupid to turn them away. I'm glad they didn't."

"Agreed. One, a wizard by the name of Vernt, told the council that regardless of the obvious liability that came from him being a man," Chellsee chuckled, "he could be of value to their organization. There was always the need of magic in battle. Vernt, didn't suggest that *he* serve in this capacity, but that he could train women to perform magic. He also recommended that a school be set up. Vernt put forth the idea that an educated warrior held an advantage in the world. It was a revolutionary concept that would eventually come to be used in other militaries such as the Dralin City Guard." She gestured at Pelya for confirmation.

"I read and speak a number of languages and have been trained in battle strategies as well as arms," Pelya acknowledged.

"I thought as much." Chellsee leaned back. "The Council of Eight listened. Vernt was assigned the position of Academy Commander, along with a great deal of power to implement his ideas. He proved to be invaluable. He not only created an academy of learning for the Blue Wyverns, but he coaxed other artisans into writing down their knowledge. As time went on,

knowledge was continuously increased and expanded upon. The Academy of Settatt is now one of the most advanced learning centers in the world and has expanded into cities like Aest, one of the capitals of Soarth, and Zimth, the capital of Swelth.”

“I’ve heard of the academy. Some people think it’s brilliant, others think it’s terrible to teach commoners.” Pelya shook her head. “It is the good of the common people that makes the world worth living in, not the power of the wealthy.”

“Well said!” Chellsee thumped a fist on the table. “And in the Wyverns, the common women grew power. Old retired generals were coaxed to Settatt to share their knowledge of strategies. Retired sergeants gave knowledge of personal fighting, training and combat. Vernt offered a program to wounded or crippled veterans to come and share their knowledge in exchange for room and board. They didn’t expect the hundreds that came. The Academy Commander established intense literacy training for everyone he could get his hands on. Then he arranged for paper production, aided by artisans from Soarth. Sheet after sheet of paper was filled with little pieces of knowledge from everyone. The most promising students were set to organizing all of these pieces into comprehensive tomes of information.”

Pelya continued to listen in fascination.

The innkeeper took another drink to wet her mouth after all the talking. “As time went on, the women of the Blue Wyverns became some of the best soldiers in the world. Those who didn’t wish to carry a weapon did supporting tasks. It was usually better than whatever hell of a life they had left.”

“I didn’t realize any of this,” Pelya said. “I suppose we don’t pay attention to the outside world in Dralin.”

“It’s not a popular concept,” Chellsee said with a shake of her head. “Even in this day and age, most countries do not approve of women in combat. Eddland and Altordan are the only two countries I know of where it’s common.”

Pelya nodded. “I can see that.”

Don came to the table. “The masseuse is ready.”

“Tell her Pelya will be there in a moment.”

“Yes, Mistress.”

Chellsee turned back to Pelya. “Five years after the inception of the Blue Wyverns, Settatt died from a disease. She had proven to be wise and even brilliant in her leadership, so to honor her, the Council of Eight named the quickly growing town after her.” The innkeeper leaned her elbows on the table. “Due to the wise management of the Council of Eight and its deputies, the city of Settatt has become rich and peaceful.”

“Now I really want to join them,” Pelya said with a short laugh.

“I’m glad to hear it.” Chellsee pointed toward a door at the back of the common room. “Go get your massage.”

Pelya stood and smiled. “I’ll do that. Thank you for the story.”

Pelya stayed at the Leather Hilt Inn for nine days. She was badly out of shape and needed the exercise. She spent most of her time between training and sleeping. Mistress Chellsee was the only person she spoke to, but not often because another company of troops arrived, occupying the innkeeper’s time.

When she finally did leave, it was with her gear clean and travel ready. Mistress Chellsee had set her up with supplies and rations for the journey. She gave the innkeeper a large hug and thanked her not just for the room and board, but for the friendship as well. Chellsee had changed Pelya's terrible outlook on life and Pelya was grateful.

Chapter 6

Over the next eleven days, Pelya fared much better. She continued on country roads instead of the highway, but spent three of the nights at inns. She made it a point to eat frequently and exercise every morning.

The weather had been mild, interrupted by short rainfalls on a couple of days. It was currently sunny and birds chirped happily. Pelya traveled through hill country ripe with orchards and grape fields. She had even had the opportunity to stop and sample wine at some of the wineries in the area. At the moment, the road meandered through a grassy field.

Warmth from her dragon mark flooded the left side of Pelya's back and chest. She drew her main sword and scanned the surroundings. Nothing stirred to the sides, or on the road behind, but the warmth remained. She peeked under the collar of her shirt and saw the intricate tattoo glowing orange on her skin.

She checked herself for injury. The mark only activated when she was hurt or used too much magic, although the latter was something that happened to Ebudae far more often than Pelya. There was no injury on her body, so she did another scan of her surroundings. Nothing lurked around the hills, grasslands or scattered groves of trees. The sun shone from above with complete disinterest while a breeze gently caressed the grass on the sides of the road.

Then Pelya spied a large shadow on the grass a distance away. She looked up to see a dragon descending in a lazy circle toward her. Every hair on her neck and arms stood straight up and she froze. Most people didn't see *one* dragon in their lives, let alone two.

With incredible self-discipline, Pelya gained control of her muscles and drew her secondary sword. It would cut through anything, possibly even dragon scales. However, she knew enough about dragons to know that even a magically keen sword would probably be useless.

She rapidly dismounted and let Honey's reins fall to the ground. Hopefully, the horse would run away before the dragon could eat her.

The dragon had nearly finished its descent. The previously disinterested sun took notice of the creature, glinting rays off purple scales on the creature's head. Leathery wings were laced with lighter colored veins while the shadowed underbelly was a vibrant lavender color, similar to the combined light of Ryallon's two moons.

As the dragon gracefully flapped its wings to land a short distance away, Pelya looked around for a place to hide. There was nothing in reach, so she took a deep breath and walked forward, praying that death would be quick.

Then she remembered something Hezzena had told her. Dragons were forbidden from killing humans, with the exception of self-defense or thieves. Pelya desperately hoped it was true, because the one coming towards her was larger than the last three inns she had stayed at.

"Please put away those silly blades, human," it said in a male, tenor voice delivered by magic, requiring no movement of its mouth. "They won't help you even if one *is* made of siahthite. I must admit curiosity as to how you came into possession of it." The dragon crouched on its haunches and folded its wings back.

Pelya had to crane her neck to look up at it. She didn't respond to the order to put away the blades because the awesomeness of the creature overwhelmed her.

"I was afraid this was going to be difficult." Iridescent scales rippled as the dragon sighed heavily, gusting Pelya's braided hair about her shoulders. Surprisingly, its breath was rather pleasant, smelling of smoked bacon and cinnamon. "I don't suppose you'll just put away those

swords and behave reasonably? Hmm?” It leaned forward to look at her with a swirling, liquid-silver eye big as Pelya.

The blades probably wouldn’t do much good anyway and the dragon wasn’t showing any hostility to her. Pelya slid them both back into their sheaths. Meanwhile she took hold of her senses and forced them back into her control despite the fact that they wanted to run screaming in every direction. One thought stayed at the forefront of her mind. “What is siahthite?”

The dragon raised a scaly eyebrow in a surprisingly human gesture. “You have a sword made of one and you don’t know what it is? How extraordinary.”

Then the dragon reached forward with its right claw and squished Pelya’s cheeks between a thumb talon and finger talon. “You humans have such fascinating, squishy skin.” It squeezed gently, careful not to hurt Pelya. “Squishy, squishy.” Then it stopped and removed the claw, having the good grace to look embarrassed. “My apologies. I don’t have many opportunities to squish humans.”

Throughout the experience, Pelya stood dumbfounded. “Uh huh,” was the only thing she could think to say.

“Would you mind giving me some of your urine, fingernail trimmings and hair?” The dragon asked hopefully.

Pelya tried desperately to think of a response. It was futile. The absurdity of a dragon landing in front of her on a lonely road and asking her for such things allowed her senses to escape again.

The dragon squeezed her cheeks again. “Squishy, squishy, squishy. It’s just so much fun!” When Pelya didn’t respond, the dragon heaved another sigh. “*Please*, may I have them? I’ll pay you a pretty gem.” It flicked its wrist and an amethyst appeared in the center of a claw. The dragon held it close so Pelya could see.

“I don’t really need money or gems,” Pelya said. “It’s a pretty amethyst though.”

The dragon jerked back, startled by the statement. “Don’t *need*? What in the world does need have to do with it? Money, wealth, and treasure are wonderful things! One must *have* them. *Need* is irrelevant, you silly human, you.”

Pelya held her arms out to the side and shrugged. “I have more money than I need and no home to keep treasure in right now.”

“Well that’s just offensive,” the dragon declared. It squeezed Pelya’s cheeks again with its other claw, a bit more roughly than before. “Squishy, squishy.” Then it made the gem disappear. “Will you please give me the ingredients anyway?”

“What do you need them for?” Pelya was suspicious. It seemed odd that a dragon would ask for them. It was odd that *anyone* would ask for such things.

“They are ingredients for spells and also used in the creation of certain magical items or potions. I could just kill you for them, you know. I’m trying to be polite though.” It studied a sharp talon with interest, turning it back and forth.

“No you can’t.” Pelya took a chance that Hezzena had told the truth about dragons not being allowed to kill humans. She reflected on the fact that she almost never thought about that incident. The mark was still warm and she realized it was only because of the proximity of the dragon. “Dragons aren’t allowed to kill humans unless threatened or if the human is a thief.”

The dragon’s eye was instantly in front of Pelya, swirling rapidly as it gazed into her soul. “Where exactly did you hear that, you little snack?”

She couldn’t help but take a step back. “From . . .” her jaw froze and the mark warmed again. “I can’t tell you . . . I’m physically unable.”

The dragon sniffed at her and then put a talon in Pelya's collar and looked down her shirt. It was extremely awkward to have a giant eye examine her so intimately. The dragon sat back on its haunches again and stared at her incredulously. "Wherever did you get a dragon mark, and an orange one at that?" It said the last with its snout twisted up as though tasting something rotten.

Pelya opened her mouth to answer, but it snapped shut involuntarily as the dragon mark took control.

The purple dragon saw. "Of course. You can't tell me. Sometimes even Oranges have brains I suppose. They're not known for it, you know." It tapped her on the nose with a talon. "Oranges grow muscles, not brains. Wouldn't want to be hit by one, but they're too stupid to handle my vast intelligence." It used the talon to tap its own nose for a moment while thinking. Then it squeezed Pelya's cheeks again. "Squishy, squishy."

Pelya ignored the odd behavior. She decided on a deal. "I'll trade you for information about the metal my sword is made of, sia . . . siathi . . ."

"Siahthite. I shouldn't have even said the word." It squeezed Pelya's cheeks again. "Squishy, squishy. There are a great number of things humans aren't allowed to know about dragons, like siahthite and dragon marks." It crouched low. "Can I keep you and call you my little squishy?"

"No!" Pelya wasn't about to allow a dragon keep her as a pet, *especially* if it was going to name her Squishy. "You may *not* keep me."

"Well you're no fun." It tapped its nose in thought again. "Very well. I will tell you about siahthite in exchange for urine, fingernails and hair."

"All right. It's a deal." Pelya held her hand out to shake. Instead of shaking, the dragon gripped Pelya's index finger in between two talons and began to trim. A porcelain jar appeared underneath and the nail fell into it. The dragon proceeded to trim each of the nails, cutting them extremely short.

"They're not long, but it'll do. Now for the hair." It wrapped a claw around her body to turn her around. Pelya felt a tug as it cut the hair just at the neck with a talon.

The sound of her hair being sliced and the loss of its weight shocked Pelya. "Hey! You said *some* hair, not all of it!" She reached behind her and desperately patted the shorn locks. "Nooooo . . ."

"I left you the stuff on the top. It looks nice." The dragon turned her around again. "Now please put urine in this jar. I'm afraid that's something I can't do for you."

"You cut my braid off!" Pelya was furious. She loved her braid and couldn't bear the thought of losing it. "I need it."

"How odd. You need hair, but not treasure. I've never heard of anything so silly." It held out another porcelain jar. "Please fill this jar with urine now and then I shall tell you about siahthite."

Pelya looked at her beautiful braid sitting in a small basket. It hurt to see it there, but she couldn't think of how to reattach it and void the deal. She snatched the jar out of the dragon's claw and looked around for a bush or tree to hide behind. There was nothing. Pelya looked up at the dragon. "Well?"

It raised an eyebrow. "Well what? I told you I can't do it for you."

"Turn around!" Pelya made a circling motion with her finger.

"Why in the world do you want me to turn around? That sounds like an odd thing to do just so you can fill a jar with urine."

“You’re a boy dragon and boys aren’t allowed to watch girls pee, so turn around.” Pelya made the circling motion more vigorously.

“Humans are so weird.” The dragon did as asked though. When it sat back down, its tail lay in a circle around Pelya and the collected ingredients.

Pelya felt the back of her hair again and mourned the loss. Dropping her trousers to fill the jar with urine was uncomfortable at best. “I’m done. You can turn around again,” Pelya said when finished. She set the jar next to the one with nail clippings. “How do I know you’re not going to use this against me?”

“Because I promise not to.” It turned around and instantly squeezed her cheeks again. “Squishy, squishy, squishy.”

Pelya narrowed her eyes. “That’s getting irritating.”

“I can’t help it.” The dragon put lids on the jars and basket. As it closed each one, the container disappeared. “Now, about the siahthite. It’s rare here on Ryallon. The reason it’s rare is because it’s a metal only found on Siahray.”

“The moon?” Pelya asked in surprise. “There’s metal on the moon?”

“Yes, but humans aren’t allowed to know that, so I’ll thank you not to share the information.” The ingredients were gone, including Pelya’s braid, and he stretched his wings before folding them and sitting back. “Do you know anything about the energies of chaos swirling around Ryallon and the moons?”

Pelya folded her arms and tried to remember the details. “Yes. They’re the source of magic. They also exist in other parts of the universe and if normal people or creatures drink too deeply of them, they can become gods or burn out completely.”

“How extraordinary!” The dragon’s increased volume scared the birds out of a distant copse of trees. “Not many humans know anything outside of their own brief lives. I like you, my little squishy.”

“I’m not your little squishy.” Pelya was beginning to worry that the dragon *would* keep her.

It sighed. “Pity. Oh well. When Siahray and Piohry came to be, long before humans existed, chaotic energies swirled around them and corrupted the mass within. Siahthite and piohrite are two metals that were affected.”

“Piohrite would be metal from the moon Piohry then?” Pelya asked.

“Yes, very good. I’m not supposed to tell you that either, but I like you.” It squeezed her cheeks yet again. “Squishy, squishy. Anyway, both metals have extraordinary properties and can only be made into a blade using special forges that allow magic to combine with heat. I won’t explain the process, but your sword was created that way.”

Pelya pulled it out. “It never dulls and it cuts through anything.”

“Yes. There are probably other qualities, but I won’t speculate.”

“There aren’t any runes to hold the magic, at least not that I can see.” That detail had driven Ebudae to frustration.

“I agreed to tell you of the metal and I’ve done so. My obligation is fulfilled.” It stood on all four legs and stretched its wings out again.

“Wait, how did it get to Ryallon from the moon?” Pelya asked.

“Our agreement did not require me to tell you that, and I would never have made the agreement if it did. Goodbye, my little squishy. I wish you good fortune on your journeys and much treasure even if you don’t need it.” The dragon turned and jogged a few steps before launching itself into the air with a great thrust of the wings.

Pelya sheathed the sword and watched as the magnificent creature rose into the air. She was surprised when it suddenly turned and came back toward her. It landed in front of her and reached out to squeeze her cheeks. "Squishy, squishy. I just had to do it one more time!"

The dragon turned and leaped into the air again. Pelya was buffeted by the gusts created by its powerful wings. She shielded her face with an arm until it was well into the air. Before long, the dragon was a speck in the sky and Pelya's dragon mark cooled.

She headed back to Honey who was calmly grazing on grass just off the road. Pelya patted Honey's mane. "You didn't run from the big bad dragon? I'm impressed, you brave soul." Pelya mounted and headed up the road.

Once again, the gentle breeze and buzzing insects were Pelya's only company. Even the sun had resumed its disinterest.

Chapter 7

The journey to Settatt took another eighteen days through the idyllic hills of Eddland. It seemed like every day was a perfect day as Pelya passed villages and towns along the meandering highway. Even when it rained, it was a perfect sort of rain that perked up the flowers and washed away worries.

Occasionally, she would pass the ivy-covered rubble of a long-forgotten building or tower. She wondered about the people who had lived in them and what their lives might have been like. It was a favorite game she used to play with Ebudae while exploring the ruins below Dralin. They would sit in an ancient dining room and pretend to have dinner served.

Pelya stopped at a couple of the more interesting ruins to look around. There were no secret entrances that she saw or potential exploring to be done. So close to the highway, it wasn't surprising. Exploring wouldn't have been as much fun alone anyway.

She stayed at inns most nights, needing the company of people to combat the overwhelming loneliness waiting in the gloom of her mind. The nightmares still came most nights, but they no longer dominated her every thought. She exercised some mornings. Other mornings, she got on her horse in the early hours and rode, letting her mind wander with the breeze.

Eventually, Pelya rode over a wooded rise to see the city of Settatt in a valley before her. An expansive castle with rounded towers dominated a rocky hill on the west of the city, the main tower being eight stories high. Pennants flew above each of the towers and from numerous battlements. It was precisely the sort of castle bards sang about at Carnival.

Pelya smiled dreamily at the idea of walking through the halls, but only for a moment. She was getting too old for little-girl fantasies.

The castle *was* picturesque though, as was the city. Fluffy white clouds dotted the perfectly blue morning sky. Birds playfully chased each other through the air. A squirrel rushed from one tree to the next off to Pelya's right. Sounds of the city drifted up from the valley below. To the north and east, Settatt spread over and beyond smaller hills.

A one-horse cart heading south passed her. A man and his son rode in the front while three children sat on supplies in the back. They were dressed in colorful clothes with leather jackets and rounded hats. One of the girls waved at Pelya. "Hi."

Pelya smiled and waved back. "Hi."

The farmer nodded to Pelya and moved on, leaving her alone to breathe deeply of the cool air. Trees full of late autumn colors dotted the hills and streets. The first breaths of winter could be felt and Pelya was glad to have a place to stay. At least she *hoped* to have a place. There was the slight problem of having to turn over her possessions. The more she thought about it, the more she realized she wasn't willing to do so.

Honey nickered, bringing Pelya out of her reverie. She leaned down to pat the side of the horse's neck. "Yes, yes. We can go."

Pelya turned onto a side road leading east. The Blue Wyverns Recruit Complex was a short distance off the south highway and Pelya didn't want to chance riding by it on her valuable horse. She had an idea to avoid giving up her things, but wasn't certain she would succeed. It was best not to tempt fate though.

She would be glad to stop riding for a while even if Honey was a joy. She was fairly certain the warhorse was bored half to death from the lack of adventure. In some ways, Pelya was too. Other than the defbat, ruffians and the dragon, their journey had been uneventful.

Pelya chuckled. Perhaps most people wouldn't consider defbats, dragons and ruffians uneventful.

A double column of Blue Wyverns rode toward her on well-tended horses. Their dark uniforms were clean and sharp with the metallic threads on the light-blue wyvern emblems sparkling in the sunlight. Standard-bearers held vertical pennants that flapped in the breeze on tall poles. One was a white wyvern emblazoned onto a dark-blue field. The other had a dark-blue wyvern on a white field.

Pelya did her best to ignore them and hoped they wouldn't stop and take notice. She was relieved when they rode by and the officer only nodded briefly. She nodded back and rode on.

It took a couple of hours to ride around to the eastern side of the city. A road in that direction led to smaller towns and villages and eventually to the haunted Willden Forest, so vast that no one knew where it ended.

She turned back toward the city and soaked in the sun as Honey trotted along. Soon, she saw the low wall indicating she had reached the estate of the Settatt Academy Complex. Pelya found herself smiling as she looked at the buildings and park-like grounds that extended for half a mile along both sides of the road.

Gardens surrounded streams that bubbled under the elegant bridges of tree-lined paths. Trees and manicured bushes provided shelter for wildlife while benches in small courtyards provided places for scholars and academy students to gather.

The limestone buildings were two or three stories tall, braced by ribbed half-columns along the exteriors. Rounded towers on the corners had steep roofs with sharp decorative spires. Some buildings were connected over the streams by archways on the upper levels.

In the center of it all was the Grand Library rising three stories on both sides of the road. Pelya slowed and stared up at a windowed walkway joining the two buildings as she rode under it. Four giant statues of women soldiers lined the front of the buildings on each side of the road, representing the eight founders of the Blue Wyverns. The massive double doors of the building on the right were open to the public while the ones on the left were closed and had armed guards standing in front. Arched stained-glass windows on each level glinted in the sunlight.

Chellsee had told Pelya about the Academy Complex. It was one thing she looked forward to seeing. Regrettably, she didn't want to meet too many people before securing her belongings. In addition, only Blue Wyverns had full access to the Academy.

Beyond the Academy Complex were manors and houses of the upper class. There was no guardhouse at the edge of the city, nor a city wall. The road widened and cobblestone appeared. Honey's hooves clip-clopped in a sound reminiscent of the streets of Dralin.

Pelya was astonished to see children playing unsupervised in the yards. That was unheard of in Dralin where a child would disappear forever if left alone for a few seconds.

Pelya broke into a smile. Settatt was a wonderful city. It was *so* wonderful that she rode through the streets to see if they were all that way. After a while, trying to find a slum became a game. She had never heard of a city without one. There had to be crime and poverty somewhere, but she couldn't find a single homeless person as she rode toward the northern outskirts. Some of the houses were simple, but children still played happily in the yards.

On her way back, she rode through a Temple District. The churches weren't as big as the ones in Dralin, but there was a surprising variety due to the fact that people from all over the world had settled in Settatt.

Pelya discovered a temple to Reanna, the Sun Goddess, so she stopped. It was on a circular courtyard with three other small churches. A fountain around a tall tree in the middle of the

courtyard served as a playground for frisky birds that chirped happily. The road circled around the fountain before going to the north and south.

She dismounted and stretched her aching muscles while looping Honey's reins around a hitching post in front of the church. A few people in the courtyard nodded when passing Pelya, but paid little attention.

The single-story church was quaint with a steeple at the back and an A-frame roof atop limestone walls. Pelya walked up the steps to a wooden door with a golden sun embossed into the wood. There was no attendant, so she slipped in and stepped to the side while looking around.

Wooden pews lined a yellow carpet running down the center of the temple. At the end, behind a podium, were a large wooden sun and a small seating area for a choir. Three people rested in the pews, praying to Reanna. Along the right wall, a young priestess in orange robes sat in a chair. She raised a questioning eyebrow at Pelya.

Pelya smiled and shook her head to indicate she didn't need assistance. She moved to the left side of the pews where candles could be lit. Pelya stared at a grouping on one of the tiered tables and debated. After a minute, she lit three candles, one for each of the brigands she had killed on the road.

She didn't pray for them, not wanting to draw Reanna's attention. Pelya felt that Reanna would just worry about her. Brigands weren't the sort of thing the goddess tolerated anyway, but it made Pelya feel better to light the candles.

She dropped a few gold pieces and a couple of lesser gems into one of the tithing plates on her way out. It was probably as much as the church received in a normal year. The girl on the other side was assisting someone else so didn't notice, just the way Pelya wanted it.

Outside, Pelya stretched again and hugged Honey's neck for a moment before mounting and heading back to the south.

Near sunset, Pelya reached the Business District below the hill where the Blue Wyvern Castle was. The sun's golden glory radiated behind the castle and its flapping pennants, a sight so beautiful it nearly brought Pelya to tears. She shook her head and marveled at the city the Blue Wyverns had built. Never had there been a place so opposite from Dralin.

She rode up to the Cloudswept Bank, a two-story edifice that took up half a city block. There were no windows on the building built of thick granite blocks. One of two massive stone doors on tracks was open to let people in and out. They looked as though they would hold against anything short of a dragon. Considering her luck with dragons, that wasn't reassuring.

Pelya gingerly felt the back of her hair. She had never worn it short before. It was alien, just like everything else her life had become.

She dismounted and was surprised to see a young man run up and offer to take the reins. He wore a grey tunic with a windswept cloud embroidered on the front. Pelya handed the reins over, gave him a copper and thanked him. She unhooked her saddlebags and headed inside while ignoring the watchful eyes of two armed guards to either side of the door.

Pelya walked into the bank and was immediately impressed by its size. Her boots echoed on marbled floors as she looked up at crystal chandeliers and a ceiling painted blue with clouds. It was a theme on everything in the bank. Even the columns were blue marble with white specks that glittered in the light of the chandeliers.

The bank attendants wore grey shirts with clouds just as the young man outside had. Three guards getting up from a table and coming toward Pelya with hands resting easily on their hilts also had the same theme on loose-sleeved chevron tabards that flowed over their chain shirts.

Their leader was a suave man with a handlebar mustache above a cunning grin. Blue eyes danced in tune with fingers that hovered above the hilt of a thin sword. He bowed with a flourish. "Greetings. I am Farl Themdin, responsible for security."

Pelya could tell he was an experienced duelist by the way he carried himself. She kept her hands away from her own swords. "Hello. I'm Pelya Jornin, here on business. I have papers of balance."

"Wonderful." He pointed to a grouping of desks away from the barred windows where a few late customers were doing business. "You'll likely want to speak to Franklin Tubo."

"Thank you," Pelya said. "Do you greet all the guests?"

"Only those who carry themselves with such grace and weaponry as yourself." He grinned and bowed with another flourish before leading the other two back to their table.

Pelya knew that the man was acknowledging her as a threat and that he would keep an eye on her from that point on.

She walked to the grouping of desks where two men worked. One was in the process of gathering his things to leave, but stopped upon seeing Pelya. "May I help you?"

"I was told by the nice gentleman over there to see Franklin Tubo." Pelya pointed at Farl. "However, if that is you and you are headed home, I'll come back tomorrow."

The man smiled and gestured toward the other gentleman who had his head down, writing on papers. "He's Franklin and he never goes home on time. Thank you for the consideration though. It's appreciated."

Pelya smiled. "You're welcome."

Franklin looked up and blinked a few times before he could focus. He was a balding man with a wrinkled brow. His eyes were brown and bloodshot from staring at numbers for too long. "Yes?"

Pelya dug a scroll tube out of her saddlebags and handed it to the man. "I have papers of balance and I'd like to discuss making a long-term deposit."

Franklin cracked his weary knuckles before taking the tube and inspecting its condition.

The other man finished gathering his things. "We like deposits," he said with a smile as he walked past.

Pelya chuckled and sat down in one of the cushioned chairs in front of Franklin's desk.

Franklin noticed the movement and gestured at the chairs. "Oh, rude of me. Please, do sit down."

"Thank you." Pelya didn't waste the breath to tell him that she was already sitting.

Franklin pulled out the papers and scanned them for a moment before rolling them up and putting them back in the tube. "Pardon me for a moment." He stood with the tube and made to walk back to an office area behind him.

"You'll leave my papers on the desk," Pelya said warningly.

He turned around in surprise. "My dear woman . . ."

"You'll leave the papers." They were the only proof of Pelya's money. She trusted the bank in general, but had a hard time trusting strangers. There were too many crooks in the world, despite how picturesque Settatt might be.

Franklin carefully set the tube on the desk. He shook his head at someone behind Pelya and then went to the office.

Pelya looked over her shoulder to see Farl and friends standing nearby.

Farl winked. "Your hand is faster to that hilt than I'd like."

Pelya looked down to see that it did indeed rest on her sword. She blushed as she took the hand away.

He nodded, but remained where he was. "To give you fair warning, I'm a swordmaster second class and my weapon is enchanted."

Swordmasters were rare. It was even rarer to announce oneself in a world where the slightest advantage could mean life or death. Farl would only do so if he considered Pelya a true threat and wanted to avoid violence.

Pelya returned with the proper greeting. "Your warning is noted and respected. I also am a swordmaster second class. Both of my weapons are enchanted, as is my clothing."

Farl raised an eyebrow and bowed even more deeply than before.

"Is there a problem, Farl?" a new voice asked.

Pelya turned to see a new man in a silken burgundy shirt and white leggings. His black hair was slicked back and he had sharp blue eyes. To say he was skinny would be an understatement. His nose was long and pointed and his chin was recessed, revealing an overbite. He looked like a plucked chicken in fancy clothes.

"No problem, Master Kest, just greeting a fellow swordmaster." Farl bowed to him.

"Oh, how impressive." Master Kest turned to Pelya. "Will you please come with me?"

Suspicion crept up on Pelya. She retrieved the tube of papers from the desk. "Why?"

Master Kest blinked. "To discuss your accounts of course."

"She doesn't trust any of us, Master Kest," Farl said. "I'm guessing she's from someplace like Dralin where everyone is out to steal from a person."

"Oh, I see." Master Kest tapped his chin. "I wish to discuss your accounts in private. I promise not to steal from you." He looked at Franklin standing nearby and whispered loudly enough for all to hear. "I'm fairly certain I could overpower her though."

Pelya burst into laughter, as did Farl. The others looked unsure of themselves. The strategy worked though. Pelya stood. "Lead the way, Master Kest. I shall do my best not to draw your ire."

Master Kest smiled and turned with a gesture for her to follow.

Pelya trailed him into the office, which was expensively decorated. A large, polished desk rested in the middle of the room. Wool carpets were soft under the feet and expensive maps lined the walls.

"Please sit, Pelya Jornin." Master Kest gestured to a row of leather-cushioned chairs in front of his desk. He went to his own chair. It was large like the desk and the office. He looked tiny in comparison. "I'd like to see your papers to verify their validity if I may."

"Of course." Pelya reached over the desk with the tube. "I'm sorry about the way I acted back there. Farl was right. I am from Dralin."

Master Kest smiled reassuringly. "That's quite all right. We at the Cloudswept bank are here to serve you."

He spread out the documents and glanced over them for a minute. Then he reached into a drawer to retrieve a circular piece of glass with runes around its black frame. With a word, he activated the device. It caused the documents to glow with a pale-golden light as he moved it above them. He said another keyword to deactivate the device before putting it away.

After studying them, Master Kest set aside the documents. "I see you've deposited a significant amount of money at our branch in Dralin, which you can access from any of our branches including this one. These records indicate you've been a customer for a long time, most of your life I'd say."

“That’s correct.” Pelya felt no desire to elaborate.

“Mister Tubo informed me that you wish to deposit more?”

Pelya took a deep breath. “I want to join the Blue Wyverns.”

“Oh.” The banker’s face fell.

She exhaled and decided to take the risk of telling him. “But I don’t want to give up my worldly possessions.”

Master Kest’s face brightened significantly. “Oh! No, we definitely don’t want you to do that.” He shook his head slowly to the left and right in exaggerated motions.

“But I don’t want to get in trouble with the Wyverns for having things . . .”

The motion of his head sped up. “Oh no. We wouldn’t want you to get into trouble. Not at all.” He clasped his hands together on the desk. “What sort of things do you wish to keep safe?”

“Well,” Pelya took another deep breath, “That’s the problem. I have powerful and expensive items of magic.”

Master Kest nodded in an exaggerated manner. “And we have vaults engineered by wizards to put them in.”

Pelya rather liked the man and she grinned in response. “I also have a valuable warhorse that I’d like taken care of.”

His bushy eyebrows furrowed. “We have arrangements for stables. A horse would require the cost of upkeep. However, you have a great deal of money in your account, more than enough to care for the horse.”

“I have a few bags of gems as well.” Pelya pulled them out of her secret pockets. “You can take the expenses from them.”

The banker emptied the bags onto the desk and used a small, but expensive, jeweler’s loupe to check the quality. There were about eighty gems total. “Oh, emeralds and rubies too, yes, and fine quality. Very fine indeed. A number of lesser gems, always good to have variety.” He set the glass down and looked at them as a whole. “I’ll have to have them appraised by our resident jeweler, but I’m certain these double your substantial wealth. It’s more than enough to care for the horse. It’s probably enough to care for a hundred horses.”

“Good. May I draw my swords to show you their quality?”

Master Kest’s Adam’s apple bobbed as he gulped nervously, but he gestured for Pelya to do so.

Pelya unhooked her main sword and set it down on the desk. She drew the blade and placed it next to the sheath.

The banker stood and examined it with the jeweler’s loupe. “Extensive runes on the blade and hilt. Powerful magic with expensive gemstones. They appear tuned to store energy. Fine craftsmanship, very fine indeed.” He sat down. “I can’t even begin to guess how much a blade like that is worth. I’ll have to have it appraised.”

Pelya resheathed it and left it on the desk. “I don’t care how much it’s worth. I just want it kept safe.” She set her secondary sword on the desk and unsheathed it as well. “More importantly, I want this one safe. It’s priceless.”

The banker used the loupe to examine it. “No runes . . . odd metal . . .” He sat down after a moment. “It appears simple, but I’ve never seen steel so perfect.”

Pelya resheathed it. “It’s not steel. It’s something else entirely and it’s invincible from what I can tell. I’ve cut through magical skin, cloth and metal with no resistance. More than anything else here, I want this one protected.”

“Of course.” The banker sat back and steepled his fingers while looking at the plethora of riches on his desk. “I like you. So many nice things. What else do you have?”

Pelya chuckled light-heartedly. She tugged at her shirt. “My clothes are magically enhanced and stronger than armor. I’ll need them kept safe, though I’ll feel vulnerable wearing mundane cloth.”

The banker picked up the eyepiece and came around the desk. “May I?”

“Of course.” Pelya held out an arm.

“Oh my, that’s not embroidery,” he remarked. “To help appraise the value, will you tell me what wizard sewed such intricate and perfect runes into the material?”

“My best friend, Ebudae Pallon.”

The banker literally jumped backward into the air with one foot flying to the side. He landed on the other and stumbled against the desk. “Please don’t hurt me.”

Pelya held her arms out to the sides in disbelief. “I’m not going to hurt you. Why would you say such a thing?”

“The Pallons are historically the deadliest assassins in the world. Few people know of them, but it’s my job to be informed about such things.” He was pale as a ghost and visibly worked to compose himself as he walked back to his seat.

“Well, Ebudae isn’t an assassin, even if she is especially good at killing other wizards.” Pelya sat back down, leaned an elbow on the arm of the chair and rested her chin in her palm.

The banker gulped audibly, his Adam’s apple bobbing theatrically. “Of course. And did she make the swords as well?”

“No, but she did make these runeballs.” Pelya pulled out the sack that carried them. It was covered in runes and required an activation word to open it. “There are a hundred runeballs in here that have varying effects. I don’t want to be without them, but . . .”

Master Kest’s jaw hung open.

Pelya raised an eyebrow. “What?”

“A hundred runeballs handcrafted by a Pallon would be worth twice as much as everything else you’ve shown me combined.”

“I don’t care how much it’s worth. I just want it secured in case I don’t like being in the Blue Wyverns.”

“You could work for us,” Master Kest suggested instantly. “A woman of your skills and resources is always welcome. Your records show previous employment as being with the Dralin City Guard, an excellent qualification.”

“What would I be doing?”

“Why, protecting our investments throughout the world of course.”

Pelya shook her head. “I don’t want to sit at a table every day like Farl, with all due respect.”

“Master Farl has a family he wishes to spend time with. It is an excellent arrangement, but we also need people who are willing to travel. Someone of your skills would be well compensated.” Master Kest leaned forward eagerly.

“I’ll keep it as a secondary option for if I don’t like the Blue Wyverns.” Pelya liked the idea of having a backup plan.

Master Kest appeared partially pleased with that answer. “I will make a note of it in your papers. The offer will remain open throughout the world unless you commit a crime of magnitude.”

A short laugh burst from Pelya's throat. "You mean like killing a chancellor of the High Council and being banished from Dralin?"

Master Kest drummed his fingers on the desk. "You're serious?"

"Yes." Pelya turned her attention to a globe of the world. It was a pretty thing. She didn't feel like meeting Master Kest's eyes.

"Well, since you were honest about it, I'm certain we can overlook it." He winked. "We'll use it as an excuse to pay you a little less, should you accept the offer."

Pelya laughed heartily along with Master Kest. After a few moments, she wiped her eyes. "I like you, Master Kest." She sat back and breathed. A thought occurred to her. "I can't take my papers into the Blue Wyverns."

"We can deposit those as well. It will require a sample of your blood. Each person has unique characteristics in their blood that we can identify through a difficult process. It will take five or six days to perform that identification, so your belongings will not be accessible to you until then."

"Wow. Even in Dralin I've never heard such a thing." Pelya shook her head in amazement.

"We'd like you to keep it to yourself if you don't mind." Master Kest winked. "It's only for our most valuable customers."

"I can do that." Pelya grinned. "So when can I turn everything over?"

He opened his arms to the items on the desk. "You can do so now, if you like."

Pelya looked at the items. She needed to do it right away or she might lose her nerve. "My horse, Honey, is outside. Your people will take good care of her?"

He nodded. "The best."

"Also, I'd like to write letters to my father and Ebudae Pallon in Dralin letting them know I'm well. Can you see to it that they get them?"

"Most definitely."

Pelya rifled through her saddlebags and pulled out a few other pouches. "I have coins, gold, silver and even a few coppers in these." She tossed them on the desk.

Master Kest laughed softly. "So full of surprises. I like you."

"I like you too." Pelya pulled out her change of clothes. They were well-made, but mundane. She looked around for a place to change. Finding nothing, she shrugged and changed in front of the banker.

"Oh my." Master Kest turned his chair around until she was done and had thrown her clothes on the desk.

When he turned around, she tossed the saddlebags on the desk and took one of the coin purses. "I'm going to take a little bit of money so they have something to confiscate."

"That is a wise decision. I'm certain Master Farl can find you a mundane sword and belt if you like?"

"Yes, that would be wonderful." Pelya gestured at the now-cluttered desk. "You can take the cost of it out of that."

"As you like," Master Kest said. "I have one more proposal for you that I'd like very much for you to accept."

Pelya sat down again. "What is it?"

"I'd like permission to invest your money in business ventures." Master Kest became animated. "By loaning money to merchants, governments or even the occasional farmer, I can help them grow their business. In return, I receive a share of their income. That income would be shared with you if it was profitable."

“I sense a catch in there.”

“If their business is *not* successful, then you lose your money.” He held his arms out and shrugged.

Pelya didn’t know what else to do with her money. “You can use half of the cash, but not the swords, clothes, Honey or the runeballs.”

“Three-fourths of the cash. The remainder will be more than enough to care for the items and the horse.”

“Done.” Pelya nodded.

“I’ll just draw up papers for you to sign while you get a sword.” He hurriedly opened a drawer and began writing. Pelya got the sword from Farl and came back to write the letters to her father and Ebudae using a quill and paper that Master Kest provided.

Two hours later, Pelya walked out of the bank with a borrowed weapon on her hip, a little less blood, a small coin pouch, the clothes on her back and a fresh start to her life.

Chapter 8

The Recruit Complex on the south side of the city consisted of numerous buildings and practice yards. It was night by the time Pelya reached the avenue in front of the east-facing Enlistment Building, which was three stories high and took up an entire block.

Across a side street to the right was a fenced parade ground that took up a square of four city blocks. Across the side street to the left of the Enlistment Building were smaller buildings serving different functions. From what Pelya understood, the complex extended for about ten to twenty streets in each direction.

Behind the complex, leading up and over the hill next to the main castle, was the rest of the Blue Wyvern Base that housed the main army. Other buildings and complexes could be found throughout and around Settatt, such as the Academy Complex to the east and the Arms Complex far to the north where blacksmiths and tanners made equipment.

Across the wide avenue in front of the Enlistment Building was a park resplendent in autumn colors. Lampposts lined walkways where people casually strolled even at the late hour. A family cleaned up a dinnertime picnic on the grass not far away from the avenue lamps. On a park bench near a small pond, young lovers kissed with no regard to who might be watching. Gentlemen in fine clothes walked along one of the paths, discussing the day's business. The park extended to the wooded hills in the south, the business district to the north and the highway to the east. Sounds of voices and distant traffic echoed off the buildings.

The façade of the Enlistment Building was blue marble with white statues of the eight founders along the front. Pennants of Eddland and the Blue Wyverns were interspersed with wyvern finials along the top. A half-circular courtyard cut into the front of the building. Mosaic cobblestone surrounded a magnificent fountain with the statue a mother wyvern in the center and baby wyverns around the edges, each with water spouting from their mouths.

Pelya stopped across the avenue for a moment and gazed at light emanating from open windows along the front. The shutters were open even though the early night air was cool.

She noticed a few other women in the courtyard who looked as though they wanted to join. One wore an expensive cloak, gloves and dress, likely a young woman of wealth. Her ebony hair was braided in the manner Pelya used to wear. She walked toward the building before turning around and staring at the lights of the city reflecting off a scattering of clouds in the starry sky. After a moment, she turned back and walked to the fountain where she gazed into the water, clearly debating whether or not to sacrifice her position in life.

A hunched woman covered in dirt and grime showed signs of being beaten. It was difficult to discern how old she was as the stooped posture could be from a lifetime of abuse rather than age. She looked at the doors to the building as though daring not to enter. She had no cloak or shoes, only a ragged brown shirt and trousers she clutched at with both hands. Two soldiers carefully approached and began talking to her. Their chain shirts and the metallic thread in their insignia gleamed in the light of lanterns hanging on walls around the courtyard.

A third, conservatively dressed woman turned and strode away from the building, her eyes down to the ground. She made her way through the park toward the highway.

Pelya wondered where the woman had come from and where she would end up. "Hopefully not Dralin," she muttered under her breath.

The richly dressed woman approached another soldier, likely believing her to be the highest-ranking person. It seemed as though she was trying to make demands. Pelya saw that she was

talking to a corporal and that the highest ranking officer, a lieutenant, was standing off with a sergeant, trying not to laugh.

Pelya found it odd that the women weren't armed. The lady had a fine long knife and the beaten woman possessed nothing but her ragged clothing. Pelya suddenly felt out of place with her borrowed longsword. She moved to a nearby bench and sat down, staring at a circle of light cast by the lamppost next to it.

Pelya realized her life was at a major turning point. The scene around her faded as she debated her fate.

A couple of hours later, she looked up and saw that the lady and beaten woman were gone, whether inside or away, she didn't know. A pair of soldiers that hadn't been there earlier casually watched to see what action she would take.

Pelya sighed deeply before getting up and walking forward. She took her time and trailed her fingers through the water of the fountain. The lieutenant nodded toward Pelya, but didn't approach. As she walked up the wide steps to the main doors, Pelya got the sense that the Wyvern soldiers in the courtyard wouldn't interfere with a women's decisions unless they truly believed intervention was necessary, such as with the beaten women.

It was warmer inside and Pelya realized she had developed a chill while on the bench. A statue of a wyvern dominated the center of the entry. Smaller ones lined the front wall. If one didn't know that the organization was called the Blue Wyverns, it wouldn't have taken long to deduce.

A ruddy-faced woman sitting behind a table to the right called to Pelya in a thickly accented voice from northern kingdoms. "This way, please."

It was quiet except for a few soldiers speaking in low tones, their voices lightly echoing off the high ceiling above. Pelya headed over to the table. Other tables around the perimeter of the hall were empty at the late hour.

The woman, a recruiting sergeant by her insignia, had a no nonsense attitude. She wore a light blue uniform shirt with a white wyvern embroidered on the front. Though she carried a sword at her hip, she had no armor. She reached her arms back and tightened the ponytail of her coarse hair. "Name?"

"Pelya."

The recruiter sighed. "Full name?"

"Pelya Sheela Jornin."

She jotted the information onto a form. "Age?"

"Nineteen."

More jotting. "Place of birth?"

"I was told I didn't have to inform you about my past."

The woman set down her quill and steeped her fingers. "That is correct. However, recent orders have come down from the Recruit Commander that certain information is vital to the organization. Questions asked during basic training will help us to assess your skills and how you fit in to the Blue Wyverns. Knowing things like your birthplace helps us identify physical characteristics and what physical ailments you might be susceptible to."

Pelya reluctantly answered, "The city of Dralin in the Country of Altordan."

"Thank you." More jotting. "Eye color?"

"Sapphire blue." Pelya peered to see what the recruiter would write.

She jotted down the word, 'blue'. "Hair color?"

"Jet black."

The recruiter jotted down the word, 'black'.

"Do you have any distinguishing marks such as birthmarks, piercings, scars or tattoos?"

"None."

The recruiter looked Pelya up and down. "None? Not even a scar or birthmark?"

"None."

The recruiter stood and walked around the desk to give Pelya a proper examination. "You carry yourself as though you know how to use that sword, yet you have no scars?"

Pelya thought it *was* odd that she had no scars. She remembered the incident with the defbat. Her face *should* be deformed. The thought went away as quickly as it came. "None."

The recruiter lifted Pelya's shirt.

Pelya crossed her arms to prevent it from going too high. "Do you mind?!"

"None?"

"None!"

The recruiter shook her head and went back to the table. She jotted down the word, 'none'. "Do you have any illnesses, diseases, mutations, extra or missing appendages, or anything else physically abnormal?"

"No."

The recruiter gave Pelya a dubious glance, but jotted down the word. "Are you insane?"

"Probably."

The recruiter jotted down, 'probably'.

Pelya giggled.

"Is there anything else you would like to tell us about yourself?"

Pelya thought about the question. There was an endless list of possibilities. She settled for, "No."

The word was jotted down and the paper set aside for the ink to dry. "Come morning, you'll be given interviews and tests that will help us to place you. Those will last for three days. After that, you will begin basic training. Each afternoon, you will have chores. By doing these chores, you will compensate the expense it takes to train you. A person is only valuable to the degree that they help others." She sat back and continued, clearly having given the speech countless times. "You will join twenty other recruits and become a troop. The members of the troop will learn together and look out for each other as you advance."

"That makes sense." Pelya pulled at the collar of her shirt and wished she had her good clothing.

"I'm glad you think so." The recruiter frowned at the interruption. "You will turn over your possessions and enter the Blue Wyverns as an equal to all other recruits." She leaned on the table. "Basic training will last for one full year. You may leave at any time, but if you do, you will not be allowed to return for two full years and then only with a special hearing. Do you understand everything I have told you?"

"I do."

"Welcome to the Blue Wyverns. May you come to know us as your family and find the respect and care all people deserve." The recruiter pointed at a table near the back wall. There was no one behind it. "You will turn over your belongings there. Give them your full name so we can match records, please."

"Thank you." Pelya walked toward the table. Two Wyvern soldiers were talking a short distance away. They noticed her and came over.

One of the women was missing her right eye. A gruesome scar crossed from jaw to temple and into the side of her light-blond hair. It was the sort of reality that would make many women change their minds about joining a mercenary group, especially since the eye socket wasn't covered by a patch. She gestured for Pelya to sit as she took a chair behind the table.

As Pelya did, she noticed the woman rubbing the temple above the cavity. "A friend of mine adds flaxseed oil to her tea when her socket pains her. It helps a little."

The woman stopped rubbing. "Thank you. I'll give it a try." Genuine appreciation was in her voice. "Now," she took a paper from a stack, "I need you to identify yourself and turn over any personal belongings. The reason for this is . . ."

She stopped because Pelya had already taken off the sword belt and laid it on the table along with the coin pouch. "My full name is Pelya Sheela Jornin. I donated my horse and other things to the Church of Reanna." It was a lie with just a touch of truth. However, if anyone had seen her at the bank, they could call her on the lie. She would deal with that problem if it arrived.

"The Sun Goddess." The woman smiled. "More people prefer to give to Subu, the Sun God."

"Yeah." Pelya plucked at her shirt. "Do you need the clothes too?"

"Yes, we'll have you change in a room where you'll be given a recruit's uniform, night clothes and basic supplies such as a towel, soap, a brush and things of that nature." She pointed to a hall behind her. "After that, you'll be taken to a common sleeping room for the night."

Pelya realized she was hungry. She should have eaten before coming, but it hadn't crossed her mind. "Is there any chance of dinner?"

"Dinner finished long ago. You don't look to be starving, so I'm afraid you'll have to wait until morning and eat then." The woman folded her hands on the table.

It occurred to Pelya that she had never truly been a recruit before. Weaponmaster Coodmur had personally taken a hand in her apprenticeship since childhood, guiding her with love and respect. She fully expected that she would be able to skip basic training once they saw her skill.

The woman turned to the other soldier she had been talking to. "Marla, would you please take Pelya Jornin to the changing room and see to it that she has proper equipment?"

"Of course." Marla gestured for Pelya to follow. "This way, Pelya."

Pelya followed her down the hall and then along a cramped corridor. Cabinets lined one wall and narrow doors the other. Marla sized Pelya up, opened a cabinet, took out clothing, including boots, and handed them to Pelya. Then she opened one of the doors on the other side and gestured for Pelya to enter.

The changing room was small with one bench to sit on and a knob to hang clothes on. "You'll want to put on the night clothes," Marla told her as she shut the door. "Leave your personal clothes on the bench or the hook."

Pelya quickly changed. She gathered the bag of supplies that was already in the room, the towel, boots and the light-blue uniform before stepping back into the small corridor.

"Very good. You'll be bunked on the south side of the third floor. This way please." Marla led her down another corridor where they took a set of wide stairs up to the third floor hallway.

Pelya made certain to keep track of directions as her bare feet treaded the smooth and cool wooden floor.

Before long, they reached a large room off to one side that had cabinets lining the walls. Three doorways were in the center of each wall, leading to what appeared to be sleeping rooms. Tables around the room held extra uniforms, nightclothes, towels, cloaks, boots and items for personal care.

Marla led Pelya to loud woman who was directing two recruits to clean the floors properly. "Sergeant Yalla, I have a new recruit."

Sergeant Yalla turned and put rough hands on her ample hips. Her mouth was twisted in a scowl of permanent disgust and her dull hair looked as though it had been shorn short for offending her with its presence. "Well, she'll not get any dinner for being so late. We don't have to coddle these silly girls like in the old days."

Pelya had been trying to remember how normal recruits in the Dralin City Guard behaved. She seemed to remember something about the word humble, a thing the weaponmaster had never taught her. Commander Coodmur always made it clear that Pelya was exceptionally talented and should never pretend to be otherwise. It wasn't the best advice for this particular situation.

"Nothing to say then, girl?" Sergeant Yalla wagged a finger in Pelya's face. "You look to be proud. We'll work that out of you in the first few days, you'll see."

Pelya kept her mouth shut and ignored the biting comments that crossed her mind. It was the closest she could come to humility at that moment.

"Not a talker, are you? Too good to speak to the likes of me, are you?" Sergeant Yalla spit on the floor at Pelya's feet. "Git your arse in the west sleeping room then. Go to bed and be quiet about it." She jerked a thumb at a door to the right side of the room and turned her attention back to the harried recruits.

That had gone about as differently as Pelya could have imagined. She looked at Marla with an expression of disbelief.

Marla gave Pelya a disapproving look and shook her head as she walked away.

Pelya stared after her, but only for a second. In her experience, when things started to go bad, they had a snowball effect. The best way to deal with it was not to react.

In the west sleeping room, there were ten beds with simple straw mattresses and blue woolen blankets on each side of a center aisle for a total of twenty. Four of them had women sleeping. The floors and walls were bare, offering no comfort. Candles at each end of the room provided the only light.

If she picked a bed too close to the door, Pelya would be the first person the sergeant targeted in the morning. If she chose a bed at the far end of the room, the action would declare her to be antisocial, so Pelya went to one of the beds in the middle, set her new things on the footlocker and slipped under the covers.

She was wide awake. Her body was tired after riding around the city, but her mind was racing with thoughts.

Pelya had expected more from joining the Wyverns. They should have noticed her the way she carried herself. They should have noticed her strength and the way she held her head high. It wasn't *that* difficult. After all, she could determine the skill level of each person she had come across. She was trained to assess the potential danger of every person she saw. It was vital in Dralin.

The woman in the bunk next to her was quietly crying. Pelya turned to look and saw that it was the wealthy lady. Her coffee-colored eyes glistened sadly above the seam of the covers.

Pelya looked to the door. There was no sign Sergeant Cranky would come back, so she slipped over to the other bed, sat on the edge and ran fingers through the lady's hair.

The woman buried her face in Pelya's lap and broke down into muffled sobs.

Pelya continued to comfort her until the tears stopped. Then she slowly extricated herself and went back to her own bed.

The lady wiped her eyes and smiled in thanks.

They both fell asleep shortly after.

Chapter 9

Pelya sat up straight at the sound of a metal spoon banging on an old shield. “Get up, Recruits. Time to begin your new lives.” Sergeant Yalla came in and shook one woman who was trying to rub her eyes. The dowdy woman had made the mistake of sleeping next to the door.

The other women in the sleeping room groaned and either covered their heads or grudgingly got out of bed. The one exception was the beaten woman from the night before. She gingerly slid out of bed and stood next to it, shaking like a leaf with her arms across her stomach. In the morning light that streamed through two window slits on the far wall, Pelya could see that the woman had bruises covering her face and arms.

The lady Pelya had comforted sat on the edge of the bed and rolled her eyes at Sergeant Yalla’s clamor.

Pelya’s first instinct was to stand next to her footlocker at attention. At seeing the reaction of the others, she decided to rub her eyes and groan at having to get up. She didn’t want to draw extra attention to herself.

It didn’t help. Sergeant Yalla came to her bed and singled her out. “Feel like speaking today, or are you still too good for us?” She banged the spoon on the end of Pelya’s bed. “Get up!” Then Yalla moved to the lady’s bed. “You get up too, Miss rich lady. Not so important now are you?”

The lady paled and ducked her head in humiliation. Her long hair, now unbraided, fell around her face.

Pelya stood. “Is breakfast ready? I’m *so* hungry.”

The distraction worked. Sergeant Yalla turned to Pelya. “Oh, you’re hungry are you?” She gestured with the spoon at the beaten woman. “What about her? You don’t think maybe she’s a little hungrier than you?” The sergeant sneered. “You look as though you’ve never been without a meal. Have you ever gone so much as a day without food?”

“Once.” Pelya placed a dramatic arm across her forehead. “I’m not certain I survived.”

The other women tried to suppress laughter.

Sergeant Yalla put her hands on her hips. A warning growl entered her voice. “You think you’re funny, don’t you?”

Pelya knew better than to respond, but she couldn’t help herself. “I bet you liked me better last night when I wasn’t speaking.” She winked.

Sergeant Yalla tried to hit Pelya across the face with the spoon.

Pelya captured the woman’s wrist mid-swing, the spoon an inch away from her cheek.

Silence fell heavily upon the room.

Pelya’s voice was low and harsh. “You don’t get to hit the women who come in here, Sergeant. Even if you no longer have to coddle them, as you said last night.”

Yalla pulled away and Pelya released the woman’s wrist. The sergeant glared before scurrying away. At the door, she turned and said, “Get your uniforms on and come into the office. Someone will take you to the mess hall for breakfast.” She left the room in a huff.

Everyone stared at Pelya. The concept of not being noticed obviously wasn’t going to succeed. It would be better if she could just get rid of her damnable desire to protect others. She silently blamed the urge on her father.

They were still staring at her. Pelya sighed. “So here’s the thing. There are going to be a lot more incidences like that. People are going to be mean to you. Sometimes it will be

personal, sometimes it won't. The key is to keep pushing forward anyway, but not like I just did. Be the best person you can be. Survive the bad and cherish the good." Pelya picked up the uniform on her footlocker. She noticed that a cloak had been added during the night. "Let's get dressed right away and report with a spring in our step."

They immediately followed her advice.

The lady Pelya had comforted spoke in a soft voice, pleasing to the ears, "My name's Ravenne. Thank you for everything." She was elegant in her movement and her glossy hair floated around rosy cheeks as if to caress them. The tentative smile she gave showed hopes of growing if given encouragement.

Pelya gave her a quick smile as she put on the cotton tunic. The thick, light-blue material was embroidered with a white wyvern. Sturdy dark-blue pants and polished black boots completed the uniform. "You're welcome. I won't be able to do that often though, so chin up."

The brown in Ravenne's eyes became deeper as they glistened with restrained tears. "I will." She held her chin high and changed shirts. Her elegant fingers deftly latched the buttons and then slid along the embroidery of the wyvern as she examined its texture before picking up the cloak and putting that on too.

Pelya got the sense that there was much more to Ravenne's grief than the loss of her wealth, but it wasn't the time or place to ask.

They all finished changing into the uniforms except for the beaten woman. She picked at the folded uniform, but kept a protective arm across her stomach. Judging from her hunched posture and the strained look on her face, she was in too much pain to dress herself.

A young woman hopped over the bed next to the beaten woman. Her russet hair bobbed with energy. She put a comforting hand on the other woman's back, leaned in and looked up with kind grey eyes. In a peppy voice she asked, "Hey, sweetie. Do you need help?"

The beaten woman burst into tears. She clutched her stomach and sat on the bed. The grey-eyed girl looked to Pelya for support.

Pelya and Ravenne rushed over, followed by the dowdy woman who had slept near the door. The last, a plain woman in her late twenties, wore a worried expression as she joined the group.

Pelya knelt in front of the beaten woman. She had seen countless cases like it in Dralin. "Hi. My name's Pelya. I know that you've been terribly hurt and frightened, but right now you're safe, so you need to lift your chin and let us help you."

The woman gasped between sobs, but she bravely lifted her chin exposing a black welt along the side. Near it was a sickly brown bruise, letting Pelya know that it had been caused a number of days earlier. The woman's right eye was swollen shut.

"Good. Now, I'm going to help you take off your shirt." Pelya gently moved the woman's arms out. She lifted the shirt and immediately saw the blackened stomach, confirming her suspicions. The grey-eyed woman clasped her hands to her mouth in a gasp.

Pelya released the shirt and gently caressed the woman's cheek. "We're not going to worry about changing clothes." She turned to the plain woman. "She needs to be taken to Healer Hall immediately. Would you please go get someone?"

"Yeah. My name's Beth, by the way." She brushed a strand of reedy hair behind her ear. Her thin lips were unfamiliar with the concept of a smile. There was a hint of brashness behind her wide hazel eyes, though it wasn't aimed at Pelya or the others.

"Hi Beth, and thank you," Pelya said.

Beth dashed off.

The dowdy woman, perhaps a couple of years older than Pelya, gave a timid wave. She was heavysset with a plain face and rotting teeth. Her eyes darted about the room, afraid to stay on any one thing for too long. Her voice was surprisingly airy in contrast to her appearance and manner. "I'm Uma. Came in a few hours ago."

The young woman spoke next. "I'm Tina." She was carefully running fingers through knots in the beaten woman's hair. Tina struck Pelya as the sort of person who would nurse a bird to health if it had a broken wing.

"I'm Ravenne, and you're Pelya," Ravenne said, finishing the introductions.

They all turned to the beaten woman.

Pelya ran fingers along the side of her hair. "She's not going to tell us her name for a while. She just needs to concentrate on breathing."

The word came out in a cracked whisper. "D . . . Deliah." She began to cry again.

Pelya lifted her chin. "No, no. You're done crying. It will just hurt more. Take each breath one at a time and don't worry about anything else."

Trust and hope flooded her pale-green eyes along with the tears. She gave a single, slow nod of agreement.

"What's going on here?" A lieutenant followed by Sergeant Yalla and Beth came storming in. She was lanky and cranky. "Why aren't you all reporting for breakfast?"

Pelya stood, but kept a hand on the Deliah's face. "This woman needs to go to Healing Hall. She's been severely beaten. Judging from the bruises on her stomach, there could be internal injuries. I truly believe her life depends on it, Lieutenant."

The lieutenant crossed her arms. Her blonde hair was pulled back in a ponytail that tightened the skin around the edges of her face. "Healing Hall is only for those who have graduated from the recruit process. Your request is denied. If she cannot join, then she must leave."

Pelya immediately wanted to strangle the lieutenant, but spoke respectfully instead. "She's been injured internally. She can't join. She may not live through the next few nights without medical attention. *Please*."

"Your request is denied, Recruit." The lieutenant didn't look happy about it and refused to meet Deliah's hopeless gaze. "She may report for duty or leave."

"That's not fair," Uma said. "I agree that this woman needs medical attention."

"Life isn't fair," the lieutenant retorted. "Recruits are not allowed access to Healing Hall."

"How can that be?" Pelya asked incredulously. Physical checkups and healing were vital for recruits in the Dralin Guard. She expected the same thing here.

"It's been that way for the last three years." The lieutenant rubbed her brow. "I can *see* that she needs assistance, but regulations must be followed."

"May she get medical attention elsewhere and rejoin at a later date?" Pelya asked.

"That's allowed," the lieutenant agreed. "We're not heartless."

"She can't make it anywhere on her own and I doubt she has the money to pay for it," Ravenne said. "I'd offer, but I don't have my money anymore . . ." She raised an eyebrow at the lieutenant.

The lieutenant was unimpressed by the hint.

"May I escort her to the Temple of Reanna?" Pelya asked. "I believe they will give her healing and I can protect her in case the person who beat her comes around. After that, I will bring her back if she is able." Pelya was going to do it whether the lieutenant agreed or not, but she hoped not to be thrown out on her first day.

"I'll inform the recruiting sergeants that you are both to be allowed to leave and return." The lieutenant nodded to Pelya. "I respect your honor in the matter, Recruit." She scanned the others. "The rest of you get to breakfast now."

Ravenne gave Pelya a quick hug. The others said goodbye and good luck. Tina was the last out. She waved as she went through the door.

Pelya grabbed the socks and boots off Deliah's locker. The woman's feet and shins were also bruised. Pelya clucked at the sight of them as she carefully put the footwear on. Someone had done a number on the woman.

When the boots were on, Pelya sat down next to her. "I'm going to help you to your feet. We're going to go into the city to the Temple of Reanna to get you healing. If the person who did this finds us, I'm going to kill him with my bare hands while you have a seat. All you need to focus on is putting one foot in front of the other and breathing. Is that understood, Deliah?"

Deliah nodded slowly. Vulnerability mixed with the trust in her eyes.

Pelya put an arm around Deliah's back and lifted her to her feet. A whimper was the only complaint the woman gave. Slowly, they made their way back through the corridor, through the recruiting hall and out into the courtyard. People stared at them, but no one interfered.

An elderly carriage driver with a fancy hat that matched his horse's was parked on the other side of the avenue next to the park. He fed his horse while watching Pelya and Deliah slowly move across the avenue and behind his carriage to the sidewalk. When they came abreast of the horse, he said, "She appears to be injured."

Pelya stopped with a glimmer of hope that he would give them a ride. "She was beaten badly before joining the Wyverns last night. I need to take her to the temple of Reanna."

"Reanna, huh?" The driver briefly took off his hat to scratch his head. "Yeah, they might heal her." He looked them over. "You just joined the Wyverns, so neither of you has money?"

"That's correct," Pelya admitted.

"You'll put in a good word for me with Reanna if I give you a ride?"

"Most definitely." Pelya decided not to let him know how much that word might mean.

"Hop in." He pointed at the seat. After a second glance, he said, "Or struggle in as the case may be."

Pelya laughed. "Thank you so much."

He watched as Deliah tried to lift a leg to the step and cried out in pain.

Pelya reached an arm under Deliah's knees and lifted her. It wasn't too difficult to get her into the seat.

"Strong lass, you are," the driver said. "Stronger than me."

Pelya climbed over Deliah and sat down as the driver got into his seat and released the brake. The carriage jerked forward, eliciting another cry of pain from Deliah. Pelya wrapped her arm around the woman and held her against her chest. "Just concentrate on one breath at a time."

Deliah closed her eyes and focused on her breathing the rest of the way.

They arrived at the temple in good time. The driver circled the tree and fountain to stop in front of Reanna's church. He watched as Pelya lifted Deliah out of the carriage. "The name's Vern Tetin."

"Pelya Jornin." She smiled at him. "I'll put in a good word for you. Thank you for the ride and your kindness."

"You're welcome, Pelya. Best of luck." He drove off.

Pelya didn't bother setting Deliah down as she moved up the steps and manipulated the door open. Once inside the temple, she walked between the pews where a few people were saying morning prayers. A priestess approached from the right and met Pelya at the pulpit where the High Priest had his face buried in a book.

"We have healing beds in a room off the main temple," the priestess whispered, directing Pelya to the left. She was a dark-haired woman who looked to be in her late thirties. Her fingers were thin and Pelya knew the woman was probably the healer. Priests tended to lose much of their physical strength from channeling godly power.

The High Priest looked up and noticed Pelya for the first time. He was dressed in orange robes with a yellow sun emblazoned on the front. He followed them into a hall.

When the hall intersected another, the priestess said, "to the right, second door on the left."

Pelya followed the instructions and set Deliah on the middle of three beds. She knelt at the side. Deliah had fallen unconscious, but was still breathing, to Pelya's relief.

The priestess moved to the other side of the bed, followed by the Head Priest. She dipped a cloth into water. "What happened to her?"

"Someone, I don't know who, beat her within an inch of her life. Judging by the bruises, she won't live more than a day or two." Pelya lifted Deliah's shirt to show the blackened stomach.

"Oh my. I don't know if I can heal so much damage." The priestess looked to the Head Priest.

He clasped his hands and smiled beneficently. "Do what Reanna allows you. If you cannot heal her, bring her peace."

Pelya interrupted, "Tell Reanna that Pelya Jornin would like her help."

They frowned at her.

"Go on." Pelya gestured for the priestess to begin the healing. "Tell Reanna that Pelya Jornin would like her help. Don't worry about why it matters, just heal Deliah." Pelya secretly took Deliah's hand, which had fallen over the edge of the bed. It was a terrible idea to touch someone who was going to be healed, but Pelya wanted Reanna to know she was there.

The priestess looked at the Head Priest for confirmation.

The man held his arms to the side. "I don't suppose it could hurt."

"Very well." The priestess began gathering divine energy. She closed her eyes and said prayers, including Pelya's name a few times. It took a few minutes before she laid her hands on Deliah.

Pelya instantly felt Reanna's presence through Deliah's hand.

Golden light bathed the room.

Pelya saw a glimmer of Archpriestess Appana through the light. Appana stood and brought her hands to her mouth in surprise at seeing Pelya.

The light disappeared along with Pelya's consciousness.

Light streamed through tall windows as Ravenne and the others filtered into the mess hall at the rear north corner of the Enlistment Building. The wooden ceiling was two levels high with large wooden chandeliers hanging from chains. Their candles were snuffed until needed for late dinners. Thick center columns between the rows of tables braced the ceiling.

Twenty other recruits were scattered around the six rows of tables along with a number of soldiers and administrators who ran the Recruit Program. Mess hall supervisors and servers moved around the room, tending to the needs of the diners. Conversations rose to the ceiling and became lost in the rafters.

Along two of the walls were waist-high openings where diners could line up to fill their trays with plates of food. Heat from multiple ovens and cooking fires radiated into the room bringing the aroma of baked goods and breakfast fare. Behind the openings was a veritable army of cooks and preparers making certain there was enough for everyone, their activity adding to the noise of the hall.

After going through the line to get food, Ravenne set her breakfast tray down on a table and was instantly joined by Tina, Uma and Beth.

Tina knelt on the long bench instead of sitting. She had a bubbly personality combined with curiosity about everything. "What do you think happened to Deliah?"

"She was obviously beaten," Uma said. "It's normal for a man to beat his wife when she's being stupid, but not like that."

Ravenne choked on her food. Tina helpfully smacked her back a few times.

"Where are you from that you would think men should be allowed to beat a woman?" Beth asked.

Uma held her chin up in pride. "I'm from Paruth. It's important for a woman to take care of her man, if she's fortunate enough to get one, like a leaf gets a happy breeze."

"Paruth?" Beth said in horror. "You poor woman."

Ravenne made a face.

Uma scratched her head in puzzlement. "Why does everyone say that? All along my journey I've heard it."

"Because Paruth is the worst country in the world," Tina said. "There are always wars and the people are in poverty because anything they make is used for taxes. How can you stand it?"

Beth put a reassuring hand on Uma's arm. "Be gentle, Tina. Uma comes from there and I'm sure she's a fine person."

"Why did you leave?" Ravenne asked Uma. What she *wanted* to ask was why Uma didn't leave sooner, and running at that.

"Well, There's not a lot of men who aren't fighting wars all the time and even the ones that *are* left would never marry someone like me." Uma pointed at her face. "I'm the fourth daughter of a miner and ugly like a mud bubble is ugly when worms die."

Ravenne frowned in confusion at the comparison.

"Now don't you speak like that," Beth said. "You're not ugly and any man would be lucky to have you."

"Especially if he likes to beat his women," Tina added with an impish grin.

Ravenne elbowed her in the ribs, ignoring the look of false innocence that followed.

Uma laughed. "Yeah." She became serious. "But not like Deliah. No one should be treated like that."

"Do you think Pelya can really get her healing?" Beth asked. "I've never heard of that church she was talking about."

"Churches don't help common folk most the time," Uma pointed out.

"What *is* the Church of Reanna?" Tina asked.

Ravenne thought back to her schooling on the gods. It had bored her to death and she didn't remember much. "I believe Reanna is the Sun Goddess, but nobody really likes her. Most worship Subu, the Sun God."

"Now why would there be two gods for the sun?" Uma asked. "That's just foolishness like a cow is foolish for kissing a fence."

Beth frowned. "Do you think Pelya worships Reanna? She seems like an odd one."

Tina leaned forward. "Did you see her muscles and the way she caught the sergeant's wrist."

"That woman doesn't know her place." Uma pointed her fork. "You mark my words; she's going to be trouble. If we listen to her, the mice are going to nibble our toes in the fields."

Tina tilted her head. "What exactly does that mean?"

"Well you don't want mice nibbling on your toes in the fields," Uma said as though it were clear as day. "That's a bad thing."

Ravenne blinked and shook off the image. "Well, I like her. When Sergeant Yalla went after me this morning, Pelya took the attention upon herself. When Deliah was hurt, Pelya risked her own future to help her."

"The lieutenant said Pelya was honorable," Tina said.

Uma grunted. "Honor feeds the pride, not the chickens."

Ravenne picked at her food. "Well, I like her anyway."

Beth reached over and squeezed her hand. "We all do."

A sergeant called out above the noise. "Recruits! Take your trays to the bins and then line up!" The sergeant stood at the door where the recruits lined up in two columns. Three other soldiers around the dining room helped to herd them.

Once everyone was there, the sergeant continued her speech. "To the recruits that just arrived," she gestured at Ravenne's group, "you will be taken to the enlistment waiting room. Once there, you will be tested on what skills you have. This process will take the next few days." She counted them. "I only see four of you, though I'm told there are two others. You will be joined by newcomers until you reach a troop of twenty."

Ravenne looked back at the others. They looked to be just as excited as her.

The sergeant made her way back to the front of the line. "Once your testing is done, you will begin training and chores, at which time you will be taken to your recruit quarters on the third floor. If you make it through the first month, you will move to the recruit barracks, a series of buildings on the other side of the training yards."

Ravenne tried to sort that into her memory.

The sergeant looked them over. "You'll likely forget all of this by tomorrow, so I'll make the exact same speech again. Now let's go." She turned and led them away.

The recruits headed out, excited and nervous to begin their new experience.

A man's voice called through the fog in Pelya's head. "Wake up. Can you hear me?"

Pelya groaned and opened her eyes. Shapes swirled in sepia clouds.

"Good. You're awake, you foolish girl." One of the shapes rose in the air.

Pelya blinked and rubbed her eyes. Her head felt enormous and her neck weak. She rolled over and pushed to her feet. It didn't go well though and she fell right back down, not knowing which way was up.

Arms wrapped around her. “Come on. Get up.” The voice was that of the High Priest. “What do you think you were doing, touching a patient while they were being healed?”

Everything was spinning. Pelya leaned on him while things began to come into focus and color seeped in. The smell of gold lingered in her nose, though she hadn’t the slightest idea why.

“Pelya?” The voice was Deliah’s from nearby, though much stronger than it had been before. “Are you all right, Pelya?”

Pelya looked in that direction and saw Deliah sitting up in bed. The room came more into focus. Pelya steadied herself by holding onto the High Priest’s shoulder. “Yeah. I’m fine.” It was a blatant lie. She felt sick to her stomach and weak.

“Well your friend is doing much better in spite of your interference,” the High Priest said. “Reanna, in all her glory, chose to bless her. Priestess Mililia could be unconscious for days though.” He gestured at a bed where the priestess lay.

Pelya would have worried, but the priestess’s breathing was even and peaceful. “How long have I been out?”

“Just a few minutes.” The High Priest was unhappy. “You touched a patient that was being healed. It resulted in a backlash of power that flashed throughout the room. I’m astonished that you and your friend didn’t die from it.”

“Oops. Sorry.” She wasn’t really. Seeing Appana even for that brief moment was worth it. Pelya hoped Appana would tell her father and Ebudae that Pelya was all right.

The High Priest was unimpressed with the apology. “I’d like the both of you to leave. I won’t ask for the customary donation as I can see the two of you don’t have it.”

Pelya hadn’t let anyone see her donation the day before, so he couldn’t know. That was fine with her. She tightened her grip on his shoulder. “Reanna pays you with her divine light. She provides for you in ways you don’t always understand. Perhaps you should just be grateful for the opportunity to do good in a cruel world rather than having to experience the daily suffering people like my friend go through.” She gestured at Deliah, who was gingerly getting out of bed.

The High Priest stared at Pelya. He didn’t have a response to her statement.

Deliah limped over to Pelya who put an arm around her shoulders.

“We’ll leave,” Pelya said.

The two women leaned on each other and staggered out of the room. On their way through the main cathedral, Pelya lit a candle and whispered a brief prayer for the sun to light Vern Tetin’s path. It briefly flared before settling into a normal flame.

A few minutes later, she and Deliah were making their way down the road. “I’m wearing night clothes in the middle of the city,” Deliah said.

“Yeah. Good choice. It becomes you.”

Deliah giggled and then covered her mouth as though she had just committed a sin.

“How are you doing?” Pelya asked.

She lifted her shirt. The bruises were a sickly brown, but at an advanced stage of healing. “I don’t feel good, but I think I’m doing better than you.” She looked up at Pelya. “You don’t have any bruises, but you look as if someone beat you.”

“Yeah. I don’t feel so good either,” Pelya admitted. “Such is life.”

They walked on through the streets and made it to the recruiting complex after lunch, but were still allowed to eat. Pelya was thankful that no one complained about her and Deliah each consuming enough for ten people.

Chapter 10

Pelya didn't feel so good. The food had helped her to recover some of her energy, but being zapped with the healing from Deliah and given the vision of Appana by Reanna had done more damage than food could repair. Her muscles were weak and twitchy, she felt sick and she couldn't see straight.

She briefly wondered why the dragon mark didn't heal her, but the thought went away before she could latch onto it.

"Are you all right, Pelya?" Deliah asked. They were sitting in a large waiting room where recruits were being called for tests. "I know I'm exhausted and still hungry from the healing, but you look worse than I do right now."

"I don't feel good at all," Pelya admitted. Even to her, her voice sounded slurred. "I wonder where the others are?"

"They're probably in for tests already. I hope we get to stay with them." Deliah clasped her hands in her lap. "You've all been so wonderful to me. Thank you again."

"Quit thanking me." It was surely the hundredth time the woman had done so. "I just hope we get to go to bed soon."

"Me too, but it's only mid-afternoon." She yawned.

"Deliah Transom?" A woman wearing a blue administrator's vest over a white shirt and blue skirt called out.

"That's me." Deliah stood and followed the woman after giving Pelya a small wave.

Pelya looked around the waiting room. Four wide halls stretched out in each direction. The room was in the center of the Enlistment Building. Multiple long-burning lanterns hung from hooks on the walls to provide ample light. The middle of the room was filled with chairs placed back-to-back in four rows. They were a quarter-full of recruits waiting for tests.

Rooms with open windows into the waiting room bordered each hallway entrance. Administrators stood behind the openings or sat at desks processing paperwork. Most of the people who ran the tests were dressed in blue robes, though Pelya caught sight of a blacksmith wearing garb befitting his trade. She was surprised that such a thing would be tested for, but the Blue Wyverns were known for being more than a mercenary group. They were an organization that sheltered women from a cruel world.

She wished they existed in Dralin. If ever a city needed protection for women, it was that pit of despair.

Pelya rested her elbows on her thighs and buried her face in her hands while waiting for her name to be called.

She didn't know how much time passed before a woman shook her shoulder. "Are you Pelya Jornin?"

Pelya looked up with bleary eyes. "Yeah."

"I've called your name six times." The administrator was clearly irritated. "You're wasting my time."

Pelya stood slowly. She felt a little better, but not much. "I'm sorry."

"I don't want to hear it. I have too much to do. Now come." She marched toward a different hall than Deliah had gone to.

The pace was brisk. Normally that wouldn't bother Pelya, but moving fast was uncomfortable at the moment. She passed Uma going the other way and gave her a weak smile.

Neither of them were allowed to stop, but Uma asked, "Is she . . ."

“She’s good,” was all Pelya had time to say. It drew a sharp glance from the administrator.

They turned down another hallway and then a narrower corridor before entering a room. Cloth was lined on shelves along the left side. Thread and sewing materials were in bins everywhere. Four tables were set in the middle of a room. One table had an elderly woman jotting down notes.

The administrator gestured to a chair at one of the other tables. “Sit there please.” She took the chair opposite.

Pelya sat down gratefully. There were articles of clothing, bits of cloth, buttons, thread, needles and just about everything one could imagine to make clothes. Ebudae would have loved it.

“What is this?” The administrator asked, pointing at a needle.

“That’s a needle.” Pelya was sure she had just gotten her first question as a recruit correct. She was proud of herself.

“This?” The administrator pointed at a button.

“A button.” Two for two.

“What sort of button.”

Pelya stared at it. It was wooden, with two holes in it. “A round one.” Pelya was pretty sure that was right.

The elderly woman snickered at the answer.

The administrator sighed. She pointed to a spool of thread next to it. “This?”

“Thread.”

“What sort of thread?”

Pelya picked it up and stared at it. She didn’t know there were different sorts of threads.

“Never mind.” The administrator pointed at a blue vest. “What is this?”

“A vest.” Pelya hoped she wouldn’t be asked what kind.

“Very good. Now please sew that button onto the vest.” The administrator folded her hands and waited with a watchful eye.

Pelya immediately picked up the vest and the button, ready to succeed. She had seen Ebudae sew many times. As she held them in her hand, it occurred to her that she never really paid attention to *how* Ebudae sewed. “Where do you want me to put the button exactly?”

The elderly woman snickered again.

Pelya’s administrator sighed. “Where do you *think* it should go?”

Pelya took a better look at the vest. “Oh! It goes here under the other two.”

The elderly woman covered her mouth in a vain attempt to control her mirth.

“Yes. Now please sew the button on.”

Pelya set down the button and vest. She picked up the needle and thread. Ebudae was always threading needles, though it was usually with metallic threads and magically enhanced needles. “Is this magic thread?” Pelya asked.

The elderly woman burst into a full cackle.

Pelya’s administrator chuckled and smiled in bemusement. “Magic thread? Why ever would you ask such a question?”

Pelya felt silly. “I don’t know.” She set the thread down and stared at the needle.

Tears of mirth flowed from the elderly woman’s eyes and she pounded the table, trying vainly to gain control. It was distracting.

Pelya’s administrator reached forward and put a kind hand on Pelya’s. “Do you know how to sew, Pelya Jornin?”

Pelya looked up hopefully. "I've seen it done before."

The elderly woman had almost gained control, but lost it again at that.

Pelya blushed and stared at her lap.

"That's quite all right. Not everyone is meant for sewing." The administrator led Pelya out of the room and away from the howling laughter.

Pelya was disappointed to see that neither Deliah nor any of the others were in the waiting room. The administrator had her sit in the chairs again while she informed someone at one of the windows that Pelya was available for more testing.

The next three tests were cooking, menial tasks such as mopping and polishing metal wares, and woodworking. Pelya failed miserably at every single one. Her body was rebelling worse than before and demanding sleep.

After the woodworking, Pelya came back to find Tina sitting in the waiting area with misery in her eyes. It wasn't the first time Pelya had seen recruits despairing. She collapsed in the chair next to Tina. "What's wrong?"

"I clearly don't know how to use a sword." She lifted her tunic and showed a nice bruise on her side from an instructor's wooden practice sword. "Nor do I know how to shoe a horse, or shoot a bow, or sew clothes. I'm useless."

"Oh good. I'm not the only one." Pelya didn't feel so bad about her own failures. She put a comforting hand on Tina's leg. "One of the sewing women was laughing so hard at my sewing failures that she fell on the ground as I was leaving. I can't wait to get to the sword tests, even if I'm not at my best."

"You look horrible, Pelya." Tina bent over in front of Pelya and looked up at Pelya's face. "Beth said that Deliah told her you were injured. What happened?"

"I touched Deliah while she was being healed. The room flashed golden and I passed out."

Tina gasped. "You can't do that! Everybody knows you can't do that."

"I feel icky," Pelya's body was about to fall into little pieces on the floor. She was sure of it.

"Hey, hey. Chin up, right?" Tina patted her shoulder.

"Right." Pelya couldn't believe she had just said icky. She was tougher than that.

"Tina Medini?" one of the administrators called out.

"I'll see you tonight." Tina jumped to her feet. "They said we would get more people in our troop, but smaller groups usually stick together, so we can talk at dinner."

The administrator cleared her throat impatiently. Tina ran after before Pelya could respond.

"Pelya Jornin?"

Pelya stood up, swayed and stumbled forward a couple of steps before coming to the man who had called her name.

He was short, with slicked-back hair. His face was clean-shaven and severe. Light blue wizard robes swayed around his feet as he turned and led her down a hall. "Have you been drinking, Recruit?"

"I don't feel good," Pelya said while trying to keep down the bile that was creeping up her throat.

"Wonderful. Not that I really care." The wizard's voice was tinny, but booming. It clanged against the inside of Pelya's skull like Sergeant Yalla's spoon hitting the shield that morning.

"Do you know any magic?"

"Yes, sir." Pelya wasn't sure using magic was a good idea in her current condition.

"Wonderful. And what little parlor tricks have you learned along the way?" To say the wizard was being condescending would be an understatement.

Pelya wished Ebudae were there to make his head pop into a thousand gooey bits. “I know spells to protect my mind and body against magic and physical attacks. I can place wards on doors. I can do simple things such as lighting candles.” Ebudae had taught her a few other spells too, but Pelya kept those to herself. They took a lot of focus and she rarely used them anyway.

“That’s impressive.” The wizard didn’t *sound* impressed. He opened a door and gestured for Pelya to enter.

Inside was a room devoid of any furniture except for a chest and a small writing table with a quill and a few papers on it. The wizard set down the paper on which he would fill out the results of Pelya’s test and then gestured to the center of the room. “Please stand in the circle.”

It was a casting circle with runes spreading out in a web of protection. The wall and ceiling had similar casting circles. Pelya stepped into the middle of the circle. She was familiar with them from Ebudae’s lab. She even recognized the liquid-silver paint used to create the circles and the two pots of water with discharging rods in case someone gathered too much uncontrollable energy.

“Cast a spell that protects you against magic.” The wizard leaned against the desk as though bored. “We’ll test how strong it is.”

Pelya stood straight focused.

Her stomach rebelled. She only restrained it with supreme effort.

“I’m waiting,” the wizard said in a singsong voice.

Pelya put her arms in front of her. They were shaking and her mind was swirling.

“Wonderful form,” the wizard said with a roll of his eyes.

Pelya dropped her arms. “I don’t think I’m in any condition to cast a spell, sir.”

“In battle, nobody is ever in condition to cast a spell and we need to make certain that you can cast magic in battle, so get to it or I shall report that you are a liar of the highest order.”

Pelya sent a wordless prayer to Reanna that she wouldn’t kill herself in the casting. She ignored her physical condition and brought her focus to bear as though she were in battle.

With gestures and words taught by Ebudae, she began drawing energy and transforming it. A slight adjustment allowed her to draw much less than usual. After all, this was just a test and she wouldn’t be able to handle much.

Something was wrong.

She had let her mind wander.

Her hands were shaking.

The wizard cursed and curled up underneath the desk.

The energy ripped away from Pelya. She felt her feet jerk out from underneath her and fly up behind her back. Her left arm went right and her right arm went left. She vomited, but the backlash from the spell shot it down her throat along with raw magical energy that burned. The room spun around her at odd angles before she hit the floor with a thud and bounced.

Pelya struggled to her hands and knees before vomiting again. Fortunately, it stayed out. Unfortunately, there was an exceptional amount since she had consumed a large lunch.

“By the gods, woman! What did you eat?” The wizard cursed, stomped and swore.

“You’re lucky I have apprentices to deal with it!” He dashed to the door and stuck his head out. “I need a hundred mops and a lake full of water to clean up this mess!”

Pelya’s dragon mark finally took mercy on her. She was grateful that the recruit tunic was snug around the neck so the wizard couldn’t see the orange glow as it heated her left side and all her bones to heal the effects of the backlash.

The wizard collected Pelya by the arm and lifted her. “You’re lucky you hardly gathered any energy, else you would be dead even with the protections of the casting circle. Whoever taught you to play with magic should be hung!” He grabbed both arms and shook Pelya like a rag doll as he yelled up at her. “Magic is only to be taught in universities to those who have talent, and only in the proper methods!” He threw his hands up in frustration. “Where did you learn those absurd gestures anyway? Not a one of them was proper.”

An apprentice rushed in with a mop and a bucket. His face twisted when he saw the mess.

The wizard turned on the apprentice. “Don’t make that face, you idiot! Get cleaning.”

Pelya stood there, too weak to move. The dragon mark’s healing took too much from her, adding to the effects of spell and healing backlashes.

The room rudely spun to the left and up. Then it swung right and down. Pelya felt the floor leap up to smack the side of her head before everything went black.

Chapter 11

“Wake up, Pelya.” Ravenne’s voice was nearby and the world was moving back and forth. “Please!”

Pelya opened her eyes. It was a mistake. The light cracked her skull like porcelain. At least that’s what it felt like. “Ugh.” She closed them again and drooled into her pillow.

“She’s awake. Thank the gods,” Deliah said. “I’ll never forgive myself.”

“You have nothing to forgive,” Uma said. “She touched you during a healing. Everyone knows how stupid that is.”

“Now I see why,” Tina said right next to Pelya’s ear. “Are you in there, Pelya? We have to get dressed and get to breakfast.”

“If you can’t get up, you’ll be thrown out, Pelya,” Uma added.

“They don’t throw anyone out,” Tina said. “Otherwise the streets would be littered with homeless women.”

Ravenne’s voice was hushed. “Actually, they do. I’ve seen it. They take the women in wagons to cities like Beltaddo, or over the borders to Swelth and Foauth.”

“I knew this city was too perfect,” Beth said.

Pelya concluded that they were going to continue talking, so she opened her eyes and tried to get up. It was difficult because they were sitting on the covers, pinning her. One of them, probably Tina, was actually leaning on her back. “Ungh!” she told them. After considering, even Pelya wasn’t sure what she had tried to say.

“Oh, she’s awake,” Tina said. They scrambled off the bed and pulled back the covers. Tina groaned. “Please don’t make us change you again, Pelya.” The young woman turned to the others. “See, I told you we should have left her in the uniform.”

“She threw up on it,” Beth said. “It needed to be cleaned. Let’s just strip her again and get the uniform on.”

“I can’t tell you how glad I am that we don’t have to do laundry,” Ravenne said with relief in her voice.

Pelya felt the night pants jerked off her legs. “I can dress myself.” She swung her bare legs over the side of the bed and stood. Then she promptly fell into Tina, knocking them both into Ravenne’s bed.

“Hey!” Tina laughed and pushed her off.

Ravenne giggled madly while helping Pelya to her feet. “Sure you can. Come on, we’ll help you.”

Pelya let them strip off her nightshirt and put on the uniform tunic and pants. It didn’t take long before they were heading toward the door. Pelya had arms over Uma and Beth’s shoulders as they helped her walk. Her words were slurred as she asked, “What happened? I remember being punched by a floor after the magic test, but nothing else.”

“They couldn’t wake you up, so they brought you here and dumped you without even cleaning you up.” There was anger in Beth’s voice. “I can’t believe they would treat anyone like that.”

“It doesn’t make sense,” Deliah agreed. “I thought entering the wyverns was the same as being offered asylum.”

“Do you need asylum?” Tina asked.

“We don’t have to talk about our pasts,” Uma said quickly. “That’s the other thing we get.”

“I know. I’m just curious,” Tina said.

“My husband could claim me and take me back to the farm,” Deliah told her. “The Wyverns won’t let that happen.”

“He’s the one who beat you up, huh?”

“Tina, leave her alone,” Uma said in exasperation.

“It’s fine,” Deliah replied. “Yeah. He’s the one who beat me. He did it a lot. We’ve been married two years. At first, it was only a slap in the face sometimes, but it got worse. Now, he keeps beating me and won’t stop.” A sob broke from her throat.

Tina put an arm around her. “Hey, hey. I’m sorry.”

Deliah controlled it right away. “No. It’s fine. I just start to panic whenever I think about it.”

Pelya’s right foot collided with her left. If not for Uma and Beth, she would have landed on her face. The others helped steady her.

“I’m worried more about Pelya, than me,” Deliah said. “She looks even worse than yesterday.”

Beth grunted. “Let’s get her to the dining hall and we can ask her there. She’s heavy.”

They reached the hall a minute later. Pelya flopped down on the table after sitting, her muscles too weak to hold her upright.

Tina placed a plate of food in front of her.

Ravenne sat next to her and propped Pelya up. “We’re not going to feed you, so you need to manage that on your own, but you can lean on me.”

“Chin up, Pelya,” Uma said with a smirk. The others giggled.

Pelya chuckled and grabbed the fork. She felt unbelievably weak. It took determination, but she began taking bites. Each one helped to replenish the damage of the healing, backlash and dragon mark. Pelya realized that she needed to get a grip if she wanted to survive testing.

With the exception of Pelya, they ate quickly. Beth tossed her fork on her empty plate. “So what happened to you yesterday, Pelya? Nobody told us.”

“I did the magic testing even though I was still weak and disoriented from the healing incident.”

“Why in the world would you try to do magic in that condition?” Ravenne asked.

“You shouldn’t have even told them you could,” Uma pointed out. “You’re obviously not a wizard.”

“I know some magic,” Pelya said around a mouthful of food from her third plate. The food was helping a great deal. She almost felt as lively as a zombie.

“You went to a wizard’s academy?” Uma asked in surprise. “You don’t look it.”

“I thought you said we’re not supposed to ask about people’s pasts,” Tina retorted.

Uma narrowed her eyes.

“I didn’t go to an academy,” Pelya said. “My best friend taught me some spells.”

Uma, Beth and Ravenne gasped.

Tina leaned forward. “Can you teach them to us?”

“No,” Deliah said firmly. “Magic is full of bad things. I’ll not be learning it.”

“Nobody’s teaching anything to anyone.” Beth wagged a finger at Pelya. “You and your friend are foolish to be playing with magic without proper training. It takes decades to learn magic in a proper academy.”

Ravenne squeezed Pelya’s arm. “She’s right. You shouldn’t be messing with magic, Pelya.”

A sergeant bellowed from the middle of the mess hall. "Recruits! Take your trays to the bins and then line up!"

Tina gave a dramatic sigh. "I'm not sure I'll survive."

"I'm not sure *Pelya* will survive," Beth said with genuine concern. "You still look like the bottom of a cesspool."

"Love you too," Pelya said with a wry grin. The remark got the laughs she wanted. The truth was that she *felt* like the bottom of a cesspool. She was grateful for their help getting up, but at least she didn't need them to carry her anymore.

After the sergeant repeated her morning speech, the recruits made their way to the waiting room where an attendant checked them in. After getting Pelya situated, the others sat around her, with Tina and Delia on the seats behind her.

"You take it as easy as you can," Beth said. "Try to survive your tests."

The statement struck Pelya as funny. She laughed briefly. She realized they were staring at her intently.

"You're a bit reckless, Pelya." Ravenne squatted in front of her and squeezed her hands. "We're worried about you."

Another laugh escaped Pelya. She looked at their serious faces. Then another escaped. They exchanged worried glances.

"Pelya, please," Tina said. "We like you so much. Don't do anything stupid, all right?"

The laughter burst forth from her throat and continued. Pelya couldn't help it. She had traveled alone for two months to get to Settatt, facing danger after danger. She had killed a Crazy God and faced the High Council of Dralin. She had explored the ruins of an ancient city underneath Dralin and faced countless monsters. She had been raised in the most dangerous city in the world.

She had survived it all, yet these women didn't want her to do anything reckless or stupid. Pelya clutched her stomach, she was laughing so hard.

Deliah shook her head sadly. "She's gone mad."

"Everyone is staring, Pelya." Ravenne squeezed her hands again. "Please stop."

For their sake, she tried, but it was too much. Everything was too much. She couldn't stop laughing. Her sides ached and she propped against Uma who didn't know what to do with her.

"Tina Medini?" an administrator called out.

"Have to go." Tina jumped up gladly and headed to the test.

"Uma Zed?"

Uma gently laid Pelya on the chair where she had been sitting. She also left gladly.

"Oh dear." Ravenne leaned her elbows on her knees and hung her head. "I always pick the craziest friends."

A stocky soldier with a sword at her hip strolled into the waiting area after getting papers from one of the windows. "Pelya Jornin?" She looked around at the recruits with contempt on her face.

Pelya took a deep breath and stood. Beth helped her balance.

"Is there something wrong with her?" the soldier asked crossly.

Pelya took a deep breath and stepped forward. "I'm just happy." She smiled and spread her arms.

"What did they put in her breakfast?" Beth asked Ravenne behind Pelya's back. "I didn't get any of that."

The soldier gestured impatiently for Pelya to follow. "You look fit enough. Come on." They headed into the far hallway towards the rear of the Enlistment Building. "I'm Corporal Temdin. We're going to test your physical skills."

Ravenne sat next to Beth as they watched Pelya leave. "I have no idea *what* was in her breakfast. There's something seriously wrong with her."

Beth leaned on Ravenne dramatically. "I don't know how much of that I can handle. If a slice of pie is crazy, she's the whole pie!"

Ravenne laughed in spite of herself and gave Beth a playful shove. "Have you been taking wise-saying lessons from Uma?"

Beth returned the laughter. "Mice nibbling on toes in a field? I still don't know what that means."

"I don't think I *want* to know." Ravenne rubbed her temples. "This isn't how I expected training to go. I thought that we'd spend our days getting yelled at and hitting each other with wooden swords."

"I like the testing," Beth said. "I get to try new things. I was surprisingly good at the blacksmithing even though the hammer gets heavy."

"Blacksmithing?" Ravenne shook her head in amazement. "It's so *dirty*."

Beth raised an eyebrow. "You're a bit stuck up, aren't you?"

Ravenne reddened, part from embarrassment, part from irritation.

A mellow voice called out. "Ravenne Ambruis?" It came from an elderly administrator standing not far away.

Ravenne jumped up and dashed over, not wanting to respond to Beth's statement.

The administrator smiled. "Well you're eager, aren't you? You can call me Iriene. We're going to test your reading and writing skills today."

Ravenne forgot about Beth. "I like reading and writing." She smiled at the administrator as they disappeared down the hallway.

Pelya mentally checked her physical condition as she followed the corporal. Most parts of her body reported as not ready. A few others were AWOL. Strangely enough, her left pinkie was willing and able to go. She had no idea why it wasn't as tired as the rest of her.

"Did you hear me?" Corporal Temdin asked irritably.

"Huh?"

"If you lose focus like that on the battlefield, Recruit, it'll cost you your life every time."

The corporal shook her head in disgust. "I say we should have some quality control around here and not let vagrant women like you in. Things are changing though, and that's one of the things that'll come. Mark my words."

Pelya took a better look at the woman. The corporal was stocky, but also out of shape and walked with a limp. Pelya was surprised that Corporal Temdin hadn't realized Pelya was a fighter. Anyone testing recruits should be able to assess abilities with a glance. The corporal should also realize that Pelya was in terrible condition at that moment.

If their places were exchanged, Pelya would have taken herself immediately to the Healing Hall regardless of what regulations stated. Pelya laughed at an image of her escorting herself through the halls. She took her own hand and dragged herself after the corporal, laughing madly.

The corporal muttered.

The dragon mark heated momentarily and Pelya felt a shift in her mind. Her breath eased and the laughter stopped. She wondered what the mark had healed. Regrettably, it also left her even more tired than before.

Pelya continued holding her own hand. She needed the company.

They exited into a foggy yard where the clacking of wooden swords and grunts of exertion snuck their way through the grey. Chill air bit at Pelya's face and hands, so she wrapped her cloak tighter. "Well, this wasn't here yesterday." Pelya burped. It occurred to her that there was much more wrong with her than her body was letting on.

Corporal Temdin grunted. "The yard?"

"No. The fog, silly."

The corporal spun on a heel and jabbed a finger against Pelya's nose. "You will address me as Corporal, Recruit! You will address all of your superiors by their rank." She bellowed in an impressive voice. "Is that clear, Recruit?!"

"Yes, Corporal." Pelya smiled pleasantly.

Corporal Temdin stared at her. "You're a dimwit." She turned and muttered some more. "We're letting retards into the Wyverns."

Pelya looked around to see who the corporal was talking about. That wasn't a polite way to speak of the mentally handicapped. Pelya didn't approve of the corporal's language, but she followed anyway.

They reached a practice mat where a dour sergeant stood talking to a private. Corporal Temdin jerked a thumb over her shoulder. "This is the worst one I've ever seen. I don't know what the Wyverns have come to."

Pelya looked over her own shoulder to see who the corporal was talking about. There wasn't anyone there, so she concluded that the woman was losing her mind.

"Wonderful." The sergeant shook her head. "Test her out, Private."

The private, a young woman with a spring in her step, went to a stand holding practice swords, picked out two wooden shortswords and tossed one to Pelya.

Pelya tried to catch it. Her arm didn't respond though, so the wooden sword hit her in the gut as she stood there. Pelya collapsed to her knees and groaned.

"Wow. You were right, Corporal." The sergeant rubbed her brow. "See what she's got, Private."

The private helped Pelya back to her feet and handed the sword over. "Here you are, sweetie. Just do your best."

Pelya gripped the sword. The tip fell to ground because it was heavy. She lifted it with both hands.

"There you go. Now try to hit me with it." The private smiled encouragingly.

Pelya told her arms to swing, but they didn't listen. She assessed her own condition again. Her mind was as foggy as the air around her and her body felt ethereal.

"Come on, sweetie," The private said again. "Just swing at me the best you can."

Pelya took a deep breath and gathered all of her concentration. The image of a drop of concentration hitting the bottom of an empty bucket flashed through her mind. With effort, another joined it.

The private tapped Pelya's sword with her own.

It was like being hit with a brick. Pelya grunted, but she took a step forward and tried to swing back.

The private easily parried and even caught Pelya's stumble. "That's fine. You did wonderful for your first time." She took the wooden sword away from Pelya.

"See?" Corporal Temdin said to the sergeant.

"Yeah. We don't need to go through any more of the physical tests with this one. Take her away, Corporal."

Corporal Temdin took Pelya's upper arm and led her back to the waiting room. Once she made certain Pelya was sitting comfortably, she left, shaking her head all the while.

Pelya closed her eyes. Everything was a disaster. She was a swordmaster second class who couldn't lift a sword. She couldn't do magic or anything at that moment. It wouldn't normally be a problem, but she didn't know where to turn. No one was being helpful. She couldn't go to Healing Hall because she was only a recruit. Even the other recruits thought she was reckless.

Once again, Pelya felt alone. The depression from weeks before threatened to creep up on her. She wanted to go somewhere where no one would see her. Perhaps she could even cut her arms like Ebudae used to do. Maybe it would help.

"Pelya Jornin?"

Pelya stood and followed the administrator. The test was for cooking. She did her best, but failed, never having cooked a meal in her life. Even on the road to Settatt, she ate rations. Once, she had caught a fish, but put it back because she didn't know how to clean it, let alone cook it.

More administrators called her and she failed those tests too.

In one test, she cut her finger trying to put an arrowhead on a shaft. The fletcher's assistant took her back to the waiting room. Ravenne and Uma were waiting there for her.

Ravenne rushed up and put an arm around Pelya's waist. "You look worse than ever. It's lunchtime. You can eat and relax for a bit."

Pelya nodded.

"Should I stay here and let the others know," Uma asked.

Ravenne nodded. "Yeah. They'll be worried too. I'll get Pelya some food right away."

A few minutes later, Pelya was sitting at a table in the mess hall. She looked around blankly. She didn't remember walking there.

"Hey, I'm going to get you some food." Ravenne leaned in close. "Will you be all right for a moment?"

Pelya stared at the windows along the far wall. There wasn't much light coming in from them.

Ravenne cursed and disappeared.

Tina and Beth arrived and sat on either side of her. "Hi Pelya," Beth said. "How are you?"

Pelya stared at her.

Ravenne came back with food and squeezed in between Tina and Pelya. "She's in bad shape. I don't know what to do."

Beth placed a fork firmly in Pelya's hand and stabbed a piece of squash with it. "You need to eat, Pelya."

Pelya gave it a try. Not only did the squash make it to her mouth, the next bite and everything after that came quickly. Each bite helped her fight off the fog in her mind.

"I've seen this before," Ravenne said. "If our castle wizard used a lot of magic, he would need sleep and food. That's how Pelya's reacting, only worse."

“Like a healing hunger,” Deliah said. “I can’t tell you how tired I am, but I’m doing better than Pelya.”

“You have a wizard?” Tina asked Ravenne.

“My family is rich.” She shrugged. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

“That’s fine,” Uma said. “None of us have to talk about it.” She paused. “Although I’m extremely curious about Pelya’s past.”

The others agreed wholeheartedly.

Pelya took a breath now that her second plate was cleaned of food. “I failed all the tests, including the sword.” Hopefully, they wouldn’t persist with the other question.

They exchanged glances of disappointment. Deliah jumped to cover the subject change.

“Oh, I know. I was *so* terrible. I dropped the sword and ran away a few steps.”

“I did a little better,” Uma said, “but I don’t know that I’ll ever get it.”

“I’m a swordmaster,” Pelya whispered.

Beth patted her on the back. “Sure you are. Listen, you just concentrate on getting through the day. After that, we’ll get you dinner and get you in bed. I’m certain tomorrow will be better.”

They stared at Pelya sympathetically. She could tell that not a one of them believed her.

Chapter 12

The first couple of afternoon tests went better. One was a strategy session where she was quizzed on how best to arrange troops. She couldn't concentrate well, so made mistakes that she wouldn't have normally, but it still went better than most.

Pelya came to realize that she *was* in a sort of magical exhaustion. Ebudae had them occasionally and Pelya had even experienced a few. None of them had been so overwhelming as this one.

She sat in the waiting room trying to keep from fading again when an elderly woman with crow's feet spreading out from her eyes spoke. "Pelya Jornin?" She had a pleasant smile and blue eyes that sparkled merrily. "Come with me please."

Pelya followed wordlessly.

They entered a cramped room with stacks of paper and took seats on opposite sides of a desk. "We'll get right to the questions." The administrator studied the paper for a moment. "Have you ever had sex before?"

Pelya sat up straight. "That's none of your business."

"It is a question that we ask of all new recruits." She gave a tight nod of her head as if that explanation would do.

"That's nice. It's still none of your business." If the woman persisted, Pelya would leave regardless of whether or not it cost her position in the Wyverns.

The administrator took a breath for patience. "Very well then. Do you prefer men or women sexually?" She looked expectantly at Pelya.

"What?! You can't be serious?" Pelya stood. "If you have no questions of worth, we're done here." She turned and began to walk out.

"You can't leave. You *have* to answer the questions. They are very important!"

Pelya turned around just short of the door. "They are *not* important! While I would like to become a Wyvern, I am not willing to discuss my personal preferences. I will be whoever I wish to be. I'm going back to the waiting room." With that said, Pelya left.

The administrator walked out behind her, glaring at Pelya's back all the way to the waiting room. She took the papers to one of the windows.

Before long, another elderly administrator came out. Her hair was white and thin, though there were traces of strawberry blonde from her youth mixed with it. Her voice was surprisingly strong and steady with a mellow tone to it. "Pelya Jornin?"

Pelya stood.

"Come with me and we'll begin your test."

Pelya stood carefully and followed, surprised that she wasn't in trouble after the last interview.

They settled in another cramped office with papers. The woman gestured for Pelya to sit on a chair in front of the desk. Then she sat on a cushion in the one behind the desk. She winked. "My old bones can't handle these uncomfortable chairs. I'm Professor Iriene Withiar, by the way." She reached over the desk and shook Pelya's hand. "Please call me Iriene."

"Hello, Iriene." Pelya wasn't wasting any extra words, but she was happy to find a pleasant welcome.

Iriene took a sheet of paper and handed it to Pelya. "Read the writing on this, please."

The writing was in Common, a language created from a hodgepodge of different dialects. It became harder to understand the further a person traveled from their home, though Pelya could discern most dialects due to the international flavor of Dralin.

Pelya read, "Rita, go to the cobbler. Retrieve three pairs of boots purchased ten days ago. Do not explore or spend money on sweets. Return immediately."

"Very good!" The woman gave her another paper. "Here is another note. I'd like you to translate the writing into as many languages as you are able." She pushed forward a quill in a jar of ink along with blank pages of paper.

Pelya could read and write in nine languages and speak four fluently, so it would take time. "Do I have to rush?"

"Not at all." The woman smiled. "I'd like to see your penmanship as well."

Pelya held up a hand. It was shaking from exhaustion. "It's usually not bad, but I'm exhausted from backlash during a magic test."

"Ahh. In that case, take as much time as you need. These tests are not timed." She stood and poured water from a pitcher into a cup. "Backlash is nasty. I'm surprised you're standing. Something to drink will help a bit, just be careful not to get it on the paper."

"I won't. Thank you so much," Pelya said with heavy gratitude. Writing wasn't her favorite activity, but she enjoyed it on occasion. There was something magical about drawing lines on a paper and having them mean something.

Three of the languages Pelya knew were archaic languages from the ruins below Dralin. Ebudae's estate was above an academy of magic and the library was protected from the passage of time. One of those was Ancient Common, the second was the original language of Altordan and the third was a language of magic either lost to time or hidden away. Pelya had spent countless hours learning them simply because Ebudae wanted someone to practice with. They guessed at pronunciations, but neither knew for certain how to speak the languages.

The rest of the languages Pelya had learned in the Guard as a child. She had wanted to be the best Guardsperson ever and chose languages that were common in Dralin so she could always understand what was being said.

An hour later, she was done transcribing the phrase into eight of the languages. She tiredly handed the papers back to Irene. "I know a ninth, but it's a language of magic and isn't useful for mundane communication. In addition, it's a bit dangerous to write those words down."

Iriene shuffled through the papers for a moment before looking up at Pelya. "I don't know two of these languages." She pointed at one.

Pelya glanced at it. "Ancient Altordanian."

"Oh my." She flipped through them. "I see you know Ancient Common too; very useful that." She pointed at another.

"That's one of the languages from the Continent of Pomelea. A surprising number of people from Pomelea come across the Eastern Ocean to the island of Scinta. Many of those find their way to Dralin. The most obvious distinction is that they have black skin. It's beautiful. They have different colors of hair too, usually bright and pastel." Pelya smiled in fond remembrance. "There's an inn run by group of men from Pomelea. They serve food made in the style of their homeland and it's delicious. I used to go there whenever possible."

"Eight languages and one of magic." Iriene took a deep breath to steady herself. "How many do you speak?"

"I speak four fluently." Pelya pointed at the writing in Ancient Common. "I can only guess at this. I'm rough with the language of Pomelea." She pointed at two more. "These I've only heard a couple of times."

Iriene studied the papers again. "Good spelling, not the best penmanship, but you already explained that." She concentrated her grey eyes on Pelya. "You're young as well. You must have had quite an education."

"I did, but I was told I didn't have to explain my past, and I'd like not to do so now, even though you're the nicest person I've met."

Iriene frowned. "I don't like hearing that."

"I'm sorry." Pelya tiredly rubbed her forehead. "I should just shut up."

"No, no, dear." Iriene reached over and patted Pelya's arm. "I don't like hearing that you haven't met nicer people than me. It didn't used to be that way." She sat back and sighed. "Even just a few years ago, we were *all* nice to recruits."

"What happened to change things?" Pelya remembered a few other comments about things changing.

"The rules changed, dear." Iriene stood and put Pelya's writing samples into a waterproof tube. "Now don't you worry about it. There's nothing we can do. Come with me."

Pelya's legs creaked as she stood. She groaned in response.

"Oh, dear me. You are much too young to sound like I do when I get up. That's not good at all." Iriene looked Pelya up and down. "There's nothing to be done about it now though." She opened the door and gestured for Pelya to exit.

Pelya turned down the corridor towards the waiting room.

"Not that way, dear." Iriene locked her door and gestured for Pelya to follow in the other direction.

"Where are we going?"

"To make certain your talents are not wasted on silly things like mopping floors and sewing." Iriene stopped abruptly and turned.

Pelya almost stumbled into her, but managed to stop by grabbing Iriene's shoulders for balance.

Iriene didn't react, except to look up into Pelya's eyes. "Unless you'd *like* to mop floors and sew?"

Pelya shook her head. "No. The sewing ladies laughed at me."

"How odd. Please let go of my shoulders now."

Pelya let go and folded her arms behind her back in parade rest.

"Very good." Iriene explained as they walked through hallways in a direction Pelya hadn't been before. "All recruits spend half their days training and half their days contributing to the Blue Wyverns in a productive way. Those who do not know anything but mopping will mop floors. Those who can read and write nine languages will transcribe books. It's still a great deal of work, but I know which one I would prefer."

"Not mopping and sewing," Pelya chimed in quickly.

"Good girl."

The last hall they turned down had an exit at the end. Iriene led Pelya out to the fog on the northern side of the building. They walked to the avenue in front of the Recruit Building and then north past five or six streets to a stable yard.

Iriene stopped at a small hut where she spoke to an attendant. "We need passage to the Academy Complex, please."

“Yes, Professor Withiar.” The attendant ran to an area where silhouettes of four carriages loomed in the mist. Blue-uniformed drivers were in the first two. The attendant spoke to the one in front.

The triangular carriage rode on two large wheels with a long bench seat behind the driver’s single seat. It was attached to a single horse by dual shafts. The symbol of the Blue wyvern was done in white on a light blue background just like Pelya’s uniform. The woodwork was painted light blue, including wooden fenders and brass-bound spokes. A large black canopy protected the passengers from the worst of the weather.

The driver was a handsome young man with tousled brown hair and an easy smile. His clothes were light blue with an ankle-length dark jacket that flared as he jumped down to open a small door for them. Pelya followed Iriene into the carriage, accepting the driver’s strong hand of assistance. She ignored the twinkle in his hazel eyes and the white teeth he flashed in hopes of impressing her.

Pelya realized that men occupied many of the support roles within the Blue Wyverns. She liked that both men and women were valued.

“I was *hoping* to see the Academy Complex,” Pelya said with a smile as the driver got into his seat, released the wheel brake and headed into the city.

“And you’ll be welcomed there with your knowledge. You won’t always feel like that, of course. Expect hard, tedious work.”

“I don’t always like tedious work, but I’ll handle it just fine.” Pelya sank into the cushioned seat and huddled her cloak against the chill air.

“That’s an excellent attitude.” Iriene smiled approvingly. “Not many people share it.”

“Are we allowed to leave?” Pelya asked with worry, looking back at the disappearing Recruit Complex.

Iriene raised an eyebrow. “Do you honestly think I would take you if we weren’t?”

“I’ve seen people do things all the time that don’t make sense.” Pelya rubbed her face with both hands and wished she could just sleep.

“To answer your question, yes.” Iriene patted her shoulder. “You won’t get in trouble for going with me and your conscience will serve you well in the Blue Wyverns.”

“What happens if I’m not accepted though?” Pelya was worried about the last interview.

“Now why wouldn’t you be accepted?”

Pelya stared at the shapes of people walking past in the fog. “I didn’t answer any of the questions on the last test.”

“What test?”

“It started with questions about sex.” Pelya scrunched her face at Iriene. “They don’t need to know that. It’s not important information.”

“Agreed.” Iriene sighed. “Things are changing within the Blue Wyverns, Pelya. I probably shouldn’t talk to you about this, but . . .”

Pelya was surprised that the administrator was being so open. She decided to return the favor. “You’re not the first person who’s said something. Others have reacted in different ways, some approving of the changes and some disapproving of them.”

Iriene gave Pelya an appraising look. “You’re very perceptive. Anyone who understands languages like you do is intelligent, of course, but not always perceptive.”

Pelya didn’t know how to respond. She didn’t feel comfortable enough to discuss her time in the Guard.

“The Recruit Program changed a few years ago when Recruit Commander Indiya took charge.” Iriene folded her hands in her lap. “We didn’t used to ask about a person’s past or preferences. Now we ask, though recruits won’t be refused for not answering them.” She smiled and patted Pelya’s leg encouragingly. “Commander Indiya began changing other rules, saying we weren’t tough enough on new recruits. Then she changed things so that women are more likely to be assigned menial tasks and less likely to join the fighters. Less than half the recruits are getting swords and those aren’t well trained.”

“Interesting.” Pelya wished she could think clearer so she could figure out why it would be like that. “I heard something about the poor quality of recruits at an inn I stayed at in Beltaddo.”

“I’m not surprised. And if you mention that I told you any of this, I’ll deny it.” Iriene gave Pelya a pointed stare. “It is unwise for a recruit, or even a washed up officer like me, to complain about anything around here.”

“Were you demoted then?” Pelya asked.

“Me? No,” Iriene scoffed. “I was a field captain when Commander Indiya was a recruit. After a certain number of years, a Blue Wyvern may not be demoted. I’m well educated and enjoy working for the Academy and with new recruits in my golden years.”

“I could see by the small scars on your neck, left cheek and hands that you were a fighter.” Pelya pointed at an especially long one that disappeared under Iriene’s collar.

She ran a finger along the scar. “I got that fighting skeethies in the mountains of Foauth. The Blue Wyverns are technically mercenaries and have been hired by many countries.” Iriene smiled in remembrance. She picked up one of Pelya’s hands. “I can tell you haven’t seen a sword in your life. Your hands are perfect.”

Pelya stared at her hands, turning them over. They *were* perfect. She couldn’t think for the life of her why they weren’t covered in scars.

“That’s all right, dear.” Iriene patted them. “You’ll learn the basics. You’re a strong, tall woman. If you work hard, you may make it into the ranks.”

Pelya shook off the thought. “Why *did* you tell me all that?”

Iriene shrugged. “Because it’s been bothering me for a year now. Because the last time I mentioned it to someone who could do something, I was rebuked and told to mind my own business.” She squeezed Pelya’s hands. “Because I like you and trust you for some odd reason. And I mentioned it now because the driver of this carriage is my nephew Matthew and I trust him also.” She winked.

Matthew turned and flashed his pearly whites again. He was a little older than Pelya. “Hello, Auntie Iriene,” he said in a buoyant voice.

“Hello, Matthew. How are you this fine day?”

Matthew chuckled, a rich sound that tickled the bones. “Trying to stave off the heat, Auntie.”

“Very good, now pay attention to the road so you don’t run anyone over in this silly fog.” She waved for him to do so.

He chuckled good-naturedly again. “Yes, Auntie.”

Iriene turned back to Pelya. “Will you keep my trust, Pelya?”

“I will *definitely* keep your trust, Iriene. Of course, none of that will matter if I don’t make it in.” Pelya stared at the fog-shrouded buildings rolling past.

“You’ve already made it.” Iriene patted Pelya’s hand again. “Anyone who writes three languages or more is automatically accepted into the Recruit Program regardless of their other skills or lack thereof.”

"That makes sense," Pelya had to admit. "There are not a lot of people who can read and write. It's becoming more important every year it seems."

"It is," Iriene agreed. "Knowledge is the weapon of the new world, mightier than any sword or spell, Pelya. You remember that."

"I will." Relief gave Pelya new resolve. It never occurred to her to rely on anything but her sword. She wondered if the Cloudswept Bank would up her pay if she told them that and the Blue Wyverns didn't work out. She sank deeper into the seat and closed her eyes.

"Lie down, dear." Iriene patted her lap.

Pelya did so, surprised by such kind treatment. She was instantly asleep.

A while later, they rolled up to the Academy Complex. Pelya jerked awake and rubbed her eyes as she tried to peer through the fog at the shadows of trees and buildings. The misty air was settling underneath her clothes and causing her to shiver.

The carriage didn't go to the Main Library, but turned south down a small dirt road and traveled along a stream until it reached a building at the back of the complex. It was three stories high and the windows were shuttered against the fog. Two customary statues of wyverns were on either side of the brick path leading to the main entrance.

Iriene put a hand on Matthew's shoulder. "Care for your horse and then wait inside for a bit."

"Yes, Auntie Iriene." He drove forward to a shed next to a roundabout. Low-hanging trees surrounded everything, occasionally dropping their golden leaves to the ground.

Iriene led Pelya up stone steps to unattended bronze-bound doors. "This is the Transcription Building where you'll be spending your afternoon duties." She opened one enough for them to slip through before closing it. They were in a round greeting area with statues on either side. A high, stained-glass window above the door glistened in the glow of a small chandelier. Vertical ribs ran up the walls and braced the ceiling. Halls extended to the left and right.

A wide desk with papers and an enormous logbook on it was at the opposite end of the room. The young man sitting behind it had curly hair worn close to the skull and narrow eyes above a long nose. He wore a brown tunic with a light-blue Wyvern on the front in what Pelya guessed was an Academy uniform.

He greeted them in a friendly voice. "Good afternoon, Professor Withiar."

Iriene responded. "Hello, Tobias." She went up to the logbook and signed her name on the open page before handing the quill to Pelya. "Sign in and note the day."

Pelya did so. Glancing at the names above her, she noticed the name of Ravenne Ambruis. "Ravenne is here?" Her teeth chattered and her jaw quaked as she spoke. She couldn't stop sniffing either.

"You know her?" Iriene asked.

"We're in bunks next to each other."

"You'll be coming here together every afternoon then. She reads and writes in four languages." Iriene gestured to the left hallway. "It's unheard of to find two such recruits in one day. I'm very pleased." The smile on her face proved as much.

They walked down the hall and turned right at another. Shortly after that was an open doorway. They entered an office where a distinguished man in brown scholar's robes embroidered with a light-blue wyvern emblem sat at polished desk filled with scrolls.

An apprentice wearing a similar robe sat at a side desk near the door. He had greasy brown hair and a pockmarked face. Behind him were cupboards for supplies and an empty fireplace. The right wall of the room was filled by a floor-to-ceiling bookshelf with old books.

Pelya wrapped her arms around herself and looked around. It seemed foolish for such a cold office not to have a roaring fire going.

The scholar had greying black hair and a full beard. Lines creased his face and he wore a stern frown as he looked up. "Don't tell me you found a second literate recruit in the same day, Professor Withiar," he said in a penetrating voice.

"I have, Professor Opelnee." Iriene took out the waterproof tube with Pelya's writing samples. "Take a look."

The professor opened the tube and spread the papers out. After a few seconds, he jerked to his feet and picked up one of the papers. He shook the paper at Pelya. "You write Ancient Common?"

"Yes, Professor."

The professor shook the paper at Pelya some more as he moved to the bookshelf. "We'll just see about that." He carefully pulled a book off the shelf, brought it over to the desk, set it in front of Pelya and opened it to a bookmarked page. Then he sat on the edge of the desk next to it and tapped a paragraph halfway down the page. "Start reading here."

Pelya looked at the book. The writing blurred and tilted.

Iriene caught Pelya with surprising strength before she could fall over. "Whoa, dear. Steady now."

"Is she all right?" The professor asked suspiciously.

"Get a chair," Iriene told the apprentice who was already doing so. They helped Pelya into it. "She experienced magical backlash in testing yesterday. I've been watching her and she keeps going in and out of consciousness. I'm not sure if she realized it, but she even did so while writing those samples."

Pelya *hadn't* realized it.

"Can she read?" Professor Opelnee asked. "I must know."

They looked at Pelya.

"Yeah. I just . . ." Pelya closed her eyes and took a breath. "Can I get something hot to drink? I can't seem to stop shivering." Her teeth clattered to prove the point.

"Did I mention that she's running a fever too?" Iriene said with a sigh.

The professor lifted Pelya's chin and felt her forehead with a thick, ink-stained hand. "Well that won't do." He went around the desk, opened a drawer and took out a small flask. "Drink all of this." He opened it and placed it firmly in Pelya's hand.

"What is that?" Iriene asked.

"Just you never mind." The professor helped Pelya get it to her mouth.

Pelya drank it whether she wanted to or not as he tipped her head back. It was spicy and thick. A moment after the last drop went down her throat, Pelya shuddered violently. Her mind cleared somewhat and warmth flooded her system. To her dismay, she felt the dragon mark soak some of the energy from it. It led her to wonder how much worse her condition would be without the mark. The thought disappeared. Pelya was beginning to believe her dragon mark was cranky by nature. That thought also disappeared.

"How do you feel?" Professor Opelnee her chin one way and then the next. "Judging by the bags under your eyes and the blank stare, I'm guessing it wasn't effective." He stared at the bottle in disappointment. "I was told it was a good quality healing potion by the Druid who traded it to me."

"You gave her a healing potion?" Iriene's eyes were wide.

"I want her to read this." He jabbed the passage in the book.

Pelya wiped her face. "I was in worse shape than you know. That backlash probably would have killed me if I had gathered any more energy." Pelya leaned forward and looked at the book. The words didn't blur anymore. "I also touched someone who was being healed earlier in the morning. The potion you gave me wasn't strong, but I don't feel like I'm going to fall down and die anymore."

Professor Opelnee stared at the bottle. "Maybe it *is* as good as the Druid said." He turned his attention to Pelya and crossed his arms. "Both of those actions are foolish and show poor decision making. Do you always do stupid things that might kill you?"

Pelya considered her life and the adventures she had taken with Ebudae. She slowly nodded. "Yeah. I pretty much do things like that all the time."

Iriene laughed lightly. "How precious." She patted Pelya's back.

The professor huffed disapprovingly. He tapped the paragraph again. "Read."

Pelya looked at the words. The writing had been smeared in a few places and it was faded, but she could make out the words. She rubbed her eyes again and scooted forward a bit more. "I'm not as good as Ebudae, but I can read it."

"Is Ebudae another recruit?" the professor asked hopefully.

"No, she's my best friend back home." Pelya pointed to the first sentence. "This is a bit different than the Ancient Common I'm used to. It says here, 'And they did look for them. A whisper stood there, but not them.'"

"Yes! Yes, that's what it says! You *do* read Ancient Common!" Professor Opelnee exclaimed with a laugh as he leapt to his feet. He threw a fist in the air and twirled.

His apprentice and Iriene stared at him in horror. Pelya grinned.

He saw their looks, reddened and came over to sit on the edge of his desk again. "Continue reading." He tapped the book again.

Pelya looked at the words. The potion had dried her mouth. She looked up. "May I please have something to drink?"

The professor waved an arm frantically at the assistant who jumped both ways before running out the door.

Pelya trusted they would take care of her, so she sank her attention into the book. "The rest of the paragraph says, 'Another did disappear, but they were not seen. Nor were they smelt.'"

The professor put a finger under the word. "I read that as odor, perhaps it is smelled?"

"Perhaps. I'm not the best at this, Professor." Pelya burst into tears. She had no idea why.

"Here now." The professor patted her shoulder and looked at Iriene. "Why do you women always cry without warning?"

Iriene folded her arms and glared at the professor.

Pelya sucked in a breath and wiped her face with her sleeves. "I'm so sorry. I don't know what just happened. I promise I'm not normally like that." A wave of exhaustion overwhelmed her and she folded her arms over her knees and buried her face.

The apprentice came in with a bottle and cup. "I have wine."

"That's the last thing she needs," Iriene said in disgust. "Get her water or juice. You men can be such idiots."

Pelya got the impression that the last was aimed at Professor Opelnee.

"I still outrank you, Professor Withiar," the scholar said with a growl.

Iriene's voice gained a bit of a growl too. "The statement is true regardless of rank, Professor Opelnee."

Pelya took a deep breath and looked at the words on the book again, determined to head off a fight. By the way they spoke to each other, she got the impression that they quarreled often. "The next paragraph says . . ." She tried to decipher it.

The words got their attention and they looked at the book as well.

The apprentice moved toward the door. "Water or juice. I'll be right back."

Pelya moved her finger from the new paragraph to the old one. "The writing style changes."

"Yes, I know." The professor sighed.

"There are also words of magic mixed in." Pelya recognized a couple of them, but others would require Ebudae's expertise.

"There are?" The professor put a hand on Pelya's back and looked close. "Which ones?"

Pelya pointed them out. "I don't understand these, but this one says 'acid'. This one says 'fluentia', which means to fly with recklessness."

Professor Opelnee sat up and folded his arms. "That's not a language of magic I've ever seen. Where is it from?"

"Uhhh . . . I'm bloodsworn never to tell." Pelya didn't want to hide the information from them, but she wouldn't break a promise to Ebudae.

"How very mysterious," Iriene said. "Now I'm even more intrigued."

Professor Opelnee stared at Pelya as though trying to force her to reveal the information with just the power of his will.

"I'm willing to read it to the best of my ability, Professor." Pelya shrugged helplessly. "But I won't break my word."

His bushy jaw jutted forward. "Can you decipher words you don't understand using what you know?"

Pelya shook her head. "I'm not good at that. I know what I was taught, but the more complicated techniques of deciphering languages is well beyond my talents."

"Can you tell me who taught you?"

Pelya remembered the way the banker had reacted upon hearing Ebudae's full name. She could, but she tightened her lips and shook her head no.

Professor Opelnee was a shrewd man though. He stroked his beard and looked at Pelya with piercing eyes. "Her name is Ebudae, isn't it?"

Iriene snapped her fingers. "The name she mentioned. I bet it is."

Pelya kept her lips tight and wished she could run away.

Professor Opelnee jutted his beard forward. "You said that you would do your best to read these passages . . . what's your name, anyway?"

"Her name is Pelya Jornin," Iriene said.

"You'll do your best to read these passages, Pelya Jornin?"

"Yes, Professor. I think I can read a lot of that. I'll do my best."

The apprentice came in. "I found some juice." He looked at the jug. "I'm pretty sure it's juice."

"Well, pour her a drink!" Professor Opelnee roared. "She's got a book to read."

"Yes, of course." The apprentice poured the juice and handed the cup to Pelya.

Pelya took a drink and her stomach instantly rebelled against the rancid juice. She spun out of the chair in the hopes of getting out of the room, but vomited on the carpet instead. The cup flew out of her hand, spilling its contents before clattering across the floor.

Professor Opelnee hastily closed the book and put it on the shelf while Iriene put an arm around Pelya.

“What did you give her?!” the gruff professor asked. He snatched the jug from the apprentice and sniffed it. “It’s gone bad! Have you lost your mind? Are you trying to poison her?!”

Pelya sobbed in misery. She was sick and tired of being tired and sick. Her body hated her and she wasn’t too thrilled with it either.

“I need to get this girl to Healer Hall,” Irene said. “They’ll take her and damn the regulations.” She helped Pelya to her feet, half-lifting her. “You’ll just have to wait for your book to be read, Professor.”

“So be it.” Professor Opelnee’s voice was filled with anger, but he took a breath and calmed himself. “Take care of her Iriene. Get her well and if *anyone* gives you a problem, I’ll deal with them.”

“Yes, Professor.” Iriene steered Pelya around the mess on the floor and led her out of the office.

The professor yelled at the apprentice, “This mess is your fault, you clean it up!”

Irene grabbed a cloth from the desk clerk and cleaned up Pelya’s face the best she could. Once they were back in the carriage, Matthew grabbed a blanket from the back and covered Pelya with it as she lay her head in Iriene’s lap and cried in misery before falling asleep.

“Where is Pelya?” Ravenne asked the others as she brought her tray of dinner to the table. She was the last of their group to arrive.

“She’s probably off being sick somewhere,” Uma replied. “Every time we see her, she looks more like a wraith wandering through the trees, looking for her lost cow.”

Tina giggled while Ravenne pictured that image and rubbed her temples. Ravenne set her utensils aside and wiped the water spots from them one at a time with her napkin. “I’m worried about her more than ever. She touched Deliah while healing and then she was hit by magical backlash. It’s like she thinks she can do anything better than everyone else.”

“I thought you liked her,” Beth said in surprise.

Ravenne tossed the fork on the table. “I do, but I don’t know if I want a friend that’s rushing headlong into trouble at every turn. I’m worried she’ll get herself killed and I couldn’t handle that.”

“I would die before I’d let her get killed,” Deliah said earnestly. “No one has ever been kind to me before I met the lot of you. She saved my life.”

“But she also touched you while you were being healed. That could have killed the both of you,” Tina pointed out.

“*Should* have killed you,” Ravenne said. “Nobody is supposed to touch someone who’s being healed.”

Deliah pounded the table with her fist. “I don’t care. She’s my friend.”

Beth put a hand on her shoulder. “She’s all of ours. But she’s a wreck and I’m worried that she’s not here right now.”

“Maybe she got kicked out,” Uma suggested.

Beth picked up her cup. “That’s a possibility. I wouldn’t be surprised.”

“She wouldn’t get kicked out,” Deliah said defensively.

“Maybe she died,” Tina said excitedly. “You said she’s reckless.”

“She didn’t die!” Deliah slammed her tray down and left for their sleeping quarters. The others watched her go. Beth leaned over the table and smacked Tina’s hand.

Tina shook her hand and held it with the other. “Ow! It’s just a possibility.”

Ravenne took her tray and Deliah’s. “I’m going to get some sleep.” The others watched her walk off and dump the trays in the bin. As she headed to bed, Ravenne wondered what to do about Pelya. She badly wanted a friend, but friends never lasted long for her.

Deliah sat up as Ravenne came in. Ravenne went over to sit on the edge of Deliah’s bed and they held each other for moral support. “She’s not dead,” Deliah insisted.

“I know.” Ravenne squeezed. “We need to keep an eye on her though. I’m worried that she’ll get too close to the sun and burn up.”

Deliah didn’t respond for a moment. “Is that something Uma said?”

Ravenne laughed. “It’s an expression. Some people try to do too much. They’re like a bird that flies too high toward the sun. They burn up when they get too close. I don’t want Pelya to burn up like a bird that flies too high.”

“I don’t want that either,” Deliah said gravely. “We’ll keep an eye on her.”

Ravenne stretched and yawned. “I need sleep. Don’t worry about Pelya. She’ll be back.”

Chapter 13

Pelya woke up to the sound of a woman coughing loudly in the next bed. The odor of vomit and gangrene mixed with acidic cleaning solutions. The sounds of moaning and people talking in hushed tones filled Pelya's ears.

She opened her eyes and sat up. Sick and injured women nearly filled six rows of beds. Nurses and healers bustled back and forth between the patients.

A rotund nurse with a cranky disposition scuttled over to Pelya and took her wrist to check for pulse. "Are you better yet? You're just a recruit and shouldn't be here. That professor had a lot of nerve bringing you here yesterday." She clucked and felt Pelya's forehead. "There's nothing wrong with you. Your pulse is strong and you're not running a fever." She roughly gripped Pelya's face. "Your eyes are clear, but it's the middle of the night and I suppose we have to keep you until morning. Then we'll have to waste food on you."

"I'm all better." Pelya *did* feel better. She might have stayed until morning, but not with an obnoxious nurse griping at her.

"Well, if you're certain." The nurse threw aside Pelya's covers and gestured for her to vacate the bed. "The Enlistment Building is seven streets to the east. Report to your duty sergeant."

Pelya shook her head and got to her feet. She was still in her recruit uniform, which had become ripe by that point. To her surprise, even her boots were on. The good news was that she didn't sway even though she still felt weak.

"Go on. Don't just stand there." The nurse waved her away. "The exit is over there." She pointed to a hallway at the far end of the room.

Pelya walked gingerly in that direction. She stretched her muscles as she walked. They were weak and they ached, but she could actually feel all of them.

The nurse caught up with her. "Hold on, you."

Pelya stopped and turned.

The nurse lost the worst of her attitude. She handed over a small pouch of tealeaves. "You take these for your tea. The healer prescribed them for you. They're a special medicine and magically enhanced. It will help with the effects of backlash."

Pelya took the bag. "Thank you."

"You're welcome. Get better, Recruit." She went back to her patients.

Pelya left the room, and with directions and disapproving looks from a couple of staff members, she made her way out of the Healing Hall and into the icy dark.

Siahray was half-full and cast a spooky blue-green light through the early morning fog that lingered heavily in the streets. Spots of dim yellow light hinted at lampposts, but it wasn't enough to find her way. She didn't know which way was east.

Tears jumped to her eyes and she shivered at the cold.

A shadow stroked her cheek.

Pelya turned to it, but it was gone. Another shimmered in the mist not far away. Pelya followed it, a quiet sob escaping her lips. Another shifted and she followed it too. More appeared as she rushed along the street to get out of the cold air. It wasn't the first time she had followed shadows. They were servants of Distra, the Goddess of Shadows. Her father was the goddess's champion.

A few minutes later, a shadow moved against a door, which opened as Pelya reached it. Once she was inside, the door closed behind her. She was in a narrow corridor with lanterns every hundred feet. At the intersection ahead, a shadow slipped to the left.

The corridor was warmer than outside, but Pelya shivered as she followed. Another corridor led her to an area she knew.

"I'm all right now," she whispered. "Please tell Daddy that I love him and miss him." She took a deep breath and regained control of herself.

A shadow kissed her ear.

Pelya opened her eyes and saw that the remaining shadows were ordinary. She wiped her face with her sleeves and hurried back to her own bed.

Sergeant Yalla was behind the desk. Upon seeing Pelya, she snarled. "You're not so sick after all, are you?"

Pelya didn't want to talk, but remembered Yalla considered silence as disrespect. "I don't feel as bad, Sergeant Yalla. Shall I go straight to bed, or do you have tasks for me?" She hoped to the gods that there were no tasks.

Sergeant Yalla's face twisted in odd ways as she searched for a way to find insult in Pelya's words. She failed. "You need to strip out of that stinky uniform so it can be washed." She pointed to a row of hampers along the wall. "Do it now and leave it in the hampers."

Pelya stripped and dumped the uniform in the hampers. Then she waited in her undergarments for further instructions.

"Get in bed, foolish girl. You'll shiver to death and catch a real sickness if you don't."

Pelya dashed into the room. Beth sat up briefly and waved. Pelya waved back, changed into her nightclothes and slipped under the covers. She glanced at Ravenne who was breathing evenly with her back turned. The rest were sleeping soundly too. She sighed in relief, closed her eyes and fell asleep immediately.

The spoon banging on the shield woke Pelya. She sat up and tried to figure out where she was.

"Pelya!" Ravenne scrambled over and wrapped Pelya up in a hug. The others followed and her bed was suddenly full. Other recruits stared as they dressed.

"We thought you were kicked out," Uma said.

"Or dead," Tina added.

Deliah squeezed Pelya's arm. "We thought maybe you had gotten into trouble."

"Or dead," Tina said again.

"She's obviously not dead," Beth said in exasperation. "What happened, Pelya?"

Deliah waved them off. "It can wait until we're at breakfast. I bet she still needs food."

"I do." Pelya's stomach growled in response, eliciting laughter from them. They pulled her off the bed and helped her change into her clean uniform even though she didn't need the help.

They all changed, and Pelya noticed that Deliah was moving easily. Deliah noticed her observation and lifted her shirt to show that there were no more bruises on her stomach. They exchanged smiles. It occurred to Pelya that Deliah was much younger than she had originally appeared, probably around Pelya's age. Abuse aged a person.

"You look much better," Ravenne said to Pelya as she pulled on her second boot.

Tina made an inelegant noise. "She still has black circles under her eyes and her hair is flying in every direction. She grunts whenever she moves and she kinda doesn't smell too good."

Pelya patted her hair, trying to get it to behave. She missed her braid.

Uma gave Pelya a droll smile. "And that's still better than you looked yesterday."

"Leave her alone," Beth said. "Maybe food will help."

They headed to the mess hall as a group and sat at their usual table. Pelya looked around while eating. "We have more people in our group now, don't we?"

"We're called a troop," Beth gestured to two other tables. "We've formed into three cliques." She appeared troubled by the concept.

"They seem nice enough," Uma said.

Pelya frowned. "If we come to battle, then we'll need to rely on each other. It's important that the cliques come to terms with each other and integrate even if not everyone likes each other."

"Do you think we'll get to battle?" Tina asked with a hopeful smile.

"I don't think we will," Uma said. "Not everyone gets to be a warrior."

Deliah took a drink. "I'm probably going to mop floors for the rest of my life."

"Deliah . . ." Tina started.

"It's better than being beaten for the rest of my life." She winked. "In all seriousness, I have no skills. My parents were drunks. My husband was a drunk. I never learned anything other than cooking or cleaning."

"I'm sorry," Tina said.

"Don't be. You never beat me." Deliah smiled. "I don't care what I do. I just want to have a chance."

Ravenne smiled slyly. "I know what my job is going to be."

Tina turned to her. "You already know? What is it?"

"Guess."

The others put forth a few guesses, all wrong.

Pelya blew on her hot cider and smiled. "You're going to be a scribe at the Academy Complex."

Ravenne's jaw dropped. "How did you know?"

"Because I'm going to be a scribe with you."

"You read and write?" Uma asked incredulously.

Tina gasped. "No way."

"Do you really read and write, Pelya?" Deliah asked.

"I do." She smiled at Ravenne. "I think we'll have fun."

"Yeah. That's great." Ravenne grabbed her plate. "I'm going to the waiting room. See you there."

"Ravenne?" Pelya reached out, but Ravenne slipped her grasp and ran out of the mess hall.

"That was odd," Tina said. "Why did she act like that?"

Beth scratched her head. "I don't know. That didn't make sense."

"You'd think she'd be happy," Deliah added.

"Perhaps she's mad that she didn't get to be best at something." Uma looked at Pelya pointedly.

Pelya's jaw clenched and she looked down at her plate so they couldn't see how much the comment hurt. She got up, took her plate to the dishwasher and left for the waiting room without saying another word.

There was no sign of Ravenne when Pelya got there, so she took a seat. The others arrived a minute later.

Tina stood in front of Pelya and put a finger in her face. "Don't leave us like that, Pelya. We've been nothing but nice to you and you need to be nice to us too."

"She's right," Beth said. "You need friends. We all need friends."

Pelya stared at her hands. "I'm sorry. It *was* rude of me." She looked up at them. "I've been alone for a while now and I've . . ."

Deliah sat next to her and put an arm around her. "Yeah?"

The words came out in a whisper. "I've been scared."

Uma rubbed Pelya's neck. "Hey. We all get scared. That's why we need each other."

"But I don't want Ravenne to be mad at me. I didn't mean to be better at anything." Pelya leaned back and groaned as the neck rub caught a knot.

"We'll talk to her when we can," Beth assured her. "But you need to be nice."

Pelya felt like a little girl being scolded. "I will. I'm sorry." There were certain aspects of life she had never experienced. The friendships that were developing were different from what she had with Ebudae, or anyone in the Guard. She liked the part where she got the neck rub though. Uma had hands of magic.

"It's all right." Deliah patted her back. "We're going to get through this together. This is the last day of testing. You and Ravenne have your duties, Beth has hers and the rest of us will learn tonight or tomorrow what we're doing."

"I'm probably going to be a seamstress," Beth said happily. "My mother and aunts were seamstresses and they taught me what they knew, so I'll be sewing everyone's uniforms or making new ones."

"Can you choose a color besides blue?" Tina stuck her tongue out and gagged dramatically.

Pelya sat up. "I know, right? It's everywhere."

"Even in your eyes," Uma said with a wink.

Pelya playfully stuck her tongue out. "Yes, but they're sapphire-blue, not pale, sickly-blue."

Beth patted Pelya's leg in excitement. "I saw a sapphire once. It was on the necklace of a noblewoman who came to have something mended by my aunt. It sparkled like your eyes do."

"I like that idea." Pelya smiled, though her first thought was the sapphires she had deposited in the bank. She wondered if anyone had discovered her wealth yet.

Professor Withiar came up to the group. "Pelya Jornin, what are you doing here? I left you in Healing Hall."

"I woke up in the middle of the night and a nurse was cranky about my presence, so I went back to my bed." Pelya didn't want the nurse to get in trouble, even if she *had* been mean.

She arched an eyebrow. "And why aren't you still in bed?"

"I have tests? . . ." Pelya didn't want to get herself in trouble either.

"Wasn't it foggy and cold last night?" Tina asked.

Iriene crossed her arms sternly. "It is *still* foggy and cold. Who escorted you, Pelya?"

“Shadows?” Pelya didn’t think they’d make the connection she had with them, and she couldn’t think of another answer.

Iriene took Pelya by the arm and lifted her roughly to her feet. “I’ll have a talk with Healing Hall later. As for you, there will be no more testing. I’ll take you to your bed right now. You are to stay there except for meals and if anyone says otherwise, you are to *run* to me.” Her eyes flashed and her teeth clenched in anger. “Is that clear?”

Pelya was surprised and a bit intimidated by the intensity in Iriene’s voice. “Yes, Professor.”

Iriene yanked on Pelya’s arm and dragged her back to the sleeping quarters. Pelya glanced back and saw the others staring with wide eyes. None were brave enough to interfere.

Sergeant Yalla was speaking to the daytime sergeant as they switched shifts when Iriene dragged Pelya up to them. They both took a step back at the look on the professor’s face.

“This is Pelya Jornin. She is to stay in bed and not be disturbed for the rest of the day and night. She is to take meals in the dining hall and is to be allowed as much as she can eat, after which she is to report back to her bed and sleep.” Iriene released Pelya’s arm and moved to take both sergeants by the collar. Her voice lowered dangerously. “If these orders are not followed, Professor Opelnee will file a complaint on you with the Recruit Commander, and if that’s not enough to get you to follow my orders, I will personally retrieve my sword and cut your ears off. Do I make myself clear?”

“Yes, Captain Withiar!” they said in unison. Fear was evident in their voices. They obviously remembered Iriene before she was a professor.

Iriene turned and pointed a finger at Pelya.

Pelya rubbed her sore arm as she took a few steps back.

Professor Withiar left the room, muttering about obstinate recruits and sergeants.

Sergeant Yalla rushed over to Pelya and pushed her toward the room. “You heard her! Now get you to bed!”

Pelya half-ran, half-stumbled as the sergeant pushed her and even helped her change into nightclothes. When Pelya got in bed, the sergeant tucked her tightly in and pointed, much as Iriene had just done.

The other sergeant, a woman in her middle years spoke in a gruff voice. “I’ll wake you for lunch and escort you to the dining hall. You’ll stay in your nightclothes.”

Sergeant Yalla collected Pelya’s uniform. “I’ll take this so she can’t put it on.”

They both stared at her intently.

Pelya turned on her side, pulled the covers up to her ears and closed her eyes in the hopes they would go away.

She was asleep instantly.

Deliah watched her friend being dragged away. She dashed to the hallway and then followed at a distance until the woman had Pelya back to Sergeant Yalla.

“Is she all right?” Tina asked, directly behind Deliah.

Deliah nearly jumped out of her skin before turning and putting a finger in front of her lips for Tina to be quiet. The others were nowhere to be seen.

They listened as the woman spoke to the two sergeants. Deliah exchanged a wide-eyed glance with Tina when the sergeants called the woman Captain Withiar.

When Captain Withiar came back towards them, both women ran back toward the waiting room.

An administrator came out of the waiting room and into the hallway as they ran up. “Tina Medini?”

Tina waved. “That’s me.”

“I don’t appreciate having to call you four times and then having to come out here. That won’t work once you begin training.” The administrator shook a finger at Tina.

“I’m sorry.” Tina did her best to look contrite as she followed the administrator.

Deliah went over to Beth and Uma who were waiting expectantly. “That woman was a captain of some sort. Pelya has to spend all day in bed.”

“Bed is for the lazy.” Uma clucked. “There’s work to be done.”

“Bed is also for the sick,” Beth pointed out. “And we’re testing. There’s no real work in it.”

Deliah put her hands on her hips. “Pelya needs her rest and I’m grateful to that Captain Lady for seeing to it.”

A short wizard in light blue robes called out. “Beth Latchness?”

Beth got up and followed. “Best of luck in your tests,” she said over her shoulder.

“Are you sad that you didn’t get to go back to bed and cuddle with Pelya?” Uma asked in snarky tone.

Deliah couldn’t think of how to respond to that, so she punched Uma in the nose.

Uma jerked back and covered her face. “Ow!”

Two of the other recruits came between them. One, a woman with dark-blond hair and a strong grip held Deliah back. “That’s enough of that.”

An administrator rushed up. She was skinny and had her hair in a ponytail like most of the Blue Wyverns preferred. “What’s going on here?”

Uma was the first to respond. “I get bloody noses all the time. I just need to clean it up.”

The administrator pointed at the group. “Fighting won’t be tolerated. We *do* kick recruits out, contrary to what you may have heard.” The recruits nodded and she went away, but kept looking back.

The blond turned back to Deliah. “Are you done?”

“Yeah.” Deliah looked around her to Uma. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have done that.”

Uma was doing her best to keep the blood from getting on her uniform. Another recruit, a short woman with a cheerful disposition, was holding a blue cloth under it. Uma’s voice was slightly altered by the injured nose. “I deserved it. That was a good punch.”

The recruit helping Uma felt around the nose in spite of Uma’s attempts to get away. “It’s not broken, just bloody. Go to the washroom and clean up. There are more cloths there like this.”

Uma looked at the cloth with distaste. “Must everything be blue?”

The others chuckled. Deliah went over and put a hand on Uma’s back. “I’ll help you clean up. I really am sorry. I don’t know how to talk as good as the rest of you. It’s always been easier to fight.”

They headed to the nearby washroom. Uma gingerly dabbed her nose with the cloth. Most of the bleeding had stopped. “I’ll remember that next time I want to say something funny.”

“Why didn’t you tell that administrator that I punched you?” Deliah asked. The thought of being kicked out terrified her. She took another cloth off a stack near the washbowl and dipped it in water.

Uma held her nose up to make it easier. "Because we need to stick together, even if we don't always agree. Just don't punch me again."

"I won't." Deliah was careful not to push hard against Uma's nose.

An administrator called from the waiting room. "Deliah Transom?"

Uma took the cloth. "I'm fine. Go on."

Deliah dashed off to suffer through another test she would likely fail.

Chapter 14

A hand shook Pelya's shoulder. "Wake up, Recruit."

Pelya jerked up and saw the day sergeant standing over her.

The sergeant held out a pair of slippers. "It's lunchtime. Captain Withiar said you had to eat, so put these on your feet and I'll take you to the mess hall." She tossed the slippers on the floor and stood with her arms crossed.

Pelya got out of bed and put them on while yawning.

"Come on." The sergeant led Pelya at a brisk pace to the mess hall. They were early for lunch. A few recruits were just beginning to trickle in. The sergeant led Pelya to a counter where mess hall supervisors were organizing their duties. "This is Pelya Jornin. She is under orders to eat as much as she needs and then report to her bunk for sleep. I need someone to escort her when she's finished."

A corporal with her arm missing below the elbow responded. "Of course sergeant. Can she serve herself, or does she need assistance?"

The sergeant looked to Pelya and raised an eyebrow.

"I can serve myself."

"If you're not back in an hour, I'm going to check on you." The sergeant wagged a finger. "Don't you dare get me in trouble with Captain Withiar."

"I won't, Sergeant. I'll be back within the hour." Pelya was sincere. She didn't want to get in trouble with Captain Withiar either.

"Good." The sergeant left the mess hall.

The corporal pointed to the food line. "Get some food. You can always come back for more, so don't take more than you'll eat. Blue Wyverns don't waste food."

"Yes, Corporal." Pelya grabbed a tray and went along the line to fill it with food.

Everything sounded good, so she piled her plate in spite of the disapproving looks of servers.

She sat at the table they normally took near the windows and looked around the mess hall for the first time with normal eyes. It was as large as any of the three in the Dralin Guard Fortress. The ceilings were high and wooden chandeliers hung from them. Those were normally lit for the late dinners. At the moment, the windows let in a good amount of light even with the fog outside.

Ravenne came in first. Pelya waved hopefully. Ravenne nodded and indicated she was going to get food first. After getting the food, she came over, set her plate on the table, and then sat on the bench next to Pelya. "I'm sorry for my behavior this morning."

"No. I'm sorry for everything." Pelya took her hand. "Please don't be mad at me. I'll try to do better."

"You already do everything better." Ravenne poked at her food.

"I'll try to do worse then." Pelya felt tears stinging her eyes and hated it. Crying was weak and she did it much more than she liked. She was an adult and it was time to get a grip.

Ravenne looked at her. "I don't understand you. First you grab Sergeant Yalla's hand like you're a warrior of some sort, you get Deliah the best healing I've ever seen where she's walking around in a few hours, then you say you can do magic, and you can read at least three languages if they're going to take you as a scribe." She tucked a leg up under the other and turned to Pelya. "You act like a leader, but you do foolish things all the time and now you're crying again."

Pelya shook off the tears and took a deep breath. "I'm lonely. I've been alone for two months now and I was never alone before that." She closed her eyes and realized how much she must sound like a baby.

"Hey, hey. You're not alone anymore." Ravenne took her hand and squeezed it. "You have friends now. We're in this together."

Pelya straightened her back and firmed her resolve. "I'd die for you, all of you."

Ravenne half-grinned at the statement, as though wondering if Pelya was serious. "We're just recruits. There's nothing to die for right now." She put a hand on the side of Pelya's cheek. "Relax. Please relax. You're scaring us with your intensity."

"What's wrong now?" Tina asked as she appeared with Beth and Uma on the other side of the table.

Ravenne gave them a look. "Pelya wants us to know that she'll die for us and that she's all alone."

When it was put that way, Pelya thought it sounded silly.

"I've always wanted someone to die for me." Tina sat on the bench. "I was hoping it would be someone I *didn't* like though."

Pelya chuckled as the others laughed.

"I was telling Pelya she didn't need to be so intense," Ravenne said to the others.

Deliah came up on Pelya's other side. "She's right. We like you, Pelya, but you scare us a little."

Pelya chewed on her lower lip in embarrassment. "I'm sorry. I'll try to tone it down."

Beth pointed with a fork. "Wearing nightclothes is a good start. That woman who took you back to the sleeping area gave orders for you to sleep the rest of the day?"

"Yeah. Professor Withiar used to be a captain and everyone's afraid of her. She made it clear that I'm to sleep whenever I'm not having meals."

Ravenne nodded. "Good. You need it. I like Professor Withiar. She was nice when she took me to the Transcription Building. Her nephew drives the carriage. He's cute."

Tina grinned. "Oh, Ravenne has a boyfriend."

They laughed and teased Ravenne.

Tina stuck her tongue out at Pelya. "You're lucky that you got out of the rest of the tests. I wish I could read and write in more than one language."

"I wish I could read and write in one," Uma said. Beth agreed.

"I'm happy I can't," Deliah said. "That's for people other than me. I'm fine with a mop or a garden. I just wish I had a child to raise."

Pelya put an arm around her back. Deliah smiled sadly.

"I don't want children," Tina said. "They sound like a lot of work and they smell."

Beth stared at her plate. "And they die."

The rest of them became silent and reached out to touch her supportively.

"His name was Tooty and he was always happy." A heavy sigh lifted Beth's shoulders. "He died before he could even walk. My husband told me it was my fault and he kicked me out."

Tina and Uma wrapped her up in a hug. "Poor Beth," Tina said.

"I'm here now." Beth smiled bravely. "It's time to start again."

"I was supposed to get married," Ravenne said. "My father arranged a wonderful match with a rich merchant from Deller."

"You turned down wealth?" Tina asked. "Why would you give it up?"

“Because the man’s last three wives died after he beat them.” She leaned over and looked at Deliah. “Rich or poor, no woman should go through that.”

Deliah nodded in understanding.

“Why would your father marry you off to someone like that?” Beth asked.

“Because I’m his sixth daughter and the man offered a significant amount of gold for me.” Ravenne smiled and stabbed her baked potato. “I gave up a comfortable life to avoid a rich death, and here I am.”

“I’m glad you’re here,” Uma said. “I’m glad for all of you.”

They all agreed.

“What about you, Tina?” Ravenne asked.

Tina smiled mischievously. “I ran away from home because I wanted adventure.” The smile became rueful. “The problem is that I have no skills, so I joined the Wyverns to get some. When I’m done, I’ll go on real adventures.”

They smiled and laughed at that. Then they turned to Pelya. It was her turn.

“I murdered a man.”

Gasps.

Ravenne gripped Pelya’s hand. “What happened? Surely you had a reason?”

“He threatened to kill my best friend.” Pelya closed her eyes. “He was a man of power and I stabbed him in front of witnesses. They held a trial and banished me.” Pelya wished she could have done things differently. She remembered her swords sliding so easily through the chancellor’s robes. “I would have been executed if not for powerful friends.” She took a drink.

“How did you kill him?” Tina asked in fascination.

“No more questions about it,” Beth said. “That’s not the sort of thing anyone talks about and Pelya showed us an immense amount of trust in doing so.”

“That also explains why she’s such a wreck,” Deliah added. “I’ve seen people go mad from killing another person.”

“Yeah,” Uma agreed.

They stared at Pelya with pity.

“I’m not crazy,” Pelya protested weakly.

Deliah patted her leg. “We know, sweetie.”

Pelya sighed.

The call went out for testing to resume.

They got up. Ravenne gave her a hug. “We’ll be back for dinner, Pelya. Get some rest.”

They all exchanged hugs and left Pelya alone in the mess hall with a few other stragglers. Pelya took her plate to the cleaning basin. The corporal who had agreed to keep an eye on Pelya approached. “You have a bit of time left. Are you still hungry, or would you like to go back to sleep?”

Pelya wanted both, but she was more tired. “Sleep, please?”

“Of course. Come with me.” The corporal led her back and Pelya was soon asleep.

By the time dinner rolled around, the women were exhausted and less talkative. They went to the comfort of their beds immediately after.

Chapter 15

An hour earlier than previous days, Sergeant Yalla woke them with the spoon and shield. The recruits had become used to it. They were dressed and standing in quick order, including Pelya. Yalla came over to her. "Captain Withiar said that you're to begin training with the rest of the troop. It's a good thing you look nearly human again."

"Yes, Sergeant."

"Right then." Yalla looked Pelya up and down and then addressed the others. She pointed at Pelya. "This is how you stand at attention! Your drill sergeant will be here soon. You will stand at attention and obey her every order. This is the last time I will be responsible for you. Welcome to the Blue Wyverns. May you come to know us as your family and find the respect and care all people deserve." Yalla banged the shield for emphasis and left the room.

Everyone briefly cheered before attempting to mimic Pelya's stance. Looking around, Pelya saw a few people who were doing it wrong, so she rushed around and gave them pointers.

A woman's coarse alto voice resounded from the doorway. "What are you doing out of position, Recruit?"

Pelya closed her eyes and cursed under her breath before running to her place next to her footlocker.

The drill sergeant marched rapidly toward Pelya. Her honey-brown hair swayed in its tight ponytail with each step. Sergeant chevrons on the left front of her dark-blue tabard indicated her rank. The insignia and wyvern emblem were white instead of light blue, indicating that she worked in the Recruit Complex. She reached Pelya and stood face-to-face, crowding Pelya's space.

Her fierce expression challenged Pelya to create problems. She was nearly as tall as Pelya and wore her height like a threat. "You'd like to spend your time socializing instead of working, wouldn't you?" She jabbed a finger into Pelya's chest. "Little girl time is over. I'm going to turn you into a soldier."

She turned and spoke to the entire group. "I'm going to turn you all into soldiers even if it kills you."

A corporal had followed the sergeant in. She was also tall and well-muscled. Her hair was done in a ponytail, but it was very red. "I'm impressed by the others, drill sergeant. They were at attention better than I think I've ever seen a raw troop of recruits."

A number of the recruits reddened in embarrassment, knowing Pelya had helped them.

"Agreed, Corporal Acdoam. It's too bad this one had to ruin it for them." The drill sergeant walked toward the door. "I am Drill Sergeant Itern. You will address me as Drill Sergeant, or Drill Sergeant Itern. Nothing else. This is Corporal Acdoam. You will address her as Corporal or Corporal Acdoam, nothing else. Now line up! You'll march in single file to the mess hall. You'll eat your food efficiently and then we'll begin your orientation. Today will be about learning where you fit in."

They marched to the mess hall where they lined up for their meal. Their tables were assigned and talking was discouraged as they shoveled food into their mouths. The drill sergeant and corporal ate with them, Pelya noted with respect.

Pelya could have eaten a second and third meal, but it wasn't offered. She was feeling much better. If allowed to rest, she could probably recover fully in a few days. With basic training, it might take a ten to twenty days, although she could definitely use the exercise. Perhaps she would even learn new things.

As they walked, Pelya watched the sergeant and corporal move back and forth to inspect the recruits. Neither was experienced in their manner or movement. Their sword belts weren't positioned for maximum effect. They didn't have the stride of someone ready for battle. The corporal's shoulders were hunched forward instead of back and ready for action. Neither woman was aware of their surroundings. Those details bothered Pelya.

The recruits were led to the northern exit of the building and across a street to the walled parade grounds. The ground was dirt packed by thousands of feet over the years. Audience stages lined the northern side. Other than that, it was primarily a place to gather. Eighteen other troops were already organized for roll call.

The sun was rising above the distant hills, but clouds whisked across the sky with a brisk wind. The ground was damp from the earlier fog and light rains. Sounds of soldiers reporting drowned out a flock of birds that flew overhead.

Drill Sergeant Itern bellowed, "You will make four rows of five columns! We will call roll call and then we will practice marching. I expect you to fail miserably. After you are finished failing miserably, you will learn how to march properly. This will take months and marching is the easiest thing you have facing you. Now line up!"

Corporal Acdoam lined them up. It was a clumsy process as each woman tried to figure out exactly where they were supposed to be. Pelya was happy that she was the last person in the second column. Regrettably, it meant that Ravenne was at the front of the next column.

Next, the sergeant called roll. With each name, she came to stand in front of the person and stare them up and down to form her opinion of them.

Pelya kept her eyes straight ahead while Drill Sergeant Itern walked around her and inspected her. "You're going to be my problem student, aren't you, Pelya Jornin."

"No, Drill Sergeant!" Pelya knew she was about to get humiliated and berated. She set aside her pride and the fact that she could snap the sergeant like a twig.

"Sure you are. You think you're better than the rest of us. I can tell." The sergeant stood in front of Pelya and folded her arms. "I've seen your type before. It'll be harder to train you because you think you already know everything."

Pelya kept her face expressionless as she debated how much trouble she would get in for breaking the drill sergeant's arm and making her cry. Although she had to admit, there was truth to the words.

"You think you don't need to be trained. You're going to tell everyone what to do even though you don't know *anything*." Sergeant Itern's voice rang clear through the air.

Pelya considered that it was an excellent voice for a sergeant to have. She was disappointed that the sergeant had said those words though, because she *had* planned on giving everyone hints. Now she had to try to shut up and not help anyone. Perhaps it would be best that way.

The sergeant shook her head in disappointment as she called the next name and walked away.

There was always one person a sergeant labeled as a troublemaker in a squad, or troop as the Wyverns called them. Sometimes it wasn't even the person who made the most trouble, but the person the sergeant hated most. Occasionally, it would be the person who got caught doing something wrong, as with Pelya.

Pelya fortified her resolve. She would be that person for Drill Sergeant Itern. It would save everyone else from dealing with it. Perhaps humility would be good for her too. Her new friends seemed to feel much the same way the sergeant did. Pelya would be the most humble recruit to ever cross the parade grounds.

She giggled at the contradiction. She stopped immediately when everyone turned to stare at her. Mentally, she kicked herself.

Drill Sergeant Itern walked slowly to Pelya. "What's so funny, Recruit?"

Pelya desperately tried to come up with something. "I was thinking about emo bunnies." For the life of her, she couldn't imagine why she would say such a thing.

The sergeant pursed her lips and rocked on her feet. "Why in the world would that make you giggle, Recruit?"

She had nothing. "Because emo bunnies are cute and cuddly and that always makes me giggle." Pelya giggled, but it was more from nervousness and mental panic than from any thought of cute emo bunnies.

She saw Deliah, in the row to the right and up a spot, wince in embarrassment.

Sergeant Itern stared at Pelya for a moment. "I don't even know how to respond to that, Recruit. This experience is going to be worse than I imagined." She shook her head. "I'm not even going to yell at you right now. I'm not certain you have the mental capacity to deal with it." She continued her roll call, ignoring Pelya from that point on.

When done, the drill sergeant turned and faced them. "We are on the buddy system. What that means is that each of you will have a buddy."

Pelya was familiar with the system. They used it in the Dralin Guard as well. Her last buddy was a man named Sornin who had died in the battle against the Crazy God. She shook off the sorrow that threatened to creep up. Hopefully, she could be buddies with Ravenne.

"Buddies look out for each other," Sergeant Itern continued. "Buddies share a room. Buddies exercise together. Buddies go on errands together. That's how it works." She gestured at the first two columns. "In these two columns, the person next to you is your buddy." She moved to the other two columns. "In these two columns, the person next to you is your buddy."

Pelya looked to the last person in the first row. It was a young woman she hadn't met.

The young woman stared at Pelya with stark fear. "Oh no, not you."

Pelya smiled toothily.

"Yes, Recruit Lilli, your buddy is Recruit Pelya." Corporal Acdoam patted her back as she walked to the front of the troop. "Deal with it."

It may as well have been a death sentence by the expression on the young woman's face.

When Pelya decided to join the Blue Wyverns, she had imagined walking through the gates and being doted upon once her past training became known. At no point had she ever considered that she would be treated as the crazy one. She also never considered that the recruiters and drill sergeants would be so dense as to see her six-foot frame and muscled form and not come to the conclusion that Pelya might be talented in combat.

"We will now take you to see the various areas where you will have your lessons," Sergeant Itern explained. "Each lesson will be explained to you. Then you will be taken to your barracks where you will be shown your routines. The entire process will take all day. Tomorrow you will begin actual training, which will take up your morning. Tomorrow afternoon, you will begin daily chores. This will be your routine for the next year."

A year of basic training would be a waste of her skills, but Pelya told herself it didn't matter. She didn't have anything else to do and needed the time to sort her mind out.

"After that year, if you are capable, you will join the ranks of the Blue Wyvern Army. If you are not capable, you will either be released, or given other tasks that will support the Blue Wyverns." Sergeant Itern spun on a heel. "Follow me!"

They all moved at the same time and ended up in a muddled mess.

“Halt!” Sergeant Itern glared at them. “It appears as though we *will* be working on basic marching drills.”

For the next hour, the troop did the marching drills. They weren’t good at it, but became adequate enough to follow without collapsing over each other.

Pelya restrained herself from helping those around her. Both Sergeant Itern and Corporal Acdoam berated Pelya for mistakes that were the result of other recruits doing things wrong while she did it right. Because she didn’t match, they targeted her.

During this time, Pelya covertly studied Lilli. The ginger-haired woman looked younger than Tina. Her freckled nose crinkled in concentration as she stutter-stepped in an attempt to match the person in front of her who was also out of step. She was five-foot seven and skinny. Basic training would definitely put some meat on her bones though.

Pelya looked over the troop. She was the tallest of them all, the second tallest being a woman at five-foot ten. Pelya was also the strongest, a detail that had always made her self-conscious. It came from training with a sword since she could pick one up. It wasn’t until the first time she had killed a person that she regretted the training. Pelya *liked* combat until it came to killing people. It was a quandary that ate at her.

“Jornin!” Corporal Acdoam was next to Pelya, yelling in her ear. The smell of onions and breakfast sausage wafted under Pelya’s nose.

Pelya sighed. Her focus would *have* to get better if she wished to survive basic.

“Your troop is going to leave you here if you don’t wake up.”

Pelya ran forward to fall in line. Lilli appeared downright nauseous at having Pelya for a buddy.

The first place they went to was an exercise yard where they watched advanced recruits perform various exercises while drill sergeants yelled how lazy everyone was. The exercises were basics Pelya enjoyed, including running.

Sergeant Itern blathered on about various things, but Pelya tuned her out. She considered paying attention, but the woman had a boring voice no matter how loud she could be.

Lilli whispered at her. “Come on.”

Pelya fell into line and flashed her troop buddy a brief smile before facing forward. They marched to the next area where recruits did hand to hand combat. None of them were good at it in Pelya’s opinion.

“Psst.” Lilli got Pelya’s attention again and saved her from having to face the corporal’s onion-laden breath.

They reached the practice yard where training for swords was done. The recruits there had wooden swords and wicker chest plates. Sergeant Itern’s troop watched for a few minutes before moving on. Pelya didn’t even need to be prodded by Lilli. The woman gave an exaggerated expression of relief.

There were no recruits training at the next area. Well-used bows and arrows were set up at archery stations with targets at varying distances. Sergeant Itern held up an arm. “Since no one is here, I will give you each the opportunity to shoot one arrow. The person with the best shot will get to avoid the twenty pushups that everyone else will have to do.”

Groans rolled through the air as most figured they would be doing pushups. A few recruits looked hopeful, including Ravenne. Pelya was decent with a bow, but it wasn’t her strength. In any case, she wasn’t about to win the contest and make everyone else hate her more.

They lined up at four of the twenty stations. Sergeant Itern and Corporal Acdoam supervised and kept score. Ravenne, in the first row, made an excellent shot a finger’s width off

center on one of the short targets. She passed Pelya with a grin on the way to the back of her column.

It was nothing compared to a brunette recruit in the third row. She had long fingers and hit the bulls-eye on a medium range target.

Ravenne slumped when the shot was made. Pelya shot her a sympathetic glance.

The last row came to the line after everyone else had shot and a few were holding welts on their arms from bad snaps of the strings. Sergeant Itern went through the instructions for the fifth time.

When each woman had a bow and arrow, Sergeant Itern bellowed, "Load!"

Pelya nocked her arrow more easily than she had meant to.

Lilli dropped hers. After two tries, she got it.

Pelya smiled encouragingly.

"Draw!"

A moment later, most had their arrows pulled back and their bows mostly steady. Corporal Acdoam walked by Pelya. "Bring it to the corner of your mouth, Jorin."

Pelya had brought the string to her chest instead and was swaying back and forth intentionally. She altered the string to her nose instead, interfering with her vision.

The corporal muttered a few curse words and walked away.

"Take aim!"

Pelya aimed to the left of the farthest target at her station.

Sergeant Itern moved next to Pelya. As she yelled, "Fire," she jabbed Pelya's side with the back of an arrow.

Pelya reacted *almost* the way the sergeant wanted her to. She jerked the bow upward and shot straight into the air while hiding her grin.

Sergeant Itern watched it fly. She jerked one way and then the other before deciding on a direction. "Run!"

The recruits ran in every direction. Pelya dropped the bow and followed Lilli who was going in a safe direction. She used extreme willpower to keep from laughing madly.

The arrow fell safely near where Pelya had shot it. Sergeant Itern ran over to Pelya. She stomped her feet and threw her hands in every direction while berating Pelya's ancestry.

Pelya humbly stared at her feet and went to a quiet place in her mind where she could avoid any reaction to the sergeant's words.

The sergeant's energy finally died down. She put her hands on her hips put her face next to Pelya's. "Do you understand me, Recruit?!"

Pelya wasn't sure what she was supposed understand, but it really didn't matter. "Yes, Sergeant," she said meekly. At least Pelya hoped it was meekly.

Sergeant Itern yelled at the top of her lungs directly into Pelya's face. "I can't hear youuuuuuu!"

Pelya discerned that the sergeant had eaten extra bacon and eggs that morning. "Yes, Drill Sergeant!"

Sergeant Itern huffed for a moment before facing the troop. "Line up!"

The troop followed the order quickly.

"Everyone but recruit Flayb, give me twenty pushups."

Pelya went just a little slower than Lilli, who struggled with the order.

Corporal Acdoam stood over Pelya the entire time, telling the recruit to work harder. The language used made a few of the recruits blush, but it was nothing compared to some of the things Pelya had heard.

Pelya was already bored with basic training. She sighed as the corporal gave her another twenty pushups after everyone else was done. Pelya did them without complaint. She needed the conditioning. After being sick though, her muscles were yelling at her louder than the corporal.

“Get on your feet!” Sergeant Itern yelled when Pelya finished.

Pelya did as ordered.

The troop marched to the next area.

Pelya noticed that Tina kept glancing in her direction with a thoughtful look on her face.

Chapter 16

They stopped for lunch back at the mess hall. It was a quiet affair where the sergeant and corporal sat together and grumbled about how it was the worst group of recruits they had ever seen. Everyone kept their heads down so as not to antagonize them anymore.

Pelya and Lilli sat together. To Pelya's astonishment, Lilli patted her leg and smiled encouragingly. Pelya smiled back and they enjoyed the rest of their meal.

The afternoon went much the same as the morning had with a tour around the Recruit Complex and the training areas. To Pelya's surprise, there was a pool for learning how to swim, including lessons on how to take off armor underwater to avoid drowning.

Pelya's biggest concern was that the recruits would be spread too thin between different types of training. The only thing she could think of is that they would spend a few days on one type and move on to the others. She *hoped* it would be that way.

Before sunset, the sergeant led them to their new rooms on the third floor of the Recruit Barracks, a building behind the east street from the parade grounds and diagonal from the Enlistment Building where they would still eat meals. They marched up the wide stairs in single file to allow other people room to go down. More than a few of the troop were out of breath by the time they reached the top. From there, they followed long corridors toward the back of the building.

Pelya was tired by that time, but she set aside the feeling with discipline.

A wide opening along the last corridor led to a narrow room with five wooden doors on both sides of the stone walls. A battle-scarred corporal yawned from behind a desk at the end of the room. She massaged muscles above a thigh-high peg leg propped up on the desk.

The wooden floor was bare of any rugs and polished smooth from countless years of foot traffic. A fireplace behind the desk had a small fire in it and wood stacked nearby. The crackling sounds and the smell of the wood gave the recruits a small sense of comfort. Lanterns on wrought-iron hangers between each door provided adequate light.

"There are ten rooms for recruits," Sergeant Itern told them as they lined up in two columns with Pelya and Lilli in the back. "Each room has two beds, two footlockers and one nightstand. Each pair of buddies will have a room." She pointed to the brunette corporal at the desk. "This is Night Corporal Birown. She will see to it that you are in bed at lights out. If you are *not* in bed, she will file a report with the Night Captain. You don't want to meet with the Night Captain."

Corporal Acdoam shuddered and shook her head. Corporal Birown appeared bored with the entire process as though she had been through it a hundred times. She put the peg leg on the floor and leaned back in her chair while yawning again.

"We will now assign you rooms. You may examine them briefly." Sergeant Itern paced. "After that, you will collect your packs from your old barracks and bring them here. After *that*, you will be taken to the baths. The lot of you stink, especially Jornin." She sneered while Corporal Acdoam laughed like a donkey. No one else thought it anything but humiliating.

Everyone was assigned rooms. Pelya and Lilli got the last one on the right and went inside to examine it. Straw mattresses were on wooden bed frames with blankets and sheets folded at the base. The nightstand between the beds had two candles on it, which would provide the only light since there were no windows. Each woman had a plain wooden footlocker for possessions they no longer owned, another clue to Pelya that things had changed from the way they used to be.

The sergeant bellowed for the troop to line up, so they closed the door and took their places.

By the time they had marched to get their packs, returned to deliver them and down again to the baths, the troop was exhausted and sore. They took their baths quickly. Pelya cleaned herself and tried not to notice others staring openly at her muscular frame.

After drying off and changing back into their uniforms, they went to dinner.

Sergeant Itern lined them up in two columns again before they ate. "You will eat with your buddy. I don't want to see women gathering in cliques. *If* any of you make it to battle, you will need to trust each other to keep you alive. Cliques sabotage that trust."

Pelya agreed with the concept, but knew it was impossible. Every organization had cliques and she was certain the Wyverns did too.

They did as they were told though. Lilli and Pelya sat together, even though Pelya wanted to talk to her friends. A few glances showed that the others wanted to get together too. Pelya caught Lilli glancing at a few of the other woman. The sergeant's move had effectively squashed the three cliques in their troop.

When they were nearly done eating, Pelya told Lilli, "I'm sorry I'm such a mess."

Lilli leaned in and whispered, "It took all of my effort not to laugh when the sergeant told us to run from your arrow."

Pelya snorted and nodded. "Me too. I tried my hardest to keep a straight face and not get us into more trouble."

Lilli put a patronizing hand on Pelya's side. "But you have to start paying attention. Neither the sergeant nor the corporal likes you. They're going to catch everything you do wrong."

"I know. I'll try," Pelya said sincerely. She picked at her food. "I'm sorry you got stuck with me."

"It's fine." Lilli smiled encouragingly. "Say, do you think it's going to snow? I've heard that we're in for a harsh winter."

They made small talk about the weather until heading to the barracks a short while later.

Back in their rooms, they changed into nightclothes and readied themselves for bed. Pelya brushed out her hair and set the wooden brush on the nightstand. She was both mentally and physically tired.

Lilli had her knees tucked up to her chest and was resting her chin on them. "Pelya?"

"Yes, Lilli?"

A tremor entered Lilli's voice. "I'm ready."

"Ready for what?" Pelya tried to remember if they were supposed to do something before going to bed.

The tremor increased and Lilli began rocking. "You know."

She thought harder. After eating, they were to go to sleep and be at drills in the morning. "No . . . No. I don't know. What are you ready for?"

Lilli looked at her with wide eyes and gulped. "Sex?"

Pelya mentally went over the instructions again. Sex wasn't anywhere in them. "What are you talking about, Lilli?"

"We're supposed to have sex." Lilli spread an arm as though it was obvious.

"I don't remember that instruction in recruiting or . . . anywhere. I wouldn't be here if it was." Pelya shifted one leg under the other and faced Lilli's bed.

"Well . . ." Lilli thought about it. "Everyone knows that the women in the Blue Wyverns have sex with each other."

Pelya raised an eyebrow. "They do? That's news to me. Where did you hear that?"

"Well . . . Everyone knows it." Lilli was unsure of herself.

"Who *exactly* told you that?"

Lilli was silent for a moment. "People in my village."

Pelya was going to have to use her investigative skills. "Name the one that sticks out the most in your mind."

"My brother, Jeremy." Lilli began shaking. "He said that women in the Blue Wyverns were rougher than any man would ever be and that I needed to stay home, get married and have children like a proper woman." She broke into sobs.

Pelya waited for the tears to finish, offering neither comfort nor condemnation. "And you still joined?"

She nodded. "Yes. I didn't want to marry Widower Halvers no matter how well off he is. He's so *old* and he has leprosy." She burst into tears again. "So I ran away."

"That's understandable." Once again, Pelya didn't offer comfort or condemnation. She didn't know how true the part about the widower was, but it sounded as though Lilli had done a good job of getting out of a bad situation. The girl needed to continue standing on her own two feet.

When Lilli was done, Pelya said, "Lilli?"

"Y . . . yes, Pelya?"

Pelya's voice was firm and compassionate. "I'm not going to have sex with you, nor will you be required to do so by anyone else."

"No?" Lilli seemed surprised by the revelation.

"No. Anyone who told you otherwise was deceiving you." Pelya slipped under her covers, satisfied that the problem had been resolved. She blew out her candle, leaving Lilli's as the only source of light.

"Are you sure?" Lilli asked with skepticism.

"Completely." Pelya rested her head on the pillow and closed her eyes.

A couple of minutes passed in silence. Pelya was beginning to nod off when Lilli said, "Pelya?"

"Hmm?"

"I feel better now."

"Good." Pelya shifted her head on the pillow.

"Pelya?"

Pelya sighed. "Yes?"

The tremor returned to Lilli's voice. "If you *want* to have sex, I'm still ready."

Pelya sat up. "I don't want to have sex."

Lilli was sitting on the edge of her bed, facing Pelya. Her eyes widened in surprise. "You don't?"

"No." Pelya leaned against the wall and rubbed her eyes with the heels of her palms. What she *wanted* was to go to sleep.

"But . . ." Lilli leaned forward and lowered her voice. "I've never had sex before, you know."

"No I didn't know that, because I didn't ask, because it's none of my business." Pelya flopped her hands in her lap.

"Oh. Well I haven't, not with a man *or* a woman."

“Good for you. Now why don’t you go to sleep,” Pelya suggested. “We have drills tomorrow.”

“Oh.” Lilli sat there quietly for a moment and stared at the ground.

Pelya stared at the ceiling. She didn’t try to lie back down because she guessed that Lilli wasn’t done.

“Pelya?”

Pelya’s voice lowered in resignation. “Yes?”

“I’m curious about sex.”

“Good for you.” Pelya wanted *very* much to go to sleep.

Lilli leaned forward a bit and her shoulders rose. “*Can* we have sex? I promise I’ll do my best.”

“No. We may *not* have sex.” Pelya swung her feet over the edge of the bed. “Listen . . . Lilli . . . I’m not going to have sex with you. Perhaps someone else will someday, but not me. So please just let me go to sleep. *Please*.”

“Oh.” Lilli shrank back. Under Pelya’s gaze, she slipped under the covers and faced the wall.

Pelya felt a little guilty, but not much. She slid under her own covers and faced her own wall.

“Pelya?”

Pelya glared at the wall. “Yes?”

“Are you sure?”

“*Yes!* Now go to sleep!”

Silence.

A moment passed.

“Pelya?”

Pelya growled.

“I’m sorry I made you mad.”

“You didn’t make me mad. I just want to go to sleep, all right?”

“All right.”

Pelya finally began drifting off again when she felt pressure on edge of her bed. She rapidly sat up and shifted to the corner, holding the blanket in one fist against her chest. “What is it, Lilli?”

Lilli’s chin was down against her chest and her shoulders were slumped. “You probably don’t want to have sex with me because I’m ugly, right?”

“You’re not ugly,” Pelya said plaintively. She was tired of the conversation.

“I’m not?” The news appeared to shock Lilli.

“No! You’re very pretty, Lilli.” Pelya rubbed her eyes again.

“Then . . . you *do* want to have sex with me?”

Pelya held her arms out, incredulous. “How did you jump to that conclusion? I *don’t* want to have sex with you.”

“But if I’m pretty, you should want to have sex with me.” Lilli looked at Pelya as though the logic were obvious. “If you don’t want to have sex with me, then I’m ugly.”

Pelya’s lips twisted and her eyes narrowed. “When the recruiter asked if you were insane, what did you tell her?”

Confusion crossed Lilli’s expression. “What?”

Pelya shook her head. “Never mind.” She took a deep breath. “Listen to me. I’m not going to have sex with you. I don’t care what conclusions you jump to because of it. Right now, you need to get in your own bed.” Pelya pointed firmly at Lilli’s bed. Her voice rose in volume with each word. “Don’t *ever* sit on my bed or ask me to have sex with you again. *Ever!*”

Lilli jumped from Pelya’s bed into her own. She scrambled under the covers and peeked fearfully from underneath.

Pelya punched her pillow a few times, covered up and closed her eyes. If Lilli ever came back to Pelya’s bed, Pelya was likely to break both the girl’s legs.

Chapter 17

The next morning was cool, with clouds in the sky where they belonged rather than huddling next to the ground. After breakfast, the troop reported to the parade grounds for roll call. From there, they went to an exercise yard in a different part of the Complex. An hour's worth of exercise felt wonderful. Pelya's muscles ached after the workout, but it was a good ache.

The others didn't fare so well. Lilli leaned on Pelya's shoulder while panting after falling down on her last ten pushup attempts. Running laps around the yard had taken out half the unfit troop.

After that, Sergeant Itern took them to the armory. Their sizes were recorded by a group of armorers for permanent records. They spent another hour trying on different types of armor from basic leathers to full plate so they could understand the motion ranges and weights of each in addition to what sort of weapons they were effective against.

Next, they were taken to a building where hand-to-hand combat was taught. They were given lessons on balance and wrestling until lunchtime.

Overall, it was the most disorganized training Pelya had ever been a part of. It was as though they went through the motions of whatever interested the sergeant that day. There was no time to become proficient in the basics of any one thing.

No one spoke during lunch because they were too busy groaning. Pelya was thrilled that they were given time for her to grab thirds. She still needed energy replenished. Getting back to exercising would require a good deal of food too. It was the one thing the Wyverns didn't have a problem providing.

After lunch, they reported to the parade grounds where a group of administrators waited for them. Each of their names was called out and the recruits were taken for afternoon chores.

Lilli asked Pelya, "What's your chore?"

"Transcribing."

"What's that?" Lilli frowned in confusion.

"I copy writing from one paper to another."

"Writing?" Lilli's attitude toward Pelya changed. "You write?"

"Yes. What's your chore?"

"Housekeeping." Lilli made a face.

"I couldn't do that. I'd probably shoot the bed into the air."

Lilli laughed, drawing the attention of everyone. She stifled it with both hands.

Professor Withiar stepped forward to call out Pelya and Ravenne's name. Pelya gave Lilli an encouraging smile before following the professor to the carriage yard.

The professor looked over her shoulder at them. "You appear to be tired."

"I'd nod, but my neck is too weary," Ravenne said.

Iriene chuckled. "You'll get used to it." They reached the carriage yard and she ordered a carriage before turning back to them. "Every day after lunch, you are to come here and request a carriage to take you to the Transcription Building. For the first month of your training, you'll be on a different schedule than the advanced recruits, so it will just be the two of you unless we get more in that time. After that, you'll join the advanced recruits in a wagon every day."

"Yes, Professor," they said as one.

"Good. When you get to the Transcription Building, you are to sign in at the desk and follow instructions from there. Is that clear?"

"Yes, Professor," they said again.

The carriage rolled up with Matthew driving. Iriene smiled up at him as he stopped and applied the wheel brake. "Take them to the Transcription Building, Matthew."

Matthew jumped out, his long coat flaring. "Yes, Auntie Iriene."

Professor Withiar turned to the women. "Goodbye and good luck, Recruits."

"Goodbye, Auntie Iriene," they both said to the embarrassment of Matthew and the laughter of the professor.

Ravenne and Pelya got into the carriage, each taking Matthew's hand as he held the door open for them. Ravenne returned the brilliant smile, while Pelya rolled her eyes at it. Once they were settled, Matthew jumped into his seat and began driving toward the Academy Complex.

They sank back into the seat and relaxed as the carriage rolled out of the yard. People bustled about along the sidewalks, many on business for the Blue Wyverns. Riders and loaded wagons maneuvered over the street as they headed toward their destinations. At the crowded intersection with the highway, a pair of cloaked soldiers directed traffic and resolved conflicts.

Pelya ran fingers through her hair as they passed through the intersection. The shortness of it was beginning to grow on her. She giggled.

Ravenne looked at her with worry. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah." Pelya blushed. "I used to have long hair. I was just thinking that short hair was growing on me and it struck me as funny."

"Uh huh." Ravenne undid her own ponytail and put the string in a pouch that was standard equipment. "I prefer ribbon for my hair, but I don't get to choose that anymore. I'd also like to braid it, but there hasn't been a lot of time to do one properly and my arms are sore from training." She turned to Pelya. "How do you like your troop buddy?"

"She's a bit naïve, but nice." Pelya watched a couple of merchants arguing about the price of beans along the store-lined street. "Her name is Lilli."

"How is she naïve?"

"She's been told a lot of lies about the world and never experienced any of it for herself until arriving here." Pelya wondered what it must have been like to see home as safe and the world as dangerous instead of home as dangerous and the rest of the world as safe.

"You can't hold that against her," Ravenne said harshly.

The tone took Pelya by surprise. "I don't. I said I like her, and I do."

"Oh. All right." Ravenne watched people bustling along the other side of the street.

Pelya decided to just not talk.

Ravenne turned toward her and tucked one leg under the other. "How do you know she's naïve? Did she do something?"

The change in manner surprised Pelya. Sometimes she just couldn't figure people out. "Well . . ."

"Go on," Ravenne encouraged.

Pelya didn't know whether she should say or not, but the incident had been bothering her. "She thought that all Blue Wyverns had to have sex with each other."

Ravenne's jaw dropped. "No! That's a bit extreme. What did you tell her?"

"I told her it wasn't true. She doesn't have to do any of that if she doesn't want to and no one is going to force her in the Wyverns." Pelya shook her head. "Her brother told her a bunch of lies, I think. I feel bad for her."

"If she thought that, why would she join?"

"She hinted at escaping a bad betrothal." Pelya shrugged.

Ravenne made a face. "I'd have joined even if I thought those things were true." She paused for a moment and studied Pelya.

Pelya wondered what the examination was about. "What?"

"Did you?"

"Did I what?"

"Did you have sex with her?"

"No!" Pelya shook her head in disbelief. "Why would you ask that?"

"Well . . ."

"Well what?"

"I mean, she's pretty enough and I can see her being your type." Ravenne winked.

"My type?" Pelya didn't like where the conversation was going.

"It just seems to me that you'd like someone petite, cute and naïve."

Pelya was at a loss for words.

Ravenne put a hand on Pelya's leg. "I don't have a problem with it."

"My preferences are no one's concern but my own." Pelya spoke angrily. "The Blue Wyverns don't get to ask me, you don't get to ask me, Lilli doesn't get to ask me, the High Commander doesn't get to ask me, and even the gods themselves don't get to ask me." She folded her arms and stared ahead, infuriated by yet another person sticking their nose in her business.

"Wow. Fine then." Ravenne turned the other way and stared out the carriage.

They were silent for a few minutes before Pelya dropped her arms. "I'm sorry, Ravenne. Nothing's gone the way I expected and I haven't been very nice to anyone I suppose."

Ravenne turned back and looked down at her hands. "It hasn't gone the way anyone would expect." She looked at the sky. "I don't even *know* what I expected."

"Well, how do you like your troop buddy?"

Ravenne smiled. "Her name is Pennia. She's from the Kingdom of Swelth and she lived on the shore of a lake near mountains. She said it was beautiful."

"It *sounds* beautiful!"

"I think we'll be the best of friends," Ravenne said cheerfully.

"Oh." Pelya tried to smile, but failed.

Ravenne raised an eyebrow. "What, are you jealous?"

Pelya tried to shrug it off, but failed. "Yeah." She felt miserable.

Ravenne studied Pelya for a moment. Then her eyes widened. "You're attracted to *me*; that's why you didn't share your bed with Lilli."

"Oh, by the *gods*!" Pelya said in exasperation. "I'm not attracted to you or *anyone*. I just want friends so I don't have to be alone anymore. I hate being alone." She buried her head in her arms and pulled on her hair until it hurt.

"You're *not* attracted to me? Why, am I ugly or something?"

Pelya couldn't believe she had to have this conversation again. "You're beautiful, Ravenne. I just want you to be my friend, nothing more." She huddled in on herself. "I don't even care if you won't be my best friend, just as long as you like me." Pelya hated that she felt that way. She was strong enough to take on the world by herself, but being alone wasn't an option anymore.

"I like you! Best friends betray each other though." Ravenne pulled her feet on the seat and hugged her legs.

“Never!” Pelya looked at her in shock. “My best friend’s name is Ebudae. We didn’t like each other at first, but then we became best friends and have been ever since.” Pelya chewed on her lip. “We’ll always be best friends no matter how far apart we get.”

Ravenne’s interest was piqued. “Why isn’t she here?”

“She couldn’t leave and I couldn’t stay. I miss her more than anyone.”

“What about your mother?”

“She died giving birth to me.”

Ravenne held Pelya’s hand. “I’m sorry.”

Pelya squeezed the hand gratefully. “I really just want to be your friend.”

“We can do that, but I’m going to be friends with Pennia and all the others too.”

“Agreed. I would never take that away from you.” Pelya considered Ravenne’s previous statement. “I don’t know what your best friend did to betray you, but I *am* loyal to my friends and will defend them to the last drop of blood.”

“You’re being scary again.”

Pelya heaved a great sigh. “I can’t help it. I *am* intense. Death and worse can come from any direction at any time.” She held a fist forward and clenched her jaw. “The key to living is to take life and live every moment as if it’s the last. Love every instant you get, good or bad.”

Ravenne tapped her on the shoulder.

Pelya reddened in embarrassment. “Yes?”

“Did Ebudae think you were a little crazy too?”

Pelya laughed. “Yes, but she’s crazier than me, so we got along famously.”

“Why *did* you giggle at roll call yesterday, by the way?” Ravenne stretched her legs and yawned.

“I was thinking that I needed to be humble. Then I decided that I would be the most humble person that ever walked Ryallon and everyone shall admire my humbleness as I humbly walk past.” Pelya grinned.

Ravenne giggled and shoved Pelya. “That sounds like you. You are grand even in humility.”

“Drill Sergeant Itern truly hates me.” Pelya sighed. “Life for the next year is going to be hell, *if* I make it that far.”

“Hey, don’t talk like that.” Ravenne curled one leg up under the other. “You’ll make it just fine.” She tilted her head. “The drill sergeant really *does* hate you. What will you do?”

Pelya smiled. “Better me than anyone else. I can shoulder the burden.”

“Yes. It will fit nicely next to your humility,” Ravenne said drily.

Pelya laughed loudly. “That did sound arrogant, didn’t it?” She shook her head. “I don’t mean to.”

“It’s a bit refreshing actually.” Ravenne smirked. “I thought everyone was going to hate me because *I* was the arrogant one. You’ve solved that problem for me nicely.”

“You’re not remotely arrogant,” Pelya said.

“I’m the daughter of a high-ranking noble from the Kingdom of Foauth. I *do* think I’m better than commoners most of the time, though I’m beginning to realize that’s not always true.” Ravenne blushed. “I still think everyone should curtsy to me.” She grinned mischievously. “I think you should do all my drills for me so I don’t have to sweat.”

Pelya laughed as they pulled up to the Transcription Building. “I wouldn’t mind. I’ve never been this out of shape.” They both got out and said goodbye to Matthew.

“Out of shape? Other than being ill, you’re positively manly.”

Pelya's mood fell to the ground. "I'm not manly."

"I'm sorry." Ravenne hugged Pelya's arm. "That's not what I meant. I mean you have more muscles than I've ever seen in a woman."

"Thanks, I feel better." Pelya's voice made it clear she didn't feel at all better.

They entered the greeting hall. "Don't be so sensitive. It's a compliment." Ravenne signed her name in the book Tobias pushed forward for them.

"Calling any woman 'manly' has never been a compliment," Pelya protested.

Tobias chuckled. "I'll have to remember that on my next date." He smiled at the laughter he received for the quip as he pointed to their right. "You'll go to the right, and then make a left. Go down that corridor a ways until you come to a stairway on your right. Go down two levels. Go right. Follow the hall until it ends. Go left. You want the first pair of double doors on the left. A sign next to it will tell you that it's the copy room."

Ravenne put her hands on her hips. "You expect us to remember all of that?"

"Not only remember it, but recite it." Tobias folded his hands on the desk and waited.

Pelya recited the directions, "Go to the right, make a left, go down that corridor until we come to a stairway on the right, go down two levels, go right, follow the hall until it ends, and then go left. We want the first pair of double doors on the left. A sign next to it will tell us that it's the copy room." She turned to Ravenne. "Because it's a magical sign that speaks."

Tobias laughed. "Get going then. Report to Professor Zergienner. She'll get you started."

They thanked him and followed the directions.

"How did you remember all that?" Ravenne asked.

"It's important to be able to understand directions when given. I'm . . ." She was about to say that she was excellent at it. "I can do it sometimes, but it's hard and I need to improve."

Ravenne smirked. "Is that you trying to be humble?"

Pelya reddened. "Yes. How did I do?"

Ravenne laughed. "Very believable. Every word was humble."

Pelya shoved her playfully and they headed down the stairs, which were made of stone and had magical lanterns hanging from the wall on each landing. The hallways were also lit by the lanterns. The temperature was moderate and the air dryer than outside. The women passed numerous doors, all of which were closed. They turned down the last hall and reached the door to the copy room.

They quietly entered and looked around. It was brighter than Pelya had imagined, with more of the lanterns hanging along the walls. Shelves of blank paper lined two of the walls while the third had writings to be transcribed. Other shelves held writing supplies. The room smelled pleasantly of paper, ink and warmth.

Four columns of three scribe desks faced away from the door. Five desks had recruits sitting on tall stools. They turned from their work to look at the newcomers.

A young woman in brown professor's robes embroidered with a light-blue wyvern sat at a desk on the opposite end of the room. "You would be Pelya Jornin and Ravenne Ambruis? Come forward. I don't bite."

They walked forward between two columns of desks. One recruit said, "But she does nibble." It drew snickers from the others.

"Reporting for duty, Professor Zergienner," Ravenne said as they approached.

The professor had a pleasant smile that lit her grey eyes. Her platinum-blond hair was tied back in a braid. Pelya subconsciously ran a finger through the back of her own hair in remembrance. Professor Zergienner's voice was soft and airy as she spoke. "You will spend the

hours between lunch and dinner here copying old papers to new. We do not trust the most valuable documents to recruits, but these are still important, so you must be careful.”

“Yes, Professor,” Ravenne said. She was determined to take the lead, so Pelya let her. It was nice for a change.

The professor stood and escorted them to desks. “I’ll let the two of you sit next to each other.” She turned and gestured to two desks side by side. “I am not as strict as many professors. I allow some talking, but I expect work to be done and if there are too many distractions, you’ll be separated.”

“Yes, Professor,” they said as they sat.

“Very good. I’m going to get you each writing materials and something easy to copy.” She looked at them as they sat. “Which of you is Pelya?”

“I am.” Pelya raised her hand.

“I understand you write nine languages including ancient common. If you do well, you’ll be given more advanced material, but that’s for later.”

“Yes, Professor.”

“Good.” She moved to get the materials.

Ravenne stared at Pelya with her jaw open and arms spread. Everyone else in the room was also staring at her incredulously.

“I’m sorry.” Pelya folded her hands on the desk and hung her head.

“Nine?” Ravenne whispered. “Nine languages? I just can’t win.”

Pelya continued staring at her hands, hoping Ravenne wouldn’t stay mad.

“What languages do you write?” one of the other recruits asked.

Pelya looked around and saw that they were all waiting for the answer.

Professor Zergienner placed small stacks of paper in front of the newcomers. “Go ahead and answer Pelya. It’s all right.” She went to get the materials to be copied.

Pelya listed them off, but didn’t look anyone in the eyes.

It was a surprise when Ravenne came over and gave Pelya a hug before sitting back down. “That was very impressive, but your speech was humble.”

“That last one was a language of magic,” one of the other recruits said from the front. “Can you do magic?”

“A little bit, but I’m not a wizard.”

Ravenne pointed warningly. “The last time you tried, you nearly killed yourself with backlash.”

“Light a candle,” the recruit said. “That doesn’t take much magic. I *must* see.” She pointed at an unlit candle on Pelya’s desk.

Pelya examined it and noticed that it had basic runes carved into the wax that would enable it to burn ten times longer than normal. They were one of the easiest enchantments to create and didn’t cost much more than a normal candle. Casting the lighting spell on it would be easy.

Professor Zergienner placed paper on Pelya and Ravenne’s desks. “You can do so if you like, Pelya.”

She shook her head. “Ravenne was right. I nearly killed myself last time. I’m still recovering.” The statement was partly for Ravenne’s sake and partly because Ebudae had taught her a more efficient spell that wouldn’t be recognized or approved of by a college-trained wizard.

“Huh.” The recruit narrowed her eyes in suspicion before turning and going back to her work.

Pelya looked at the paper she had been given. She didn't want to talk to anyone, or face Ravenne's gaze.

Chapter 18

Half of Pelya's page was done when the door to the copy room swung open and hit the wall loudly. The sound caused the recruits to jump. Most cursed at the mistakes made as a result.

Professor Zergienner stood and placed her hands on the desk in anger. "Professor Opelnee! What do you mean coming in here like that and disturbing the recruits? I'd be surprised if there was one good paper amongst them now and it'll not be their fault."

"Where is she?!" the elder professor demanded. His beard bristled as he scanned the room. He jabbed a finger in Pelya's direction. "There you are!"

Pelya held a hand to her chest in confusion and wondered what she had done wrong *this* time.

Professor Opelnee stormed over to her. "Why didn't you report to me immediately upon arriving?"

Pelya shrank back. She didn't know why he was angry.

"All new recruits report to me!" Professor Zergienner yelled as she approached them. "Why are you disturbing my recruits?"

"This one is to report to *me*, not you!" Opelnee grabbed Pelya's arm and jerked her off the stool, knocking it to the ground.

"Ow!" Pelya jerked back, but the professor's grip was surprisingly strong. It was a position she was unaccustomed to.

Pelya's mind emptied. She became hyper-focused on every detail as time slowed. She could kill the professor, injure him, or simply incapacitate him.

Professor Zergienner grabbed Pelya's other arm. "I will not let you take this young woman. She's in my care."

Professor Opelnee slammed a fist into Ravenne's desk, causing the recruit to scream and jump away. His face was red with rage and he bit his words as he pointed a finger in Zergienner's face. "You answer to me, not the other way around. I am the High Professor of Archives." His voice lowered to a snarl. "You will *never* challenge my authority again."

Zergienner shrank under the professor's stare and backed away.

Professor Opelnee jerked on Pelya's arm again and pulled her toward the door.

Ravenne reached out. "Pelya!"

Pelya waved her off. "I'll be fine." She *hoped* she would be fine. It wouldn't look good if she killed the High Professor of Archives only a few days after joining the Blue Wyverns.

All of the recruits watched as one of their own was pulled from the room.

Professor Opelnee set a rapid pace that Pelya matched. It was in the opposite direction she and Ravenne had come. He didn't let go of her arm, but she didn't complain so as not to intensify his wrath. She could handle pain where necessary.

With one of the thicker pieces of straw on her broom, Deliah deftly flicked a bit of grit out of the darkened grout of the floor. She was outside one of the file rooms at the Recruit Offices. Cleaning them would be her daily chore, which was fine with her, except that the clerks in the file room kept glancing at her suspiciously. Deliah didn't know why, considering she couldn't read and wouldn't care about them even if she could.

Other recruits were cleaning other areas of the building, but from what little Deliah saw, they weren't doing a good job. She wondered how they had managed to get the assignment. Two had even snuck off at the first opportunity.

The Recruit Offices weren't nearly as clean as Deliah expected. It would take all year for her to get it into proper condition. If the other recruits would work harder, it might be done a little faster.

She flicked another pebble out of the grout and vigorously swept the dirt into a growing pile.

"You're doing an excellent job."

Deliah cringed and held an arm over her head to deflect the blow she knew would come.

"Here now!" The cleaning supervisor, Mathildee, held a calming hand forward. "I'm not going to hurt you, sweetie. We don't do that here." She was a kindly matron with a worn face and frazzled hair. Her voice was rough, but sincere. If anything, she was too easygoing in her manner, thus the poor condition of the building.

With a sleeve, Deliah wiped the tears that had jumped to her eyes unbidden. Her nerves were shattered even after the warm welcome and friends she had received. "I'm sorry. I'll do better."

"Shh, shh." Mathildee took Deliah's shaking arm. "You're doing an excellent job. Please, Deliah. I want you to relax."

Deliah took a deep breath and nodded nervously. "I'll try."

Mathildee smiled encouragingly. "Would you like to take a break? You've been working hard." She gestured at the hall, which was nearly swept clean. "This floor hasn't looked this good since . . . well, ever I suppose."

"Oh no. I still haven't mopped it." Deliah wondered that anyone would think that the floor looked acceptable.

An officer walked up the hallway, coming from outside. She held her chin high as she looked down upon the world. Deliah admired how sharp her uniform was, but she couldn't tell what rank the officer was because she hadn't figured out the insignia.

Next to the officer strode an angry man dressed in black silks, handsome but cold of appearance. His earth-brown eyes were cruel and his hand rested on the hilt of a wicked-looking longsword that seemed as though it wished to jump into his hand. Wisps of white in the muted-blond hair give testimony to the man's life experience. His square jaw twitched as he spoke to the officer in a rasping voice that grated on Deliah's ears. "Things should not have collapsed so badly in Dralin. We *must* succeed here and elsewhere and not become complacent!"

Mathildee saluted the officer with the edge of her right hand to her forehead. Deliah did her best to mimic the gesture.

"Hush, Laen. This is not the place to discuss such things." The officer stopped and returned the salute. She folded her arms behind her back and spoke in nasal tones. "Administrator Persiv, the floor looks better than usual. What changed?"

Mathildee gestured at Deliah. "Our new recruit cleans better than anyone I've met, Commander Indiya."

The Commander looked Deliah up and down. "Doesn't look like much, but if she's that good, then send her to clean my office sometime in the next few days. Your people can't even take out my trash properly."

"Yes, Commander." Mathildee nervously saluted again. Deliah followed example.

The commander didn't even bother to return the salute as she walked off in the company of the man.

Mathildee held the salute until they were out of sight. She turned and took Deliah by the arms. "Commander Indiya has never spoken to me before. I didn't even know she knew my name. I'll take you to her office tomorrow. You *must* do a good job."

Deliah held her broom tightly, frightened by Mathildee's intensity. "Yes, Administrator, Persiv."

Mathildee released her. "I told you to call me Mathildee and I meant it." She brushed off her dress. "I'll let you get back to your work, but if you need a rest, you take it."

"Yes, Mathildee." Deliah watched the administrator walk off before going back to sweeping. She kept her nose to her work until Mathildee came to send her off. The floor of the hallway was spotless, but Deliah didn't feel that she had done near enough in spite of Mathildee's awe.

Ravenne went to the door and peeked to see Pelya being pulled down the hallway and around the corner by the brawny professor. She had seen women dragged off like that by men, including her best friend from a year ago. That friend had died a few days later from the brutal experience.

She would *not* let that happen to Pelya.

"Come inside," one of the other recruits said to Ravenne.

"I have to go after her." Ravenne turned to see that it was the woman who had asked Pelya to cast the spell to light the candle.

Her pink eyes held warning. "He's the High Professor of Archives. He'll have you kicked out."

"Izzabell," one of the other recruits called. "Professor Zergienner is crying."

The pink-eyed woman turned. "We'll be right there." She turned back to Ravenne. "Come on. We'll figure this out in a minute."

Ravenne wasn't sure Pelya had a minute, but she followed nonetheless. One of the other recruits closed the door.

Professor Zergienner wept loudly from where she was sitting behind her desk with her head in her hands. Izzabell rushed over and put a comforting arm around her shoulders. "It'll be all right, Professor."

The professor shook her head and said between gulps of breath, "No, it won't. I'm not allowed to do my job, so he'll yell at me for falling behind. He'll yell at me for . . . for . . . for everything!"

"I know. He's a brute," Izzabell said sympathetically. "You've earned respect and I've never seen him give you any."

"What will he do to Pelya?" Ravenne asked.

Everyone turned to her. The professor stopped crying. "I . . . I don't know."

The look in her eyes gave Ravenne a guess as to the answer.

Another recruit spoke up. "I've never heard of him doing anything like . . ."

Hope filled the professor's eyes. "Neither have I." She wiped her face with her sleeves. "I'm certain Pelya will be fine." She stood and clapped her hands. "Back to your places and no talking. We have work to catch up on."

Ravenne looked toward the door. "I'm going after Pelya."

“No!” Professor Zergienner pointed at Ravenne’s desk. “You will sit down and transcribe those documents, Recruit.”

Ravenne was about to disobey, but the other recruits circled her to protect their professor’s order. She went to her desk reluctantly. The others went to theirs. They kept a close eye on her.

She looked at the paper, but there was no way she could continue transcribing while Pelya might be in trouble. Granted, the woman was the oddest person Ravenne had ever met, but she seemed genuine and *had* sworn to protect Ravenne to the last drop of blood. It was only fair that Ravenne do the same thing.

Ravenne thought about how Pelya had saved Deliah’s life. Pelya had gotten in trouble with the drill sergeant the first morning because she was helping others, not because she was doing anything wrong. In addition, Pelya knew nine languages, *nine*. Ravenne looked to the door. No normal person could read nine languages. Pelya was unusual, but there was something special about her too. Ravenne wasn’t willing to let Professor Opelnee or anyone else ruin that.

Professor Zergienner’s voice broke the silence. “Ravenne.”

She jumped. “Yes, Professor?”

“If you go after her, Professor Opelnee will likely have you expelled from the Blue Wyverns. He is not a tolerant man.”

“I accept those consequences,” Ravenne said easily.

Izzabell spoke up. “If he’s doing something bad, then he might do worse to you.”

Ravenne abruptly stood. “I accept *those* consequences as well. I will *not* allow my friend to go through that experience if there’s the slightest thing I can do to prevent it.”

Professor Zergienner gestured toward the door. “Go then.”

Ravenne ran.

The professor dragged Pelya down another hallway. “You will report to me in my office every afternoon, young woman. If I have nothing for you to do, then, and only then, may you join the others.”

“Yes professor.” They reached stairs on the opposite side of the building from where Pelya and Ravenne had come down. Pelya felt her shoulder twist when he turned and headed up. She grunted. “I *will* cooperate, Professor. You don’t have to hurt me.”

Professor Opelnee stopped. He looked at his hand on her arm and let go. “Come.”

Pelya rubbed her arm as she followed him up to the ground level and to his office.

His apprentice was busily writing in a book. He glanced at Pelya, but only briefly.

Professor Opelnee had a chair in front of his desk. He pointed firmly at it. “Sit!”

Pelya quickly, but without panic, did as she was told.

The professor retrieved the book from the other day and placed it in front of Pelya. He opened it to the same place. “Translate. If you need something to drink, I have water. I fetched it myself, so I know it’s not rancid.” He said the last with a pointed glare at the assistant who buried his head further into his writing.

Pelya moved her seat so it was more comfortable. She peered at the words. Her mind was still focused for battle and the writing didn’t make any sense. A deep breath helped calm the adrenaline. She rubbed her face to calm herself.

“What’s the problem?” Professor Opelnee’s tone was impatient.

"I need to focus on the words," Pelya said. "I'll do a good job, Professor, but it takes concentration. Please bear with me."

He took a deep breath of his own. "Of course. Translating ancient text *does* take concentration." He paused. "I'm sorry. My behavior wasn't the best."

It was a lousy apology and Pelya was still upset, so she didn't respond. Instead, she leaned over the book and took another look at the words. They made more sense with her mind clear.

"And they did look for them. A whisper stood there, but not them. Another did disappear, but they were not seen. Nor were they smelt . . . smelled?" She looked up at the professor.

"Yes, I believe so. Please continue."

Pelya bent her mind to the next, more difficult, paragraph. "Tests were performed for . . ."
Pelya shook her head. "It's a magical word I don't understand."

Professor Opelnee snorted. "Go on."

Pelya leaned over the book again.

Ravenne appeared in the doorway, out of breath. She charged in and went to Pelya's side. Pointing her finger accusingly at the professor, she yelled, "Unhand her!"

Professor Opelnee raised an eyebrow.

"Uh, Ravenne?" Pelya tapped her arm. "He doesn't have his hands on me."

Ravenne looked at her dubiously. "Oh." Her face reddened. "I thought . . ."

"He's having me translate a complicated book." Pelya stood and wrapped her arms around Ravenne. "Thank you for rescuing me."

Ravenne hugged her back. "You're welcome, but . . . I didn't rescue you. You weren't in danger."

Pelya took her by the shoulders and looked her in the eyes. "You *did* rescue me at great risk to yourself. The fact that I wasn't in danger is irrelevant. I will remember this always, Ravenne. Thank you."

"Are you two finished?" Professor Opelnee's tone was gruff.

"Yes, Professor." Pelya smiled at him. "Ravenne is going to go back to work and I'm going to continue translating." Pelya gave Ravenne another hug. "I'll see you when it's time to leave."

Ravenne returned the embrace and then ran out of the room before Professor Opelnee could say anything.

Pelya sat down and looked at the word again. "I think it might have something to do with fire. There's a jagged edge off this letter that sometimes appears on fire spells."

Professor Opelnee completely lost interest in Ravenne, as Pelya had hoped. He took a closer look at the jag Pelya was pointing to. "Fire. Very interesting. Let me write that down." He had a quill and ink ready as he moved around to his seat. The paper he wrote on already had notes at the top. "Continue."

"Tests were performed for fire, acid . . . I don't know this one . . . or this one, though this swirl and this line may be related to cold . . . splitting . . . ground, fluentia, and . . . I don't know this one." Pelya looked up. "I think tests were performed for a number of spells. It's the sort of thing Ebudae would do if she were testing a magical item or something."

Professor Opelnee scribbled furiously. "Interesting, interesting. Go on."

Pelya continued reading. "The tests failed. We conclude that arcane magic has not resulted the disappearances."

"Resulted?" the professor asked. "Is it possible that it could be 'caused'?"

Pelya studied the word. "I don't know. It's possible. I'd have to ask Ebudae."

"What next?"

Pelya moved to the next paragraph. "This Great Disappearance . . . Those words are capitalized."

"Interesting. Very interesting." The professor scribbled.

"This Great Disappearance has taken a tenth of our people. Perchance there is a force elsewhere. Perchance the force is divine. Perchance the force is evil to eat our people with no trace. Perchance we will find this before our people are gone." Pelya looked pointed at the word perchance. "Ebudae told me that some dialects of Ancient Common don't have marks for questions. Perchance is one word to use in place of it and that's what they're doing here. These are all questions."

"Extraordinary!" The professor scribbled down that note and then sat back. "Who is this Ebudae? She's the one who taught you?"

"Yes professor." Pelya answered the second question and hoped she wouldn't have to answer the first. She mentally kicked herself for using the name at all.

Professor Opelnee stood up and poured Pelya a cup of water. "Is she a professor of an academy? Who taught her? Would I be able to contact her with this writing?" He handed her the water. "Don't spill this on the book."

"Yes, Professor." Pelya sat back and took a sip. She didn't want to answer the questions. There would be no getting around it though, as he sat on the desk and waited expectantly. Pelya stared at the cup of water. "Ebudae learned how to read from tutors as a child. She is exceptionally intelligent and deciphered more languages on her own and through a variety of sources. She has access to a number of libraries in Dralin that are not necessarily legal. She will only welcome contact if you have books of exceptional value to exchange."

The professor stood and paced for a minute. "I can't give away any of the Academy's books, even in my position. Where can I find her so that I may send a letter?"

"You can't." The more Pelya thought about it, the less she was willing to send anyone to Ebudae. She set the cup down on the floor next to her chair. "I've told you more than I ever should have. I'm bloodsworn to keep her secrets."

Professor Opelnee grabbed Pelya's shoulder.

Pelya rapidly sank in the chair, throwing him off balance.

She twisted out of the chair and around behind him, dragging the offending hand up and behind his back.

Professor Opelnee was strong as he pushed back against her, but it was easy to use his strength against him. She twisted him to the floor and pinned him with the arm behind his back and her forearm against his neck.

The assistant stood to run for help. Pelya gave him a warning look. The assistant promptly sat down.

It took a moment for the professor to stop struggling. When he finally spoke, it was with panting breaths. "You have my attention."

"Good." Pelya spoke quietly in his ear. "My friend is an assassin and will kill us both if you send a letter." It was a lie, but he had no way of knowing and if he ever discovered Ebudae's reputation, he would believe it to be truth.

"I see." He tried a trick to get out of the hold, but Pelya countered it easily and added pressure until he grunted in pain.

"I'm bloodsworn to tell you no more. I will translate everything I am able, but I will tell you no more about my past."

“I can accept that.” The professor’s voice was strained from his face being squished against the carpet.

“And lastly, my body belongs to me. You do *not* have permission to touch it for any reason.”

“Agreed. I apologize.”

“I’m going to release you slowly.” Pelya did so and helped him to his feet.

Professor Opelnee and Pelya stared each other in the eyes as he brushed himself off. The professor was the first to break contact. “My behavior has been atrocious and I ask your forgiveness.”

“Granted.” Pelya waited.

He moved around the desk to his seat. “There will be no report of this incident on my part. You were justified in your actions.”

“There will be no report of this incident on my part. The matter is resolved and we have a book to translate.”

They both turned to look at the assistant.

The assistant moved his head side to side in giant motions. “I’m not reporting *anything*.”

Pelya and Professor Opelnee went back to work on translations until Ravenne came to collect Pelya that evening to return to the Recruit Complex for dinner.

Chapter 19

Pelya held Uncle Bobbell's hand. He turned to look at her. Blood oozed out of his mouth and his eyes were yellow.

He blinked.

Pelya stabbed him.

He blinked.

Pelya stabbed him over and over. Each time, he blinked.

She couldn't stop stabbing him. Her arm moved of its own volition.

Pelya screamed in terror.

"Pelya! Wake up, *please!*" Lilli screamed through the dark from her bed.

Night Corporal Birown threw open the door and limped in with a lantern in her hand. "By the gods, you two! What are you doing?"

Pelya tried running but the corner of her room held her back. She turned and stared at the light of the lantern in terror, certain that the monks were coming for her.

"She's gone crazy!" Lilli yelled. "She's crazy! I don't want to be here anymore." Lilli broke into tears and huddled into her own corner.

Others came rushing into the small room. "What's happening? What was that screaming?"

Deep within, Pelya knew where she was, but she couldn't break through the abject terror flooding her mind. She dug her heels into the mattress, pushing back against the corner. Her teeth clenched near to breaking and she couldn't stop screaming within her throat. The silhouetted shapes of monks danced back and forth behind the lantern.

Corporal Birown turned and yelled at them. "Get out of here, all of you!" It took her a moment to get them cleared, including Lilli. Then she placed the lantern on the nightstand and sat on Lilli's bed. She spoke in firm tones. "I need you to get control, Pelya."

Pelya's vision gradually became normal. She could see her bedroom in the light. Corporal Birown leaned an elbow on her knee while concern etched her face. In the doorway, Ravenne and Deliah peaked in along with Pelya's other friends.

The corporal asked, "Do you know who I am, Pelya?"

Pelya nodded. Her jaw ached from clenching it so hard.

"You need to say my name."

It took a few strangled tries, but Pelya finally succeeded. "Night Corporal Birown." Saying the words released the rest of the fear and she broke into pitiful sobs.

Ravenne dashed in and wrapped her arms around Pelya. "Let it out. Just let it out."

Corporal Birown stood and held a hand to prevent the others from coming into the tiny room. "Did something happen to her today?" she asked Ravenne.

"No, I don't believe it did." Ravenne stroked Pelya's back. "She was in a good mood on the way back from the Academy and at dinner."

Beth sneaked in a step. "She has nightmares and whimpers a lot in her sleep."

The corporal turned to her. "How do you know that?"

"I'm a light sleeper." Beth motioned toward Pelya. "I slept near her in the barracks the first couple of nights we were here and she kept waking me up."

"I slept on the other side," Ravenne said. "I'm a heavy sleeper though."

Deliah's head was in the doorway. Sadness filled her voice. "I used to think I had problems, but something bad happened to her."

“Well she needs to quit crying.” Corporal Birown came and patted Pelya on the back. “Come on, Recruit. You’ll make yourself sick. Get up.”

Ravenne helped by pushing Pelya up. “Come on. You can do it. Let’s walk around.”

Pelya got to her feet, but the tears had taken over. She punched her thigh with the side of her fist.

They took her out of the room where everyone had gathered in groups and was talking.

Lilli pointed from one of the groups. “I’m not getting anywhere near her anymore. I’ll sleep outside before I’ll get in that room again.”

Corporal Birown shot her a scowl. “That can be arranged, Recruit.”

Lilli backed off and was comforted by her friends.

Pelya walked back and forth with Ravenne on one side and Tina, who had slipped under her arm, on the other. She gasped breaths of air and worked on gaining control. Her body was in shock from the intensity of the nightmare and the fear that had surged through her blood.

“The rest of you get to your rooms and back to sleep.” The corporal shooed them into their rooms.

“I’m *not* going back into that room, corporal.” Lilli had tears in *her* eyes. “She’ll kill me. I know she will.”

“She can have my bed for the night, corporal,” Ravenne suggested.

Corporal Birown opened her mouth to refuse, but took a second look at the mess that was Pelya. “Fine. I’ll allow it tonight.”

Lilli ran to Ravenne’s room before the corporal could change her mind.

Birown pointed at Tina. “You go to bed now.”

Tina did so reluctantly, deciding it would be unwise to argue with the corporal.

After another minute of walking, Pelya stopped. “I’m better now. Can I have some water?”

Birown poured the water and handed the cup to Pelya. She gestured to the seat in front of her desk. “Come sit down and talk to me.” To Ravenne, she said. “Go to sleep, Recruit.”

When Ravenne was about to protest, the corporal held up a hand. “No arguments. I’m done with this for tonight. You get to bed.” She pointed firmly at Pelya’s bedroom.

Ravenne hugged Pelya and did as ordered.

Pelya sat on the chair and drank the water with shaky hands.

Birown sat behind the desk and leaned back on two legs of her chair, balancing herself with a toe under the desk. She had deep pink eyes that were nearly red, making her appear almost evil. “So tell me about your nightmare.”

Yellow eyes blinked as Pelya ran her sword through Bobbell’s gut.

Pelya gave a short scream and dropped the cup before burying her face in her hands again.

Ravenne stuck her head out the door. Birown waved her back. “Just another nightmare.”

Ravenne frowned in confusion, but disappeared into the room.

Pelya recovered the cup and wiped off her night pants. She didn’t want to think about it again.

“Can you tell me without giving me details?” the corporal asked. “Your friends say you have a lot of nightmares.”

Pelya tried to think about it without thinking about it. “I had some bad experiences and saw a lot of death. I keep seeing the death in my dreams. There’s so much blood.” Pelya put the heel of her palm to her forehead and pushed back the tears, though a tense whine escaped her throat.

"I was wondering if it might be something like that. I don't normally ask this, but did you kill anyone?"

Pelya whispered, "Yes."

"I thought as much." She let the front feet of the chair fall to the floor and opened the bottom drawer. "I've killed a few men in my time too. Nearly *been* killed. The nightmares aren't as bad as they used to be, but everything hurts now." She dropped a couple of pouches on the desk and smacked her wooden leg for emphasis. "There's a reason I'm a night corporal. I don't have to move much." She took weed from one of the pouches and stuffed it into a pipe she pulled from the other. "This helps with the pain. You can have a hit or two if you like." She pulled out a stick that she lit with fire from the lantern before using it to light the pipe.

"No. It gives me hallucinations and I think that's a bad idea right now." Pelya leaned her elbows on the table and sighed tiredly.

Birown held the puff for a long moment before blowing the smoke slowly. "Think you can go to sleep?"

Pelya shuddered. "I can't. It's still there." She fought off more of the tears. "I've *got* to get a grip."

"Let's play cards." The corporal reached into the drawer and grabbed a deck. "Ever played?"

"Yeah. I know a few games, but I have no money." Pelya moved her chair forward eagerly.

"I know. It's just for fun."

They played until morning. Shortly before the sergeant was supposed to get there, Birown shooed Pelya into the room to get ready for the day.

Ravenne woke up as Pelya came in with a candle. She wiped her eyes. "What time is it?"

"Morning. We'll have breakfast soon." Pelya began changing.

"You've been awake all night, haven't you?" Ravenne swung her legs over the edge of the bed and rubbed the sleep out of her eyes.

"Yeah. Thank you for helping me and . . . thank you for being there for me even though I'm insane." Pelya folded her nightshirt slowly.

Ravenne came up behind Pelya and wrapped her arm around the taller woman's waist. "You're welcome. I always wanted a crazy friend."

Pelya sighed and dropped the folded shirt on her footlocker.

Ravenne giggled. "I have to go get my things. I'll be right back." She grabbed Lilli's pack and uniform.

Pelya did her best to make the bed, but she had torn the mattress with her heels when digging into it. She would have to get control of the nightmares if she wanted a chance of fitting in anywhere.

Ravenne slipped in with her things. "Sergeant Itern is here. Corporal Birown just told her that we're buddies now." She began changing.

"How did that go?" Hope touched Pelya's heart, but she didn't believe it would happen.

Ravenne slipped her tunic over her head. "From what I saw, Sergeant Itern didn't have a choice. I get the feeling that Sergeant Itern is intimidated by Corporal Birown."

"Interesting." Pelya began checking her equipment. "She told me her name is Anna. I like her. She doesn't get much company and said I could join her whenever I like."

"You have to sleep *sometime*, Pelya." Ravenne watched what Pelya was doing. "How do you get your uniform so perfect?"

Pelya began showing Ravenne the little details that sergeants looked for. By the time they were done, Ravenne looked just as sharp as Pelya. Sharper, if one considered that she didn't have the dark circles under her eyes.

"How do you know all that?" Ravenne asked.

"My father was in the Guard where we lived."

The answer satisfied Ravenne. There was a knock on the door and they filed out for roll call.

After roll call, Sergeant Itern said, "There will be a buddy change. Lilli and Pennia will buddy. Ravenne and Pelya will buddy. Now let's go." There was no emotion to her voice about the change.

Pelya glanced back at Corporal Birown, who innocently did paperwork.

A little later, they were back at the archery range. Everyone near Pelya kept glancing at her nervously. She ignored them as she gauged the cold breeze blowing clouds across the deep blue sky. Blue skies were one thing she loved about being out of Dralin where it was rare for the sky to be anything other than a putrid mix of brown and green from the smog. The ground was damp and cold through the soles of her boots from a short rainfall the night before. Grass grew along the edges of the fence that protected other areas from stray shots.

Ravenne nocked her arrow. "Hold your bow at an angle like this, Pelya. It keeps the arrow from slipping."

Pelya did it easily. "Where did you learn to shoot?"

Sergeant Itern ordered them to aim at the closest targets. Corporal Acdoam was giving tips, as was a range supervisor that *should* have been there the first day.

"We have archery ranges at the hunting lodge and at our castle. I like to shoot, though I don't like hunting."

Sergeant Itern called for them to draw and aim.

Pelya drew the bow to the corner of her mouth. She aimed for the edge of the target. She had no intention of letting anyone know her abilities, but she wasn't going to play a clown.

"Fire!"

Pelya's arrow zipped through the air and slammed through corner of the target to the fletching, loosing a cloud of hay dust.

"Wow," Ravenne said in amazement. "That's one of the fiercest shots I've ever seen." Her own had been strong and hit just off the bullseye.

They shot five arrows each before going to collect. Pelya tried to make her shots as random as possible, none of them hitting the bullseye. The only thing that kept them from going all the way through the weather-beaten targets was that the worn arrows were too short to draw fully.

Ravenne's aim was good, though she cursed the quality of their equipment. They shot another ten rounds until most of the recruits had welts on their arms. Ravenne and the other girl who excelled asked for arm guards but were told they weren't allowed for recruits.

It struck Pelya as odd. Another thing that bothered her was that the drill sergeant was giving tips and orders instead of the archery attendant, an older man who appeared to have no actual skill with the bow. An organization the quality of the Wyverns should be doing better.

After the tenth round, Sergeant Itern formed the troop into four columns. Ravenne now stood to Pelya's left where Lilli had originally been. The sergeant paced for a moment before asking Corporal Acdoam, "What do you think we should do next?"

Pelya's jaw dropped. *Never* had she heard a drill sergeant ask what to do next.

One of the women raised her hand. "We should practice swords, Drill Sergeant."

Corporal Acdoam shook her head. "Swordplay isn't as much fun as you think. You need balance before you can get good at it."

Sergeant Itern gestured expansively. "If they wish to practice swordplay, let them. They can learn the hard way that basic training isn't all about fun."

Pelya shook her head in dismay. It made no sense at all.

Ravenne gave her a questioning look, but they started marching and Corporal Acdoam's eyes were on them.

At the sword yard, they were given wicker chest guards and wooden swords to play with. Pelya didn't dignify what happened next as practice.

Pelya was feeling well enough to take on the entire troop if she had wanted to, even with how tired she felt. Instead, she gently guarded against Ravenne's ferocious, but slow, attacks while she inspected the area.

The yard was as large as the archery area. It had four sections for troops to practice. In between each was a challenge circle for dueling and advanced lessons. A larger challenge circle was carved into the center of the yard. Each area had a small stage for the supervisors to watch the recruits from a height. The supervisor for their area was sitting on a chair with her legs lazily stretched out, giving no instruction at all. She didn't even wear a sword at her waist.

The equipment was just as poor as the archery equipment. Their wooden swords had splinters in them instead of being sanded and lacquered. Pelya was appalled when she saw that the Iron swords were chipped and spotted with rust. Leather straps on the wicker were in bad repair and even the stands to hold equipment were left exposed to the weather instead of being tucked in a storage shed.

A recruit tripped and fell, causing a stop in the action. She was fine, but Pelya noticed that the ground wasn't being raked or covered with soft sand to protect the recruits from such falls. Instead, there were divots and ridges from countless feet digging into the ground.

Ravenne was doing much better than Pelya expected. She must have had rudimentary training in the past. After a few minutes, Pelya let a blow land on her side and smiled as Ravenne held victorious arms above her head.

Corporal Acdoam praised her and gave her a tip that would be useless in any battle. Pelya didn't even get that much.

Ten minutes later, they were told to put away the gear. Sergeant Itern exchanged another joke with the supervisor as they laughed heartily.

"What's wrong, Pelya?" Ravenne asked as they helped each other out of the wicker vests.

Pelya kept her voice low. "This isn't how basic training should be. I keep seeing detail after detail that's out of place. Everything's wrong. I'll tell you in the carriage this afternoon."

"All right."

They put their gear away and lined up before going to shield training where Pelya made mental notes of more inconsistencies.

Chapter 20

Matthew greeted at them as they climbed into the carriage after lunch. When they were on their way, Ravenne turned to Pelya. "What do you mean, everything is wrong?"

Pelya explained her observations of the day. She wrapped her cloak tighter as the wind picked up, blowing stubborn leaves off the half-bare trees. "... and there just shouldn't be rust on those shields!" The more she thought about it, the more upset she was. "The worst part is that we're never going to become battle ready if we don't have any consistency in this training."

Ravenne pursed her lips and narrowed her eyes at Pelya.

Pelya blushed. "I'm being too intense again, aren't I?"

"Yes, but that's not what I'm thinking about." She tapped her chin.

"Oh?" Pelya wasn't sure she wanted to know.

"I'm going to tell you a secret." Ravenne glanced in Matthew's direction. "And our quiet little driver is going to keep the secret, isn't he?"

Matthew grinned over his shoulder. "Yes, Miss Ravenne." They had been fortunate enough to get him every day, though Pelya suspected that it wasn't entirely a coincidence.

Ravenne brought her legs up onto the seat so that she could hide them under her cloak. "For the last year, I've been having an affair with one of my father's guardsmen."

"Oh!" Pelya was *very* intrigued. She listened intently. "Do tell."

"It was easy for me to sneak away for a few hours every day and sometimes at night." She grinned impishly. "I don't know that we ever loved each other, but we certainly did enjoy the company."

"That's one way to put it," Pelya said with a wink.

Ravenne laughed. "In addition to enjoying each other's company, he began teaching me how to defend myself and even use a sword. I became quite good, or so I thought." Her eyes narrowed.

Pelya chewed nervously on her lower lip.

"Imagine my surprise when the only contact I made on you in sword practice was the one you let me make."

"Hmm?" Pelya put on her best innocent face.

"You handled me with ease, but made it look otherwise. You've also used a bow before. I can tell, Pelya." Ravenne crossed her arms and set her jaw in annoyance. "Why haven't you been honest with me?"

"I..." Pelya hadn't exactly been *dishonest*. "Things have been confusing. When I tested for the sword, I was weak from the backlash." She sat forward and threw her arms up. "I haven't wanted to talk about my past with anyone but you and we haven't had enough time for me to sit down and do so properly."

Ravenne thought about the words for a moment. "All right. I can accept that, but we're friends right?"

"Right." Pelya said the word emphatically.

"So tell me where you got your training with a sword." Ravenne huddled under her cloak a little tighter as a snowflake drifted by.

Pelya looked up at the thickening clouds. They were awfully grey. She exhaled a deep breath. "Matthew?"

Matthew looked over his shoulder in her direction. "Yes, Miss Pelya?"

"Can we truly trust you, Matthew?"

He nodded gravely. "Yes, Miss Pelya. I never discuss what my passengers say to anyone, not even to Auntie Iriene."

"Thank you, Matthew." Pelya believed him.

"You're welcome." He turned back to the road and wrapped his scarf around his mouth and nose.

Pelya took another deep breath and turned to Ravenne again. "I learned combat in the Dralin City Guard."

Ravenne's eyes widened and she gave a low whistle. Matthew looked over his shoulder with respect in his eyes.

"My father was a sergeant and I reached the rank of Unit Leader before I was banished from Dralin."

Matthew turned and lowered his scarf. "How does one get banished from Dralin? I thought they gave criminals a lifetime pass."

Pelya laughed. "It seems that way some days." She gave Matthew a rueful look. "You *really* promise to keep our secrets?"

Matthew held up a hand. "I solemnly swear." He lowered the hand and spoke sincerely. "I can be trusted, Miss Pelya. I like you two and would never betray you."

"We like you too, Matthew." Ravenne gave him a shove in the shoulder. "Too bad it's not so easy to sneak away from the barracks as it is my father's eye." She grinned at his instant blush.

"Ravenne!" Pelya grinned and laughed.

Matthew switched the subject quickly. "So how did you get banished, Miss Pelya?"

The mirth died. Pelya picked at a fingernail. "I murdered a chancellor of the High Council."

Matthew frowned. "If I remember correctly, the High Council is the ruling body of Dralin and even more powerful than the Grand Assembly that runs the country of Altordan. I study a lot of history," he explained.

"Yes," Pelya confirmed. "Altordan exists to serve Dralin is the easiest way to understand it. Anyway, he attacked my best friend, so I killed him without thinking. They banished me in a trial a few days later and I'm under a geas never to return." She stared at her hands, wishing she could go back and change it.

"He attacked your best friend Ebudae?" Ravenne asked.

"Yeah."

Neither Ravenne nor Matthew spoke for a bit. Pelya had lost her desire to talk, especially since the topic was her.

Matthew finally spoke. "I've been thinking . . . That doesn't sound like an easy thing to do. If I remember, all the members of the High Council are wizards and lock themselves in an impenetrable castle."

"Great. I have to get a ride from the one person who knows that." Pelya heaved a sigh. "You won't hear about it, but some of the Chancellors attempted a coup. I was part of a small force attempting to foil it. We succeeded in the end, which is why I wasn't executed. But the chancellor I killed wasn't part of the coup." That statement was largely true if one ignored the thousands of missing details. She decided to switch subjects. "So I can use a sword and shoot a bow. My training is why I'm so fit and *manly* as everyone likes to say." She gave Ravenne a pointed stare.

Ravenne didn't even have the good sense to blush. "And because of your training, you believe that things aren't the way they should be at the Recruit Complex."

"Exactly." Pelya leaned on the back of the driver's seat. "I'd bet that things have been getting steadily worse here for the past three years, haven't they, Matthew?"

He didn't answer right away. "About that long. Can I trust the two of *you*?"

They moved their faces on either side of his and smiled charmingly. "Yes, Matthew. You can trust us with anything," Ravenne said seductively. She ran a finger down the side of his neck.

Matthew let out a long, slow breath. "Right. I won't tell you where I heard this, but the Recruit Commander they hired three years ago is incompetent. There have been a lot of stupid rules since she's been in charge."

Ravenne looked at Pelya from behind Matthew's head. "Auntie Iriene apparently agrees with you, Pelya."

"Hey!" Matthew's head spun toward her. "I told you no names!"

Both women giggled. Ravenne gave him a kiss on the cheek. "I won't tell. I like Auntie Iriene."

Pelya gave him a kiss on the other cheek. "Me too." Both women sat back.

Matthew reddened and nodded, satisfied with their assurances. "I know Auntie Iriene talked to you a little bit about it, Pelya, but you didn't look too good that day."

Pelya huddled in her cloak again. "I remember. I don't think the problems are caused by incompetence though. Drill sergeants would still keep things sharp in an organization like the Wyverns."

"Most of the drill sergeants have been sent off to battle and been replaced," Matthew said. "We're at the Academy Complex, by the way." He turned onto the road to the Transcription Building.

Pelya punched her thigh with the side of a fist. "That's why it's such a mess. Inexperienced drill sergeants wouldn't be sure of themselves, and Sergeant Itern is *very* inexperienced."

"How do you know?" Matthew asked.

"Because I've trained with experienced sergeants and they would eat Sergeant Itern alive." Pelya pointed her finger. "There's something bigger going on here than anyone realizes."

Matthew pulled the carriage to a stop. "There's nothing you can do about it though, Miss Pelya. No one will believe a recruit."

He was right, but Pelya *had* to do something. She chewed on her bottom lip and tried to come up with a plan.

"Why do I get the feeling you're going to do something crazy, Pelya?" Ravenne asked.

Pelya grinned at her.

"Can we do it inside at least? I don't want to be snowed on any more." Ravenne shoved her and they ran to the door.

Inside, they brushed off and signed in. Tobias said, "Professor Opelnee has made it clear that you are to report directly to him, Pelya." He leaned forward. "He's threatened to rip my leg off and beat me with it if you don't, so . . ."

"I will report to him immediately." Pelya handed over the quill and dashed off to his office with Ravenne.

At the door, Ravenne gave her a hug before heading toward the copy room.

Professor Opelnee had a fire going along with a pitcher of warm cider. They sank immediately into the translations.

Matthew had a blanket waiting in the carriage when they came outside. The sun's last rays had just disappeared in the west. Twinkling stars above glistened around the light of both partially-full moons, which combined to cast lavender light on the thin blanket of snow covering the ground. "It's cold out tonight," he told them, "but not as bad as it will be when winter truly sets in. There will be nights when we won't be able to travel because the snow is too deep."

"How did your afternoon go?" Pelya asked Ravenne. They huddled under the blanket as the carriage rolled around the roundabout.

"It was good. Professor Zergienner made us hot cider. She's happy that I'm there because I write fast and neatly, though two of the other girls are better." Ravenne scooted closer to Pelya for the warmth. "The professor is unhappy that you're not there, but she's not willing to confront Professor Opelnee."

"He's not trained in combat, but he's strong. I can understand why she would feel that way."

Ravenne grabbed her arm. "*How* do you know he's strong? What did he do?"

"Relax. He just thought to intimidate me by grabbing my shoulder yesterday after you left the office." Pelya grinned slyly in the light of the moon. "We both agreed not to file reports about the fact that my forearm kept his face pinned to the carpet while he apologized for his behavior."

Matthew looked back. "You didn't!"

"Oh, Pelya. I never should have left you." Tears glistened in Ravenne's eyes.

Pelya took her hand. "I'm feeling much healthier again, though I'm tired. I can handle a man like Professor Opelnee any day. So don't you worry about me." She reached for her braid to chew on it, but it wasn't there. "Do you ever chew on your braid?"

Ravenne made a face. "Eww, and that's an odd change of subject."

"I miss my braid." Pelya stared out the side of the wagon. "I miss everything."

"You're awfully depressed," Ravenne said. "I'm certain it's not at all healthy."

"I'm doing better." Pelya chewed on a fingernail since she didn't have the braid.

"This is better? I'd hate to see worse!" Ravenne shoved Pelya's hand aside. "Don't bite your fingernails. It's unladylike and unattractive."

"Daddy hated it when I chewed my nails." Pelya stared at the bitten nail.

Ravenne rolled her eyes. "So what does Professor Opelnee have you translating?"

"A book about something called the 'Great Disappearing'. There was a kingdom called Morhain in middle of the Willden Forest about two thousand years ago." Pelya stopped thinking about her hair and fingernails. "Professor Opelnee said that Morhain was very powerful, but decadent. Its armies were fearsome, leaving the blood of their enemies in their wake."

"Like the Iynath Empire?" Ravenne asked. "My father says that we are in danger even so far away if they continue conquering their neighbors."

"No." Pelya waved off the concern. "Iynath would never get past Altordan and the only other way is over the Caaldith Mountains and Willden Forest. I hear they're impassible by anyone."

"You're probably right," Ravenne agreed. "Go on."

"The worst part about Morhain was their knights." Pelya spoke in dramatic tones. "Instead of fighting for glory, or even for money like mercenary knights, these knights fought for honor

and they drank the blood of their foes. They wore intimidating armor with spikes and skulls decorating them.”

“Ooo.” Ravenne listened in fascination.

“Morhain spread through the Willden Forest in a way that made peace with the trees and protected them. An alliance was formed with the Druids. Their only rival was the Pnonian Empire, a wealthy and dominant nation that controlled everything from the Ninua Mountains in the north, to the Willden Forest in the east, to Altordan in the south and to the ocean in the west.” Pelya pulled the blanket up over her shoulder. “They fought epic battles, but never was the Pnonian Empire able to pass the boundary of the forest. The borders pushed back and forth. Professor Opelnee said that whenever the Knights of Morhain came into battle, the Pnonian Empire shrank and blood flowed to the oceans.”

“If they were so powerful, what happened to them?” Matthew asked.

“The Great Disappearing happened.” Pelya’s voice became ominous. “Everyone in Morhain just disappeared one by one.”

“So it was a disease or something?” Ravenne asked dubiously.

“No. They just disappeared. That’s what we’re reading about now. It’s a book of tests that were done.” Pelya shook her head in amazement. “Every single citizen of Morhain disappeared over the course of three years. There was no cause. Nothing like it has ever happened before or since.”

“Why does he need you to translate?” Matthew asked.

“I read a different dialect of Ancient Common than he does,” Pelya said. “This book is different still, but between us, we’re getting a surprising amount translated. He’s fascinated by information about the two empires.”

“What about the Pnonian Empire,” Ravenne asked. “What happened to it?”

“It decayed. The rich gained their wealth on the backs of the poor. Some things never change.” Pelya scowled. She had seen too much of it in Dralin. “Over the last couple centuries of its existence, the Pnonian Empire fractured. Smaller countries formed, while bordering countries consumed other pieces.”

Matthew turned in his seat. “What about Altordan? You said the Pnonian Empire stretched to it.”

“Altordan has existed for recorded time, even before Morhain or the Pnonian Empire.”

Pelya smiled at the thought that her country was older than any other. “It’s changed many times, but it’s always been the same country with a city in the place where Dralin is now. That’s part of why I’m not worried about the Iynath Empire conquering it.”

“Why is Dralin so important?” Matthew had gone back to guiding the horse through the lamp lit streets. “I couldn’t find any reason why it would be when reading about it, just that it was.”

Pelya opened her mouth to tell them about City Center, a channel of chaotic magic in the middle of Dralin, but her jaw stuck open. Breath left her. Pelya reached for her throat and struggled against the sensation. She kicked her foot into the floorboard.

“Pelya!” Ravenne took the side of Pelya’s face in one hand. “What’s happening?”

Breath came back in a rush, but Pelya’s lungs burned. She recognized the influence of the geas upon her. She didn’t realize the High Council had added that particular barrier to it.

“Pelya,” Ravenne said intently. “Please tell me what’s wrong.”

“The geas that was placed upon me apparently prevents me from telling anyone why Dralin is important.” She sat back and put a hand to her forehead. “I don’t think I can handle any more of this.”

“Rest then.” Ravenne covered her better with the blanket. “Just rest.”

Pelya curled her legs up and closed her eyes.

Matthew had been looking back with concern. “We’ll be back at the Recruit Complex soon.”

Pelya’s eyes opened. “What are we going to do about that?”

Matthew’s brow furrowed in confusion. “About what?”

“About the Recruit Program. It’s being run into the ground. We have to fix it.”

They both looked at Pelya as though she had lost her mind. She hadn’t given them any reason to think otherwise she supposed.

Pelya chewed on her nail again. “I didn’t have time to come up with a plan because I was so busy translating.”

Ravenne raised an eyebrow. “The two of us little recruits are going to fix the Recruit Program of the Blue Wyverns all by our little selves?”

“We’re not little. We can accomplish anything.” Pelya gestured with her head to Matthew. “Besides, there are three of us.”

Matthew jerked around. “There are? How did I enter into it?”

“Because you like us and we like you,” Ravenne said.

“Then you’re in?” Pelya asked hopefully.

Ravenne crinkled her nose. “Only if Matthew is.”

“Uh uh.” Matthew shook his head. “I like being alive.”

Ravenne leaned over the back of his seat. “I’ll give you a kiss.” When he didn’t respond, she whispered in his ear. “On the lips.” Then she turned his head towards her and gave him a long, sweet kiss.

When she was done, he turned his attention back to the road. “Yeah. I’m in.”

Ravenne sat back with a wide smile. “I thought you might be.” She turned to Pelya. “Soooo . . . how are we going to fix the Recruit Program?”

Pelya chewed on another nail and stuck her tongue out when Ravenne smacked her hand. “I don’t know. Like I said, I didn’t have time to come up with a plan. Let me think about it tomorrow during drills. I’m certain I’ll come up with something.”

“I can give you a carriage ride anytime,” Matthew said. “There are few restrictions on us as long as we stay out of trouble and we take care of our horses and equipment.”

“This is the very definition of trouble,” Pelya pointed out.

“Yeah, I know, but I said I’d help.” He smiled back at Ravenne. “You can come get me any time you need. I have a room to myself over the carriage house. It’s on the second floor, three doors to the right of the main stairs.”

Pelya rolled her eyes.

Ravenne smiled happily, but it disappeared quickly. “Now I just need to figure out how to sneak out.”

“Yeah. That’s one of the hardest problems with any idea I’ve come up with,” Pelya said. “I’d like to find out more about Recruit Commander Indiya. Do you have any idea where her office is, Matthew?”

“Yes, but you’re *not* going to break into it? . . .”

“I don’t know.” Pelya shrugged. “It’s one of the options.”

“Why did we agree to this?” Ravenne asked.

“Because it’s exciting and adventurous.” Pelya grinned.

Ravenne and Matthew looked at her dubiously.

“Because Blue Wyverns will die if they are not trained properly and that will harm a force for good within a world that needs such things.”

They considered those words for the remainder of the ride.

Chapter 21

Pelya lurked through the ruins. She turned a corner and came face to face with Yancy Divathia, the woman she had rescued.

Yancy's eyes were empty sockets. Yellow tears flowing down her cheeks. Yancy's voice whispered harshly from her throat. "It's your fault." The accusation echoed off the buildings.

Pelya jumped out of bed in a panic, her breathing heavy.

Rustling sounds came from Ravenne's bed. "Pelya?"

"I'm fine. Just a nightmare." She clutched at her nightshirt and bent over.

Ravenne got up and came to her. "You need to get some sleep."

Pelya leaned on her for support. "I know, but the nightmares keep coming."

"Let me try to light a candle." Ravenne fumbled around the nightstand. "I know the flint is around here somewhere."

"I've got it." Pelya stood straight and leveled her breathing to focus.

"Oh, all right." The fumbling stopped.

Pelya pictured the candles on the nightstand. With a gesture and a word she lit them using magic. The casting created a gentle breeze that barely ruffled her hair.

Ravenne's eyes widened and she whispered harshly, "You shouldn't play with magic. It's dangerous."

"I've been able to do that since I was ten. Everyone in Dralin learns a little." Pelya dismissed the concern with a wave.

"Since you were *ten*?" Ravenne waved her arms in outrage, but her voice was still the harsh whisper. "*Nobody* is supposed to do magic before coming of age. It destroys the body. What is wrong with you?" She gripped Pelya by the arms. "You frighten me, Pelya. You rush head first into everything as though you want to die."

"I don't want to die," Pelya said, pulling out of the grip. "But I don't want to be still. The world is filled with people suffering and I have to help them."

"You're just a recruit though."

"I've never been 'just' anything, Ravenne. I'm capable of accomplishing great things." Pelya held her cold hands over one of the flames. "Perhaps I'll die trying to do those great things, but existence goes on beyond this body. While I'm in it, I shall do my best to bring good to the world while vanquishing evil."

Ravenne flopped down on her bed. "You're *serious*. You really plan to save the world, don't you? I bet you don't even know what you're saving it from."

Pelya stared at the flame. "Yes, I'm serious. I can't save the *entire* world, but I'm going to do as many little things as I can to make life better. People suffer everywhere, Ravenne. They hurt. Their eyes are filled with despair while people whose hearts are filled with darkness torture them. Their bodies are left lying in alleys, broken, staring up at me . . ." Pelya thought back to her short time in the Guard. It was like that every day. There was no end to the horror in Dralin.

Ravenne's voice shook. "Don't tell me what you've seen, Pelya. You frighten me."

Pelya turned to her and softened her gaze. "I'm sorry. I just . . ."

"Let's get some water." Ravenne stood and gently took her arm. "I think *I'll* have nightmares if I try to go back to sleep."

Pelya hung her head. "I'm sorry. I'll try to relax."

"Sure you will." There was no confidence in Ravenne's tone.

They went into the common area where Uma and Beth were sitting in chairs at the desk, chatting with Corporal Birown.

Birown raised an eyebrow. "Well, hello. We have a gathering. You don't have to get up for another two hours, you know?"

"She had another nightmare." Ravenne pointed at Pelya. "At least there was no screaming this time."

Pelya reddened in embarrassment. "What are you two up to?" she asked Uma and Beth. They looked away.

Pelya smelled the pipe. "Ohhh. You're relaxing."

"Relaxing, yeah." Beth smirked. "I like that word. We're relaxing."

Corporal Birown lifted the pipe from where she had hidden it. "Care for a hit?"

Pelya waved her off. "No, but thank you."

Ravenne's jaw dropped. "Is that legal?"

"Technically, no. Not in Eddland." Birown shrugged. "But the healer said it helps with the pain, and it does, so I don't much care."

"There are worse things in the world to worry about." Pelya shrugged in disregard for their smoking. It wasn't illegal in Dralin, and even if it had been, the Guard had greater crimes to deal with.

"Like what?" Uma asked.

"Like the Recruit Program falling apart." Pelya grabbed one of the chairs along the walls between the doorways and brought it to the desk. "The equipment is shoddy and the drill sergeants don't know what they're doing."

Birown gave her an appraising look. "How did you come to that conclusion?"

Tina appeared from her room, quietly slipping behind Beth's chair. Pelya saw her, but decided to go on anyway. "My father was a sergeant in the Dralin City Guard. I learned about how a military should be run, and we're doing everything wrong here."

"Dralin?" Beth gave a low whistle. "I've never heard anything good about it."

"I wasn't allowed to go out into the city alone until I was sixteen and even then it was two of us. I'm pretty sure my father had us followed to be safe," Pelya said. "But I learned enough to know that something is wrong with the Recruit Program here. Women aren't being trained properly and if we go out into battle, we'll die because of it."

Worry crossed the faces of the women.

Corporal Birown took a hit of her pipe and held the breath for a moment. "Saying I agreed with you, what can you do about it?" She exhaled. "You're just a recruit."

Pelya took a chance she was right about the Corporal. "The evidence of poor equipment is everywhere. I can plead the case with the High Commander."

"Who won't see you or any recruit." Birown pointed her pipe at Pelya. "She won't even see sergeants, administrators or most officers who have noticed similar things."

"Is there any more evidence?" Tina asked. "Maybe if we gathered a lot, it could be presented."

Pelya shot Ravenne a glance of surprise at the young woman's eagerness to help and received a glance in return.

"We've met a few people who have grumbled about change," Beth said. "Perhaps organizing a group . . ."

“That will be crushed by Recruit Commander Indiya,” Birown said. “Most anyone who’s gathered any information has been transferred or demoted.” She took another puff. “Next idea?”

“Go back to our rooms and forget about all of this,” Uma suggested.

“That’s probably the best idea any of you have come up with.” Corporal Birown leaned back on the hind legs of her chair.

“I’m not capable of forgetting or ignoring it,” Pelya said with a shake of her head. “I have to do something.”

Corporal Birown let the front legs fall to the floor. “Tell you what. When you come up with a good plan, I’ll let you sneak out for a couple of hours, but not until I know you’ve got some smarts about the matter.”

“You’d really let us do that?” Ravenne said in surprise.

“Things aren’t right around here and it’s been bothering me for a long time.” The corporal took another puff. “I’m willing to get in trouble, but only if it stands a chance of changing things.” She exhaled. “Now off to bed, all of you.”

They did as she told them. Pelya and Ravenne tried for a few minutes to come up ideas, but to no avail. They blew out the candles and managed to get a little more sleep before breakfast.

After exercises, the troop did another round of archery without learning much more. A vote was made for swords, but the sergeant ignored it. They did more wrestling, a favorite of the sergeant’s, and then finished off by working with staves.

Pelya tried hard not to let her abilities show. She wanted to save the revelation for when it was needed. To her surprise, neither the sergeant nor the corporal berated her for anything. It was as if they were in apathy about the training.

They practiced around troops that had been there for a while and Pelya studied them. Most drill sergeants were better than Sergeant Itern, but none of the recruits were doing well. The thought of any of them being put into a battle made Pelya shudder.

At lunch, Sergeant Itern and Corporal Acdoam chose not to join their troop, heading off to socialize with another sergeant instead. Not surprisingly, the troop split into its three cliques almost immediately.

“I think I see what you mean, Pelya,” Beth said as she sat down with her tray. “It doesn’t feel as though we’re learning anything, and I expected more yelling from everything I heard about drill sergeants.”

“What’s this?” Deliah asked, abandoning her troop buddy along with Tina.

They took a minute to fill her in on the previous night’s discussion.

“Well, I clean in the Recruit Office every day,” Deliah said. “I can tell you where the different types of files are, but I can’t read. I was supposed to clean the Recruit Commander’s office yesterday, but she was in a meeting and told me to come back tomorrow.”

“Do you ever hear anything?” Tina asked.

Deliah shook her head. “The Commander was talking to a man yesterday about things going badly and that they need to go better here. I don’t normally listen to conversations that aren’t my own. I suppose I could change that . . .”

“I don’t know,” Pelya said. She worried about too many people knowing being involved. One slip of the tongue could get them all in serious trouble. “It’s not likely that anyone will say

something around you, but it's always good to listen, I suppose. Don't try to do anything foolish though. I believe the Recruit Commander may be the key, but there's nothing that can't wait until we're alone to talk about."

"This is just stupid," Uma said in disbelief. "We don't stand any chance of making a change around here, and I'm not willing to get kicked out for treason, or whatever we're doing."

"And you don't have to help with it." Pelya included them all in her gaze. "None of you have to do anything at all."

"I'm helping," Ravenne said. "I already promised."

"I'll help too." Tina grinned eagerly. "I'm a runner with the Office of Communications. I was told I got the job because I'm always dashing off in every direction. I can try to find things out wherever I go. This sounds like a lot of fun."

"It's not *fun*," Uma protested incredulously. "It's dangerous and foolish." She gestured at Pelya with both hands. "This woman is mad. She's touched in the head and two potatoes short of a meal. Why are any of you listening to her?"

They turned to Pelya with thoughtful looks, obviously considering the truth in the words.

Pelya waggled her finger over her lips and made a wubba-wubba sound while crossing her eyes.

Uma shook her head while the others burst into laughter.

"Are you going to report us, Uma?" Beth asked worriedly.

Uma looked at her in surprise. "I thought you had more sense than that, Beth."

"Pelya may be crazy, but I think she may be right too." Beth held her cup of hot cider in both hands and sipped on it.

Uma saw that they were waiting for her answer. "I'm not going to report anyone," she said begrudgingly, "but I'll not help."

"I'm in," Deliah said. "I'll start listening today and see what happens."

"What will you do, Pelya?" Uma asked. "Sit around while everyone else does the work?"

"You don't know me, Uma," Pelya said defensively. "As far as what I'm going to do, I'll start by writing down a list of issues that I find with the training yard, such as rusted equipment. I'll see what else I can find out too."

"I'll help with the list. The rest of you drop hints to see if anyone bites on what might be wrong with the program," Ravenne suggested. "If a person likes the changes that have happened over the past few years, don't say anything else. If they don't like the changes, listen to what they think is wrong." She put a hand flat on the table. "We don't need to rush. Let's take it one day at a time and slowly gather information. We'll take actions once we know enough to be effective."

"And you shall all follow a madwoman," Uma scoffed.

Tina rolled her eyes. "Oh, hush, Uma. Nobody follows sane people because they never do anything interesting." She then ignored the glare Uma gave her. "So what do you need me to do?"

They planned each of their tasks and left for their afternoon chores. Matthew was waiting as Ravenne and Pelya ran up. They updated him on the plans while they rode.

"Can I tell Auntie Iriene?" Matthew asked. "I know for certain she'll support you."

"I don't think she'd follow a bunch of recruits though," Pelya said.

"You'd be surprised." The road was clear enough for Matthew to put an arm over the back of the seat and look back at them. "I said I'd help. Let me do what I can."

“I think it’s worth a try, Pelya,” Ravenne encouraged. “We’re more likely to succeed with outside help.”

Pelya considered. “I guess talk to her and see what she wants to do.”

“I think you’ll be surprised,” Matthew said as he turned back around.

Ravenne leaned forward and kissed him on the cheek again. He smiled back at her.

They talked about the plan and other things on the way to the Transcription Building.

Deliah grabbed her broom as she reported to Mathildee and waited until the other recruits were assigned their tasks. It felt good to have a broom in her hands. She had always used it as a shield against her husband’s blows. The last few times, he’d taken it away from her. The beatings were worse then.

“Deliah? What’s wrong?” Mathildee’s voice was filled with worry as the matronly woman put a hand on Deliah’s arm. “Why are you crying, sweetie?”

“I . . .” Deliah wiped her eyes. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to.”

“You need to stop crying, sweetie. I promise you’re safe.” Mathildee patted Deliah’s arm. “I’m going to try to get you into the Commander’s office. Do you think you can handle it?”

“I can handle it.” Deliah composed herself and shoved aside the dark thoughts. “Shall I get the cleaning supplies?”

“Yes. I’ll help you.” Mathildee led her to get the supplies and they marched to the Commander’s office on the far side of the single-level building.

A lieutenant sat at a desk in a small waiting room outside of the office and had them wait while she went in to check. There were a few chairs, but neither woman sat. A moment later, the lieutenant came out. “You can go in, but do not disturb the commander while you clean.”

Deliah looked around the office as she entered behind Mathildee. The commander was intently writing and didn’t look up. She sat behind a curved desk that Deliah would need to polish with some of the oil Mathildee had shown her for that sort of thing. Bookshelves lining the left wall would need the polish too and the books needed to be dusted. An empty fireplace behind the commander hadn’t been cleaned in years. She would have to do that when the commander was out of the office, and be careful not to create a mess.

Mathildee took the mop bucket and cloths to a sitting area in the left corner and gestured for Deliah to do the same with her cleaning supplies. Then she gave Deliah an encouraging pat on the back and left the office.

Deliah took a duster and continued her inspection. There were windows to either side of the fireplace that would need cleaning. A larger window that took up the center of the right wall had its curtains drawn open and tied off. Tapestries hung from the wall on either side. One was of a group of Blue Wyvern officers signing a paper. The other was of two wyverns in a field. To the right of the door was a desk with a map spread upon it and more maps hanging from the wall.

The floor had a rug under the sitting area, a wool carpet under the desk and four chairs for visitors, and another rug in front of the fireplace. Every one of them looked grimy. The floors around them hadn’t been properly swept or mopped in ages. Deliah could see dirt crusted in the corners.

She wanted to huff and rant about the condition of the office, but it would disturb the commander, so she moved quietly as she went to inspect the tapestries. She looked at the one with the wyverns in the field. The threads should be vibrant, but they were dull instead. She felt

it and stuck her tongue out in disgust at how greasy they felt. Soot from the fireplace had settled on it over the years.

Deliah had never seen a tapestry before coming to the Blue Wyverns, so she had no idea how to clean them. She was certain that Mathildee would know, but it would have to be done outside, as would the draperies, rugs and carpet, which surely held just as much dust. She quietly brought a chair over and tried to lift the tapestry rod from its brackets.

“What are you doing, Recruit?”

Deliah turned to see the commander staring at her with unnerving intensity. “The tapestries and drapes need to be taken outside to be cleaned, Commander. They’ll raise far too much dust in here.”

“Those tapestries weigh more than you do, Recruit.” The commander waved a hand in irritation. “I’ll have soldiers take them down in the next few days and deliver them for cleaning. Clean something else.”

“Yes, Commander.” Deliah got down and put the chair back. “Will you please have the soldiers bring the rugs and carpet so I may clean those as well?”

“Yes, yes. Now work quietly.” The commander set aside the letter she had been working on to dry, picked up a scroll and began reading it.

Deliah retrieved a bucket and cloth to work on the dirty windows. She wondered what was in the letter and the scroll and if it would help Pelya, but she couldn’t think of a way to get her friend into the office.

“Tina! I have a message for you to run to Headquarters.” The recruit supervisor of the Communications Office came up to her. Lieutenant Halreos was a whip of a woman, tall and lean with a sword at her hip that matched. In long strides, she closed the distance from her desk to where the recruits sat. Her dark ponytail bounced in a manner similar to Tina’s when she moved.

Tina jumped up and snatched the message as the lieutenant reached her. She put it in the pouch given to communication recruits as standard issue. “Who do I deliver it to, Lieutenant?”

One of the recruits in the chairs behind Tina stood in outrage. “Why does *she* get to take a message to headquarters?”

The lieutenant snapped her fingers sharply at the recruit. “You will always address me as lieutenant, and you will *never* speak to me in that tone of voice again.”

The recruit sat down more rapidly than Tina had ever seen a person do so.

Lieutenant Halreos turned back to Tina. “You are taking this message because you are in the front row and you’re sitting on the edge of your seat, ready to go.” She gave a pointed glance at the other recruit who sullenly sank into the seat. “The message is to be delivered directly to Commander Brynin, no one else. If anyone asks to see the message, you will show them the wax seal on the envelope.”

“Yes, Lieutenant.” Tina turned with a jump to go.

“Wait!”

Tina lurched to a stop and jumped back to the lieutenant.

Lieutenant Halreos pointed a stern finger at Tina. “You are to deliver it *only* to Commander Brynin. If anyone refuses to let you reach her, then you are to get their name and rank and run

immediately back to me. If anyone interrupts you on your way to the commander, you are to run immediately back to me. Is that clear?"

"Yes, Lieutenant." Tina waited for further instruction.

"Well what are you waiting for?" the lieutenant asked. "Get going!"

"Yes, Lieutenant." Tina turned with another jump and ran as fast as she could out the door.

Once out of sight of the Communication Building, Tina paced herself at a slower run that ate the distance. Headquarters was a simplistic term for the castle on the hill that housed the Council of Eight, the highest-ranking officers of the Wyverns. It also housed diplomats, emissaries and countless staff and servants.

On her way up the hill, Tina passed manors owned by the wealthy of Settatt. It was prime real estate with beautiful views overlooking the city. She kept her cloak loose, the exertion of her run keeping her plenty warm. Her pace slowed, but she persisted.

A voice called from behind the low fence of a large manor. "Over here, Recruit."

Tina looked in that direction and saw a kindly gentleman raking leaves in his yard.

"Stop for a moment and have a drink." He gestured at a pitcher on the table.

Tina turned her eyes to the castle and quickened her pace.

Minutes later, she was at the castle gate, where Blue Wyverns stood tall with their pikes, checking everyone that came through. An officer waved Tina over. "Did you run all the way up that hill, Recruit?" the captain asked in amusement.

Tina wanted to answer, but she was gasping for breath.

A few of the other soldiers laughed. "I'd take that as a yes, Captain," one said.

The captain chuckled. "Show me your document, Recruit."

Tina dug it out of the bag and held it up tightly with both hands.

The captain glanced at the seal and then at Tina. "Will you give it to me to deliver?"

Tina shook her head vigorously and stuffed the message back into the pouch, hoping the captain wouldn't persist. She didn't want to have to run back down the hill.

Fortunately, the captain smiled and hooked her thumbs in her sword belt. "Good girl. I haven't seen you before. What's your name?"

Between gasps of breath, Tina answered, "Tina Medini."

"Get on with you then, Tina." The kind captain waved her through.

Tina dashed off at a run toward the castle. She mentally kicked herself for not asking directions to the Commander's office.

On the other side of the wall was a massive courtyard. It extended hundreds of yards in each direction and two hundred yards forward to the castle. Two immense wyvern fountains ten times larger than the one in front of the Recruit Complex were located halfway toward the north and south walls. Gardeners tended flowerbeds and trees in park-like sitting areas where visitors, officers and nobles wandered about in their warm cloaks to have discussions or even read a book. The hubbub of voices and the singing of birds created an inviting atmosphere.

Tina slowed and marveled at the beautiful castle and grounds before her. The façade of the castle was three stories tall with crenelated tops, each with a banner rising above tall poles. Thin, arched windows lined each level. Above that, rounded towers rose from each corner. The walls were made of stone with an unusual blue and white swirl. Smaller pieces of the same stone made up the cobble of the courtyard.

Even though she wanted to take the time to explore, Tina hurried to the open doors where she showed the sealed envelope to another officer who waved her through. This time she asked

directions. They were complicated, but Tina repeated them twice aloud until the officer was satisfied.

She stopped as soon as she entered the main hall. Double rows of marbled columns supported the rounded ceiling high above where stained glass windows let in clouded daylight. The floor was made of blue and black swirled marble, as were the columns. Servants moved industriously to polish it while trying to stay out the way of well-dressed soldiers and visitors. Thirty-foot tall statues of the original Council of Eight lined the hall, watching the people below with benevolence in their marble eyes.

Her boots were sharp on the semi-circular steps, the sound rising to mingle with the soft echoes of voices and other footsteps. Noticing that everyone else was walking, Tina chose not to run. She moved at a brisk pace until reaching a hallway heading north. After a few more turns down ever smaller halls, she reached a circular area with a grand staircase spiraling upward to the upper levels. Tina took that to the third floor. After showing the message at two more checkpoints, she reached Commander Brynin's office.

The waiting room was large enough to seat twenty people, with comfortable couches and chairs. It was empty save for a bored lieutenant reading behind a desk next to the commander's door. Tina resisted the urge to get water from the pitcher on a table. She walked up to the desk. "Message for Commander Brynin."

The lieutenant glanced up at Tina. "Toss it on the desk. I'll get to it later."

Tina pulled the message out of the pouch and held it up so the seal could be seen. "I was told to deliver it directly to Commander Brynin."

"Well that's not going to happen." The lieutenant gave a wave of dismissal. "Either toss it on the desk or leave." She went back to reading her book.

Tina considered her options. She *couldn't* leave it on the desk. Going all the way back was silly when she was so close. After a moment's thought, she stepped around the desk and headed toward the door.

The lieutenant's sword whistled out of its sheath and the tip was at Tina's throat faster than she would have imagined possible. Tina froze in terror, acutely aware of the cold steel pressing against her neck.

The lieutenant's voice whispered harshly through gritted teeth as she crouched low in a battle stance. "It would be unwise for you to do anything but slowly move back, Recruit."

Tina choked back tears as she took a step back and then another. A drop of blood trickled down her neck.

The lieutenant lowered the sword, but remained in the defensive stance. "What is your true business?"

Tina's entire body shook. "I . . . I . . . just h . . . have a message for the c . . . commander. I . . . I was told t . . . to deliver it to her directly."

"And I told you to drop it on the desk."

Tina continued backing up. She carefully put the message back in her pouch. "What is your name, Lieutenant?"

"Why do you wish to know that, Recruit?"

Tina was near the door and her shaking had become much calmer. "Because I have to take the message back to Lieutenant Halreos along with the name of the person who prevented me from carrying out that task."

"And is that your intention?"

"Yes, Lieutenant." Tina was at the door, ready to bolt.

The lieutenant stood straight and sheathed her sword. "I'm impressed, Recruit. Anyone else would have tossed the message on the desk." She opened the door and spoke. "Messenger for you, Commander."

A faint voice came from the office. "Send her in."

The lieutenant gestured toward the open door before sitting down and going back to her book.

Tina hesitated for a moment before moving forward. She kept her eye on the lieutenant the entire time as she reached the door and backed in. Once inside, she hurriedly closed the door and put her back against it, gasping for breath.

A small fire kept the office cozy. Lush wall-to-wall carpet cushioned her steps. Tina looked around in awe at shelves of expensive artifacts and ancient weapons. A desk in the middle of the room was polished and covered with ornate carvings. Even the chairs and tables in the room appeared to be works of art. Rare maps and paintings finished off the effect.

The most striking thing in the room was the commander, leaning back in her chair. Silken black pants covered gazelle-like legs to bare feet propped on a corner of the desk. A sleeveless, velvet-green tunic exposed slender arms with roped muscles toned by swordplay. Short, brilliant-red hair feathered forward to cup her pale cheeks.

Tina pressed back against the door harder as rose-pink eyes turned from the scroll the commander studied. Unknown peril resided behind those eyes. A smile formed, one that knew the mysteries of the world and kept them hidden.

"Hello, Tina. It's good to see you again." The commander's voice was smooth, caressing the air as it moved to stroke Tina's ears.

Tina gulped. "H . . . hello, Commander."

"You have a message for me?"

Tina fumbled in the pouch and pulled out the message. "Y . . . yes, commander." Tina held it out.

The commander opened her long fingers. "I told you, you don't need to be nervous around me. Now, be a good girl and bring the message here."

"Y . . . yes, commander." Tina approached cautiously, holding the message in her outstretched hand. The commander's eyes never left hers. Tina blinked to try to escape them, but their attraction only grew stronger.

The message was shaking in Tina's hand by the time, she got it to the commander's fingers. The commander slowly took the message, but refused to release Tina's eyes. "How long have you been in the Recruit Program now, Tina?"

"I . . . I . . ." Tina couldn't remember. She wanted to escape, but the commander's gaze trapped her. "Six days?"

"Very good. Have you discovered anything interesting? Tell me, Tina. Tell me what interesting things you've learned."

Tina gulped again. The eyes were captivating. Red and white striations radiated through the pink from the deep, bottomless center.

"Tell me what you've learned, Tina."

The words came out in a rush. Tina's voice was an octave higher than usual. "Pelya said that the Recruit Program is being sabotaged. The equipment is in disrepair. Incompetent soldiers have replaced the drill sergeants. Someone is actively trying to make the whole program weaker. She thinks the Recruit Commander may be responsible."

“How very interesting.” The commander dropped the message on the desk and ran her fingers over Tina’s hand. “Who is Pelya?”

Goosebumps ran up Tina’s arm at the touch. Her teeth began to chatter in spite of the warmth in the room. “P . . . Pelya Jornin. She’s from Dralin. Her father was in the Guard there. Pelya wants to find out what’s happening. She’s gathering information and some of the other recruits are helping her.”

“Are you helping her, Tina?”

Tina’s voice was barely a squeak. “Yes.”

“Good.” The commander removed her fingers from Tina’s hand. “I want you to continue to help her. You’ll have a message to bring me every couple of days. You can report progress to me then. Is that understood, Tina?” Commander Brynin blinked.

Tina felt the hold on her released. She backed up a step and brought her hand to her chest. “Y . . . yes, commander.”

“Go on now.” Commander Brynin waved her away and went back to her scroll. “I shall have to look into this Pelya Jornin’s past.”

Tina dashed to the door on weak legs. She went through and closed it behind her. Being certain to keep distance between her and the lieutenant, Tina left the waiting room and ran down the hall, not caring about the frowns of disapproval she received.

Beth deftly ran thread through a patch as she sat mending nightclothes at a table with three other recruits. There were piles of nightclothes on palettes around the room. Six tables in the middle of the room had recruits busily sewing. More experienced recruits were cutting and sewing material for new nightclothes while inexperienced ones, such as Beth and her tablemates were mending.

The room was lively with activity and chatter. Beth listened to the recruits at her table, but they said nothing of interest. They stopped talking to her upon seeing how much faster she worked. It was just as well. She didn’t plan to be at their table long.

She finished the patch, folded the shirt neatly and set it in her growing pile of mended shirts before grabbing another.

The supervisor, a no-nonsense matron who kept a constant eye on her crew came up silently behind Beth and picked up the freshly-mended shirt. Beth ignored her as she began working on the next. Her work was excellent and she had no concern it would be found to be otherwise.

The supervisor’s piercing voice rose above the chatter. “Recruit Latchness, your work is excellent and your fingers agile. Can you cut patterns and sew them?”

Beth set down the shirt she was working on. “Yes, supervisor.” She could have clarified, but didn’t think the supervisor wanted to hear it. The woman was the sort that preferred actions to words.

“You’ll be advancing tables. Leave your work and come with me.” The supervisor snapped her fingers.

Beth followed her, ignoring the glares from the other women at the table. She almost managed to contain her smug smile.

Almost.

Uma sat down and looked at the equipment around her. None of her new friends had asked what *her* job was. She wasn't about to tell them that it was her job to care for the equipment the recruits used for practice. Not after the comments they made.

She picked up a practice sword. There *was* rust on it. Uma had no idea why *she* was assigned the task of cleaning it. She'd never touched a weapon before and hadn't the slightest idea how to tend to any of it. Weapons were for men, not women. The decision to join the Blue Wyverns seemed more foolish each day.

Uma looked around the equipment room. Three other recruits were at a table, laughing and drinking. She had tried to sit with them yesterday, but they called her ugly and told her to stay away. Uma hadn't dared try to join them today, and they hadn't invited her.

She wanted to tend the sword, but there was nothing to clean it with. Uma didn't know *how* to remove the rust, nor had she been given instruction. The supervisor was in her office, also drinking, and had told Uma to shut up and mind her own business when Uma asked for supplies yesterday.

Uma set the sword down and slunk to the back of the room where piles of broken equipment shielded her from view. As she curled up in a sheltered corner, she put the edge of her fist in her mouth and bit down on it to stifle the sounds of her lifelong misery as it threatened to burst to the surface.

As Pelya and Ravenne exited the carriage, Professor Zergienner came out of the Transcription Building and slammed the door behind her. "I've had enough of this place!" She stormed down the steps and pointed at Ravenne. "You two are supposed to be transcribing for me, but instead, you're *both* working for Professor Opeljerker! He's declared that Ravenne is to be his assistant while the normal worthless idiot is sick."

They backed against the carriage as the professor reached them and waved her arms angrily. "I don't know why I bother trying to make deadlines! Two promising recruits and I don't get either one of you as I should." She jabbed fingers into their chests. Then she hopped into their carriage. "Take me to the Green Rock Tavern, driver. I'm going to get drunk."

Matthew snapped the reins. "Yes, Professor."

Pelya and Ravenne jumped away and headed toward the building, looking back at the carriage going around the roundabout. They could hear Professor Zergienner ranting to Matthew about the indignities poured upon her.

In the entry, Tobias was picking up papers that had been scattered off his desk. They rushed to help him. "Professor Zergienner seemed a bit upset," Ravenne said in an understatement.

"Yeah." Tobias set handful of papers on the desk. "She's been fighting to get Pelya back to the transcription room and now Professor Opelnee is demanding Ravenne as well. Speaking of which, you're to report to Professor Opelnee, Ravenne."

"I'm not sure I want to." Ravenne set papers she had gathered on the desk.

"Yeah, well you'd better get going. He's in a mood." Tobias waved for them to go. "I've got this, but thanks for the help."

Pelya put her papers in the growing pile and followed Ravenne down the hall, leaving Tobias to mutter about why his desk had to suffer just because the professor was mad.

They reached Professor Opelnee's office a moment later to find him searching through his apprentice's drawers. "There you two are! How am I supposed to get anything done if you take so long to show up?"

Pelya rolled her eyes. "Don't be so dramatic, Professor. What are you looking for?"

Ravenne's head jerked at the tone and she took a step behind Pelya.

Professor Opelnee raised a warning eyebrow. It only took him a second to realize that Pelya wasn't impressed. "You're not a normal recruit, Jornin. You're not even a normal girl."

Pelya put a hand on her hip. "I'm an extraordinary girl, Professor. Are you going to tell me what you're looking for?"

He grunted in response and gestured at the assistant's desk. "Professor Zergienner broke my quill. I can't figure out where this fool keeps the spares."

Pelya went to a cabinet next to the assistant's desk. "They're in here." She pulled out a long box, opened it and took a quill out to hand to the professor. "What happened to Eldon?"

"Is that his name? Didn't even know he had one." The professor went back to his desk to organize his notepaper and materials. "He walked through the doorway and immediately vomited. I made him clean up the mess and told him not to eat so much corn. It looks terrible when spewed all over the floor, not to mention the smell."

Pelya and Ravenne made faces.

He sat down and tapped the book. "Let's translate, Jornin. Our new assistant can get us some cider, no . . . let's have mint cream. That tastes wonderful when the clouds drift across the sky."

"Where would I get mint cream?" Ravenne asked.

"How in the world would I know?" Professor Opelnee's beard bristled. "That's what assistants do. So be a good assistant and figure it out."

Ravenne gave Pelya a glance of suffering before heading out.

Pelya settled in to work on translations, determined to keep her friend from having to deal with too much of the prickly professor.

It was a long while before Ravenne came in with a covered tray. She set it down on the assistant's desk and brushed leaves off her cloak.

Professor Opelnee grumbled. "What took you so long? You're even more useless than the idiot."

Instead of being intimidated, Ravenne spoke in irritation. "They don't have mint cream in the Transcription Building. I had to walk across the Academy Complex to the commissary to get it and then bring it back." She gave the professor one of the mugs.

"Is that why it always takes so long?" He went back to scribbling notes from the last translation.

Ravenne gave Pelya a mug before sitting at the assistant's desk and sipping on her own.

Professor Opelnee looked in her direction. "How did you pay for these? The commissary costs money for drinks."

"You have an account there." Ravenne stretched her legs and took another sip.

"That account is for me, not recruits." His beard bristled again, seeming to have emotions of its own. "I didn't give you permission to order a drink for yourself."

Ravenne snorted. "If you're going to make me walk across the Complex to get the drink, I'm going to get one for myself."

"Impudent girl." The professor pounded a fist on the table. "Don't you have work to do?"

"I wouldn't know. It's my first day and I've had no training."

Professor Opelnee held his arms wide. "I don't have time to train you, girl." He turned to Pelya. "What does my assistant do?"

Pelya pursed her lips. "Usually, he assists you. When he's not doing that, he's getting you drinks, getting you books, or dusting shelves that don't need dusting. That's his best talent from what I've seen."

The professor ran a hand through his hair. "Why am I paying him?"

"You're not," Pelya said. "He's provided to you by the Blue Wyverns, who also pay for your mint cream and cider habit along with room and board and probably a small stipend."

The professor thought about that for a moment. "Oh, well I suppose that's fine then." He waved Ravenne over. "You might as well help with translation since you don't appear to be useful otherwise."

"Are you certain the shelves don't need more dusting?" Pelya asked.

Professor Opelnee stared at her through lidded eyes. "Next paragraph."

Ravenne pulled a chair next to Pelya and watched the translation.

Pelya pointed out each word and its enunciation to Ravenne. The new assistant soaked in everything. Before long, she was even catching variations in the writing that neither Pelya nor Opelnee had noticed.

Chapter 22

Matthew was waiting for Pelya and Ravenne when they exited the Transcription Building. He jumped down and held the carriage door open. Pelya rolled her eyes when Ravenne exchanged dazzling smiles with him.

When Matthew got back into his seat, Ravenne leaned forward and tapped him on the shoulder. When he turned around, she grabbed his hair in both hands and kissed him deeply.

Pelya looked at anything but their activity. The sky was clear again and the moons bathed the landscape in their glow. The rustling trees made the shadows look alive. Pelya inspected them to see if any *were* alive, but they were ordinary. She settled under the blanket and waited patiently for the two to finish their activity.

Matthew was fully turned in his seat, returning Ravenne's kiss with passion.

After another minute of staring at the trees, Pelya whined plaintively, "I hate to be a damper on your fun, but can we go?"

The lovers released each other and Ravenne sat with a breathless laugh. Matthew leaned back in his seat and grinned happily.

Ravenne patted Pelya's leg. "You should drive so Matthew and I can kiss."

"I can't drive one of these things." Pelya didn't even want to try.

Matthew shook his head ruefully. "Even if she could, I wouldn't agree, no matter how much I want to keep kissing." He shook his hands and let out a long breath to get control again. "If anyone caught me, I'd be out of a job." He looked back at Ravenne. "I really like my job."

Ravenne nodded in understanding. "Just turn around and give me a kiss now and then."

Matthew grinned. "Agreed." He released the brake and began driving. "I talked to Auntie Iriene."

Pelya opened her mouth to respond, but Ravenne leaned forward eagerly and played with a lock of his hair. "What did she say?"

Matthew spoke over his shoulder towards her while keeping his eyes on the road. "She wants us to be careful. If it *is* a conspiracy, as you think, then she believes you may be in grave danger. If you find anything, tell her first through me so she can protect you through her connections."

Ravenne gave him a kiss. "That's wonderful. We'll do that."

Pelya silently disagreed; having to report to someone before taking action sent up a red flag in her mind. "It's good to have someone on our side," she said hesitantly. "Perhaps she'll help us present the evidence after we gather it."

"She will," Matthew said. "She has a contact in the Council of Eight. If we get enough evidence, she'll take you to her."

"Who's her contact?" Pelya asked.

Matthew shrugged. "She didn't tell me that. Just that we should get her any information we find."

Ravenne kissed his ear. "Did she give you any ideas where to start?"

"You make it awfully difficult to concentrate on the road when you do that." Matthew reddened and exhaled slowly. "She said Pelya's list of observations would be an excellent start. Auntie Iriene is going to make one to go with it. But other than that, she didn't mention any ideas other than you must stay safe."

Ravenne settled back. "I feel much better knowing we have someone to back us up and reach the Council. The thought of going at it alone is foolish."

Pelya tried to sound relieved as well. "Yes, definitely. Now we just need to get information."

"Do you have a plan?" Matthew asked.

Pelya had one, but she wasn't about to mention it to him. "I think we need to talk with the others and see what they know. I grabbed paper, quills and ink so I can begin my list tonight. I'm going to ask Corporal Birown if she'll keep the list someplace safe until we're ready to present it."

"You should sneak it to me in the mornings, if you can get up a little early," Matthew suggested.

"I can do that, Pelya," Ravenne suggested eagerly. "Corporal Birown will surely let me go a couple of hours early each morning, giving me time to get back. It's a sensible plan."

The hopeful looks on their faces couldn't be refused. Pelya winked. "Are you certain you don't mind visiting a young man's room all alone. He might take advantage of you."

Ravenne laughed. "Oh, I certainly hope so!"

Matthew's blush grew deeper as he kept his eyes on the road ahead.

Pelya and Ravenne hurried back to the Enlistment Building, entering through a small side door they normally used. To their surprise, there was a group of recruits already there. Pelya recognized Uma shoved up against the wall by a burly recruit from another troop.

A shorter recruit with a cocky attitude held up a hand. "This doesn't concern you. Best you turn around and leave."

Ravenne stopped, but Pelya stepped forward, grabbed the woman's wrist and bent the hand back on itself with a practiced move, stopping just before it snapped.

The woman fell to her knees and grabbed her arm in pain. "Aaeeow!"

Everyone turned to the newcomers as Pelya released the woman and shoved her aside. Her tone was calm and her movements smooth. "What's going on here?" She had already assessed that the burly recruit was a bully. Uma had tears streaming down her cheeks.

The burly recruit held Uma's collar with one meaty hand while pointing at Pelya with the other. "I'll deal with you next." The woman had muscle, but most of her bulk was gained by stealing food from smaller people. A missing tooth among the rotting ones added to the meanness of her expression.

On the opposite side of Uma and the bully were two other recruit thugs keeping Tina and Deliah at bay. The fifth member of the gang, a skinny brunette with a permanent sneer, stood next to bully. She smacked a fist into the palm of her hand, a gesture that was supposed to intimidate.

Pelya decided to deal with them in a way that would leave few visible marks. With two fast steps, she grabbed the bully's outstretched wrist.

A sharp pull knocked the bully off balance. Pelya's knee into the gut knocked the air out of the woman and caused her to lose grip on Uma.

Pelya captured the bully's forearm in between her bicep and ribs while driving strong fingers into the soft flesh of the bully's underarm. She lifted until the woman was on tiptoes and whimpering in pain.

The bully probably would have screamed if she had air. As it was, her face became a sickly blue of suffering.

The skinny brunette stepped forward with a ferocious overhead punch.

Pelya was surprised that anyone would defend the bully. Usually friends of a bully were just as much of a coward as their leader. Regardless of the surprise, Pelya was ready.

It was a simple matter for Pelya to grab the sneering woman's wrist with her free hand. Pelya brought it down, under and behind the woman's back. She drove the woman chest-first into the wall while continuing to lift the arm just short of its breaking point. Meanwhile, she dragged the unwilling bully along.

The bully gasped as she recovered her breath. She weakly slapped at Pelya's shoulder with her free arm in a gesture of surrender. Neither woman would be a threat to Pelya at that point.

Pelya assessed the surroundings. Every other woman, including Pelya's friends, was staring at her with wide eyes and open mouths. "Oh good. I see that I have everyone's attention." Pelya lowered her voice to an intimidating growl. "You will *never* harm my friends. You will not intimidate them, bully them, speak badly of them, or even look in their direction." She jerked the arms in her grip, causing both women to cry out in pain. "If you do anything against them again, I will rip these arms off and beat you senseless with them. Do you understand me?" She applied more pressure for emphasis.

The bully spoke first. Fear and pain battled for her eyes. "Y . . . yes."

The other woman responded with a sob. "Yes."

Pelya released them rapidly and they both fell to the ground before they could become accustomed to the change of pressure. She skipped back and prepared for the unlikely chance that they might try to retaliate.

The women scrambled to their feet. Fear in their expressions showed that there was no battle left within them. The other women in their troop helped them up and all five ran down the corridor, looking in panic over their shoulders.

Pelya moved immediately to Uma. "Did they hurt you?" She touched the side of Uma's neck and looked for bruising. There appeared to be none.

Uma shook her head. A sob broke loose.

Pelya held Uma and made comforting noises while the woman cried on her shoulder. The others gathered around them to give their support. After a moment, Uma stepped back and wiped her face. "Thank you. No one has ever stood up for me."

"I protect my friends," Pelya said. "It's a free bonus that comes with my intensity."

A laugh escaped Uma's throat and before long, they were all laughing.

"I've never seen anyone move the way you did, Pelya," Deliah said in awe.

"Yeah!" Tina mimicked a couple of Pelya's moves. "Where did you learn that stuff?"

Deliah looked up the corridor. "What if they tell on you? We could get kicked out."

Pelya went to Deliah and put an arm around her shoulders, guiding her toward the mess hall. "They won't tell anyone that they were humiliated. I was careful to avoid hurting them in a way that would require a healer, so no one else will notice."

Tina turned to Ravenne. "The thing I like most about Pelya is how she dodges questions so well." She tapped Pelya's shoulder. "Did you learn how to do that in Dralin? Did your father teach you?"

Pelya stopped, holding her ground as Tina ran into her back with an oof. She turned. "Yes and yes. Are there any other questions I have to answer?"

Tina looked up at her timidly. "No."

Uma folded her arms and looked at the floor. "Are you going to beat her up too, Pelya?"

Pelya held her arms out in disbelief. "I'm not going to beat anyone up. I just don't like questions about my past. I feel like I'm being judged."

"It just seems like you're hiding something," Tina said with a shrug.

Pelya looked to each of them for support, but even Ravenne and Deliah refused to meet her gaze. She took a couple of steps to walk away before remembering that she promised not to do that, so she stopped and put her hands on her hips in resignation. "I don't know. I've had a busy life. I was banished from my past and I suppose I feel as if my past should be banished from me in return."

"That's good enough for me," Deliah said, "and it should be good enough for the rest of you too. We need to stick together."

Ravenne looked around. "Speaking of sticking together, where's Beth?"

"We don't know," Uma said. "She hasn't shown up."

Tina clucked her tongue. "Maybe she saw the rest of us in trouble and ran the other way."

Ravenne tapped Tina's shoulder with the back of a hand. "Why are you being so nasty?"

Tina looked away sullenly. There was nothing of her normal bubbly personality left.

Pelya sensed something deeper was wrong. "Did something happen?"

"I'm hungry." Tina shoved past.

Ravenne dashed forward and matched Tina's pace while the rest followed. Instead of confronting the younger woman, Ravenne merely stayed by her side in silent support.

The group of bullies huddled at the far end of the mess hall, working hard not to make eye contact, though they did sneak occasional glances.

Beth was nowhere to be seen as they got their dinners and sat down at their favorite table. Uma worriedly checked the entryway. "I'm worried about Beth. Why wouldn't she be here?"

"Maybe she touched someone while they were being healed," Ravenne suggested.

Pelya turned to her with narrowed eyelids.

Ravenne's smiling face was the picture of innocence.

The others laughed and Pelya joined in. It released the tension.

"What happened in the hallway, Uma?" Ravenne asked. "Why did those women have you pinned against the wall?"

Uma picked at her food without answering.

Tina spoke for her. "We were going to meet the two of you outside, but they followed us down the hall. The big one said that Uma needed to mind her own business and stop causing trouble."

Ravenne set her fork down. Her voice was soft and gentle. "What trouble do they think you caused, Uma?"

Uma shrugged.

"If someone sent them, then you could be in more danger," Pelya said. "I was under the impression that they were just bullies." Pelya reached across the table and took her hand.

"Please tell us, Uma."

Uma's words were barely above a whisper. "You already hate me."

Pelya spoke sincerely, "If I hated you, I wouldn't have protected you. You're my friend, Uma."

Uma glanced up, but didn't hold Pelya's eyes. She spoke to her plate instead, the words just above a mumble. "I've been assigned to care for equipment, but we're not allowed to do anything with it. Today, I decided to ask my supervisor about the changes, like you wanted. She

yelled at me to get out of her office.” Uma glanced in the direction of the bullies. “That big one and the skinny one work there too. None of them like me.”

“We need to get you out of there.” Pelya pounded a fist on the table. “When your supervisor finds out what I did, you’ll be in even more danger than before, and I don’t think it would go over well if I shoved your supervisor’s face into a wall.”

“You’re serious, aren’t you,” Deliah said in amazement. “You’d do that.”

Pelya shrugged innocently.

“I’m not going to change positions,” Uma said with uncharacteristic determination. “This is my job and I’m going to learn how to do it. If they beat me, so be it. I probably deserve it anyway.”

Pelya shook her head. “Nobody deserves it.”

“You can’t be the only hero, Pelya.” Ravenne poked Pelya’s arm with a finger. “You want to be our savior and fix the Recruit Program all by yourself. Are you going to take all the glory too?”

The words hurt. Pelya had never asked for glory. Where possible, she avoided it. She had only ever wanted adventure and the opportunity to do what was right.

“I don’t need no glory,” Uma said. “She can have it. But I’m not going to be scared all my life, neither.”

“We’re just worried about you,” Deliah told Uma. “Glory or no, we don’t want any of us to get hurt.”

Pelya nodded. “Agreed. And I’m not looking for glory.” She couldn’t think of a way to convince them. Words were never good enough for something that required actions to prove.

“Did you find out anything?” Deliah asked.

“We have help,” Ravenne said. “Professor Withiar is going to present our information to one of the commanders when we have enough.”

“Oh, that’s excellent,” Deliah said.

“Are you certain we can trust her?” Tina asked.

Ravenne nodded. “Definitely. She used to be a Captain in the Wyverns and she’s been supportive of Pelya and me the whole time.”

“Very supportive,” Pelya added, keeping her doubts to herself. “Were you able to discover anything, Tina?”

“No. Our lieutenant doesn’t talk to the recruits.” Tina made a face. “I spent all day either sitting still or running to deliver messages.”

“How about you, Deliah?” Ravenne asked.

“I didn’t learn anything other than the Recruit Commander’s office is filthy.” Deliah took a drink. When she noticed everyone staring at her, she grinned. “I spent the day cleaning it and will be doing so over the next couple of days.” The grin disappeared. “I don’t know what good it’ll do. I can’t read’.”

“Can you sneak me in in the middle of the night?” Pelya asked in a whispered voice.

They all leaned in. “You can’t do that,” Uma protested in a whisper.

“It’ll be locked,” Deliah pointed out. “I don’t have a key.”

“And they’ll execute you if you’re caught,” Ravenne added.

Pelya rubbed her face. “The Recruit Commander’s office is where I’ll find anything incriminating and there are other ways to get through locked doors. She’s the person responsible for everything, I’m *sure* of it. I’ll take every precaution not to get caught, but there is risk in everything that’s worth doing.”

Pelya spent the rest of dinner trying to convince them that it was a good idea, but to no avail.

Beth appeared just before it was time to head to their quarters. She slid along the bench next to Uma. "I found some information."

"Do tell," Ravenne encouraged.

"My supervisor saw what good work I do, so she invited me to dinner. She does that with her favorite recruits." Beth beamed at the honor. "We talked about where I learned to sew and styles worn by the nobles of nearly every kingdom."

Deliah smiled. "That's wonderful, Beth. I'm so happy for you."

"It sounds dreadfully dull if you ask me," Tina said with a comical expression of distaste.

Uma reached out and rapped the young woman's hand. "Nobody asked you. Go on, Beth." She ignored Tina sticking out her tongue.

Beth gave a good-natured chuckle at the byplay. "Well, I told her about the list that Ravenne and Pelya are making. She immediately agreed that things have been getting worse over the last few years and there is probably more than we know."

There were too many people knowledgeable about their plans for Pelya's liking. It made her nervous.

"Do you think that's wise?" Ravenne asked.

"*Your* supervisor knows about the plan," Uma pointed out.

"Well, yes, but . . ."

"I trust her, Ravenne," Beth said. "She told me that I need to be careful though. We could get in a lot of trouble if anyone catches us."

"We've been trying to make that point to Pelya," Ravenne said pointedly.

Pelya rolled her eyes.

"Will your supervisor help us?" Deliah asked.

Beth shook her head. "I don't think she will. She complained to the Recruit Commander about something recently and lost a rank for her trouble. She *did* give me information that the quality of recruits has been falling. Uniforms and food are two of the only areas where budgets haven't been cut. "

"I wonder why that is," Uma asked.

"You can't tell anyone she told me this, but she thinks it's because officers would notice if recruits were dressed badly or growing thin from hunger." Beth snatched a cold vegetable off Uma's plate. "Appearance is very important, you know."

One of the mess hall attendants came to the end of their table. "To your barracks, Recruits. It's bedtime."

They quickly took their trays to the bins and headed off to bed. Reporting late would result in discipline that none of them wanted.

As she passed Corporal Birown after roll call, Pelya whispered a request to be woken up two hours before morning call. The corporal gave a slight nod of acknowledgement.

For an hour before bed, Pelya and Ravenne worked on Pelya's list of observations. Ravenne finished three pages in the time it took Pelya to write two, much to Ravenne's delight. There was more to write, but both women were exhausted, so Ravenne put the papers in the tube borrowed from Professor Opelnee's office. She would sneak it to Matthew before morning call.

Chapter 23

Pelya and Ravenne sat up as Corporal Birown opened the door and the light of a lantern flooded the room. The corporal came in and lit a candle for them while they sat up and rubbed the sleep out of their eyes.

To Pelya's surprise, she couldn't remember one nightmare. At that point, she regretted having to get up. Judging by the way her roommate was sticking a tongue out at her, Ravenne regretted it too.

They got up and followed Corporal Birown out of the room. A fire in the hearth kept off the creeping chill that threatened to seep in from outside. It was just the three of them. The corporal sat in her customary position with her good foot hooked under the bottom of the desk. "Have you come up with a plan?"

Ravenne spoke before Pelya could. "We've made a list of things Pelya has found. I'm going to deliver it to someone who can help us present the case to someone in the Council of Eight. We don't want to leave it where anyone can find it." She held up the tube she had brought out. "This is only part of the list, so I'll need to make trips over the next couple of mornings." Her breathing was shallow and her skin flushed at the prospect of visiting Matthew.

Pelya rested her elbows on her knees. "Deliah is going to sneak me into the Recruit Offices and show me where Recruit Commander Indiya's office is. If it's clear, I'm going to sneak in and see if I can find anything incriminating."

The front feet of Birown's chair thudded to the floor. "You're going to do what?"

"See?" Ravenne gestured with an outstretched arm at Pelya. "We all told her that's a terrible idea."

Birown leaned forward. "How are you going to get into the office? Are you under the impression that the door will be left open?"

"Exactly." Ravenne sat back smugly. "She doesn't have an answer for that one."

Pelya had avoided telling the others about another of her secret skills. It wasn't the sort of thing that engendered trust. "I'm going to pick the lock."

Ravenne snorted and rolled her eyes.

Birown opened her bottom desk drawer and pulled out a padlock. She tossed it on the desk in front of Pelya.

Pelya leaned down to examine it at eye level before touching it. There didn't appear to be a trap on the exterior. She examined the keyhole and verified that it also didn't have a trap. There was a tiny chance that there might be a magical ward upon it, but Pelya didn't think a corporal outside of Dralin would have such an expensive enchantment.

Ravenne sighed impatiently. "Are you trying to pick it with your eyes?"

Birown laughed.

Pelya wasn't about to rush the job, but she was done with the cursory inspection. She pulled two pins out of her hair. She had bent the malleable metal over the last few days and had more hidden against her scalp as well. They weren't as good as her picks, but should do for mundane locks.

Ravenne leaned forward. "What in the world are those?"

Birown leaned forward as well. "Clever girl."

Pelya put the improvised picks in and instantly recognized the type of lock by the feel. It was simple. However, she didn't unlock it right away. It wouldn't do to let them know the level

of her skill. After a short while and muttered cussing, she put pressure in the right places and listened to the satisfying click.

Ravenne's voice was hushed and indignant. "Where did you learn that, Pelya? That's a talent of common criminals."

Pelya winked. "I was raised in Dralin. It's a skill most everyone has there. My uncle began teaching me at the age of five." A vision of Bobbell dying flashed before her eyes and she jerked in response.

Birown narrowed her eyes intuitively. "And what happened to your uncle?"

"It doesn't matter." Pelya shook off the memory. "I need to get Deliah and have her show me where the office is. The two of us can sneak in and out. If anyone's watching, they'll be dull at the early hour. I'll just do some scouting this morning and determine an exact place to start looking tomorrow morning."

"Two mornings?" Ravenne asked. "*One* is too dangerous."

"It has to be done," Pelya said. "The real answers will be there."

"You really think you can do this, don't you?" Birown leaned back in her chair again. "If you're caught, the commander will likely kill you on the spot. Deliah too."

"You can't include her," Ravenne said.

Pelya considered. "You're right. I'd like to ask her directions to the office though, unless you know how to get to it, Corporal?"

"Never been there. One thing about the Wyverns is that there's not much mixing of officers and grunts." Birown stood and grabbed her lantern. "You'll need Deliah to keep watch while you have your face buried in papers."

Ravenne protested again. "No. You can't risk her."

"You're the one who said I can't hog all the glory for myself."

Ravenne glared. "I'm going to change and then I'm going to deliver this list." She stood. "I won't be a bit surprised if you've gotten yourself and Deliah killed by morning call." She spun on the ball of a foot and tromped to the room.

Birown watched the exchange before setting the lantern on the ground and sneaking into Deliah's room, surprisingly silent on the peg leg. A moment later, she returned with Deliah who was wiping tired eyes. Deliah sat. "What do you need me to do?"

"Will you tell me how to get to the Commander's office?" Pelya asked.

Ravenne came out in her uniform and sat down to put on her boots.

Deliah looked at Pelya in thought. "No. But I'll show you where it is."

Birown took her own seat. "If you're caught, you'll be executed."

"That's fine." Deliah smiled sleepily. "Blue Wyverns are brave and do what's right. Just because I'm a recruit doesn't mean I can't start now."

Ravenne sighed in resignation. "Fine. Both of you just promise that you'll be careful."

"I promise," Deliah and Pelya said together.

Birown leaned back. "Also, understand that if any of you get caught, I'll be disciplined and possibly even executed if they find out my level of involvement."

"I'll say we snuck by you," Pelya offered.

She shook her head. "You're not that good. I recommend you tell them that you're working for me. It might save you the worst."

"Why would you agree to such a thing?" Ravenne asked in disbelief.

The corporal lifted her shirt and showed them green and red spots over her stomach. "I have a year, maybe, to live." The front feet of the chair dropped to the floor again. "I love the Blue

Wyverns. What's happening here is a disgrace. You aren't being trained to be true Wyverns and I won't stand for it." She leaned back again. "I like you girls. You have grit, the sort we need. Be brave, be foolish, and most of all, be right."

Pelya didn't recognize the disease, but she did recognize the corporal's determination. "We will. We might even surprise you." She stood to leave.

"Should we change?" Deliah asked.

Pelya looked at her nightclothes. "Yeah. That would be a good idea."

"One other thing," Birown said. "The night sergeant will stop you at the stairs. Tell her that you're on an errand for me and she'll wave you through, no questions asked. If anyone else stops you, and they will, tell them that you're on night cleaning duties for whatever building you're going to. It's a fairly common punishment for troublemakers." She winked. "The lot of you fit that description."

"Yes, Corporal," they said with a laugh.

Ravenne gave Pelya and Deliah brief hugs. "I'm going to go now."

Pelya and Deliah returned the hugs before going to change.

A little later, Deliah was leading Pelya through the cold morning air toward the Recruit Offices. Their cloaks were wrapped tightly and their boots clicked against the cobbled street. Stars twinkled in the dark sky while a half-full Siahgray smiled down on the picturesque city. Piohgray had already set in the middle of the night.

They walked normally on Pelya's advice. Sneaking always looked suspicious. It was odd to be out in the middle of the night though. Pelya kept looking around for thugs lurking in alleys. She had to remember that she was no longer in Dralin where two young women walking alone were targets for thieves and slavers.

The Recruit Office was seven streets to the west and two streets south of the Recruit Barracks. Before reaching it, Deliah turned down a side street, away from the main entry with its guards.

As Pelya followed, she marveled at how empty the street was. No one patrolled around the building, neither city guards nor Blue Wyvern soldiers. Pelya couldn't remember if Settatt even had a city guard. She didn't think so.

"Here's the servant's entry that I use every day," Deliah whispered. She led Pelya up three steps to a sheltered opening in front of two bronze-bound wooden doors. She tried opening one, only to find it locked. "Oh no," she whispered. "I didn't even think about that."

Pelya looked both ways down the empty street as she pulled pins out of her hair. She was grateful that the doorway was recessed to give them cover. "Keep your eyes open while I pick the lock."

Deliah gasped and put hands on her hips. "Pelya Jornin."

Pelya ignored the tone as she slipped the homemade picks into the keyhole. She didn't waste time, but it took a moment to feel for the type of lock and the right pressure points for the tumblers. She switched one of the pins for a stronger one to move the heavier tumblers. To her dismay, the stronger pin bent, but she managed to get enough pressure on the lock and smiled at the satisfying click that followed.

Deliah put a hand on Pelya's shoulder. "A group of soldiers is walking down the other street."

Pelya snuck a peek inside the door and was happy to see an empty hall. “Marching or walking casually?” They were both whispering.

“Walking casually.”

Pelya slipped inside and pulled Deliah in behind her. She closed the door and debated whether or not to leave it unlocked. “Did they see you?”

“No.” Deliah shook her head in an exaggerated motion. “They didn’t even look in our direction.”

“Good.” Pelya left the door unlocked. She didn’t want to risk bending the pin more. “Take me to the office, but stop before intersections to let me check.” She began fixing the pin. Its integrity was gone, but she should be able to use it one more time.

The hall only had one lantern, leaving plenty of shadows to stick to. Deliah did her best to walk silently, but her boots clicked with each step. Pelya stopped and showed her a technique to avoid the sound. Soon, they were moving silently through the building. By avoiding the main halls, they made it without meeting a soul. Low flames in lanterns dimly lit the smaller corridors.

“There’s a waiting room there,” Deliah whispered, pointing at an opening on the left wall. Light shone from it into the hallway, a sign that someone was likely inside.

Pelya motioned for her to wait while she moved forward and listened at the edge of the entry. There were no sounds of movement, so she went low and glanced in. Seeing it empty, she gestured for Deliah to follow.

The waiting room was silent, but there was a brightly lit lantern on the lieutenant’s desk. Pelya motioned for Deliah to wait at the entry.

A crack of light came from under the door. Pelya silently moved to it and put her ear against the wood. Disappointment filled her veins as she heard the murmur of people talking. Their voices sounded stationary, so she took a moment to inspect the lock. Traces of light from the other side trickled through, but she couldn’t see all the way. It did help illuminate the mechanism. Pelya saw enough to know what picks she would likely need.

She moved back to Deliah with a finger over her lips. The woman seemed disappointed, but Pelya smiled encouragingly and led her back to the hallway.

The return trip out of the building was just as uneventful. Pelya made certain no one was in the street before they exited. She relocked the door, but her pick bent the rest of the way in the process.

“Was someone in the office?” Deliah whispered as they made their way back up the street.

“Yeah. We’ll try again tomorrow.” Pelya took a deep breath of the clean air. “Deliah . . .”

“Yes?”

“Let’s not tell anyone we did this except for Ravenne and Corporal Birown. Too many people are aware of what’s happening now and if the wrong person finds out about us sneaking into the commander’s office, it doesn’t matter how careful we are. They’ll have us executed.” Pelya looked at Deliah hopefully.

“I think that’s a real good idea.” Deliah smiled. “I’m good at keeping secrets, Pelya.”

“I know.” Pelya smiled back. “I’m glad we’re friends.”

Deliah took her hand and squeezed. “Me too.”

A few minutes later, they were in the Recruit Barracks and headed to their dorms. Three times, they were stopped, but their excuses were easily accepted.

The front feet of Corporal Birown’s chair hit the ground as the recruits entered. She waited eagerly until they reached the desk. “That was much faster than I expected. What happened?”

“There were people inside the commander’s office. I think three at least.” Pelya flopped in one of the chairs while Deliah did the same with a wide smile of excitement.

Worry crossed Birown’s face. “You didn’t try to enter . . .”

“No, no.” Pelya waved off the concern. “I got a look at the lock though, so I’ll be able to give it a try if there’s no one inside. Also, we’ve decided not to tell anyone what we’re doing except the four of us.”

Birown nodded. “Good decision. I was thinking the same thing when you were gone.”

Pelya pulled out the bent pin. “I just wish I had a decent set of picks.”

“I can get you a set today,” Birown said. “You’ll be whipped if you’re caught with them though. The Blue Wyverns don’t take kindly to thieves.”

Pelya gave the corporal an appraising look. “You’re very resourceful. I’d like to hear your story sometime.”

Birown grinned. “For now, you need to go to bed. Where’s Ambruis?”

Pelya looked away innocently. “She’s probably going to be gone for a bit. Her contact is handsome.”

“Oho!” Birown laughed. “Good for her.” She leaned back again. “Get to bed now, both of you.”

Deliah frowned. “I don’t understand.”

Pelya leaned toward her. “Ravenne’s having an affair with the young gentleman.”

Deliah’s confusion deepened. “What does that mean?”

“It means she’s warming his bed,” Birown said.

Deliah’s eyes widened. “Are they married?”

“No, Deliah.” Pelya patted her hand. “Not everyone gets married before they share beds.”

Deliah held the other hand to her chest, horrified by the concept.

Birown chuckled. “Go warm your own beds until morning call.”

Pelya got up. “Goodnight.” She headed to her room.

Birown chuckled some more. “Good morning.”

Pelya changed and slipped into bed, falling instantly asleep.

Chapter 24

Ravenne shook Pelya. "Wake up."

Pelya grunted.

Ravenne knelt on Pelya's back and bounced up and down. "Seriously. Wake up. It's time for morning call."

Pelya grunted with each bounce. "Fine, I'm awake." She swatted ineffectively at the offensive woman. "I'm awake."

Ravenne got off and jumped to her bed. She brushed her hair. "I just got back and didn't have time to talk to Corporal Birown. What did you find out?"

Pelya sat up and glared at her grumpily. "You're awfully chipper for this time of the morning."

A wide grin lit Ravenne's face, but she ignored the comment. "What did you find out? You haven't been executed yet, so I figure that's a good sign."

Pelya got up and changed back into her uniform. "There was someone in her office, so we left. I'm hoping it'll be empty tomorrow. Speaking of which, let's not tell the others that we're sneaking into the commander's office. Too many people know what we're doing now and that's something that could have drastic consequences."

Ravenne gestured with the comb. "That's a good idea. I still think breaking in is dangerous and foolish, but the least we can do is keep it quiet. I already told Matthew though."

Pelya finished putting on her uniform and smoothed it out, her back turned to Ravenne. "Did he treat you well?" she asked in a quiet voice.

Ravenne stopped brushing. "He did. Why?"

Pelya turned to Ravenne whose head was tilted to the side mid-brush. "Because I've seen a lot of women who weren't treated well. I've seen them broken and battered even worse than Deliah was that first day. I wouldn't want that to happen to you, Ravenne."

"I've seen that happen to women before too. It happened to my best friend." Ravenne set the brush on the nightstand. "She didn't live." Ravenne looked Pelya in the eyes. "I promise that Matthew treated me well. He treated me wonderfully, Pelya."

"I'm glad." Pelya breathed a sigh of relief.

Ravenne came over and they held onto each other, letting painful memories ease. A knock on the door indicated that it was time for morning call. They released each other and quickly finished getting ready.

Matthew and Ravenne exercised phenomenal restraint in not kissing as he helped her into the carriage after lunch, though they did grin wide enough to split their faces. Pelya gave Ravenne a playful shove in the back and got in behind her.

Clouds had begun gathering halfway through exercises. They brought a cold breeze with them along with the scent of snow. People kept their cloaks tight as they scurried about their day's tasks. The trees were losing their remaining colors rapidly and winter had been the favorite topic in the mess hall.

The women took the time to inform Matthew of the failed attempt to enter the commander's office along with the information the other recruits had learned, since Ravenne hadn't taken the

time to do so during the morning visit. They both had the good sense to blush when Pelya narrowed her eyes at them.

When they were done with the explanations, Matthew told of his meeting with Auntie Iriene. "She looked over the list and said things were even worse than she imagined. She also doesn't like the idea of Pelya and Deliah breaking into the commander's office. Even Auntie Iriene won't be able to protect you if you get caught."

Ravenne folded her arms and stared pointedly at Pelya. "That's what I've been saying, but she won't listen to me."

Pelya put her fingers in her ears. "La, la, la, la, la, la."

Ravenne shoved her playfully while Matthew laughed.

"I know how dangerous it is, but I can't think of any other way to get incriminating evidence." Pelya slumped in her seat. "It's the best chance we have of finding something useful. I can't stand the idea of spending another day wandering from practice area to practice area learning nothing like we did today."

"It was pretty bad," Ravenne agreed. "I didn't even break a sweat. Basic training should be tougher than that."

Matthew turned onto the road to the Transcription Building. "Auntie Iriene agrees. Her basic training was tough, nothing like it is now. She said they didn't do chores for the first month. That's a new thing since the new commander took over."

Pelya shook her head. "There is definitely something wrong here. I can't believe no one's noticed it."

"A lot of people have noticed it," Matthew said. "Auntie Iriene said that one of the problems is that the Council High Commander is the weakest and most negligent the Blue Wyverns has ever had. She came into power ten years ago. Few people ever get to talk to her and she never does inspections on anyone." He turned to look at them. "Auntie Iriene will get into a lot of trouble if you tell anyone that."

Ravenne leaned forward and gave him a kiss. "We won't tell."

Pelya saw movement in the bushes to either side of the road ahead. She pointed. "Matthew."

Matthew turned and yanked on the brake and the horse's reins as three riders appeared in front of them.

The riders wore the gear of thieves, dark clothing wrapped tight for silence and bandanas covering their mouths and noses for anonymity. Their cloaks were oiled against the weather, marking them to be highwaymen, as did their tanned faces. Grim determination lit the eyes of each man while they stared at their seemingly helpless prey.

Pelya quickly assessed that their equipment was mundane, but of fine quality. They had identical swords drawn. Their belts and cloaks were identical as well. A glance at the knife hilts and boots showed that they also matched. The details marked them as disciplined troops, not unruly highwaymen.

The leader raised his sword. "Give us your money or die."

It was the lamest threat Pelya had ever heard, more proof that they weren't thieves. She took a good look at the leader's eyes and saw grim determination where there should have been greed, or even lust at the sight of attractive young women.

Matthew held up an arm. His voice was defiant and only a little shaky in the face of danger. "We have no money. We're lowly recruits and a driver with the Blue Wyverns."

Ravenne clutched Pelya.

Pelya shook her off. "Let me go." Time began to slow.

Ravenne looked at her with hurt and fear in her eyes, but Pelya didn't have time to give her comfort. Matthew could handle that later.

The leader moved forward to the left side of the carriage, moving his sword to a striking position. "Then you shall die!"

Pelya grabbed the blanket in her right hand and propelled herself over Matthew's left shoulder. She landed with one foot on the edge of his seat and the other on the footboard. Time slowed even more for her. She saw each detail, each puff of breath.

The leader came closer, within striking distance. He began an overhead swing, aimed for a fatal blow on Matthew.

Pelya tossed the blanket forward and twisted it with a flick of her wrist so that it fouled the motion of the sword. She used the strength in her legs to propel her forward into the air.

The other two mock-highwaymen began moving to the other side of the wagon.

Pelya watched her feet as they landed in front of the leader on his horse. It would be tricky to keep her balance. She also used the blanket to shift the trajectory of his sword.

The leader's eyes widened at the surprise move. He tried to pull his sword free from the blanket.

Pelya used her forward momentum to drive the knuckles of her free hand into his throat.

He released his sword in order to clutch at his neck as he began falling over the back of his horse.

It was better fortune than Pelya had hoped for. She released the blanket with her right hand and grabbed the hilt of the sword with a dexterous upward move of her left.

The horse reared at the extra weight and the loss of its rider. It took Pelya by surprise.

She made a desperate move, pushing off the leader's chest with her left foot and jumping back toward the carriage. She didn't know if she would succeed, but she had to try.

Matthew and Ravenne were staring at her with their jaws hanging open. They *should* have been trying to escape.

Fortunately, the other two mock-highwaymen were also staring at her, transfixed.

Pelya reached with her right hand to grab the canopy of the carriage for balance. She flicked the sword, releasing it the rest of the way from the blanket in the process. She got a grip on the canopy's frame as her right foot landed on Matthew's thigh.

Matthew yelped in pain.

He would get over it.

The men realized that they should be attacking, so they urged their horses forward again.

Pelya stepped on the footboard with her left foot and let go of the canopy with her right hand.

The first man raised his sword in a defensive position. It wouldn't help him.

Pelya's body was eager for the action after so much time wasted on despair and misery. She released pent up tension with a long exhale as she propelled herself forward with a mighty thrust of her left leg.

Both hands gripped the hilt of the stolen sword as she drove it down into the man's heart.

The mock-highwayman looked into her soul with the knowledge that she had just taken his life.

Pelya's momentum drove the sword through his body, three quarters of its length. Blood sprayed into her face as the heart pumped it out through the blood channel of the blade.

The man released his sword as his arms dropped in deathly sorrow.

Pelya's right leg hit the neck of the horse, but immediately began to slip off the side. She released the stolen sword and grabbed the falling one while swinging her left leg around in a somersault that took her to the ground.

Time resumed its normal pace.

Pelya hit the ground hard, but tumbled to her feet and ran toward the last mock-highwayman with a roaring yell.

The man had already turned his horse and was riding toward the leader.

The dead man's horse galloped off in the other direction, leaving its owner face down on the ground with the tip of the sword sticking out of his back.

Ravenne was screaming in horror as she tried to burrow into Matthew's skin. Matthew stared at the dead man with a face paler than the clouds that billowed in shock at the scene below.

Pelya thundered around the carriage, ignoring the carriage horse whose eyes were circling in panic as it pawed the ground. A good brake and Matthew's hands still on the reins were the only things that kept it from bolting.

The leader clutched at his neck while coughing. His other arm was outstretched as the last mock-highwayman plucked him up and lifted him onto the back of the horse with a practiced swing. They looked back in fear at the blood-splattered woman who charged after them.

Pelya stopped after few more steps. The horse was too fast. She fell to her knees and dropped the sword on the ground. Her breathing was ragged from the exertion. The dump of energy to her veins during battle was leaving her system, causing her to shiver as the cold set in.

Behind her, Ravenne had stopped screaming, but Pelya could hear sobbing. Matthew was trying to comfort the woman, a good sign that he was avoiding the worst of the shock that can come from seeing a person die.

Shouts rose above the wooded area and the sound of running footsteps came close. Pelya ignored them as she came to terms with the death. Every action she had taken was a good decision. Perhaps she could have done something different, but in the heat of the moment that rarely mattered.

There had been no hate or fear in her heart when she made the kill, only measured determination. That mattered. It mattered a great deal.

Someone threw a blanket around Pelya's shoulders and shouted at her. She didn't understand him over the throbbing of her heartbeat in her ears.

What would she tell them? What would Ravenne and Matthew tell them?

Someone picked up the sword that was lying in front of her and showed it to another person.

More questions came to Pelya's mind. Who were their attackers? Why did they attack the carriage?

Someone else tried talking to Pelya, but she didn't have time for them.

The attackers were trained soldiers. Pelya came to the fast conclusion that they had stopped the carriage to kill Pelya and Ravenne. Somebody had betrayed Pelya's confidence. The attack meant that she was right about what was happening in the Recruit Program. Somebody was sabotaging it.

Professor Opelnee squatted in front of Pelya and lifted her chin to look her in the eyes. "Pelya Jornin, can you hear me?"

Pelya didn't want to go through the trouble of speaking, so she blinked her eyes in acknowledgement.

“You need to talk to me, Pelya Jornin.” The professor raised an eyebrow. “If you don’t, I’ll have to slap you across the face.”

Pelya’s voice came out in a growl. “Don’t you dare.”

The professor laughed in contrast to the scene. “There’s the recruit I know. Come on. Get to your feet.” He grabbed her arm and helped her up.

Pelya immediately began shivering even as someone behind wrapped the blanket tighter around her shoulders.

“She’s in shock,” Professor Opelnee said. “We need to get all three of them into the Transcription Building. We’ll put them in the waiting room. There’s a fire in there and room enough to talk. I don’t want a bunch of blood or people in my office.”

“Yes professor.”

Pelya didn’t recognize the voice and didn’t care to find out who it was. She looked back at the carriage as Professor Opelnee led her away. The carriage horse shielded the man’s body from view.

A crowd had gathered and more people were rushing in along the road from both directions. Most were scholars from the Academy. Shouts and excited talking filled the air while a couple of soldiers tried to get everyone away from the scene.

Another blanket covered Matthew and Ravenne who were standing nearby with Tobias. They were still clinging to each other for comfort. At the professor’s gesture, Tobias guided them to Pelya and up the road.

Halfway to the Transcription Building, Professor Zergienner came up at a run followed by the other transcriptionist recruits. “By the gods, what happened?”

Professor Opelnee spoke from where he walked with an arm around Pelya’s shoulders. “Their carriage was attacked by highwaymen. One of the men is dead and someone reported that a horse with two riders rode off into the woods. These three are in shock and haven’t answered any of our questions.”

Professor Zergienner began fussing over the recruits. “What happened to Pelya? There’s blood all over her face.” The woman looked Pelya over for injuries.

“It’s spray from the man she killed,” Opelnee said. “I can’t wait to hear the entire story. For now though, take them to the waiting room and get Jornin cleaned up. I’ll find out more at the scene and then come to ask questions. We’ll get no work done today, I’m afraid.”

Professor Zergienner put an arm around Pelya’s waist. “Work doesn’t matter right now. We need to take care of these poor young people. Imagine, highwaymen in Settatt. I’ve never heard of such a thing.”

“Neither have I. Very suspicious,” Opelnee said as he headed back to the carriage.

After reaching the waiting room, Pelya, Ravenne and Matthew huddled on a couch near the fire while Professor Zergienner and the recruits fussed over them. Busy hands cleaned up Pelya’s face and hair and wouldn’t let her help.

Ravenne’s hand found Pelya’s and squeezed. The comforting gesture caused Pelya to burst into tears for just a moment. Professor Zergienner and the others fussed over her all the more. Pelya gave Ravenne a grateful look and received an encouraging smile in return.

The next hour was a blur as people came and went. Eventually, everyone was kicked out of the room except the Academy Commander, her captain and a few soldiers involved in the

investigation. Professors Opelnee, Zergienner and Withiar stood behind the couch, the latter having come at word that her nephew had been in danger.

The Academy Commander was a short woman in height only. Her stature and authoritative presence was that of a giant. The wisdom of decades etched her face. She wore brown scholar's robes rather than a uniform, but at her side was an enchanted blade that rested on her hip with the comfort of an experienced swordswoman. Long greying hair flowing down her back in waves, gave her a soft dignity as she paced back and forth.

The power of her voice hushed the room. "I am Academy Commander Halvis. So far, we know that your carriage was attacked by three highwaymen," she said to the three victims sitting on the couch under blankets. "Pelya Jornin killed one, but the others escaped on horseback. Two other horses were recovered." She stopped pacing. "Now, I'd like the three of you to tell me what happened."

Ravenne and Matthew looked to Pelya.

Pelya had an urge to deliver the report as she would if she were still in the Guard, but decided against it. There was no telling who had sent the men after them. She stared at her hands and began speaking. "Matthew turned down the road to the Transcription Building. We were all talking . . . I don't remember about what."

"That doesn't matter." Commander Halvis dismissed it with a wave of her hand. "Continue."

"The . . . highwaymen?" Pelya knew that wasn't what they were, but most recruits wouldn't.

"Yes. We believe that's what they were." The commander gestured for her to continue again.

"They rode out in front of us and told us to give them all our money or die." Pelya kept her voice weak as someone in shock would. "Matthew stopped the carriage and told them we didn't have any money. They said that we would die."

Halvis's captain was a lanky woman in her forties with a casual air that emphasized her danger rather than taking away from it. Rich-chocolate hair was gathered back loosely in an intentional mess and held with pins to keep it off her neck. "That's a bit extreme. Why rob a carriage of recruits anyway?"

The commander waved for her to be quiet. "We'll figure that out later. Continue, Pelya Jornin."

Pelya took a steadying breath. "They rode forward. I . . ." She didn't have a clue how to describe the battle without revealing her talents.

Commander Halvis gestured with both hands for Pelya to continue. "I know you've had a bit of shock, but I need you to tell me what happened."

"I'm a Blue Wyvern, so I figured I had to fight them. I leapt out of the carriage at the first one and threw a blanket at him."

"You're not a Blue Wyvern yet," the captain clarified. "You're just a recruit."

The commander waved for the captain to be quiet. "Shut up." To Pelya, she said, "You attacked an armed highwayman with a blanket?"

Pelya responded by blushing and staring at her hands. Now, it seemed silly, but she was trained to fight with anything at hand.

"Go on." The commander gave another gesture of encouragement. She was fond of communicating with her arms.

"I punched him in the throat. My father said it was always good to punch men in the throat, or the jewels if they attacked you."

The soldiers laughed at the statement. Pelya blushed again for effect.

"Your father is a smart man," the commander said. "What happened then?"

Pelya didn't answer right away because the commander hadn't gestured. A second later, she received the gesture of encouragement she was waiting for. It was a silly game. "Then I . . . I jumped off his horse and landed on Matthew. The man's sword was in my blanket so I took it and jumped to the other side of the carriage. One of the other highwaymen was on that side and he was about to kill us, so I jumped on him and tried to drive the sword into his heart with all my might."

The captain leaned against the doorjamb and folded her arms. "A perfect blow with a stolen sword through the heart and out the back, driven with the force of a bear."

Commander Halvis turned and walked to the captain, her voice low and menacing. "Please shut up, Captain. I'm not going to warn you again."

The captain stood straight in surprise. "Yes, Commander." The other soldiers also straightened and exchanged glances.

The commander moved back toward Pelya. "What happened after you killed the highwayman?"

Pelya wondered why the woman would silence her own troops. It sent a warning tingle up her spine. "I fell to the ground, grabbed the fallen man's sword and chased the third man around the front of the carriage. It was too late because he had already grabbed the first man and they were riding off, so I dropped the sword and . . . I don't know . . . everything after that has been a blur."

Commander Halvis narrowed her eyes and considered Pelya for a moment.

Pelya looked back with as much vulnerability as she could muster at that moment, which was quite a bit.

The commander turned her attention to the other two. She pointed sharply. "Is that what happened?"

Ravenne and Matthew both nodded vigorously. "It is! Yes!" Matthew reached over Ravenne and put a hand on Pelya's thigh. "She was amazing. I've never seen anyone move like that and she didn't hesitate to protect us."

The captain opened her mouth to speak, but snapped it shut with a glance toward the commander.

The commander didn't notice. She tapped her foot. "Everything you say fits the evidence precisely. I applaud your quick action and bravery, Pelya. I also apologize to the three of you for such a terrible event to happen to you while surrounded by the protection of the Blue Wyverns. Do you accept my apology?" There was an underlying threat under the words that led Pelya to believe that it would be unfortunate not to.

"Yes, Commander," all three said in unison.

"Excellent. Now let me make a few things clear." The commander went back to pacing. "You are not to speak of this to anyone, not to your friends, not to your drill sergeant, not to your commanding officers, not to these professors standing protectively over you, and not even to each other." She stopped and pointed her finger again, moving it slowly over each of them. "Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, Commander," they replied.

Commander Halvis resumed pacing again. “I will continue the investigation and send out soldiers for those highwaymen. It happened in my territory, it’s my responsibility.” She looked pointedly at the captain who gulped and took a step back. The commander spun back towards the couch. “You three will come to the Main Library and relax for the rest of the day where I can call on you if need be. You’ll eat dinner at the Academy Complex mess hall. During this time, you’ll be escorted by two of Captain Triud’s best soldiers who will *not* ask you questions.” She turned and pointed at the captain.

Captain Triud looked ready to burst with questions herself, but she nodded silently.

The commander resumed pacing. “After dinner, you will take your carriage back to your barracks where you’ll go straight to bed. If anyone asks you questions, no matter their rank, you are to refer them to me. For the next few days until I’m done with the investigation, your carriage will be escorted to and from the Recruit Complex by four of Captain Triud’s best mounted soldiers.” She raised an eyebrow at the captain.

The captain gave a single nod.

Commander Halvis rubbed her chin in thought for a moment. “I think that’s about all I have to say.” She slowly scanned the room. “If anyone in this room breaks my orders, I will break their kneecaps. Do I make myself clear?”

To a person, they responded, “Yes Commander!”

“Good!” Commander Halvis left the room before anyone could say anything else.

Captain Triud pointed to two of her soldiers. “You, you. You’ll stay with these three and have dinner with them. After that I’ll have them escorted out of here.” She gestured for the rest of her soldiers to follow and then chased after the commander at a run.

Everyone else exchanged glances of confusion. Professor Opelnee cleared his throat. “Uh . . . you heard Commander Halvis. She outranks me, so we have to do as she says. You three go enjoy the main library and the rest of us will get back to work.”

Professor Withiar came around and gave them each a fierce hug. “You do as the commander says. Don’t talk to anyone and we’ll make sure this gets worked out.”

They agreed and were soon headed to the Main Library under armed escort.

Chapter 25

Deliah was on the second of the three bookshelves. She was taking each row of books off, dusting them, polishing the shelves and then putting them back in order. The tapestries, drapes and rugs still hadn't been taken out for her to clean.

The commander was sitting at her desk, rubbing her temples in exhaustion while staring blankly at scrolls with scribbles that meant nothing to Deliah. Occasionally, she would get up and stare out the window. At no time did she speak to or acknowledge the recruit.

The door burst open and a lieutenant came running in, her sandy-blond ponytail streaming behind her. "Commander!"

The commander jumped to her feet. "What's the meaning of this!"

The lieutenant skidded to a stop. "Two recruits were attacked at the Academy Complex."

Despair flooded Deliah's heart. It could only be Pelya and Ravenne.

The commander showed no surprise. "That's terrible. It's a shame when recruits are taken from us at such a young age." She bowed her head and put a hand to her heart in insincere remorse.

Confusion dominated the lieutenant's posture. "They didn't die, Commander. I don't have any details yet, but both recruits are alive."

The commander's head jerked up and anger flashed. "Alive? How could that be?"

Hope rushed into Deliah's heart, chasing away the despair. That was followed by cold realization that the commander likely had something to do with the attack. Deliah hoped nothing else would rush into her heart. She didn't think it could take any more.

The lieutenant held her arms out. "I'm not sure what happened, just that there was an attack. I thought you would want to know immediately."

The commander grabbed her sword and belt off the side of her desk and put it on. "Get my horse. I'll find out what happened myself!" Both officers ran out the door, leaving it wide open. The lieutenant at the desk in the waiting room grabbed her sword and followed them.

It left Deliah alone in the office. She rushed to the hallway and looked both ways. No one was coming, so she dashed back into the office.

Deliah had no idea what to look for. She decided to go to the desk and search the drawers for anything that might look suspicious. There were papers and scrolls, but they were worthless unless Pelya or Ravenne were there to read them. After finishing the left side, she started on the right side drawers.

The door closed and a rasping voice hissed through the room. "What do you think you're doing?"

Deliah gasped and slammed the drawer. There, standing in front of the office door, was the angry man who had been walking with the commander that first day. "N . . . nothing."

"It doesn't *look* like nothing." The man moved forward as a wolf moves. "Where's the commander?"

Deliah felt like a cornered rabbit. "Sh . . . she . . . a lieutenant rushed in and said recruits were attacked, so they ran off."

"I see. Good to hear." The man reached the desk and moved to the right.

Deliah moved to the left in the hopes of going around.

The man changed directions. "What were you looking for, my little mouse? Hmm?"

Deliah didn't know which way to go. She looked around frantically for another way out.

"What are you looking for in those drawers, little mouse?"

“C . . . coppers sir, maybe s . . . silvers.” Deliah could handle a flogging better than the alternative.

The man smiled cruelly. “I don’t think that’s what you were doing at all, little mouse. I think you were searching for something else. I think maybe you are working with those other two recruits. Perhaps you should meet the same fate that they just did.”

Deliah saw an opportunity and ran around the left side of the desk.

The man was far too fast for her. He cut off her escape.

Deliah tried climbing over the desk to get away, but he grabbed her in a swift move and jerked her arm harder than her husband ever had. She yelled in pain as she was pulled back.

The man grabbed the bottom of her jaw with one hand and the back of her neck with the other. “What were you looking for?”

His voice was frightening in its quiet hissing. Deliah gripped his wrist with both of her hands and kicked out against the desk in the hopes of getting away.

He was too strong. The pressure from his hands became tighter. He began twisting. “What were you looking for?”

Deliah had never been more terrified in her life. She whimpered and kicked weakly as he gradually applied force.

Tina sat in the chairs, the only runner who hadn’t been sent off with a message. She fidgeted and looked around the room. The lieutenant was reading a book until the next message came in. It was the perfect time to approach her. Tina stood and approached the desk. “Can I talk to you, lieutenant?”

She didn’t even look up from her book. “No. You may not. Sit down until you’re called.”

Tina opened her mouth, but decided that it would be best to keep it shut. She timidly walked back to the chairs and sat down.

A short while later, someone rushed in with a message. Then the flood arrived.

Tina’s heart sank when she heard that two recruits had been attacked at the Academy. She tried to get more information, but no one had it to give and she became too busy running sealed messages to different places for the rest of the afternoon, all the while despairing over the fate of her friends.

Beth happily joined in conversations with the other seamstress recruits at her table. These were more experienced and she had things in common with them. The supervisor had smiled at her, but hadn’t had time to talk.

At one point in the afternoon, a soldier came in and spoke to the supervisor, but it was in the privacy of the office. Both came out a few minutes later with concerned expressions. The soldier left while the supervisor went back into her office and shut the door.

Uma went to the back of the room soon after arriving. The other recruits glared at her, but made no move to retaliate from the night before. Pelya must have frightened them for good. The supervisor was in her office, drinking again.

Rather than ignore the equipment, she began working on the small repairs she could do without the proper supplies. Things like taking a bad piece of wicker off one piece of armor and replacing it with another. She found a spool of leather cord and began using that to replace dangerously frayed cords.

A couple of hours later, a messenger came to the office and spoke to the supervisor before darting away again.

The supervisor staggered out and stared at them all. She sneered upon seeing Uma working on the equipment. After making a vulgar gesture at Uma, she staggered back into the office.

Uma quietly went back to her work, wondering what the gesture had been for.

Pelya, Ravenne and Matthew were on the third floor of the Main Library. They had spent the rest of the afternoon exploring the different areas while being followed closely by their escort. The architecture was awe-inspiring with beautiful touches added to walls, columns and decor by the best craftspeople in the lands.

The ground floor was covered with mosaic tiles in patterns that depicted epic scenes of battle interspersed with picturesque scenes of peace. Ceilings were covered by paintings of idyllic scenery.

Throughout all of it were rows and rows of bookshelves. As one reached the second floors, the architecture became more mundane, but the shelves stretched from floor to ceiling. Many of them had cubbies with scrolls and loose papers while others had thick tomes of rare books.

They had the opportunity to cross the skybridge and gazed down in amazement at the passing traffic. Pelya and Ravenne were mildly interested in the different books, but Matthew was mostly interested in Ravenne, who leaned her head against his shoulder the entire time.

Pelya truly became fascinated when they reached the third floor. It housed a museum containing artifacts from the history of the Blue Wyverns. She read all the placards they came to and forgot about the rest of the world for a short time.

It wasn't long before one of the museum attendants by the name of Malcu noticed her. He was a wizened man with wrinkles older than Pelya. He told her so himself. Laughter came easily to his toothless mouth and he walked on wobbly legs.

Pelya loved it because he gave insights to many of the items that would never be found on a fifty-word placard. He also had a sense of humor that had the three of them laughing in spite of the day's events. Even their escorts joined in the mirth.

Their guide took them into a room that people normally weren't allowed in. Guards standing on either side of the entry frowned, but Malcu told them to mind their own business as he held open the rope barrier at the entry way.

Pelya saw an iron portcullis above the door as they passed through. There were numerous other protections around a central pedestal. Pelya had no doubt there were magical wards hidden too.

On top of the alabaster pedestal was one of the most amazing artifacts any of them had ever seen. It was a liquid statue of a wyvern, two hands high and five hands long. The iridescent liquid slowly swirled and eddied within, causing the statue to move. The tail curled slowly

behind it while the wings stretched and tilted. Cold steam emitted from the surface of the wyvern as breath misted from a person's mouth on a cold winter's day. The head turned toward its audience, sapphire eyes staring at them. A sapphire heart matching the eyes floated in its chest.

Malcu held out an arm. "This, my young friends, is the Liquid Wyvern." He waggled a finger at them. "If you promise to keep it to yourself, I'll tell you a little bit about it."

Pelya and the others promised easily as they stared at the entrancing wyvern.

Malcu waggled the finger again. "It'll go badly for all of us if you ever break the promise."

They gave him further reassurances. The escorts also agreed, just as interested.

Malcu's voice grew larger than his body as he narrated. "The Liquid Wyverns consist of a mixture of metals, among them gold, silver and even platinum. Powerful archmages merge the metals with other ingredients known only to them. In doing so, the archmages imbue the devices with more magic than could ever be put into something solid."

"I've never seen anything like it," Ravenne said in awe.

"Nor will you again." Malcu winked and grinned before continuing the story. "When an archmage is near the end of the process, they give it form. The form develops the personality of the artifact. Gems are added to focus power. Perfect sapphires in this case." He pointed at the eyes and heart.

"What does it do?" Pelya asked.

Malcu waggled his finger. "That is a secret that I may not tell you." He clapped his hands together. "That's enough of the tour. You've been a very wiggly audience and I've enjoyed every moment of it. Now go to dinner."

They left the room after thanking Malcu and saying goodbye. The soldiers led them to the Academy mess hall and sat with them while eating dinner. Pelya desperately wanted to talk to the others about the incident and they clearly wanted to talk to her, but there was no opportunity to do so.

As they were finishing, Captain Triud came in with two new soldiers and dismissed the others. "Your carriage is waiting outside along with mounted soldiers," she told the recruits. "You are still under orders to go straight to bed and discuss this with no one. When it's time for chores tomorrow, my soldiers will be at the carriage house to escort you." She turned on her heel and left without another word.

They went to their carriage. Matthew made certain the women were covered by a blanket, protecting them from the flakes of snow that were beginning to fall and the cold that gusted them in different directions.

The two new escorts mounted horses held by two other mounted soldiers. They took the lead at a pace that would be easy for the carriage to match. The other two rode to the sides and a little behind the carriage. Each soldier had hands on their hilts and determined expressions as they scanned every person and building on the lamp-lit streets. No one would harm their wards.

Pelya huddled as close to Ravenne as possible. She hoped Ravenne wouldn't be mad at her for killing that man. She also wanted to offer Ravenne comfort if she needed it.

To Pelya's surprise, it was Ravenne who offered comfort. Pelya curled up and laid her head in Ravenne's lap. When she felt fingers running through her hair, silent tears streamed from her eyes as she remembered the times when her father or Ebudae would do the same.

Corporal Birown stood as Pelya and Ravenne entered with two of Captain Triud's soldiers. One of the soldiers held up a hand. "They're not to speak to anyone. Point to their room, please."

The corporal pointed and the recruits were escorted to the room. One of the soldiers even stood inside while they changed into nightclothes and got into bed. Then she blew out the candles and closed the door behind her.

The pitch-black room was silent for a moment before Ravenne whispered, "She didn't even tuck us in."

They muffled their giggles with their pillows.

A minute later, Ravenne came over and sat on the edge of Pelya's bed.

Pelya sat up and took Ravenne's hand. In a whisper, she said, "I'm sorry."

Ravenne's voice was just as quiet. "For what?"

"For killing that man."

Sarcasm entered Ravenne's whisper. "Oh, you mean the highwayman who would have killed us all? Are you trying to say you're sorry for saving my life?"

Pelya felt her face redden and was grateful that there was no light in the room. "It sounds bad when you put it that way. I mean that I'm sorry you saw me kill somebody. It's a terrible sight."

"Can I ask you a question?"

Pelya decided she could play difficult too. She grinned as she said, "No."

Ravenne giggled. "Tough. I'm going to ask anyway." She took a deep breath. "If we survive basic training, I'm going to have a sword and be put in situations where I might have to run it through someone's heart like you did, right?"

"Yes." Sorrow surrounded the word.

"Then it's good that I was able to see the grim reality of it. They won't teach us that in basic training."

Pelya squeezed her hand. "That's true." She paused for a moment. "I know we're not supposed to talk about it, but . . ."

". . . but that's not going to stop us."

Pelya could sense Ravenne grinning. She grinned back. "Those men weren't highwaymen. They were soldiers *disguised* as highwaymen." Pelya proceeded to tell Ravenne her observations and concerns.

"So our lives are truly in danger and the Academy Commander may have something to do with it?" Ravenne asked.

"I can't tell *who* has anything to do with it anymore. If I were in Dralin, I'd kick down their doors and threaten to throw them in jail if they didn't come clean, but recruits aren't allowed to do that sort of thing." Pelya chewed on a fingernail that had the audacity to grow past a nub.

"It's all true, isn't it?" Ravenne asked.

"What's true?"

"You being a swordmaster and a member of the Dralin Guard." Ravenne shifted to a more comfortable position on the bed. "The way you took out those men. I've never seen anyone move so fast or . . . I've never seen anyone do the things you did."

Pelya gave the offending fingernail a temporary pardon. "It's true. Believe it or not, I'm out of shape. Some of that was sheer luck at landing well on the horses and carriage. One slip and we all would have died."

"We might still die," Ravenne said with a tremor in her voice.

“The best way to survive someone who’s trying to kill you is to kill them first. It’s a basic law of swordplay taught to me by the weaponmaster who trained me.” Pelya sat up straighter. “Even though it’s dangerous, I say we continue with our plan, only as fast as possible. If Captain Triud’s soldiers aren’t guarding our door in the morning, I’m going to try to sneak into the commander’s office. If she catches me, I’ll just beat her unconscious and find what I’m looking for anyway.”

“Pelya!” Ravenne covered her mouth at the sound of her raised voice.

They both remained silent. When no one entered, Pelya continued. “Whoever tried to have us killed is going to continue trying. I have to take extraordinary chances now.” Pelya took Ravenne’s hand. “I’m sorry I got you into this mess.”

“I’m not.” Ravenne squeezed the hand tightly. “I’m so scared I can’t stop shaking, but I’ve never felt so alive either. We didn’t write anything down though, so I don’t have a reason to visit Matthew.”

“You don’t need a reason. Go there for comfort. Tell him our plans.” Pelya took a deep breath. “I’ve been thinking about it. Auntie Iriene is our best chance of succeeding. Tell Matthew that we’re going to have the evidence in the next day or two and that we’ll likely need protection too.”

Excitement entered Ravenne’s whisper. “I’ll do that.”

“Good, now let’s try to get some sleep. We’ll need it.”

Ravenne didn’t let go of Pelya’s hand. “Do you want to hold each other? Just holding, nothing else.”

“I’d love that.” Pelya scooted against the wall and lifted the blankets. They clung to each other for protection against nightmares and fear until falling to sleep.

Chapter 26

Lantern light poured into their room, waking them both. Corporal Birown's voice came from the doorway. "Am I disturbing something?"

Pelya sat up. "Huh?"

Ravenne got out of bed. "No, Corporal. We had a hard day yesterday and needed security."

Birown came in and closed the door behind her. "Your escort left shortly after you went to bed, but they made it clear no one is to speak to you about what happened." She winked. "That doesn't mean I'm not going to ask of course."

"What time is it?" Pelya asked.

"It's a few hours before morning call. I couldn't wait any longer." She set the lamp down on the nightstand. "Are you going to tell me what happened?"

Ravenne moved to get her uniform off her locker and glanced at Pelya to see what their answer would be.

Pelya wanted to gauge the corporal's reaction. "Soldiers dressed as highwaymen attempted to murder us yesterday. Somebody here gave them information about our investigation."

The corporal paled. "Deliah . . ."

Pelya shook her head. "Deliah wouldn't have turned on us. I *can't* believe that."

Birown grabbed Pelya's arm. "No! She's missing. She never returned from chores yesterday. If they attacked you . . ."

The blood drained from Pelya's face and her heart weakened in desolation. "No." The word was barely a whisper. She wrapped her arms around herself. "It's my fault, all of it."

Ravenne finished changing. "You don't get to take all the glory, but you don't get to take the blame either, so knock it off, Pelya." She grabbed her brush and began on the tangles in her hair.

The words jerked Pelya out of her despondency. She stood straight and looked at Ravenne in shock.

"What did her supervisor say?" Ravenne asked Birown.

"Nobody's bothered to find out," the corporal said. "I can't leave my post."

Pelya believed the corporal. There was no deception in her voice or her body language. "Can we still sneak out?"

"Yes. It's not common knowledge that no one is allowed to talk to you yet. Everyone else was asleep when you came in." She pulled a small leather packet out of a pocket of her uniform. "I have the picks you wanted."

Pelya opened them up and smiled. They were mundane, but good enough for her needs. "Thank you. These are perfect." She tossed them on her bed and rapidly began changing. "If I'm not back before morning call, then something bad has happened. If Ravenne's not back, then she's too warm to get out of her boyfriend's bed." Pelya grinned mischievously.

Ravenne threw her brush at Pelya while Birown laughed.

"You two just be careful," the corporal said. "What *did* happen yesterday? You said you were attacked? How did you escape? I noticed blood splatter on your uniform, Pelya. It's been replaced with a clean one."

Ravenne chuckled. "She can only answer one question at a time, Corporal."

Pelya used the thrown brush to work out tangles in her own hair. "Thank you for the uniform. We've been sworn not to talk about it, but I'll tell you that three men on horseback stopped our carriage. I killed one and the other two escaped."

“How did you kill him?” Birown asked.

“I took a sword from one of the other men and used that.” Pelya tossed the brush back to Ravenne. “The details aren’t important. Just . . . you be careful too. We don’t know the extent of what we’re stirring up here.”

“You just took a sword . . .” Birown shook her head in amazement. “You need to tell me about yourself one of these days, Pelya Jornin.”

Pelya winked as she grabbed the picks. “Let’s see if I survive first.” She opened the door and went out after making certain it was clear. Ravenne slipped out behind her.

They were both surprised when they reached the street without being caught. A thin layer of pristine snow covered the ground while gentle flakes drifted lazily from above. The bottoms of the low hanging clouds glowed from the lights of the city below and Siah-ray above. The empty streets were bright and pretty.

Pelya cursed. “We’re going to leave tracks everywhere we go.”

Ravenne thwapped her on the shoulder. “Language, you beast.”

Pelya stuck her tongue out. “If I find anything, I’m going to bring it to you right away. If I have enough time, I’m going to try to find Deliah too.”

Ravenne gave her a quick hug. “You just be careful.”

Pelya snorted. “That’ll happen.” She spun and ran away at full speed.

Ravenne’s voice came from behind her. “*Please* be careful.”

Brisk air rushed by Pelya’s cheeks as her arms and legs pumped, propelling her forward. The snow wasn’t heavy enough to slow her, nor wet enough to make the ground too slippery for her sure-footed pace. Running helped rid nervous energy that had built up in her veins.

She turned on the street before the one Deliah had taken her to the previous morning, and then went around behind the neighboring building. Bright, empty streets would make it too easy for her to be seen by the guards in front of the Recruit Office.

She slowed as she reached the side street and jogged to the door they had entered the morning before. A quick check showed her that it was locked, so she took the picks out and quickly had the door open. Decent tools made all the difference in the world.

Peeking beyond the door, she saw no one in sight. After slipping in, she locked it. With her footprints outside, it would be dangerous to leave it unlocked for someone to follow her in.

Once again, the halls were empty. Even wearing boots, her steps were silent and she made faster time alone. To her relief, no light shone from the waiting room. Pelya still moved cautiously. She didn’t want to waste time, but hurrying could get the best rogue killed.

There were no signs of life in the waiting room. She moved to the door. It was dark underneath, another good sign. Pelya tested the handle and found it locked. She pulled the picks out again, choosing three as she remembered the type of lock it was.

The mechanism clicked within seconds. Pelya put the picks away and slowly looked into the dark beyond. Trace amounts of light shone through the window. She slipped in, closed the door behind her and waited for any sign of movement in the darkness.

Her eyes became used to the dimness, but it wouldn’t be enough to search for evidence. Once she was certain no one else was there, she lit a nearby lantern using magic.

It occurred to her that if anyone *did* come in, she would likely be confronted by battle. She debated for a moment before choosing to cast two spells of protection. It took less than a second to cast an efficient spell protecting her from magic. Casting wind blew past her face as she drew in the energy and then it smacked into her back as she cast. Her hair whipped about her scalp. The second was just as efficient and gave her clarity of mind.

She knew a third to protect her against physical attacks, but it would tire her too much in the long run. As it was, she would need extra sleep and food. Perhaps she would be able to guilt Professor Opelnee into letting her take a nap. She could blame it on nightmares.

Pelya turned and relocked the door. It would give her time to prepare if anyone checked it. Then she looked around the room. The desk was the obvious place to start, but nobody hid anything in obvious places.

She noticed the mess. Hurrying over, she saw things knocked off the desk and signs of a struggle. Further examination of the room showed that a row of books was off the bookshelf. Pelya's heart raced. The best explanation was that somebody had attacked Deliah.

Pelya ran both hands through her hair as she controlled the panic that threatened to overwhelm her. She looked at the mess again. The clues showed that Deliah had been interrupted in cleaning. One of the desk drawers was partially open. Pelya opened it and closed it. It moved easily, meaning that carelessness had left it ajar.

The lack of blood was a potentially good sign. People could be killed bloodlessly, but it was unusual. Pelya looked for signs of a body being dragged, but that was difficult on stone floors and carpeting. She held the lantern up the fireplace, but it was clean and empty. While she was there, she checked for signs of a hidden compartment around the damper. There was nothing.

She held the lantern up and scanned the office. There was nowhere else to hide a body. If she could find evidence, the commander could be forced to reveal what had happened in the struggle. With difficulty, Pelya forced aside Deliah's fate until she finished in the office.

The desk would be the last place she searched. Pelya quickly dismissed the tapestries as they were against the outer wall, unlikely to have a hidden recess. The bookshelf was a possible location, but Pelya couldn't imagine the commander would have let Deliah clean so much if anything was hidden there and it was obvious even in lantern light that one full bookshelf had been cleaned.

Her eyes were drawn to the map desk. The drawers in the two underhangs were small and there was extra space under each one. Pelya went to it. She moved aside the chair, set the lantern on the floor and searched underneath.

It was surprisingly easy for her to find the slim lines to the secret compartments. It took a moment longer to find the latches, but she succeeded.

The one on the left had loose papers and tightly wrapped scrolls in it. While sitting on the floor under the desk, Pelya quickly skimmed over the writing. She didn't have time to fully read each one, but details of treason became clear.

Pelya's eyes widened at the mention of Crazy Gods. She spent more time on that scroll than she should, but she had to know what it said.

It is within the Crazy Gods to change the universe, but they are easily controlled fools. Their power shall give us a weapon against all those useless entities that have gone before. The Guild of Scales must have power.

A few lines of propaganda followed, but the next paragraph was golden evidence.

Forces in the world would stop that success. They must be overcome. Destroy those that would prevent our success. The Blue Wyverns are one such organization. Destroy them from within, loyal servant. We have time.

A little further down the page was another piece of incrimination that Pelya hadn't expected.

Artifacts of great power will aid in our cause. They must be acquired by any means possible. The Liquid Wyverns are some of the most powerful in the world. They are well protected. Do not make mistakes to alert those who watch. Once again, we have time.

There was more, but Pelya *didn't* have time. Other papers had important details like the Commander's name and the name of other people Pelya didn't recognize. She quickly searched around the room and found an oil-sealed document pack to put everything in. Once she had the papers and scrolls secured, she opened the other secret compartment.

There was a small notebook Pelya skimmed through. It looked like it might be the commander's personal notes about departments, friends and enemies. Pelya wished she had more time to read. There was also a dagger with enchantments on it, two runeballs in a pouch, a necklace with runes on it and a pair of gloves. It was quite the treasure, but Pelya stuffed it all in the pouch. She put the secret drawers back and the chair exactly as she had found it.

Pelya had been in the office for half an hour by that point. She still had a couple more hours she could use to find clues as to Deliah's fate, though she had no idea where to begin.

Pelya hung the lantern back on the hook she had taken it from. Then she picked the lock again. Another scan of the office revealed nothing more of use. She blew out the lantern and slipped into the waiting room. A few seconds was all it took to relock the door and put the picks away.

There were no sounds from the hallway. She glanced in both directions and headed back the way she had come. On the way through the halls, Pelya considered checking rooms for Deliah, but the need to get the pouch of evidence to Matthew and Ravenne without discovery outweighed her friend's fate, to her great regret.

Pelya exited the building and looked both ways before relocking the door. Her footprints were the only ones visible and they were slowly becoming covered by the light flurries. With exceptional dexterity, she ran back the way she had come, stepping in each footprint to make it look like one person had left the building rather than someone who had come and gone. An experienced tracker, or even someone who looked closely, would be able to tell the difference, but there was nothing she could do about that.

She saw a few people in the distance on her way to the carriage house, but they either didn't see her or care about her business. At the entrance, an older man asked her business.

"I'm here to deliver a message to Matthew, please."

"Two of you in one morning?" The old man wagged his eyebrows and flashed a toothless smile. "Ah, to be young again." He waved her through.

Pelya blushed as she dashed into the building and up the stairs, remembering Matthew's directions from a couple of days ago. Upon reaching the door, she knocked.

It opened much sooner than she expected. Matthew peeked out first and then opened it fully to invite her in. He closed and locked it behind her. "Did you find anything?"

Ravenne got up from the bed. She was still in full uniform. "You didn't have that pouch when we left."

Pelya patted it. "I have everything we need. It incriminates the commander and talks of an organization called the Guild of Scales that's trying to sabotage the Blue Wyverns. We were right about everything. The commander has a diary here with details and names."

"She had all of that in plain sight?" Matthew asked incredulously.

"Not in plain sight," Pelya said. "In secret compartments of a map desk. Secret compartments are all the rage in Dralin. Every wizard has one." Pelya gripped the pouch. "Can we truly trust you and Auntie Iriene, Matthew?"

"Pelya!" Ravenne got up and stood next to Matthew. "Of course we can. You said you trusted her."

Pelya gave the pouch to Matthew. "I do, but this is all we have. If something happens to it . . ."

Matthew put a hand on his heart. "I promise you, Pelya, that we can be trusted. Auntie Iriene wants this probably even more than you do. She's been trying to find something for the last year." He looked at the pack in amazement. "You show up and find this in a few days."

Pelya leaned forward and winked. "I come from a city of thieves where a Guardmember has to be a *better* thief to catch them. I'm also foolish enough to break into the office of the Recruit Commander. Not everyone is willing to take chances like that."

"So what are you going to do now?" Ravenne asked.

"I'm going to try to find Deliah." Pelya told them about what she saw at the office. "I don't even know where to begin, but I have to try to do something."

Ravenne grabbed her cloak. "I'll go with you."

"You don't want to stay with Matthew?" Pelya asked.

"Yes I want to stay with him." Ravenne swirled the cloak around her shoulders and slipped under Matthew's arm. "But Deliah is my friend too, and I can't stay here if she's in danger or worse. I *have* to help."

"I think you *should* help," Matthew said. "I'll come with you."

"No." Ravenne put a hand on his chest. "You need to keep that pouch safe until you can get it to Auntie Iriene. *Please* stay safe."

"I will. Auntie Iriene and I are having breakfast together first thing every morning until all of this is done." Matthew wrapped her up in a kiss.

Pelya stepped outside until they were finished. She leaned against the wall for a few minutes.

Chapter 27

They made their way to the street and looked both directions. "Which way do we start?" Ravenne asked.

Pelya considered. "I'm worried that Deliah may be dead even though there's no blood at the scene. If there were a temple to the Death Goddess in Settatt, I'd ask there."

Ravenne took a step back. "Why in the world would you even *consider* going to a death goddess? Is there such a thing? I don't remember."

"Yeah." Pelya studied the street each way. "Sivala is a bit frightening, but she has style."

Ravenne took a few more steps away. "You know her name?"

Pelya turned to her. "I know most names of the Gods. It's required learning for patrolling the Temple District." Pelya knew more than most, but that was largely because she found the subject fascinating. "Quit acting like you don't already know that I'm creepy."

The comment worked. Ravenne laughed and gave Pelya a friendly smack in the shoulder. "So what *do* we do?"

"Let's go back to the Recruit Office and search around for any sort of clue, though I don't know what we'd find."

"You want to go back in there after you already got the evidence?" Ravenne shook her head. "I have a really bad feeling about that." She rubbed her face vigorously. "I have a bad feeling about everything right now. How in the world did I get caught up in this?"

"Doubts are perfectly normal." Pelya smiled encouragingly. "If you truly believe in what you're doing, you go on anyway. If you don't believe in it, then you keep your nose down and hide under the covers until it's safe."

Ravenne put her hands on her hips. "That's a bit harsh."

Pelya considered the words. "Uncle Gilron always said that. He was harsh by nature though. I suppose maybe I should have chosen something else to say."

"Let's just go." Ravenne began walking toward the Recruit Office. "Although I'd *much* rather hide under the covers with Matthew. We could play hide and seek." She grinned.

Pelya laughed. "I was surprised you weren't already."

Ravenne shrugged. "We both needed to talk and hold each other for a while. We had just gotten to the kissing part." She narrowed her eyes pointedly.

"Sorry." Pelya blushed and looked down a side street they passed. A crow sat atop a lamppost. It cawed.

"Should we be sneaking?" Ravenne asked.

"Not yet." Pelya gestured at the empty street ahead of them. "Right now, we're just two recruits out on an errand at too early in the . . ." Pelya stopped in her tracks.

"What is it?" Ravenne looked around.

Pelya took a step back and looked down the side street again.

The crow cawed. Its eyes flashed purple.

"Let's go this way." Pelya set a brisk pace.

Ravenne rushed to keep up with her. "What is it?"

"A hunch. I get them sometimes." Pelya hurried to a jog when the crow flew further up the street.

"How comforting," Ravenne said sarcastically. She kept pace. "At least running will help keep me warm."

Most of the structures after the Recruit Complex buildings were warehouses on the southern outskirts of town. From the little Pelya had learned, the warehouses held most of the supplies for the Blue Wyverns, everything from furniture to foodstuffs. Wooden walls built atop waist-high stone foundations supported slate roofs. The doors were reinforced and had quality locks to prevent theft, though from everything Pelya had seen, Settatt had little of that. Most of the warehouses had fenced staging yards for wagons to park while being unloaded. The roads were cobbled to protect against ruts in bad weather.

The crow would stop on lampposts at each intersection and caw once to make certain they were following. At the fourth intersection, Ravenne grabbed Pelya's arm and pulled her to a stop. She got in Pelya's face, heavy breath gusting snowflakes about them. "Are we seriously following a crow?"

"Umm . . . Yes? . . ." Pelya smiled toothily.

Ravenne put both hands on Pelya's shoulders and steadied her breathing. "I'm not sure I should ask this, but . . . Why?"

Pelya shouldn't tell her, but it was to the point where Ravenne needed to be told the truth about everything they did. "Because it has purple eyes, which means it's a messenger of Distracta, the Goddess of Sorrow, which means that Deliah might be alive and very sad. The crow will lead us to her."

The crow cawed from ahead.

Ravenne searched Pelya's face for any hint of a joke or possibly insanity.

"And why, why would the Goddess of Sorrow help us?" Ravenne shook Pelya. "Who, by the gods, are you, Pelya Jornin?"

"The gods would help me because I did some of them a favor. Just be thankful she sent the crow, not shadows." Pelya took hold of Ravenne's wrists to stop the shaking. "And I don't know who I am." She continued following the crow at a slower pace. "Even in Dralin, I didn't know who I was. I've read books, I've mastered the sword, I've studied the gods, I've explored ancient ruins, and I've done countless other things. I'm desperate to accomplish something with my life, but I don't know what." She stopped and threw her arms to the sides. "I joined the Wyverns hoping for a clue, but I'm even more confused than before."

Ravenne stopped with her. "You frighten me, Pelya."

"You've told me that." Pelya looked up the street, not wanting to have the conversation anymore. "I frighten myself, but I'm stuck with me, so . . . I don't know, Ravenne."

Ravenne puffed a big breath and folded her arms. "I'm going to continue being your friend even if you get me killed, Pelya Jornin."

Pelya tilted her head. "Thanks? . . ."

"You're welcome." Ravenne grabbed Pelya's arm. "So let's go follow this crow."

They ran after it until reaching the edge of the warehouses and coming to a wooded area across the last street. Stubborn leaves on the thick trees petulantly ignored the snowflakes that danced in mockery of their moon-washed colors. Thick underbrush had a blanket of snow, giving it a peaceful sensation.

The highway was a distance to their left past the southern edge of the park. To the right, the road continued before coming to a dead end about ten streets away. It was in that direction that the crow flew and perched on the yard fence of a weatherworn warehouse.

They dashed that way after double-checking that nobody observed them. Even the highway was quiet, though morning traffic would begin soon. The crow perched above a broken plank in the fence. When they reached it, it flew into the yard.

Pelya squeezed through, cracking one of the other planks in the process. "Being strong and tall has its disadvantages," she grumbled in frustration.

"Shh." Ravenne followed. They looked around the yard. Crates and barrels were stacked haphazardly, some of them covered with tarps. Two empty wagons sat near a rolling gate.

The crow perched on a grouping of barrels near the building. They went toward it. Pelya reached for her sword before remembering that she didn't have so much as a knife.

Ravenne noticed the gesture and raised an eyebrow.

Pelya pretended to draw a sword and swish it in the air. She whispered, "It's invisible."

Ravenne's eyes widened.

Pelya whispered, "I'm not serious."

Ravenne gave her a dubious look.

"I'm not crazy, either."

The look became one of stark disbelief.

Pelya sighed and moved toward the barrels.

The crow cawed at her and flew away.

They watched it disappear until it became a black speck amidst the white ones. Pelya looked closer at the barrels and noticed a canvas tarp covering something between them and the wall of the warehouse. "Deliah?"

The tarp moved and an eye peeked out. "Pelya?" Deliah's tremulous voice was pitched high in fear.

"Deliah. What happened? We've been so worried about you." Pelya and Ravenne pulled the tarp off and helped her to her feet. Pelya felt her hands and face. They were too cold, so she wrapped her cloak around Deliah's shoulders. "You'll catch your death of cold like this."

"Let's take her to Matthew," Ravenne suggested, leading Deliah to the opening in the fence. "His room is warm and she'll be safe there until morning call."

Deliah's teeth chattered as she spoke. "I can't go to morning call. They caught me searching the Commander's desk."

Pelya slipped through the broken planks and helped Deliah through. "I saw the mess. We've been worried sick about you."

"You were there?" Deliah looked at Pelya with wide eyes. Ravenne followed her out and they began walking back to the Carriage House.

"I just got back from there. The evidence we needed was in secret drawers in the map desk."

Deliah wiped snow from her face and shivered some more. "There wasn't anyone there?"

Pelya wrapped an arm tighter around her, lending body warmth. "It looked like the office had been abandoned since the struggle. I was able to do my search uninterrupted."

"What happened, Deliah?" Ravenne asked. She also had an arm wrapped tightly around the woman for physical and spiritual warmth.

"A man caught me going through the drawers. I saw him the first day talking about how things had gone badly in Dralin and they needed to go better here." Deliah began to straighten as walking improved her circulation. "He choked me and lifted me into the air. He was stronger than my husband and it felt like he was going to break my neck."

"He's lucky I wasn't there," Pelya said through clenched teeth.

"How did you escape?" Ravenne asked.

"The commander's lieutenant came in and asked what he was doing. She drew her sword and the man let me go so he could talk to her." Deliah's breathing became rapid. "I rammed my

shoulder into his back when he turned around. Then I ran past the lieutenant. After that, I just ran and ran.”

“Did they chase you?” Ravenne asked.

“I don’t think so. When I reached the last street, I turned and there was no one following.”

“Why didn’t you go into the woods?” Pelya asked.

“Oh no.” Deliah shook her head. “I don’t like woods. There are too many animals that would eat me. The wilderness is dangerous. I saw the break in the fence and went in to hide. I’ve been there ever since.”

Pelya squeezed her as they walked. “I’m so glad you’re safe. I never would have forgiven myself if anything had happened to you.”

“I never would have forgiven her either.” Ravenne winked and grinned impudently.

“Hey!” Pelya shoved at her.

Ravenne shoved back and they continued pushing each other with Deliah in the middle. By the time they reached the Carriage House, they were all laughing.

“Three of you?” the old man said in admiration when they asked to go to Matthew’s room. “I’m going to have to buy the young man a drink and ask how he does it.”

They laughed and blushed as they walked past, Deliah turning visibly red even in the dim light.

Matthew opened the door right away and they poured into the small room. Pelya booped him on the nose. “The old man at the gate wants details. He expects us to be worn out when we leave.”

Matthew blushed even deeper red than Deliah while Pelya and Ravenne laughed. Ravenne gave him a long kiss.

“This is Deliah then?” Matthew asked when Ravenne finally released his lips.

“She was hidden behind some barrels outside of a warehouse,” Ravenne said, “but she was caught searching the commander’s desk. Can you get her to safety?”

Matthew nodded. “Yes, I’ll bring her to breakfast. Auntie Iriene will arrange safe haven for her. We considered it might have to be done for some of you, so she’s made arrangements.”

Ravenne held him tight. “I can’t tell you how much better I feel to have your help, Matthew. This is so frightening.”

“I’ll take care of you,” Matthew told her. “I’ll do anything to keep you safe.”

“I’ll learn the sword and we’ll be able to keep each other safe,” Ravenne told him with a smile. “I love that you want to protect me, but I want to be able to stand up for myself as well.”

“You’re the most amazing woman I’ve ever met.” Matthew kissed her again.

Pelya leaned toward Deliah. “They do that a lot. It’s rather sickening.”

The lovers giggled, but they continued the kiss.

Pelya covered Deliah’s eyes with a hand.

Deliah didn’t move it aside, seemingly content to hide from the sight.

“All right, we’re done,” Ravenne said finally, breaking from Matthew. “We need to get back to our room before morning call, Pelya.” She pointed a finger at Deliah. “No kissing Matthew, no matter what that old man thinks.”

“Oh no!” Deliah said in horror. “I would never do such a thing to you, Ravenne.”

Ravenne laughed and gave her a hug. “I know. I’m just teasing.” She became serious and pointed the finger at Matthew. “The same goes for you too.”

Matthew snapped his fingers in disappointment. “Darn.”

Ravenne booped his nose as Pelya had done. "Behave." She gave him another kiss, and then she and Pelya slipped out the door, down the stairs and out into the cold air.

The snow had stopped, though the clouds were still thick above. They waved to the old man and ignored the questions of why they were leaving so soon. It didn't take them long to get back to the barracks. "Do you think Matthew and Deliah will be safe?" Ravenne asked quietly as they made their way through the halls.

"I think so. We're moving so fast that I don't think Commander Indiya's people will be able to react." Pelya didn't want to think what would happen if they did.

"Then do you think it's safe to go through morning drills?"

"I believe so," Pelya said. "We need to act normal or risk tipping our hand prematurely."

"Should we tell Corporal Birown what we discovered?"

Pelya nodded. "I glanced through the names the best I could and she wasn't on there, nor was Auntie Iriene. I didn't recognize *any* of the names."

"I'm just getting nervous." Ravenne shook her hands to relieve the stress.

"I know, but we have to stay steady and continue the course." Pelya had learned that in the Guard. "Persistence and determination are stronger weapons than any sword."

"I'll remember that," Ravenne said.

When they reached their common room, Corporal Birown jumped up and limped to meet them. "What happened? Did you find anything?"

Pelya gave her back the picks while they summarized the events of the last couple of hours. The corporal listened in amazement and gave a long whistle when they were done. "I'd never have imagined it was that bad. You were right to have Deliah stay with Matthew. She'd be interrogated for missing roll call last night and they'd have discovered her crime. This is a dangerous business for all of us."

"Were we right to come back here?" Ravenne asked.

Birown nodded. "Yeah. That's a good decision. Just keep your heads down this morning and you'll be fine. Matthew can let you know what Professor Withiar plans after that." She pointed at Pelya. "Your cloak is missing."

Pelya cursed. "I gave it to Deliah."

"I'll grab another for you." Birown went to a cabinet.

"Where did you learn language like that?" Ravenne asked, her face reddening. "I'm not even sure what a couple of those words mean."

"That's mild for Dralin," Pelya said. "I have uncles that can cuss in more languages than I care to know."

"How many uncles do you have?" Ravenne asked.

Pelya shrugged. "I call people in the Dralin Guard my aunts and uncles. They take care of me, or they did when I lived there."

Birown came back with the cloak. "You two clean up and maybe catch a quick nap. You still have about twenty minutes before call."

"Yes, Corporal." They headed back to the room and took their boots off.

Pelya got in bed over the covers and rested her head on her pillow. She was surprised when Ravenne laid down next to her and turned her back. "I'm going to go through with everything, but I'm still frightened."

Pelya curled up and wrapped a comforting arm around her.

Chapter 28

At breakfast, Tina was the first to sit next to Pelya on the other side of Ravenne. “What happened yesterday? Where’s Deliah? Did you find anything else out? Did you really kill someone?”

She took a breath to ask another, but Beth interrupted. “She can only answer one question at a time.” She and Uma sat across the table and leaned forward. “We heard that recruits were attacked and killed at the Academy Complex. You two are here, but Deliah’s missing.”

Ravenne looked around to make certain no one was nearby. She kept her voice low. “Deliah is safe for the moment, but we’re all in danger. Pelya and I were attacked, but we’re not allowed to talk about it under severe consequences.”

“I told you that this was a bad idea,” Uma told them. “Now we’re all going to get killed.”

Beth nudged her with an elbow. “Don’t be dramatic. We need to know what kind of danger we’re in.”

Uma nudged her back. “A messenger came in yesterday and talked to my supervisor, after that, my supervisor came out and glared at me.” Uma pointed a finger at Pelya. “I was actually fixing the equipment yesterday. Now my supervisor is probably going to kill me and it’s your fault.”

“Pelya doesn’t get all the glory, so she doesn’t get all the blame,” Ravenne hissed. “If you want to be mad at someone, be mad at me, because I keep encouraging her.” Ravenne shoved Uma’s finger aside and pointed her own. “Or be mad at the people who are trying to bring down the Blue Wyverns, because we found evidence last night that incriminates Recruit Commander Indiya.” She jabbed the finger down on the table. “*That’s* why we’re in danger.”

“What evidence?” Tina asked. “You have to tell us since we’re all in this together.”

“It’s dangerous to know details,” Pelya said. She decided not to inform them that they might be tortured for information.

“So only the two of you get the glory?” Uma said.

“Fine.” Ravenne slapped her hand on the table and looked around again for listeners. When she was certain they couldn’t be overheard, she explained, “An organization called the Guild of Scales is trying to bring down the Blue Wyverns. Recruit Commander Indiya is an agent of theirs who has been sabotaging everything. We found her notes along with the names of everyone involved.”

Pelya had a bad feeling about sharing the information, but there was no turning back at that point. “We’re hoping to present the evidence this afternoon after basic training. It’s hidden for now.”

“Where did you put it?” Tina asked.

“It’s in a crate outside of a warehouse near the edge of the city. No one will ever find it,” Ravenne said, catching on to Pelya’s lead. “Pelya’s going to get it before we leave for afternoon chores.”

“I’m a messenger,” Tina said. “We’re untouchable. I could run and get it during chores.”

“We want to take care of it before then,” Pelya said. “I’ll be able to handle any trouble. Were any of you able to find out more? Every little bit helps.” She asked the question toward Tina. The young woman wanted that evidence more than was comfortable for Pelya.

Tina didn’t answer right away, her eyes moving with thoughts. “I tried speaking to the lieutenant, but she doesn’t talk to runners except to give orders. I’m afraid I didn’t learn anything.”

Beth leaned forward. "I got to have dinner with my supervisor again. She said that I needed to be careful of you Pelya. She said you killed someone at the Academy Complex yesterday and she thinks you may be a spy."

Ice ran down Pelya's spine. "I'm not. I swear to you, I'm not."

"I don't think you are," Uma said, surprising them all with her unexpected defense. "You're just crazy like a spider that drinks chicken milk and makes a crazy web. You're probably going to get us killed deader than ten rocks at a funeral."

They stared at her for a moment.

"You *might* be a spy," Tina said. "You're too talented to be a normal recruit."

"Pelya?" Ravenne asked. "Are you? Because if you are . . ." Tears formed in her eyes and she looked away.

"I promise you I'm not," Pelya told them sincerely. "I don't know how to convince you otherwise. I'm just not a spy. Please believe me."

Beth reached over and patted her hand. "I believe you. I told my supervisor that you're not and I'll stand by that statement."

Uma nodded. "I believe you to, like I said. And I didn't find anything out yesterday. My coworkers and supervisor avoid me as if I'm a pox on the nose of a zombie. I did fix some of the wicker armor though."

"That's excellent," Pelya said weakly. She was shaken by Beth's accusation.

"I don't believe it either." Ravenne wiped a sleeve across her eyes. "I may be wrong, but I told you I'd be your friend even if you get me killed. I mean it."

Nothing about Ravenne's expression indicated to Pelya that Ravenne *did* believe it. "Thank you."

"I believe it," Tina said. "It makes complete sense. I don't know what you're trying to do here Pelya Jornin, if that's even your real name, but *I* think you're a spy." She hurriedly grabbed her tray. "I have powerful friends, so don't even think about coming after me." Tina ran to the bins, emptied her tray and ran out of the mess hall, glancing over her shoulder the entire time.

"What do we do now?" Beth asked.

Pelya looked at Ravenne, whose face was pale. "I don't know," Pelya said. "I swear I'm not a spy."

Ravenne picked up her tray. "We go to morning call and basic training." She walked to the bins.

The rest followed her and not a word was said.

Tina constantly glanced over her shoulder as she ran up the hill towards Headquarters. Every instinct screamed that someone was going to chase her down and kill her. The revelation that Pelya was a spy made perfect sense, but a spy for who?

A voice called from behind the low fence of a large manor. "Over here, Recruit."

Tina looked in that direction and saw a kindly gentleman, once again raking leaves in his yard. There weren't many leaves left and instead of raking them into piles, he was spreading them out.

"Stop for a moment and have a drink." He gestured at a pitcher on the table.

"Thank you, good sir." Tina vaulted over the fence. "If I don't have a drink, I'll *die*."

The man looked up and down the street for anyone who might be following her. "Then come inside." The man gestured for her to follow him as he headed toward the door. The way he held the rake was unusual as though it were a sword sheath at his hip. Tina saw him pull the end out. A few inches of a blade appeared from the handle, though he didn't unsheathe it far.

He opened the door and hurried her inside before closing and locking it. Then he set the rake in the corner of the entry and slid the hilt home on it. "Come with me."

Tina followed him to an office. He gestured to a sitting area in the corner by the door. "Have a seat in here. The wait will probably be a while, but you'll be safe."

Tina fidgeted anxiously. "I was told to come here if I was in danger . . ."

The man gave her a kindly squeeze on the shoulder. "That's right. You did well."

"Can I really have something to drink?" Tina asked. "Running up that hill was tiring."

He chuckled. "Of course. I'll send someone in. Have you had breakfast?"

Tina put her hands on her stomach. "I had some, but I don't think I ate it."

"I'll have some brought in." He left the room.

Tina looked around the office, so very different from her forest home in Swelth. Tapestries and paintings on the wall were likely priceless along with everything else in the room. Wall to wall carpeting silenced the steps of her boots and made the room warm.

Tina sank into an elegant armchair with cushioned seat and back. She felt out of place in her recruit uniform. At the other end of the office was a beautiful whitewood desk with carvings of birds around the edges. Another whitewood table was placed in the middle of the sitting area, also with bird carvings.

Tina stood up and walked over to a large globe on the other side of the room. Swaths of blue covered most of it, mixed with brown and green patches. The landmasses had bumps on them that she guessed were mountains. Floating mystically around it were the two moons, Siahray and Piohray.

The door opened and Tina jumped. A serving woman bustled in with a tray of food. "Whatever you do, don't touch that. I couldn't begin to tell you how expensive it must be." She set the tray on the table of the sitting area.

"I won't touch it," Tina said. "Thank you for the food."

"You're welcome. Just leave the tray there and I'll clean it later." The servant curtsied and left her alone.

Tina was careful not to make a mess as she ate. When done, she put the cover back on the tray and looked around the office some more, her hands behind her back the entire time so as not to touch any of the expensive figurines and baubles. She eventually went back to the globe and stared at it for a long while.

A voice whispered in her ear. "Nulanea is the continent closest to the top."

Tina jumped and yipped.

Commander Brynin's peeling laughter filled the room. "It's a pretty thing, isn't it?" She gestured at the globe. "It's a dragon's globe and if a dragon ever finds out I own one, it'll likely kill me."

"I didn't touch it, Commander," Tina said rapidly. "I promise."

"Good." Commander Brynin reached out a hand and tilted Tina's chin up. "Why don't you call me Aunt Reela, or Auntie, or some such thing, Tina?"

"I . . . I . . ." Tina gulped.

"Are you frightened of me, my pretty little niece?" Commander Brynin cupped Tina's cheeks and stroked them with her thumbs.

Tina gulped.

The commander stepped back and sighed. “You don’t *need* to be. I’m your aunt. I want us to be close.”

Tina looked down at her feet and fidgeted with her fingers. She noticed that the commander’s feet were still bare.

The commander put her hands on her hips. “Listen, I know I cut your mother’s arm off when we were young and she’s never forgiven me for it, but I’m so much better at controlling my temper now. Please don’t hate me.”

Tina looked up. She spoke timidly, “I don’t hate you, but . . .”

“ . . . but I cut my sister’s arm off. Some mistakes are just impossible to live down I suppose. I’m surprised she let you come here when I asked.” The commander folded her arms. “Well, just know that you *are* my niece and I won’t ever hurt you. Family needs to stick together. Please call me Aunt Reela when we’re in private from now on.”

Tina nodded nervously. “Yes, Aunt Reela.”

“Splendid! Now, Joffry tells me that you gave him the signal that someone was trying to kill you.” Aunt Reela’s sword appeared in her hand and she made delicate slashing movements with it. “Who is it, and would you prefer they have a quick death or a slow one?”

“I think Pelya Jornin is a spy.”

“Did she threaten to kill you?” Aunt Reela’s sword swished violently.

“No, but she said we’re all in danger and that we could die if anyone finds out what we’re doing.” Tina’s voice rose and she paced back and forth. “I don’t know that anyone threatened to kill me. I . . . I just think my life is in danger.” The blood left her face. “I’ve messed everything up, haven’t I?”

Reela sheathed her sword and took Tina’s cheeks in her hands again. “Not at all, my pretty little niece. You’ve done wonderfully.” She kissed Tina’s forehead. “Now come sit and tell me all about it.” The commander led Tina back to the sitting area and they sat on a lounge together.

Tina told Commander Brynin everything Pelya and the others had said. When Tina was done, the commander crossed one leg over the other. “Did Pelya tell you exactly where this package is?”

“No, Aunt Reela, and I think she suspected something, so I was afraid to ask more. Pelya seems dangerous.”

Reela put an arm around Tina’s shoulders and whispered in her ear. “I’ve done some research. Pelya Jornin *is* dangerous. The incident at the Academy yesterday proved it, even though they tried to hide the details from me.” The commander stood and stretched to her tiptoes. “You stay here, my pretty little niece. I have evidence to recover.” She spun on a toe. “If everything goes well, perhaps you and I will have some girl time tonight. Wouldn’t that be delightful?”

“Y . . . yes, Aunt Reela.”

Pelya stared at patchy clouds above the sword yard. It was becoming warmer with each passing hour and the sun promised to give them a respite from the winter chill. Wooden swords clacked against each other throughout the yard and the voices of instructors rose above the din. Drill Sergeant Itern was being very loud at the moment.

Pelya looked to see what was going on, only to find the sergeant yelling at *her*.

“ . . . about time you woke up and joined us, Recruit Jornin?”

Pelya yelled in her face, “Yes, Drill Sergeant!”

The Captain of the Yard, an officer responsible for the training that happened in all the areas, was in the process of doing an inspection. She was mean-looking woman with a crew cut. She wore her sword for punishment rather than defense and openly mocked recruits every time she came near one. “Perhaps she needs to be taught a lesson, Drill Sergeant. Show me you know how to deal with troops who spend their time daydreaming.”

“Yes, Captain!” Sergeant Itern jabbed a finger into Pelya’s wicker vest. “I’ve had enough of you, Jornin! You think you’re so special. Let’s see what you can really do.” She grabbed Pelya’s upper arm, dragged her toward the center challenge circle and threw her forward.

Pelya gained her balance immediately. She was tired of being yelled at by a woman who shouldn’t be a drill instructor. She was tired of everything about the Recruit Program. Tina hadn’t shown up for morning call and was still absent, which worried Pelya to no end. Any moment now, she expected someone to come along and arrest her.

The challenge circle was a wide radius outline carved into the dirt. More advanced techniques could be taught to the recruits within the circle due to rules of combat being in effect. From what Pelya had seen in her short time, it was mostly used to bully recruits in complete disregard for those rules of combat.

Corporal Acdoam brought Pelya a worn wooden sword, while Sergeant Itern handpicked the best one available, not realizing that gaining an unfair advantage showed weakness and lessened Pelya’s respect for her.

“She’s a tall one,” the yard captain said with a laugh. “Do you think you can handle her?” Her entourage, a lieutenant and a few other soldiers, laughed with her.

“Of course, Captain.” Sergeant Itern came into the circle straight at Pelya.

It was customary for opponents to salute each other, or so the area supervisor had told them the first day. Pelya gave the sergeant a salute.

Sergeant Itern chose to attack.

Pelya deftly slid to the right and, with a ferocious double-handed blow, shattered the wooden sword on the back of Sergeant Itern’s shoulders as the woman charged by.

Drill Sergeant Itern fell face-first onto the ground and clawed at the agony in her shoulders.

The captain of the yard drew the sword at her hip and stepped forward into the circle, her face ruddy in anger. “How dare you disrespect your sergeant?!”

Pelya silently spread her arms to show that she had no weapon. She chose not to point out that the sergeant had disrespected *her* by not saluting. Some people had no sense of reason and the yard captain was one of those.

Corporal Acdoam helped pick up Sergeant Itern who had finally caught her breath and was crying in pain.

The sword area supervisor stepped forward. “She is unarmed, Captain.”

The captain hefted her sword a few times while looking around at their audience. “Fine, but get us iron practice swords. She’s clearly too good for wood.”

The supervisor came back with two blunt swords and a chain shirt for Pelya; the captain already wore a chain shirt. She gave the finer of the swords to the captain and the rusted one to Pelya.

The captain accepted the better sword, showing weakness.

Pelya looked at the filthy chain shirt. “No thank you. I don’t wish to smell like rust all day.” She took the sword.

The supervisor looked to the captain.

The yard captain snarled. "If this impudent brat wishes to suffer bruises, so be it." She charged Pelya.

Pelya quickly saluted the captain while the supervisor ran out of the circle. This time, Pelya slid to the left and angled her sword to deflect the captain's harmless blow.

The captain turned in surprise, letting her guard down in the process.

Pelya firmly tapped the captain's chest with the tip of her sword in what would have been a killing blow with a true weapon. She stepped back and waited for the supervisor to call point.

The supervisor was about to do so, but the yard captain glared at him.

"So that's how it's going to be," Pelya whispered to herself. She twirled her sword once and gripped it with both hands in a ready stance.

The captain attacked. It was an experienced move that thousands of excellent swordsmen used in battle.

Pelya knew seventeen ways to counter it. Once again, the captain's blade slid off Pelya's. This time, Pelya hit her in the gut first. With a rapid overhand move, she hit the captain in the back, sending her sprawling. Pelya stepped back, wondering if point would be called. She pinned the supervisor with her gaze.

The supervisor gulped and looked to the captain.

While the captain got to her feet, Pelya took the opportunity to make certain no one else was going to attack her. The captain's entourage spoke in hushed tones, but made no move to interfere. Other troops of recruits had gathered around and were staring at Pelya in awe while whispering to each other behind their hands.

The yard captain picked the blunt sword up again and moved toward Pelya at a slower pace.

Pelya circled her, showing little of her style or strength. At the same time, she learned nearly everything about the captain's style.

The captain darted in with a thrust.

Pelya casually knocked it aside, knowing it wasn't a real attack.

The captain feinted two more times, each rebuffed easily.

Pelya waited. Her mind was calm and clear. Time slowed for her, though she didn't need it to.

The captain committed.

Pelya knocked the sword out of the captain's hand and sent her sprawling again.

The captain got to her feet and drew the sword at her waist.

Her lieutenant took a step forward and stretched an arm. "Captain no!"

Pelya moved low and fast, ducking the sharp steel. With her blunt blade, she aimed precisely behind the crossguard of the captain's sword.

The bones in the captain's hand shattered under the force of Pelya's vicious blow.

The captain's sword clattered harmlessly on the hard ground as she screamed and fell to her knees, holding the maimed hand with her other.

Pelya slid her practice blade under the captain's chin, lifting her gaze. "You don't deserve your rank, or your sword." Pelya spit in the captain's face and threw her blunt blade down on the ground in front of the woman.

Pelya spoke to the recruits, slowly turning so that her words encompassed them all. "A sword is to be respected and hated, for its purpose is to take life before your own is taken. If you hold one, hold it with a prayer that it will not be used. If there is anger in your heart, then there should be no sword in your hand."

She finished her turn and stood over the captain who cowered in fear. Pelya's voice became a growl. "Use your sword to protect the weak, not to punish them for their weakness as this fool attempted."

The captain fell back and curled up in the fetal position, terrified by Pelya's wrath.

The lieutenant drew her sword. "That's enough, Recruit!"

Pelya turned to face her. "Your captain attacked a recruit with a sharpened sword. Is that how things are run here? Is that what it is to be a Blue Wyvern? Are Blue Wyverns truly cowards?"

The lieutenant took a step back at the fury on Pelya's face.

Pelya turned on the supervisor. "I scored eight points on the captain, yet you never called them for fear of upsetting her. Do the rules of the challenge circle mean nothing to you?"

The supervisor stepped back.

Pelya spoke to the audience. She was furious. The Blue Wyverns were nothing like she expected. They were nothing like the stories she had been told. "Doing what is right and honorable is sometimes frightening and may even cost your life. The supervisor did not do what was right because he was a coward. The lieutenant and her soldiers did not do what was right because they are dishonorable cowards!"

"I *said* that's enough, Recruit!" the lieutenant shrieked. "You are under room arrest." She pointed her sword at Pelya, it shook with anger. "Escort her to her room, Sergeant!"

The captain's sergeant stepped forward with three soldiers. They drew their swords and aimed them at Pelya.

Pelya stared them down. "I'll go to my room, but I'd advise against getting those blades too close." She turned and stormed through the crowd, not caring whether the soldiers followed or not. Her attitude was foolish, even considering the circumstances, but she couldn't help it.

Ravenne ran in front of Pelya to clear a path. "Prisoner coming through. Make way."

Pelya frowned at her back, curious as to why Ravenne would behave like that. It took a few seconds, but she realized that Ravenne didn't want Pelya to get caught alone, and likely didn't want to be separated considering the weight of the evidence they were producing.

Then it struck Pelya that the behavior of the Captain and supervisor were likely aspects of the sabotage being done to the Recruit Program. Pelya was even more frustrated with her behavior. She had just jeopardized everything.

Ravenne looked back at Pelya with an expression of concern coupled with admiration.

Pelya gave a helpless shrug and then looked over her shoulder to see the sergeant and three soldiers following at a safe distance with their swords still drawn.

It wasn't long before the two recruits reached their room and slammed the door shut.

Chapter 29

They stood just inside the door for a few minutes to see if anyone would follow them in. Finally, Ravenne flopped on her bed. "I can't believe what I just saw!" She sat up, amazement dominating her expression. "You just took out the Captain of the Yard like *she* was the recruit."

"She wasn't much better." Pelya flopped on her own bed. "I can't believe she had the audacity to pull a true sword on me. How would she have felt if she had killed me? It would have crushed her even if she's as cruel as she seemed to be."

Ravenne lay on her stomach and rested her chin on folded hands. "You are so very odd, Pelya Jornin."

"Yeah." Pelya no longer had an argument for such statements.

"Did you *mean* to break her hand?"

"Yes. She doesn't deserve to hold a sword after attacking someone she's sworn to protect and nurture."

"That's very judgemental of you." There was more curiosity in the statement than condemnation.

"I can live with that. She's just lucky Uncle Gilron isn't here. He would have cut her head off with Mercy." Pelya folded her arms behind her head and stared at the ceiling.

Ravenne's nose crinkled. "Who's Uncle Gilron and how do you cut someone's head off with mercy?"

"Uncle Gilron was the weaponmaster of the Guard. He taught me most of what I know. Mercy was the name of his sword."

"Oh."

Pelya took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I'm afraid I may have messed things up badly. I'm under room arrest, so I don't know if they'll allow me to do my chores."

"You didn't mess things up, Pelya. You did what was right." Ravenne came over and sat on the edge of Pelya's bed. "I hope that someday I'm half the woman you are."

"I'd choose the left half. It has more fun than the right." Pelya winked.

They both burst into laughter, releasing some of the tension they felt. It lasted for a good while before they rested on Pelya's bed with their backs against the wall. They chatted for a while, Pelya sharing more of her past and Ravenne talking about growing up in her father's castle.

Around lunchtime, there was a knock on the door. Pelya opened it carefully, ready for trouble.

Captain Triud stepped inside the door. "Hello, Pelya. I hear you've been naughty."

Pelya put on her best innocent face. "Nooooo. Not me. I'm always sweet and good." She batted her eyelashes.

The captain's lips twitched in a suppressed smile. "Commander Halvis wishes your presence along with Ravenne's. The Recruit Commander also wishes it, but I think it would be wise for the two of you to ignore *that* particular wish."

Pelya gave a sharp nod. "Agreed. I'm also concerned for the fate of three of my fellow recruits, Tina, Uma and Beth."

"I'll try to send a force for them, but I cannot guarantee their safety. I'm not even supposed to be in the Recruit Complex. It's not my jurisdiction." Captain Triud drummed fingers on the hilt of her sword. "Professor Withiar has connections here. She's currently at the Academy

Complex, which is where we're headed. Protecting your friends will be our first order of business once we get there."

"Did . . ." Pelya didn't get to finish the sentence.

"You can ask me on the way. Now let's go!" Captain Triud threw open the door and stormed out.

Pelya and Ravenne followed her out. Two of the soldiers that had escorted them to room arrest were tied up and lined against the wall, guarded by Triud's soldiers.

Captain Triud led the recruits out of the common room in a rush, her four soldiers following.

Before they reached the stairs, another captain came up them, followed by four of her own troops. She was a pretty woman with a whip-like walk and a voice to match. "What are you doing here, Captain Triud?"

Captain Triud waved. "Just visiting. Have a nice day, Captain Vizo."

Captain Vizo stepped in front of Triud. "Halt! Those prisoners are to be taken to Recruit Commander Indiya. You are out of your juri . . . oofack."

The last sound came as Triud kneed Vizo in the gut and bent her backward over the stair railing with a sword at her throat. "I don't care. These women are coming with me. Tell your soldiers to drop their weapons or my blade slides across your neck." Blood was already appearing.

Captain Vizo's voice was raspy. "Ackkcchh."

Captain Triud looked at the soldiers. "That's her telling you to drop your weapons."

They did so reluctantly.

"Please relieve Captain Vizo of her sword, Pelya." Captain Triud kept the pressure on. "She's really quite good with it and we don't have the time to test my ability."

Pelya leapt forward and unlatched the sword from Vizo's belt. "What do you want me to do with it?" She also grabbed a belt knife out of its sheath.

"Rumor has it that you're good with one." Triud slowly let Vizo back up. "Keep it for now."

Pelya handed the belt knife to Ravenne and drew the sword. Her trust for Captain Triud had been confirmed. The captain wouldn't have armed Pelya if she meant harm.

Captain Triud's soldiers came forward and kicked away the swords on the ground. Two took the lead down the stairs. Pelya and Ravenne were next while Captain Triud came down with the second two.

The group ran down the stairs. Fortunately, there were no more soldiers in their way. Upon reaching the bottom level, they raced to the nearest exit and outside. Pelya was surprised to see an entire mounted troop of Blue Wyverns.

"I hope you two can ride." Captain Triud pointed at extra mounts. In a moment, all of them were mounted. Captain Triud held up an arm and spoke to the troop. "To the Academy Complex at a gallop. Don't run over bystanders if you can avoid it."

As soon as the rows in front of them moved, Pelya and Ravenne kicked their horses forward. Just as they did, Captain Vizo came out the door with a borrowed sword. Pelya and Ravenne were out of reach too quickly though. The captain kicked in frustration at one of the soldiers riding by.

It was exhilarating to ride through the streets with the troop. The sensation of a charging cavalry gave the recruits a rush of adrenaline.

A short while later, they reached the Academy complex, slowed to a walk and turned off the highway in the opposite direction of the Transcription Building. Captain Triud led them to a

building not far away. It was the same architecture with wyverns in front of it as the rest of the buildings. Captain Triud dismounted. "Jornin and Ambruis with me, the rest of you care for the horses. We'll be riding out again shortly."

Pelya and Ravenne followed her up the steps and into the building. A woman sat at a desk to the right and waved them along. Captain Triud set a long stride down to the end of a hall and into a waiting room. A lieutenant waved them immediately through the open door to the commander's office.

Commander Halvis sat behind a desk while Professor Withiar stood over her shoulder and pointed to words on one of the documents Pelya had discovered. Professor Opelnee was on the other side, examining another document. Matthew and Deliah sat quietly in a secluded corner of the office. They all looked up at the entrance of Captain Triud.

"Ravenne!" Matthew jumped up and the lovers collided in a hug. Deliah followed and gave Pelya a less passionate embrace.

Commander Halvis spoke to Captain Triud, "Any problems?"

The captain gave a brief salute. "They were under house arrest. It seems Pelya broke the Captain of the Yard's hand to set an example. I had to tie up a couple of soldiers and steal Captain Vizo's sword." Captain Triud rubbed her chin. "She's probably not going to forgive me for that one."

Everyone was staring at Pelya. Professor Opelnee folded his arms and jutted his lower jaw, giving his beard life. "Beating up officers now, eh? What happened this time?"

Pelya shrugged. "She drew her sharp blade on me in the challenge circle while I only had a blunt and a wicker vest. I turned her blow and broke her hand with the blunt."

"Just like that?" Commander Halvis snapped her fingers.

"Yes, Commander. She was attempting to teach me some sort of lesson even though I had already scored eight points on her that the supervisor was too cowardly to call." Pelya held her chin high. She would not be ashamed of her actions.

Commander Halvis folded her hands on the desk. "Is the Captain of the Yard any good, Captain Triud? I can't remember who it is off the top of my head."

Captain Triud shook her head. "She was placed a couple of years ago. I don't remember who it is either. She's not so bad that a normal recruit should be able to break her hand though." The captain leaned forward over the desk. "I'd mention that Pelya Jornin isn't anything like a normal recruit, but you told me to shut up about that."

Commander Halvis stood and began shoving the evidence into the pouch. "So I did." When everything was back in, she looked at Pelya. "Frankly, I don't want to know anything about you, Pelya Jornin. One of the nice things about the Blue Wyverns is the anonymity we provide women from all over the world. The recruit process is supposed to weed out the truly bad nuts, but that hasn't been happening lately. I've read the list you and Recruit Ambruis made and you've noted a few flaws. There are more."

"We ran out of time to complete it, Commander."

"Quite so. You and your friends will be murdered if we don't act now." The commander threw the pouch over her shoulder and walked around the desk, putting a hand on Pelya's back to guide her out of the office. "I've called a meeting of the Council of Eight. We're going to present this evidence to them and you're going to tell them how you found it. They will ask you and Recruit Ambruis questions. You may answer them however you wish."

“Yes Commander.” Pelya looked back at Ravenne. “We’re worried about our friends being killed before the meeting is done. Beth, Uma and possibly Tina are still back at the Recruit Complex. Captain Triud said that Professor Withiar might be able to help?”

Professor Withiar asked Captain Triud, “May I have an escort and a sword?”

“Of course, Professor. You can have the sword Pelya took from Captain Vizo, though the captain will likely want it back when you’re done.” Captain Triud grinned.

Professor Withiar took the sword Pelya handed her. “I’ll meet you at headquarters, Commander.”

“See that you do, Professor.” Commander Halvis patted Pelya on the back and took the lead from that point on.

Outside, they mounted and rode with the troop to Blue Wyvern Headquarters. Pelya, Ravenne, Matthew and Deliah rode in the middle of the column where they could be kept safe while the commander and professor rode toward the front.

Pelya took the time to consider her wording. She didn’t want to talk about her past, but it would likely be questioned. Beth’s accusation of Pelya being a spy still hurt. Pelya considered that if the evidence was read incorrectly, others might think the same thing. Regardless, she intended to speak about her past as little as possible. If she could avoid it, she wouldn’t speak at all.

At the top of the hill, Pelya’s attention was caught by the grandeur of the castle. As the troop rode through the gate, their hooves echoed against the walls, giving Pelya a thrill. Inside the courtyard, she looked up at the magnificent castle and smiled. It was everything a castle was supposed to be. She had dreamed of seeing one after reading about them in Ebudae’s books as a child. She had seen High Castle in Dralin, but that was a blocky, soot-covered edifice built to keep a miserable populace away.

The troop turned to the left and rode through the courtyard past a great statue of a fierce wyvern. Its open jaws were at eye level as Pelya rode past and she could see the detail the sculptors had given to each tooth and the snake-like tongue. The voices of people chatting around the gardens were drowned out by the troop riding by, as were the last stubborn birds that hadn’t flown south for winter.

“Are those your crows?” Ravenne asked, pointing at a grouping of them on the edge of the roof above.

Pelya examined them. “No. Those are just normal crows. Most are.”

They rode around a corner to an enormous stable yard on the south side of the castle. The cobbled yard bustled with activity as soldiers and dignitaries went to and from the castle or meandered about the grounds while conversing.

Grooms came running up to take their horses while they dismounted. They were given preferential treatment beyond what Pelya had expected. She raised a questioning eyebrow at Ravenne as they walked toward the commander.

“What?” Ravenne asked in confusion.

“Why are we being treated so well?”

“Because we’re with Commander Halvis of course.” Ravenne said it as though Pelya was dense for asking.

“Because she’s the Academy Commander?”

“Because she’s one of the Council of Eight, as is Recruit Commander Indiya who we’re about to present evidence against.” Ravenne took Pelya’s arm. “Have you not been paying attention? I notice you stare at the sky a lot, but still . . .”

Pelya shook her head. "Not really. I . . . The sky is pretty." Pelya laughed ruefully.

"Oh dear. Whatever am I to do with you?" Ravenne patted her back. "Just let me do the talking."

"I'm fine with that," Pelya said as they walked up ten steps to a wide, semicircular landing in front of an arched double-door entryway twenty feet high and thirty feet wide.

"Fine with what?" Professor Opelnee asked.

"The color of the sky. It's a lovely blue today." Pelya pointed up.

Professor Opelnee stuck his beard forward. "You're peculiar. I like you anyway, Pelya Jornin."

Pelya smiled toothily. "I like me too."

Commander Halvis frowned at her. "Enough chitchat. Let's go inside." She turned toward the open doorway.

A woman with short, brilliant-red hair came out. The hair glistened in the sunlight and feathered forward to cup her pale cheeks. She wore green silk pants over her gazelle-like legs along with a sleeveless white tunic. Roped muscles stretched along arms toned by swordplay. A sword at her hip practically danced with every graceful step she took.

And she was barefoot.

Tina followed the woman, looking nervous. Two capable lieutenants that reminded Pelya of feral cats came behind her.

"Hello, Commander Halvis," the woman said in voice that caressed the air. "I'm curious as to why you've called us all together this fine autumn day."

Commander Halvis stopped and placed a protective hand over the pouch. "Hello, Commander Brynin. I'm here to expose a traitor. We can discuss the details at the meeting."

Commander Brynin approached Halvis and circled, running a finger along Halvis's shoulders. "How very interesting. I was hoping to do the same thing, but it appears as though you've done my job for me rather than tending to your moldy books."

Commander Halvis stayed still. "Well, if you're not going to do your job, someone should."

Commander Brynin froze, her finger remaining on Halvis's shoulder. "I suppose you're right." She leaned in and spoke directly into Halvis's ear. "Don't make a habit of it."

"Of course not." Halvis let out a slow breath.

Pelya felt her dragon mark tingle. She looked around, trying to figure out where the danger might be coming from. She looked up to the sky, but saw no dragons.

Commander Brynin walked back to Tina, her hips swaying with each deliberate step. "This young recruit tells me that the recruits with you have been acting strangely, Commander Halvis." She spun on her heel. "Are you certain you trust them?"

"I am certain, Commander Brynin." Commander Halvis stepped forward until she was toe to toe with the taller woman. "Thank you for your concern. Now, if you don't mind, and even if you do, we have a meeting to attend."

The dragon mark tingled warmer.

Shouts rang out in the courtyard as another troop of soldiers rode up at a gallop. The woman at the front was Recruit Commander Indiya as Deliah had described her to Pelya and Ravenne.

Pelya stopped breathing at the sight of the man riding next to her. He was dressed in black and purple silks of a dueler. His hand rested casually on the hilt of the sword that had nearly taken Pelya's life.

"It's him," Pelya said in a whisper. The dragon mark ceased to tingle now that Pelya had found the source of danger. It remained prepared to aid her for its own survival.

“Who?” Ravenne asked.

The Recruit Commander jumped off her horse and charged up the steps. “I demand to know the meaning of this. My office was ransacked last night and I’ll have the head of whichever one of you ordered it!”

Pelya inched her way closer to Commander Halvis, debating which soldier’s sword to steal.

“That order was not given!” Commander Halvis shouted at her. “We will discuss this in the meeting.”

“There will be no meeting!” the Recruit Commander yelled. “You have items of mine that you *will* return immediately.”

The man followed Recruit Commander Indiya up the steps and looked around, sizing everyone up. Then he caught sight of Pelya and froze.

Pelya would not draw first.

Commander Brynin stepped forward next to Commander Halvis. “And exactly what sort of items would those be?” she asked Commander Indiya. “I’m *very* curious.”

Fury filled the man’s face at the sight of Pelya. He jabbed his finger toward her. “YOU! You cost me everything in Dralin!” His rasping voice attacked her with venom. “You destroyed our plans!”

Everyone else stared at the man in surprise, most putting hands on the hilts of their weapons. The Recruit Commander pulled on his arm. “Stand down, Laen.”

Pelya pointed back at him, her own voice an octave higher with shaking anger. “You kidnapped and tortured thousands! You kidnapped the chancellor’s daughter and destroyed her mind! Countless people died because of you.” She turned to Commander Halvis. “This man is wanted in Dralin for high crimes against the High Council and the citizens of the city.”

Laen drew his sword and leapt toward Pelya.

She remembered how fast he had been, so she leapt to the side. In the process, she pushed Commander Halvis out of the way of any backstroke or ruse to get the evidence.

The sound of a hundred swords being drawn at once rang throughout the air, not just from the troops, but from the soldiers in the yard as well.

Laen wasn’t interested in the evidence. His blade followed Pelya like a wolf scenting its prey.

Commander Halvis bellowed, “Drop your weapon at once, you fool!”

Commander Brynin stepped in front of her. “Blue Wyverns! Protect Commander Halvis at all cost!”

Pelya was on her own. She didn’t have room to run past Laen, so she turned and ran toward the castle. Too many people blocked the door for her to run inside. She yelled a warning as she reached the wall and ran straight up it four steps before gravity began to protest. “He’s a swordmaster with a named blade!”

Laen hit the wall using his arms as shock absorbers. He looked up at Pelya.

There was no way Pelya could face him without a magical sword. She just needed to delay him until . . . she didn’t know what. Pelya flipped mid-air and then twisted at the last second to kick him in the face.

He almost dodged the blow, but not quite.

Her foot grazed his chin and knocked his head against the wall, dazing him long enough for her to tumble to her feet and fly down the steps five at a time. Soldiers scattered to let her pass.

Laen shook off the blow and began chase, only to be met by Commander Brynin.

The clash of their swords rang through the air like the purest of bells.

Pelya skidded to a stop and turned.

Both swords glowed with surreal life as the two masters began to dance.

Everyone, friend or foe, gave them a wide berth.

Like a chorus of frantic bells, the ringing of the swords grew in speed. Both masters moved faster than humanly possible as each struggled for an advantage.

Neither gained one. Commander Brynin's bare feet barely touched the ground, so light was she.

Evil Laen was never where he should be, always moving a step ahead. It was a duel of the ages.

Pelya watched in awe, as did everyone else.

A moment later, far too soon for the epic potential of the encounter, they broke. Laen turned and ran down the steps at his top speed. No one dared get in his way. He flicked a glance of hatred at Pelya, but had time for nothing more.

A mounted Blue Wyvern reached out her hand for Laen while kicking her horse forward. Laen caught it and vaulted behind her. They rode off at a full run.

"Let them go!" Commander Brynin yelled. "He's too dangerous. I'll have him caught later." She pointed her sword at Pelya. "You! Come to me, Recruit." She swished the sword back.

Pelya's fingers twitched as she wished she had even one of her swords. Perhaps it was for the best that she didn't. She ran up the steps two at a time and stood just out of reach of the Commander's sword.

Commander Brynin sheathed her sword. As if it were an unseen signal, everyone else sheathed theirs too. Commander Brynin pointed sharply at the ground in front of her.

Pelya stepped forward.

Commander Brynin pointed the finger at Pelya's nose. "Play no games with me. Who are you?"

Pelya spoke in a voice only the commander could hear. "Pelya Jornin, daughter of Frath Jornin of Dralin. Former Unit Leader in the Dralin City Guard, stripped of my title and banished by the High Council of Dralin."

Everyone else in the yard leaned forward in a futile attempt to hear.

Commander Brynin leaned forward and tiptoed so their noses nearly touched. "Are you a spy?"

"I am not, Commander."

The commander rocked back on her heels and folded her arms. "I'm going to want to talk to you when all of this is done."

"No." Pelya decided at that moment to leave the Wyverns. She was tired of feeling helpless and at the mercy of fools.

The commander narrowed her eyes and lifted the finger threateningly.

"Enough of this!" Commander Halvis shoved Commander Brynin aside. "I have demanded a meeting of the Council of Eight and it will happen *now*!" Commander Halvis grabbed Pelya's arm and nearly pulled it out of the socket as she dragged the recruit inside the building.

Commander Indiya tried to run.

She was knocked to the ground by Captain Triud, who had snuck around behind her.

Swords were drawn throughout the yard.

Commander Indiya was relieved of her weapon and dragged inside by Captain Triud's soldiers. Half of Commander Indiya's troops remounted and fled while the others dropped their weapons to the ground in confusion.

Chapter 30

Everyone was yelling at everyone else. The commanders of the Council of Eight were shouting at each other, witnesses were yelling, even people who had nothing to do with the proceedings were yelling.

The rounded council chambers were majestic, yet comfortable at the same time. Eight columns lined the walls, carved with statues of the original Council of Eight. A painting of Wyverns in flight against a cloudy sky dominated the domed roof two stories above. The High Council sat at a semi-circular table to the left of the intricately carved hardwood doors that allowed entry into the room. In front of the table was an audience area with chairs and smaller tables for people to use while presenting issues to the council. Enough seats for two hundred people filled the room in graduating levels that allowed the people in the back to see above those in the front.

Pelya sat in a gated section off to the right of the Council table, holding Ravenne's hand with her left and Deliah's with her right. Matthew was on the other side of Ravenne. Professor Withiar had brought in Uma and Beth shortly after proceedings began and sat them down behind Pelya and Ravenne before going to sit with Professor Opelnee behind Commander Halvis in a small section of seats behind the Council Commanders.

Tina sat behind Commander Brynin who also turned out to be a member of the Council of Eight. From what Pelya could discern, Commander Brynin was the Covert Services Commander, a clandestine division that no one else seemed to like.

The High Commander, a woman of dour disposition banged a gavel. Her voice was as ponderous as her manner and her jowls jiggled with each syllable. "I *will* have silence."

The noise died down.

The High Commander leaned forward and looked toward Commander Halvis. "The evidence you've presented is compelling, but how do we know it's not fabricated?"

Commander Halvis slammed her hand on the table. "High Commander Portray, I suppose I shouldn't be surprised that you would attack the evidence. You're the one who insisted we appoint Recruit Commander Indiya in the first place. Perhaps *you* are guilty of sabotaging the Blue Wyverns as well."

Gasps echoed throughout the chamber.

The High Commander sputtered. "How dare you?!"

"Another possibility is that our illustrious High Commander is being blackmailed by this Guild of Scales," Commander Brynin suggested. "She's been doing a terrible job of running the Blue Wyverns in general."

Shocked stillness fell over the room. Pelya sensed something momentous happening.

Another woman spoke, the Logistics Commander. She was a sharp woman who couldn't sit still. Like most of the commanders, her hair was greying. "There's always the possibility that she's just incompetent. It's hard to tell sometimes."

The High Commander became pale, her hands shaking.

The Battle Commander, A hawk-like woman, spoke. "I motion that we remove the High Commander from the High Council for incompetence."

Commander Halvis's head whipped toward her. "That's never been done before, we need to deliberate . . ."

"Seconded!" shouted the Logistics Commander.

"Then we vote," the Battle Commander said, ignoring Commander Halvis's protests.

One by one, the commanders voted, only Commander Indiya saying nay.

Silent tears streamed down the High Commander's cheeks as she hung her head in shame. The audience sat in stunned silence, witnessing an event that had never occurred in the history of the Blue Wyverns.

The Battle Commander stood and moved to the High Commander. "Stand."

The High Commander stood, but refused to look anyone in the eye.

"You are hereby relieved of your position within the Council of Eight," the Battle Commander said. "You may go to your room or the chapel to contemplate. We will handle the details later."

The High Commander left with her head low. Nobody offered her comfort or even a look of pity.

The Battle Commander pushed in the High Commander's empty chair and stood behind it. "We'll deal with that later. For now, we need to decide the fate of Commander Indiya. I, for one, believe the evidence before us." She looked both ways at the members of the Council. "I also believe in the evidence of my own eyes and ears. Reports have come in from every company captain in the field about the poor quality of the recruits being sent to them. I have gone to the Recruit Complex and seen the same things that are listed in this incomplete report by Recruits Ravenne Ambruis and Pelya Jornin."

"I have seen these things as well," the Logistics Commander stated. "I motion that we arrest Commander Indiya for espionage and place her on trial."

The Recruit Commander didn't wait to see if the motion would be seconded. She bolted, evading two of Captain Triud's soldiers who were standing behind her.

Captain Triud was expecting it and hooked a leg to send Commander Indiya sprawling. Her soldiers quickly had the woman subdued.

"I believe that is the final piece of evidence we need," The Battle Commander stated. "Take her to prison while we finalize the vote."

Triud's soldiers turned the struggling prisoner over to Council soldiers while the Council of Eight, now six members, completed the unanimous vote.

The Battle Commander reached over the High Commander's chair and banged the gavel. "It is done. I motion that we convene for the night and reconvene in the morning to replace the Recruit Commander and the High Commander."

"I second the motion," Commander Halvis said.

A vote was taken and the meeting was convened. Chatter filled the air as everyone in the room talked excitedly about what had just happened.

"We didn't even have to speak," Deliah said, clearly relieved.

Uma leaned over their shoulders. "You were right the whole time, Pelya. I'm sorry I wasn't more supportive."

"I'm glad we took the chance," Ravenne said with a wide grin. "I still think you're quite mad, Pelya, but you make life exciting."

Pelya didn't respond. She was trying to figure out how to tell them she was leaving.

Tina came through the low gate into their sitting area, doing her best to ignore the glares being shot at her. "I'm sorry I didn't believe you, Pelya. It turns out you were right about everything, although Commander Brynin still thinks you might be a spy."

"That's the cow calling the pig pretty if you ask me," Uma stated heatedly.

Pelya told Tina, "I'm not a spy and I don't care if you or your precious commander believe me, especially since you're the real spy here. You nearly got us killed."

"I did *not*," Tina protested. "Commander Brynin made no attempt on your life. Someone else betrayed you."

"Me," Beth said.

They turned to look at her.

She was slumped in her seat with tears rolling from her eyes. "It was me that nearly got us all killed. My supervisor called me into her office shortly after I arrived for chores today. She began asking about what had happened yesterday and if we had found anything." Beth sat up and wiped her face. "When I told her you found evidence, she became worried and started packing things in a bag. When I told her we had names, she drew her sword on me and asked if her name was listed." Beth broke into tears, buried her face in her knees and covered her head with her arms.

Pelya reached over and took one of Beth's hands. "Thank you for telling us. I feel better knowing."

Beth sat up again. "I betrayed you. You have to hate me."

Pelya smiled encouragingly. "You didn't betray us, you took a chance to help right a wrong and got bitten for it."

"Like a cloud gets bitten by a tall tree," Uma said with a nod. She patted Beth's back. "You did your best to help. You just trusted the wrong person like a butterfly trusts a lustful moth."

Ravenne snorted as she tried to hold back a giggle. Pelya felt a chuckle escape. Relieving laughter finally filled the air for a moment. Even Beth joined in.

"So how did you escape?" Deliah asked Beth.

"Professor Withiar burst into the room and killed my supervisor while I hid under the desk." Beth wiped her eyes. "There was blood everywhere and Professor Withiar has a couple of cuts, but she said it was fun to wield a sword again. Then we got Uma before coming straight here on horseback."

"I've never been on horseback before," Uma said. "It was bumpy and my bottom hurts."

"Well, it'll be part of your training." Ravenne smiled. "We'll get proper training now."

"Maybe Pelya can train us," Deliah suggested.

Pelya shook her head. "I'm not going to stay."

"What? Why?" Ravenne asked in alarm.

"It's not what I expected." Pelya ran both hands through her hair. "Perhaps my expectations were unreasonable, but I expected an organization that truly cared for women." She gestured at the Commanders grouped in conversation behind the table. "They don't care about anything but politics from what I've seen. There is no compassion for the recruits or soldiers. I don't want to be a part of this anymore."

"I think you're wrong," Tina said, her arms folded stubbornly. "The Blue Wyverns *do* care about us. They *have* treated us with compassion. You said yourself that the Recruit Program was sabotaged and even found the evidence proving it, so you can't base your decision on that."

"She's right. I think you're being unreasonable," Ravenne said with hurt in her voice. "We've stuck by you through everything and now you want to abandon us?"

Deliah took Pelya's hand in both of hers. "You can't leave us. We need you." Hope sprung from her eyes.

"I've never done anything important in my life until I met the lot of you." Uma put her hands on Ravenne and Pelya's shoulders. "I've never had friends at all."

"I don't blame her after what I did," Beth said morosely.

“Pelya’s not serious.” Ravenne patted Pelya’s leg. “She’s just had a hard day and was nearly killed.” Ravenne’s brow furrowed as she considered the statement. “I’m pretty sure she’s nearly been killed every day she’s been here.”

“Well in that case, I can see why she wouldn’t want to stay,” Tina said with a laugh.

Professor Withiar came into the gated area. “What’s this about not staying?”

Professor Opelnee followed, his busy eyebrows furrowing like little caterpillars trying to find a place to hide.

Ravenne turned to her. “Pelya says she’s not staying in the Blue Wyverns. It’s not what she expected.”

“That would be understandable given everything she’s been through.” Professor Withiar smiled sadly. “It’s been quite the trial for our capable young woman.”

“It is *not* understandable,” Professor Opelnee protested. “Her skills are needed here. I won’t accept it.”

“You don’t have a choice,” Professor Withiar told him. “A recruit may leave whenever they choose.”

“Not this one.” Professor Opelnee stuck his jaw forward, nearly poking Iriene’s eyes out. “I outrank you.”

“I’m certain I don’t care, you old fool.” Professor Withiar shoved his shoulder. “As for Pelya, you’re right about her skills being needed, but I think a proper evaluation needs to be performed.”

“I’ll agree with that.” Commander Halvis came to just outside the gate along with Commander Brynin. “Everyone mount up. These recruits will be taken to the Academy barracks for their own safety tonight.”

“We have a great number of questions for Pelya Jornin as well,” Commander Brynin added.

“And I won’t answer a damned one of them.” Pelya stood. “Throw me in jail if you wish. Execute me, banish me, whatever you want to do, I don’t care, but I’m not answering any of your questions. I don’t care whether you understand or accept me.”

“Here now.” Professor Withiar held up a calming hand. “We’re not going to do any of those things.”

“Actually, we can.” Commander Brynin leaned over the fence. “We removed two Commanders of the Council of Eight based on the actions of this woman. That gives us the right to do any of the things she mentioned.”

Commander Halvis turned on her angrily. “It does *not* give us the right! We have lost too much of the spirit of our foremothers in the Blue Wyverns and I’ll not have you destroy any more of it.”

The commanders stood face to face in confrontation, Commander Halvis looking up at the taller Commander Brynin, but losing no stature in doing so.

Commander Brynin took a step back. “You are correct. I am a fool whose curiosity got the better of her. We do not have the right to do those things.”

Commander Halvis visibly relaxed. “Now then, where was I?” She looked at Pelya. “Ah yes. I’m still going to insist you spend the night with us, Pelya. Your life truly is in danger until we round up these traitors.”

A sly grin crossed Commander Brynin’s lips. “Plus, the bank doesn’t open til morning.” She began to study the nearest statue in false fascination.

“What’s this?” Commander Halvis asked. “Actually, never mind. Taking people’s money is a foolish idea anyway. I think that’s something else we need to look into.”

“Now you say that?!” Ravenne spread her arms. “I came here with gold.”

“You also need to offer recruits the services of Healer Hall again,” Beth said. “Deliah would have died if not for Pelya’s intervention.”

Commander Brynin turned back to Pelya. “How very interesting. I’d ask about that, but someone isn’t going to answer questions.”

“Enough!” Commander Halvis opened the gate and stood aside. “You come with me, Pelya Jornin. We’ll have you ride next to me where no one will ask you questions.”

Pelya went forward, letting her hands slip from Ravenne and Deliah’s. She didn’t want to meet their hurt expressions, so didn’t look back as she followed Commander Halvis.

The ride to the Academy Complex was oddly quiet, with everyone lost in their own thoughts while the soldiers remained on the alert.

Pelya reconsidered her decision. The only reason she would stay on would be so as not to abandon her new friends.

The truth was that Pelya still didn’t know what she wanted.

Chapter 31

Rather than take Pelya to the Academy barracks with the others, the Commander stopped the column at her house and escorted Pelya inside, giving her staff instructions to provide a room and board for the night. Then she left.

The house wasn't large, but it was well furnished and staffed. Pelya was taken to a guest room with a comfortable bed, a nightstand, a soft rug and an empty chest of drawers.

Dinner was excellent, but Pelya was the only person at the table. A servant informed Pelya that Commander Halvis rarely came home for dinner and usually not for bed either, preferring to sleep in her office.

After dinner, she sat on a bench in the Academy Professor's garden. Pelya wrapped her cloak tighter. It was a pretty place with manicured bushes and flower gardens interspersed between trees that had lost most of their leaves. Birdbaths were mirror-still from the lack of birds to play in them. Flowers were closed for the night with the exception of a section of enormous nightflowers that were open to soak in the rays of the moons.

Pelya looked up to stare at the moons. They were brighter above the clear skies of Settatt than they had been in Dralin, but not as bright as they had been on the empty roads in the countryside on Pelya's journey. Piohray was waxing beyond half-full, though it was low to the western horizon, while Siahray was waning below half-full.

A voice behind her said, "I like Piohray the best."

Pelya jumped up and reached for her sword, angry that she didn't have one.

Commander Brynin stood behind the bench. She wore a green silk shirt and white pants along with a silver cloak that shimmered in the moonlight. Her feet were still bare even on the cold ground. Her pink eyes glimmered in deadly amusement.

"You're so used to having a sword at your hip that you reach for it even though it's not there." The Commander slipped over the back of the bench into a sitting position and patted the empty spot for Pelya to sit back down. "What most people might not notice is that your left hand reaches for a secondary sword as well."

Pelya stared at her warily, realizing that the woman's pink eyes were even more dangerous than the sword. They called to her, wanting her to sink into them.

"You're eyeing my sword, wondering what it would take to remove it from my possession." Commander Brynin crossed one leg over the other. "The answer is that you can't. I'm a swordmaster sixth class and it's an intelligent sword that won't let anyone but me caress it lovingly as its satin steel slides against my naked body." The commander shuddered in ecstasy.

Pelya looked around the garden and kicked herself for not checking escape routes first.

"Come now, no running away, my little rabbit." Commander Brynin patted the seat again before putting her arm over the back of the bench. "Please?" she asked in the manner of a fox. "I'd tell you that I don't bite, but it would be an outrageous lie." She snapped her teeth.

Pelya jumped at the sound. Even if she had her swords, she might not survive a duel against the woman. She would have to duel with her mind instead. Pelya momentarily closed her eyes in order to begin a mental exercise. When she opened them again, Commander Brynin was leaning forward like a cat about to pounce.

The commander's eyes beckoned.

Pelya met them and slid forward across the ground to sit next to her. She channeled the commander's gaze in a way that compartmentalized and trapped it in an endless hallway within her mind. It would allow the commander to travel as far as she wished, but never reach anything

important. Pelya bent every other mental faculty to the task of parrying the commander's mind games. "You use rose oil in your bath, don't you?" Pelya sniffed. "It's very nice."

Commander Brynin's eyes narrowed as she peered deeper.

Pelya moved so close that it looked like the commander had three eyes. "Hello? Is anyone in there?"

The commander jerked her head back and let forth an involuntary laugh. "What mind trick did you just use?"

"One to counter yours." Pelya put her arm on the back of the bench over the commander's.

The commander placed her free hand on the hilt of her sword, but she made no other move.

"I don't know what your game is, Commander Brynin," Pelya said. "You certainly have me at every disadvantage, but if you're looking for my trust, you've just ruined it with that mind stunt you pulled."

Commander Brynin smiled ruefully. "I'm too clever for my own good, and far too impressed with myself. I keep forgetting that swordmasters generally have a mind as sharp as their sword."

"I haven't forgotten," Pelya said.

The commander's lips twisted. "Point."

"You don't concede many of those, do you, Commander?" Pelya relaxed and released the commander's arm, not because she thought the danger was over, but because it would throw the commander off guard.

Commander Brynin also relaxed, but left the arm there and scooted closer so that their sides and thighs were touching. "No, I don't, and neither do you. Can I tell you a secret?"

"No." Pelya smiled.

The commander laughed. "I'm going to tell you anyway." She leaned in. "The secret is that I want us to become best friends."

Pelya also leaned in so their foreheads were touching. "That's never going to happen. I already have a best friend and even if I didn't, I don't see myself ever trusting someone who tried to influence my mind the way you did."

They stared at each other with their foreheads together for a good minute or two as children do. Pelya admitted to herself that the commander's three eyes were pretty. However, it was by far one of the oddest confrontations she had ever had.

Commander Brynin sat back on the bench and looked up at the moons again. "Tell me about your past."

"No."

"I was afraid you'd say that." The commander sighed. "I'm a curious person by nature. I like to know everything, which is what makes me so good at my job."

"Then why didn't *you* find the evidence?"

"Because I've been concentrating my attention elsewhere, on a new threat that's invading our world, and no one knows about it." She clucked her tongue. "I was so busy with it, that I missed what was happening right under my nose."

"Yet you know Tina." It had been bothering Pelya. "She was with you when we showed up at Headquarters today, and she deftly avoided an explanation."

Commander Brynin turned her head toward Pelya. "Can you keep a secret?"

"I'm good at that sort of thing."

"Yes you are, you sneaky girl." The commander patted Pelya's thigh and leaned in again. "Tina is my niece. She ran away from home a few times, so I sent a letter to her mother

suggesting Tina come join the Blue Wyverns. I met Tina before she got into Settatt and asked her to pay attention to what was happening in the Recruit Program.”

“So *she*’s the spy,” Pelya said with a nod.

“No. She’s not really a spy. It was wrong of me to ask her to do my job for me.”

Commander Brynin folded her arms in her lap. “She’s a young woman with a reckless streak, much like I was at her age. She needs friends like you and the others to guide her, something I never had.”

“I see.” Pelya felt another twinge of guilt at wanting to leave. She decided to switch subjects. “What’s the threat invading our world?”

Commander Brynin put her arm around Pelya’s shoulders. “There’s a new race of people on Ryallon called the Rojuun, and they want to enslave humans.”

“I’ve met a Rojuun before. You may be right about . . .”

She didn’t get a chance to finish the sentence because the commander was sitting on top of her, holding Pelya’s cheeks with cool hands and pressing against Pelya’s forehead so they each seemed to have three eyes yet again. “If you tell me nothing else about your past, tell me of this Rojuun.”

“Only if you quit touching me.”

The commander considered it for a moment, then did a somersault in the air and landed on her feet in front of Pelya. “I like touching people. It makes them uncomfortable.” She sat back down without touching Pelya, but stayed uncomfortably close. “Please tell me about this Rojuun. I’m not touching you.”

Pelya booped the commander’s nose, receiving narrowed eyes in return. “Very well. It was a few years ago in the cell of a slaver.”

“Which slaver?”

“His surname was Blavoci, I’m not certain of his first.” Pelya tried to remember it.

“I’m familiar with the name. It’s a powerful merchant family known for having its own military to protect its property. The slavery part is lesser known.” Commander Brynin rubbed her chin. “The patriarch of the family died a few years ago, assassinated in a little church outside of Dralin. His eldest son is now in control. Did you have anything to do with that?”

“No.” Pelya frowned. No one had told her that. “How was he assassinated?”

Commander Brynin shrugged. “I don’t know the details. Why would you ask that question?”

Pelya laughed. “Everyone is either a wizard, thief or an assassin in Dralin. If I know how an assassination was performed, I might be able to tell you who did it.”

The commander leaned close without touching. “And which are you, wizard, thief or assassin?”

Pelya booped her nose again. “I used to be in the Dralin City Guard, which makes me a little bit of all three.”

“Join the Blue Wyverns, please,” the commander said suddenly. “I know you’ve been offered a job with the Cloudswept Bank, but the Wyverns need you more. We really are a good organization in this world. You saw that in the evidence.” She took Pelya’s hand in both of hers in spite of the agreement not to touch. “You have so many interesting talents that I can use. Please let me use you.”

“You are the strangest woman I’ve ever met, and that’s saying something.” Pelya booped the commander’s nose again, thinking back to how the purple dragon had treated her the same

way on the road to Settatt. She admitted to herself that it *was* fun. Pelya squished the commander's cheeks. "Squishy, squishy."

Commander Brynin tilted her head in amusement. "*I'm* the strangest?"

Pelya giggled. "I have no desire to be used by you in any way, shape or form, Commander Brynin."

"I want to send you on secret missions." The commander made herself more comfortable. "You'll join companies of Blue Wyvern soldiers in different countries and help keep them safe by searching out threats to them. You'll get to go exploring for artifacts that may help the Blue Wyverns become stronger. You'll get to protect these wonderful women who trust us to keep them safe against the abuses and discrimination they face throughout every country in the world. You'll get to fight crimes against all women: abuse, rape, murder, enslavement. Ryallon is a horrible place for women, Pelya. Surely you know that, having lived in Dralin. The Blue Wyverns protect women, give them strength, give them hope against the despair and fear that we face. Join us!" Commander Brynin took Pelya's face in her hands and spoke with intensity. "Please, join us. We *need* women like you in our ranks."

Pelya recognized every truth in the words, even if they were delivered by a lunatic. They precisely matched her own goals and hopes. Even though everything with the Recruit Program had been so confusing, she still wanted to join. "You said you wanted to use me and send me on secret missions?"

Commander Brynin released Pelya's face. "Yes. You have a variety of talents far beyond that of a normal warrior, such as sneaking past guards, through locked doors, into a commander's office and finding information in a secret compartment of a map desk. I can use *all* of your talents." She stood and stretched. "Commander Halvis wants to keep you too because you know a lot of languages, though she won't tell me which ones. I can use that ability too."

"Does Commander Halvis know you're here?" Pelya asked.

Commander Brynin looked at the moons again. "They're so pretty."

"Uh huh." Pelya shook her head and considered her options. It didn't take long. "I'll do it." What she didn't say was how much the prospect excited her. It would be much better than just being a soldier or scholar. Pelya even thrilled at the idea of working for someone as delightfully insane as Commander Brynin was.

The commander performed a graceful spin. "Do you ever dance naked in the woods, Pelya?"

"No." Perhaps not *quite* as insane as the commander.

"I'll have to take you with me next time." Commander Brynin spun and leapt. "My sword and I dance in the moonlight together. She shines in happiness when we do."

"How did you know I was a swordmaster?" Pelya asked. It had been nagging at her.

The commander stopped. "You told me?"

"Nope."

"Tina told me." She nodded. "Yes, that's it."

"Nope. I never told her."

A sly look crossed Commander Brynin's face. "I'm the head of the Covert Services. We know everything." She nodded mysteriously.

"Do you want me to trust you or not?" Pelya sat back and crossed one leg over the other.

The commander pointed. "That's cheating."

"How did you find out?"

The commander sighed and sat down. "I talk to my husband about work sometimes. When I mentioned your name, he reacted, so I bribed him with sex and he told me that you deposited expensive swords and equipment in the bank and that you were a swordmaster second class." For the first time, the commander looked vulnerable. "If you tell anyone, he'll lose his position. I'll owe you a favor if you don't report it."

"Your husband is Farl Themdin, isn't it?"

"Yes, we keep different last names because of my job." Commander Brynin's voice dropped to a whisper. "If you hurt him, I'll kill you." Her eyes flashed dangerously, glistening with restrained tears. "He's the only thing I truly need in this life."

"I won't tell anyone about him," Pelya said solemnly. "Would you like to know a secret that's just as frightening for me to tell, so that we each know something about the other?"

The commander curled her legs up like a little girl sharing secrets. "I'd like that very much."

"My father is the Archpriest and Champion of Distrust."

Commander Brynin's alabaster face became a shade whiter. "That's . . . interesting. You're talking about Distrust, the Goddess of Sorrow . . ."

"Yes. He's almost as depressing as she is." Pelya rolled her eyes. "Dralin is the perfect city for both of them. Daddy also has amethyst eyes from when she God-Touched him. They're pretty. I think they might even be real amethysts, but he won't tell me."

"You intrigue me, Pelya Jornin."

"You intrigue me, too, Commander Brynin." Pelya booped her nose again. "So what happens next?"

The commander twitched her nose. "After you tell me more about that Rojuun, we have you go back to your troop. Even I can't set aside the requirement that you go through a year of training. It'll be too easy for you, but you'll learn what the Wyverns are about. You'll continue chores here at the Academy and you'll have the opportunity to help those around you and perhaps aid in healing the Recruit Program." She looked at the moons again. "After that year is up, you'll report to me for duty and I'll send you riding off around the world to sneak around and aid our organization."

"I can live with that," Pelya said.

"Good." The commander turned back to Pelya. "So, you found this Rojuun in a cell of a slaver. How ironic. What then?"

"We released him."

The commander cocked an eyebrow. "We?"

"My friend Ebudae and some Carnies we were with," Pelya explained. "We were rescuing the brother of one of the Carnies we had just met. The Rojuun was in another cell. Ebudae and I unlocked it and gave him a knife so he could stand a fighting chance."

"Who's Ebudae?"

"My best friend."

"Yes, but *who* is she?"

Pelya sighed. She didn't want to tell anyone else about Ebudae. "Can you keep it to yourself if I tell you?"

"Yes. I'm also excellent at keeping secrets." The commander winked.

"Ebudae is my best friend. Her full name is Lady Ebudae Pallon of Dralin."

"A high-born lady? How intriguing. What were the two of you doing with Carnies?" The commander smirked.

“We were helping them to save the brother of one.” Pelya was relieved by the lack of a reaction toward Ebudae’s full name. “Anyway, my father and I met him in the ruins later when we were trying to rescue some of the Carnies that had been kidnapped in retaliation.”

“Out of everything in that statement, ‘ruins’ interest me the most,” Commander Brynin said.

“The ruins under Dralin. Surely you’ve heard of them? . . .”

“No.” The commander slowly shook her head. “No, I can’t say I have. You’d *think* I would have heard such a thing.”

Pelya took a deep breath and explained. “Dralin is built on the ruins of ancient cities. Vast pillars enchanted with magical wards hold it up. The ruins are dangerous and it’s illegal to go down there, but there’s no one to enforce that law. So I’d go exploring on occasion. It’s also a prime way for smugglers like Blavoci to get goods into the city.”

“Fascinating.” The commander leaned a cheek on her hand.

“So Daddy and I snuck into another one of Blavoci’s warehouses with the help of this Rojuun, Zaan Thurrn, who was rescuing his companions. There were a number of them who had been captured. Zaan told us that another faction of Rojuun was working with Blavoci, though I didn’t see them.”

“Do you always call your father ‘Daddy’?”

“Yes, I do. Anyway, that was the last I saw of Zaan or any Rojuun.”

Commander Brynin jumped to her feet. “That’s very interesting. What are they doing in Dralin? Is their reach even greater than I imagined?” She spun and pointed at Pelya. “After basic training, you’re going to help me find out more about the Rojuun, Pelya Jornin. We shall thwart their plans for humanity.”

“Tell me more.” Pelya was still intrigued by the creatures, though she had been too busy to find out more about them.

“No. Not now. You have basic training to complete.” Commander Brynin folded her arms. “I’ll talk to you occasionally to see how the Recruit Program is progressing, but tell no one, not Commander Halvis, Professor Withiar, your drill sergeant, and not even your friends that you work for me. I’ll make the arrangements.” She held out a hand. “Agreed.”

Pelya spit in her own hand and held it out. “Agreed.”

Commander Brynin took her hand away. “I hate that custom. Wipe off your hand and then we’ll shake. It’ll be just as binding.”

Pelya wiped her hand off on her pants leg and they shook.

The commander looked toward the house. “Time for me to leave.” She disappeared into the bushes and out of the garden.

A servant appeared to offer Pelya a bath, which was gladly accepted along with the peaceful sleep that came after.

Epilogue

“Pelya! Over here.” Ravenne waved Pelya to the park table where she sat with Tina, Uma, Beth and Deliah. “We’ve been waiting for you.” The afternoon sun filtered warmly through autumn leaves of trees.

Pelya jogged over and sat in her customary spot between Deliah and Ravenne. “Sorry. I was visiting Corporal Birown’s grave to let her know we all passed and that things are going well since Recruit Commander Vezibo took over last year.”

Deliah put a comforting hand on her back. “You still miss her, don’t you Pelya?”

“Yes,” Pelya admitted, “but she knew she didn’t have much time and she was content at the end. She’d be proud of us for getting through training.”

“Can you believe we graduated?” Uma asked in amazement. She flexed her arms in their new polished chainmail. “I’m strong and fit now, ready to take on bandits and the scum of the earth.” The light blue emblem on her dark blue tabard flashed in the bright sunlight.

They all wore the uniforms of Blue Wyvern regulars, having graduated that morning. In addition, they had swords at their hips and knew how to use them. Pelya missed her enchanted blades, but it was better than nothing.

Deliah held her chin high. She had an air of confidence that hadn’t been there at the beginning of basic training. “If I’d known a year ago what I know now, my husband wouldn’t have been able to hurt me.”

“No man will ever treat you that way again,” Beth said with a kind smile. “We’re all stronger than when we began basic training. We have good friends and a good future ahead of us.”

“Yes, but where are we going?” Tina asked. “Where do you think we’ll be assigned? I’m hoping to go to the border of Soarth to fight bandits, but I’m afraid they’ll send me to sit at a stupid waypoint to polish some stupid officer’s boots all day.”

“You mean you don’t already know?” Ravenne asked. “Our troop has been assigned to the Fourth Infantry in the Tennath Division. We’ll be leaving tomorrow morning for the border of Soarth like you wanted.”

Tina frowned. “I was told to report to the castle tomorrow morning for assignment.”

“I was too,” Pelya said. “That was part of my post-graduation briefing.” What she didn’t mention was that arrangements had already been made by Commander Brynin for Pelya and Tina to join the Covert Services. She was under orders to keep it a secret even from her closest friends. Tina likely didn’t know either.

Pelya never told them about the meeting with Commander Brynin, or more meetings that Brynin arranged during basic training without anyone’s knowledge. In those meetings, Brynin began to tell Pelya about the Rojuun who were coming from underneath the Caaldith Mountains to learn about the ways of humans. It was the commander’s intent to have Pelya discover more in addition to normal duties.

“I was told that our entire troop was to report for assignment to the Fourth Infantry,” Deliah said. “We’re supposed to be with them for three years before getting permanent positions,” “If you’re not with us, I don’t know what I’ll do, Pelya.”

Ravenne gripped her arm. “I’m already going to die without Matthew for three years. I can’t survive without you too!”

Uma folded her arms on the table. “Granted, we thought you were crazy at first, like a fish wiggling through flowers, but you’re really as good as you say.”

They laughed, accustomed to Uma's analogies by that point.

"So why aren't we joining the rest of you?" Tina was clearly upset. "I was told that I wasn't going with the rest of the troop, but I thought that meant we were all being assigned to different places."

"That's what I thought too," Pelya said. She treasured the friendships they had built and would miss them. "I don't want to be alone again. I don't like it."

Deliah wrapped arms around Pelya and they held each other.

"You're both going to headquarters, so maybe you'll get to work together," Beth said optimistically.

"That wouldn't be bad, but I'd rather we *all* stayed together." Tina rested a glum cheek on her hand.

"We've had a lot of good times," Uma said.

"It wouldn't have been such a good experience if we hadn't exposed the traitors," Ravenne said. "It seems so long ago now."

"It was a lifetime ago." Deliah released Pelya but stayed close. "I wonder if they ever found the man named Laen or the others that escaped."

Ravenne played with a splinter in the table. "I don't think they have. They caught most of them, but I've never heard anything about Laen."

Pelya had wanted to go after Laen, but her requests were rebuffed. She had asked Commander Brynin about the man and the Guild of Scales a few times, but received no information. "I haven't heard anything either."

Uma stretched. "Well, they executed the rest as an example against anyone who would try the same thing. At least they did it quietly, unlike in Paruth where they would have had their heads put on a pike as an example. The good news is that now the recruits have good equipment and training."

"And good drill sergeants," Pelya added. "Things got much better when the old ones were reassigned back."

"Even if they did come with the previous year's worth of recruits." Ravenne rolled her eyes.

"They *had* to be brought back." Pelya agreed with the decision made by Commander Vezibo, Commander Indiya's replacement. "They would have gotten themselves and others killed after being trained improperly."

"I wouldn't want to have to go through basic twice." Tina shuddered in horror. "It was hard enough the first time."

"I enjoyed it." Deliah smiled. "Nothing has ever been as hard as being married was. Learning how to protect myself from abuse was a joy."

"And learning how to protect those we care about," Ravenne added. "I will always be there for all of you if you ever need me."

"Now you sound like Pelya," Beth said with a wink.

Uma smiled. "That's not a bad thing in my eyes. Thank you all for being my friends. I've never had any before."

Beth put an arm around her. "You're welcome and I agree that we couldn't ask for a better group of friends."

They exchanged hugs and tears. The rest of the evening and late into the night was spent exchanging stories of the times together, though nothing had been as exciting as those early days.

The next morning after exchanging tearful goodbyes with their friends, Pelya and Tina stepped into Commander Brynin's office. The commander was leaning back in her chair with her bare feet on the corner of the desk, her hands clasped on her stomach and her eyes closed. Pelya winked at Tina. "She's asleep. We can go now."

The commander sat up. "Nice try, Jornin. Congratulations to both of you on graduating. Now have a seat."

"Straight to business, as usual." Pelya sat.

"You two know each other now?" Tina asked in surprise. "I thought you weren't going to talk to her, Pelya."

Commander Brynin leaned forward. "We're best of friends even if she *won't* dance naked in the moonlight with me."

Tina's eyes widened. "I'm really not sure I want to know."

Pelya said to Tina, "Your aunt likes to dance naked in the moonlight with her sword. I prefer to keep my clothes on and practice in the daylight."

"You know she's my aunt?" Tina gulped. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Because Pelya made an agreement not to tell anyone about my meetings with her." The commander leaned back and put her feet back on the corner of the desk. "I told her you were my niece because I have plans for the two of you. Speaking of your swords, Pelya, you may want to get them back."

Pelya sat forward eagerly. "You mean I can have them back?" Suspicion crossed her mind. "Wait. We're not allowed to have personal equipment in the Blue Wyverns. What are you about?"

"That particular rule doesn't apply to Covert Services." The commander studied her fingernails. "You and Tina will be in a great deal of danger, often without a troop at your back, and you need proper equipment to overcome it. I'm going to supply Tina with magically enhanced weapons and armor. I'll do the same for you if you prefer, but I figured you'd want your own."

Pelya thought about it for a moment. She wanted her swords, but she wasn't sure about the outfit, runeballs or the money. Ebudae had made the outfit and runeballs just for her, not for the benefit of the Blue Wyverns. Pelya felt selfish about the equipment.

Commander Brynin looked at her with a raised eyebrow. "I didn't expect you to hesitate."

"As long as the swords remain as my property, I want to use them, yes."

"Ahh. That's your concern. Yes. They'll remain your personal property. We've fixed that rule along with all the other issues you and your friends exposed." Commander Brynin folded her arms on the desk and rested her chin on them. "You don't want your magical clothes too?"

Pelya played with a lock of her still-short hair. "As far as my clothes go, they won't be useful as long as I'm with the Blue Wyverns. I'd prefer to have you supply that equipment. I'd feel much better with my own swords though."

"Why am I getting magical equipment?" Tina asked. "I'm not as good as Pelya."

The commander kicked her feet up on the desk again. "Because you're Pelya's apprentice. It's your job to learn as much as you can from her."

A smile jumped to Pelya's face while Tina's jaw dropped in amazement. Pelya wouldn't be completely separated from friends yet again. The commander hadn't shared that detail with her previously.

“I’ve learned enough about Pelya to know that she has a slew of talents useful in the field,” Commander Brynin said. “From what I understand, she’s done a great deal of teaching throughout basic training. She’ll get to continue those lessons with you, Tina, and you’ll get to aid her in keeping the Wyverns and even humanity safe.”

“I’d love that!” Tina bounced in her chair.

“Excellent.” The commander looked at Pelya. “How long will it take you to get your swords?”

“About five to eight days,” Pelya said.

Commander Brynin raised an eyebrow. “That long?”

“Yes. I can go and start the process today, but they won’t just hand them over due to extra precautions I took.”

“All right. It’ll take at least that long for you to research your first assignment,” the commander said. “Go get your swords and then the two of you take the rest of the day off. Report here tomorrow morning and we’ll begin.”

Pelya and Tina jumped up and gave each other a hug. Then they dashed out to enjoy their day off before beginning their new lives.

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“Liquid”, Book 2, “Cloudswept”, Book 3, and “Sidetracked”, Book 4 of the Wyvern Series, are available at the same store you found this one.

About the Author

John H. Carroll was the youngest of seven children and was born in Atlanta, Georgia in 1970 where he was kept in a dresser drawer with the clean socks. Luckily, he wasn't kept with the dirty socks or else he might have grown up to become slightly warped.

As a child, John spent most of his time wandering through the Mojave Desert in an attempt to avoid people. He would stare at the sky, imagining what it would be like to explore different worlds. One of his favorite memories is watching his dad build the fuselage of Evel Kneivel's skycycle in their garage. One of his least favorite moments was watching that skycycle fall into the Snake River. (Not his dad's fault and he has documentation to prove it, so nyah)

As a teenager, John spent most of his time driving wherever he could in an attempt to avoid people. He would stare at the road, imagining what it would be like to explore different worlds. He was the captain of the chess team, lettered in golf and band while in high school, and wasn't beaten up anywhere near as much as one might imagine.

As an adult, John spends most of his time gazing at a computer screen in an attempt to avoid people. He stares at the monitor for hours, imagining what it would be like to explore different worlds. Occasionally, he looks around to see what's happening on planet Earth. Quite frankly, it frightens him. He's just going to do his best to write as many books as he can before aliens disintegrate humanity for being so irritating.

Emo bunny minions surround John at most times. He is their imaginary friend and they look to him for guidance. At one point, they took over the world. No one noticed because they left everything exactly as it was. They gave the world back after a week because it was depressing.

The *Ryallon Series* is his most popular endeavor into the field of writing. His *Stories for Demented Children* have lightened the hearts of many strange children and adults. He writes in the evenings and weekends whenever possible.

If you would like to be alerted of new releases, you may sign up for his newsletter. Your email will never be shared with anyone else. You may unsubscribe at any time.

<http://mad.ly/signups/76337/join>

You can follow his blog where he discusses writing, emo bunnies, family and various other topics of insanity.

<http://www.ryallon.blogspot.com/>

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<http://www.facebook.com/John.H.Carroll.Author>

His Goodreads Page:

http://www.goodreads.com/author/show/4479427.John_H_Carroll

Stories for Demented Children:

Odd tales of anti-heroes doing their best to survive odd circumstances.

Books 1-5 are found in *A Collection of Stories for Demented Children*

The Emo Bunny that Should (Illustrated)

Zachary Zombie and the Lost Boy

Drippy the Peg Legged Rainbow

Unholy Cow

Attack of the Sugar Plum Fairies

Books 6-10 are found in *A Collection of Stories for Demented Children, Volume 2*

Phairyphant

Naughty Nanoworms

Zachary Zombie and the Wicked Worm

Steampunk Roo

Pow the Panda, The Case of the Rainbow Dragon

Novels of Ryallon:

My full-length novels are set in the world of Ryallon. They are high fantasy with rogues, knights, dragons and flower children. You can get them at the store where you found this one.

Dralin Series (Set in time before the Willden trilogy)

Dralin

Ebudae

Pelya

The Wyvern Series (Parallel to the Willden Trilogy, set in time after the Dralin Trilogy)

Wyvern

Liquid

Cloudswept

Sidetracked

Willden Trilogy (Written first)

Rojuun

Anilyia

Kethril

The Crazy Series (All previous series merge here)

Liselle

Bounty

To be announced (Coming 2019)

To be announced (Coming 2020)

To be announced (Coming 2020)

Stand-alone Novella

Rain Glade

Other Stories:

Short stories and a novella that came to me along the way.

Novella

Alien Coffee (Sci-fi)

Short Stories

Blue Haired Alien Girlfriend (Sci-fi)

Test Pilot (Sci-fi)

Don't Ever Change (Horror)

The Storage Room in the Grey Void (Surreal)