

Dralin

John H. Carroll

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This book is dedicated to my mother who gave me a good childhood and always accepted me for who I was.

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Chapter 1

“Hello, pretty little miss. Would you like to see the sights of Dralin?” the hawkish Guardsman asked with a leering grin. He brushed a few flakes of lightly falling autumn snow from his shoulder-length brown hair. A polished chain shirt peeked out from underneath the collar of a standard-issue black and brown tunic, while a long sword waited in its sheath at his waist for the opportunity to commit malice. Sheela stepped back in apprehension. Everyone in Dralin was to be feared, even many of the guards from what she had been told.

“No thank you, Sir,” she responded firmly. Just because she was a plain farmer’s daughter didn’t mean she was a fool. Her stomach knotted in dread when the guardsman took a step forward and put a powerful hand on her shoulder, which menaced rather than comforted her. The smile he must have thought was charming came across as sinister.

“Come now, lass. My shift is nearly over and the sun is about to set. I’ll take good care of you and keep you warm on this cold evening.” He tried to slide his arm around her shoulder, but she spun away off the sidewalk and into the roadway. “Hey! Don’t be like that!” the man exclaimed in surprise.

Sheela had to stop and straighten suddenly to avoid a passing wagon. Its wheels splashed muddy water from the cobbled road onto the worn dress she had run away from home in. It was hard to tell that it had once been warm yellow with sturdy threads. A year of hard work in the fields and weeks of walking dirt roads had taken the color out to leave a drab, torn garment barely hanging onto her shoulders.

She felt the guard’s hand on her shoulder again, gripping firmly. “Careful. Those wagon drivers won’t hesitate to run you over.” He pulled her back onto the sidewalk where she managed to twist out of his grip again. There were too many people around to simply run and she really did want to go into the city yet, so she moved a few steps away and stood with as much resolve as she could muster.

He held up his hands and yielded. “Whatever. Go learn about the city on your own. We’ll probably find your body in a gutter after you’ve been thrown out of a brothel somewhere.” The look of snarling contempt on his face as he spit on the ground at her feet stunned her. Sheela couldn’t help the tears that began to well up in her eyes.

With a stomp of her bare foot, she drove the tears back. After everything she had been through, harsh words wouldn’t drive her to despair. The guard turned in disgust and traipsed back to the large guardhouse that bordered the crowded highway leading into the main city.

Sheela held her chin up as she looked at the people and wagons passing by. She was on the sidewalk to the right of the highway leading into Dralin from the east. It was her hope to ask one of the guards for a safe place to go and she had seen one that looked like he might be helpful, but the leering guard had intercepted her instead.

The enormous city before her was daunting and goosebumps appeared on her arm when she thought about the stories she had heard of it. Snow drifting down heralded that winter would be starting early. Sheela wiped some off her eyelashes and turned to leave. Heading away into the cold emptiness of unknown roads scared her too. She had come too far to turn back, but fear of going on made her freeze in her tracks.

“Are you alright?” a strong, deep voice asked from behind her. Sheela slowly turned around and looked up into the brilliant blue eyes of a tall, young guardsman. His nose had been broken at some point and the tip aimed a little to the left, but he was handsome in spite of that. “I’m sorry if Tobe bothered you. He’s good with a sword, but not so much with people.”

An aura of safety about the man drew Sheela to him. He was the guard she had originally been heading to talk to before the one named Tobe had intercepted her. Still, in Dralin it wasn’t safe to trust anyone too easily. “I’m hoping to find someplace safe, but I don’t have any money,” Sheela answered tentatively. She had survived the trip to Dralin by sleeping in haystacks and by stealing a little food wherever she could, a fact that shamed her.

The guard let out a long breath, puffing out his cheeks while he ran fingers through wavy black hair that fell to his shoulders in what seemed to be a fashion with all the guards. She studied his face. Black stubble covered a strong jaw and chin. His skin was browned from being in the sun, but wasn’t dark. He spoke deliberately in warm tones that seemed to shield her from the cold air. “Dralin is a bad place not to have any money . . .” he paused, “It’s a bad place even if you do have money,” he finished with a half-hearted chuckle.

A small laugh escaped Sheela’s cracked lips, but her future was too uncertain for true mirth and her expression became serious once more. “I’m a good worker and very quiet. I don’t need much,” she persisted earnestly. “I know the city is dangerous. I only want a chance.”

He looked at her thoughtfully for a moment, and then nodded. “Alright. I’m off duty in a few minutes. I know of an innkeeper that has an opening and he owes me a favor.” It was clear the guardsman was making a large concession. “Name’s Frath by the way.” He held out a muscular hand.

She took the hand and smiled shyly. “Mine’s Sheela.” Frath’s grip was firm, but gentle, holding her hand safely rather than crushing it. His smile warmed her skin and made some of the fear go away. Sheela’s heart raced in her chest a little bit. It was an unusual feeling for her because she normally found men intimidating.

“Sheela . . . I like that name.” Frath pointed toward an empty bench on the far side of the guardhouse. “Sit over there until I’m finished, and then I’ll take you to the inn.” He rejoined the rest of the guards while she walked over and sat.

The bench was damp from the scattered snowflakes that melted as soon as they landed on anything. Sheela’s dress was already wet and dirty anyway, so sitting on the bench didn’t bother her. It felt good to get off her feet for a short time and she rubbed the cold ache out of them. Many of the people traveling by wore shoes and Sheela thought that perhaps she might someday own a pair.

Sounds of the city surrounded her as she watched people passing in a mad rush to finish their tasks before nightfall. Wagon drivers yelled above the clapping of their horse’s hooves, which clattered sharply over the humming drone of thousands of voices talking incessantly about whatever matters might be important to them at the time.

Endless buildings obscured a ruddy sunset that lit the bottoms of patchy clouds on the western horizon. Rays of light burst through the smog and snow to cast a dirty orange radiance over everything. Exotic scents came from many of the wagons that had traveled from such places as Mayncal, Brindlyn, and the Lynath Empire. They mixed in with the

odors of livestock, unwashed bodies, cooking food and smells Sheela couldn't begin to identify.

The assault on her senses was overwhelming, making her dizzy and lightheaded. Taking deep breaths didn't help because each one brought something new. The odors, both pleasant and unpleasant, were so heavy that she could taste them on her tongue.

"Are you alright, Sheela?" Frath asked, concern filling his voice. She looked up. He was taller than the other Guards, easily six feet three inches. His hand rested comfortably on the hilt of a long, sheathed sword. Judging from his broad chest and strong hands, he was likely a very dangerous man in spite of his youthful face.

For some reason, Sheela trusted him more than she trusted any of the thousands of people she had passed along the highway and entering into the city. Perhaps because of that trust, she croaked out a hoarse whisper, "I'm scared . . . I'm *so* scared." It was the first time she had shown weakness to anyone since running away. No matter how frightened she had been at any point, Sheela had held her chin up and kept a brave face.

Frath gripped her shoulder comfortingly. He didn't speak any words, conveying understanding and calm through his eyes instead. Sheela smiled briefly and stood. "I'm ready. You won't get in trouble for helping me, will you?" she asked worriedly.

"No. Not at all," he assured her, putting his arm out for her to hold onto. She gripped it with both hands as one would the railing of a ship in a storm. Frath surrendered the arm willingly as they began walking deeper into the city. "What do you know of Dralin?" he asked, slowing his pace to match her shorter steps.

"It's the most dangerous city in the world and everyone here dies a terrible death." That was the gist of what she knew. If there was anything people agreed upon, that was it.

Frath barked a short laugh. "Yeah, there's some truth to that, but it's possible to survive." His expression became grave. "I don't know why you came here, but I've seen a lot of young ladies disappear when they arrive. It's worse if you don't have family or friends, and I'm guessing you don't have that here? . . ." he trailed off questioningly.

Sheela shook her head and looked at the inns that lined the road. They were enormous three and four level buildings with stables that stretched out behind them for blocks. "Is one of these the inn you're taking me to?" She gestured to the nearest, which had a painting of a yellow wagon on a large wooden sign in front.

"No. It's closer to the middle of the city. It'll take about an hour to get there. You don't want to work at any of these. They're mean places, meant for travelers." To emphasize his point, a group of men tumbled outside one of the doors in the middle of a scuffle. Frath stopped for a moment to watch, keeping himself protectively between Sheela and the brawling men. "They're just a bunch of drunks fighting. As long as there're no weapons drawn, I don't need to worry about it."

"Why do people fight like that?" Sheela asked in confusion. "I don't understand."

Frath shrugged. "I don't understand a lot of things either. There aren't any answers in Dralin. Your best choice is to head somewhere else. If you insist on staying, then it's best to keep your head down, find a safe place to live, and stay there." He stopped and took Sheela by the arms. "If you're willing to leave this forsaken city, I'll spend the night getting you to safety."

There *were* no places safe for a young runaway woman. She had thought about escaping in a different direction, but no other city was as fascinating as Dralin with its

mage's towers, shifting streets and grand parks. Sheela looked Frath in the eye and answered defiantly. "I know that I'll likely die, end up a prostitute on the streets or maybe even become one of the Deformed, but I don't care."

Frath nodded slowly and let her take his arm again as they continued walking. "You're not going to meet that fate if I have anything to say about it," he vowed quietly.

"Why are you helping me?" Sheela asked suddenly. "Out of all the girls who walk past you every day, why me?"

He didn't answer right away. "Well . . . I don't know. I saw you look at me before Tobe intercepted you. Then you stood up to him and held your chin high. There's a fire in you that most don't have and I don't want to see it snuffed out by the evil in this city."

She squeezed his arm thankfully. "You're the only person I've passed who didn't seem hard and mean. Everywhere I look, people are too busy to pay attention to me. The few that *have* noticed me have a look in their eyes that's hungry like a carnivorous fairy." She held up her right arm so he could see the scar from where one had bitten her a few years earlier. Some of the muscles in it never healed properly and she still didn't have full use of the pinky in that hand.

"Oh, that's a nasty bite. I've only seen them in the Zoo District. Scary things, carnivorous fairies," Frath agreed. "I'm glad we found each other. I'm taking you the Shining Shield Inn. The innkeeper, Albert, nearly got killed by some thugs about a year ago and I was able to help him. He owes me a favor, but I didn't do it for that reason. I helped him because he was in trouble."

"I think it's wonderful. How many thugs were there?"

"How many? . . . There were ten, but Albert's tough and can hold his own in a fight. I didn't really do much." Frath blushed in embarrassment and turned away as he answered. She got the feeling he was being modest.

"Thank you for helping me." Sheela smiled at him gratefully. He was sacrificing a favor that could have benefited him. It occurred to her to wonder what he would want in return.

As if reading her mind, he answered the unspoken question. "You're welcome. The only thing I ask is that you do a good job for him. Other than that, I don't expect anything, alright?"

She nodded. "I'm a good worker and I'll work really hard." The nodding made her a little dizzy and she leaned on his arm.

"You look pale . . . When's the last time you had food?" he asked intuitively, stopping to peer into her frail brown eyes. Sheela lowered her head, not wanting him to see how desperately she wanted something to eat. In the last two days, all she had was a half-chewed apple and some old leaves of lettuce. Frath lifted her chin. "You're lucky to be alive right now. If you want to survive, you have to take care of yourself."

He took her down a side street to the right. There was still a lot of traffic, but nothing like the highway that had been getting more and more crowded the further they went into the city. After passing a couple more streets, he turned left into a noisy, open marketplace.

"This is the East Bazaar. You can find just about anything here," Frath shouted above the drone of voices as he shifted his arm around her shoulder, drawing her close. "Don't ever come here alone because it's also a popular place for thieves and other

criminals. If anyone pulls on you, hang on to me. It's real easy for a woman to disappear even when in the company of a guardsman."

The warning sent a chill up Sheela's spine as she held onto him, trying to avoid the crush of bodies moving around them. The growing darkness was making people seem more threatening. A lamplighter used a wick at the tip of a long pole to light oil lanterns on tall posts, but the glow did little to illuminate the throngs below. Meanwhile, merchants were setting out lit candles and hanging lanterns so customers could see their wares better. There was no sign of business slowing even with the coming night.

Frath shoved through the crowd more easily than most. A few men turned to protest, but stopped when they saw how tall he was and that he was wearing a guard's uniform. Sheela felt tugging on her arm twice, but she held onto Frath for dear life and he kept her secure. He wasn't just tall; he was broad in the chest. She could feel his chain shirt underneath the tunic, but wished she could feel him instead.

"Let me have two draddlies," Frath said to a food vendor in a wooden shack. Sheela watched as the man put some meat and cheese between two pieces of bread slathered with some sort of sauce. Frath put his mouth next to her ear. "These are wonderful. It's meat, cheese and bread all together. They're popular in the country of Eddland to the north of here and have been spreading all over the world."

"That'll be four coppers," the vendor told Frath, who removed his arm from Sheela's shoulders in order to grab a pouch hidden in his tunic. Four coppers was a lot of money to Sheela who had never had any coins in her life. Frath took the coppers out and handed them to the vendor.

Sheela suddenly felt someone grab her arms and pull her away. As she tried to scream, a hand clamped over her mouth. With desperation, she caught Frath's belt, but the hands pulling her were much stronger and she couldn't hold on. Terror filled Sheela's heart and eyes as she watched Frath turn in what seemed to be slow motion.

Then time became normal. His arm shot forward, grabbed the hand over her mouth and yanked. The motion pulled her and her attacker forward. Frath sidestepped her and pulled the arm down and around, spinning its owner. He pulled it behind the man's back and up. Sheela turned just as Frath broke the man's shoulder with a sickening crunch. The darkly dressed kidnapper screamed in agony as his arm dropped limply to his side. When Frath punched him in the back of the head with a powerful fist, the scream stopped abruptly and the man collapsed to the ground.

The immediate area became silent as shocked bystanders created an open circle around them. Frath slowly turned and stared them all down. The circle grew larger as many of the people prudently chose to leave. Sheela stared at the hard face of her protector and the bared teeth that looked as though they could rend flesh. Instead of frightening her, it made her feel protected as she rushed desperately into the safety of his arms.

Frath led her back to the food vendor who quickly handed over the draddlies and even added an order of baked chips made from cornmeal. Sheela took the draddly he handed her and they walked off with his arm around her shoulder, leaving the thwarted kidnapper unconscious on the ground.

A few minutes later, he led her to a bench in a small park. Brick paths meandered through leaf strewn grassy areas. The trees were still partially resplendent with autumn colors that had been falling to the ground. More lanterns on tall poles provided light for

anyone out for a stroll at night. The last of the daylight was disappearing in the west and the snow had stopped. Two ponds had ducks that would soon be flying further south for the winter.

“The parks of Dralin have almost no crime,” Frath told her as they sat. Sheela moved as close as possible to his warmth and security without actually sitting on his lap. The feelings that were in her mind and body felt unfamiliar to her and she didn’t understand them. What she did know was that it was nice to be close to the handsome guardsman. His voice was smooth and seemed to caress her skin, which was another sensation she didn’t understand.

“You’re not eating . . .” he observed with concern. She jumped at the words and took a fast bite. The burst of flavor in her mouth overwhelmed her. It had been so long since she had eaten anything substantial that she hardly knew how to handle it. In a moment, she was chewing as rapidly as possible, trying to finish in case it might escape.

Once he was certain Sheela was going to eat, Frath continued speaking between bites of his own draddly. “I’m sorry about what happened in the bazaar. Slavers and kidnapers have been getting bolder lately and more people have been disappearing than usual. I can’t believe one would be so stupid as to try to steal you from my protection though.”

Sheela studied his handsome face, noticing unease in the set of his jaw. A thin scar ran from chin to cheek and she resisted an urge to run her fingers along it. “Are we safe here?” she asked worriedly.

“The City Guard patrols all the parks,” he told her, pointing at a unit of six guards walking between the ponds. “But even the various criminal guilds help protect the parks. They’re safe havens for almost everyone.”

“Almost?” Sheela asked around a mouthful of food. She held a hand underneath her chin to prevent any crumbs from escaping.

“The Deformed aren’t allowed in the parks. They try to sleep here, but their taint would corrupt the parks too.” Frath popped one of the chips in his mouth. They were nearly gone between the two of them.

“What exactly are the Deformed?” Sheela asked. “From what I’ve heard, magic corrupts them or something?”

“Something like that,” Frath confirmed. “What a lot of people don’t realize is that magic leaves residue after it’s cast. There are more wizards in Dralin than anywhere else in the world. There are also potion makers, priests and just about anything else to do with magic.” He frowned, his thick eyebrows lowering over sad eyes. “The residue gathers in streets and sewers. The Deformed are generally homeless people who sleep in polluted alleys. The magical waste corrupts their bodies and minds, twisting them into deformed versions of people. They’re dangerous and nobody knows what to do with them.”

“Why don’t they clean up the magical residue?” Sheela asked. Her draddly was finished and she took the last chip when Frath offered it to her.

“Because the High Council runs the city. They don’t care about the welfare of the people. Dralin is also the richest and most powerful city in the world and they buy off or kill anyone who complains too loudly.” The set of his jaw showed anger at the careless disregard for the safety of the citizens he was sworn to protect.

Sheela put a comforting hand on his thigh, enjoying the feel of his leg through his trousers. “It seems foolish. I heard that this is one of the only cities in the world without a wall surrounding it. Is that because it’s so powerful?”

Frath nodded. “That and it would be useless because the city keeps growing. By the time they finished a wall, more houses would be built outside of it. At this point, it would be impossible to defend any wall that surrounded the city anyway.”

“Oh . . . why?” Sheela asked. Her only education had been about taking care of chores on a farm. The concept of defending a city seemed awesome to her.

“It would take all of the soldiers in Altordan’s army to man it. Even then, a concentrated attack in any direction would be too hard to defend against.” Frath sounded as if he knew what he was talking about so she just nodded in agreement. He saw circles of exhaustion under her vulnerable eyes. “Let’s get you to the inn.” Frath took her hand and together they left the park.

A little less than an hour later, they were in a much quieter part of the city where the buildings were larger and older. Lanterns adorned many of the buildings in addition to the streetlights. Sheela looked in awe at the stone buildings with their tiled roofs and green lawns, wondering how many coins it would take to buy one of them.

“This part of the city is hundreds of years old,” Frath said. “A lot of wealthy merchants and some of the old noble families reside here. There’s not a lot of crime and the buildings are beautiful to look at. I like coming here.” He gestured to one on the left that had small cherub statues underneath the eaves. The windows had glass in them, unlike most houses that had window openings covered with leather, furs or wooden shutters.

“I’ve never seen anything like it,” Sheela admitted, gawking at the ornate etching in one thick wooden door. “It’s more magnificent than I imagined.” An armed guard sitting at the bottom of a stone railing nodded to Frath, acknowledging the presence of a city guardsman. Sheela had noticed that many of the buildings in this part of the city had guards.

“Here we are.” Frath pointed to a large, four-level building just past the next street. The front of it took up the entire block and she could see a tall stone wall extended along the side street for a long distance. The inns along the highway had been more massive, but nowhere near as elegant. Next to the main walkway to the entrance was a large stone sign with a picture of a shining shield and letters that Sheela didn’t understand because she had never learned to read.

Frath led her up the stone steps to a landing with four marble columns. Two sharply uniformed guards appeared very capable to Sheela’s uneducated eye. At the door was a finely dressed man in colorful red leggings that matched the color of the guards’ tabards. He also wore a lacy white shirt and a long red jacket.

The butler gave a sharp nod to Frath, but took in Sheela’s poor dress and dirty appearance with disdain. Frath spoke to him. “I’d like to speak to Albert, please. He’ll see me.” The man didn’t look happy, but he led them inside.

The butler had them wait in a corner just inside the door while Albert finished talking to a customer. Sheela looked around the common room in amazement. It was clean and warm, with wooden walls painted mellow green. Tapestries of magnificent battle scenes covered most of the walls.

The Shining Shield Inn catered to knights visiting Dralin as well as other nobles. A few of the men were dressed in their armor, all polished and well cared for. Others wore elegant clothing unlike anything Sheela had ever seen or even imagined. Most wore fine swords on their belts. Sitting with the men were squires and servants that helped the inn staff to take care of the knights. Noble ladies were at many of the tables, drinking wine and holding dignified conversations.

“Hello, Frath. It’s good to see you.” Albert was a burly man built like a tree. Frath had told her that he was a former knight who lost his sword arm in battle. Upon seeing Sheela, Albert frowned in disapproval. “Why have you brought this vagabond into my establishment?”

“Hello, Albert. This is Sheela and she just arrived in Dralin. I heard that you need a new girl to clean rooms and help out in the kitchen.” Frath spoke quickly with determination. He kept a hand on Sheela’s back for moral support. “I see a lot of people pass by every day and their faces all blur together. I’d like to help a lot of them, but there’s not much a simple guard like me can do.”

“You’re not a simple guard, Frath. You’re a good man with the heart of a knight.” Albert put his lone hand on Frath’s arm in a gesture of respect. Then he looked Sheela up and down. “She’s small and terribly skinny, but I can see spirit in the way she stands straight and looks me in the eye. We’ll have to get her something decent to wear.” He motioned for a pretty, blonde woman, who had just finished delivering food to a table, to come over. “Tonya, this is Sheela. Try to find something for her to wear, get her some food and put her in the room in corner of the basement. She’s small enough to fit in it.”

Frath let out a barely perceptible sigh of relief. “Thank you, Albert. May I come to visit her on occasion?” His arm moved back over her shoulders as though he suddenly didn’t want to let go.

Albert raised an eyebrow, but nodded without saying anything. One of the customers called and he left to take care of him, giving Frath one more clap on the arm. With an encouraging smile, Tonya held out a hand and wiggled her fingers for Sheela to go with her. Frath smiled encouragingly and gave Sheela a giant hug, which she returned fiercely. As Tonya led her to the basement stairs in the back of the common room, she looked over her shoulder. Frath was watching her with a smile on his face. She smiled back happily as she walked down the steps.

[Chapter 2](#)

The next two weeks passed quickly. Sheela truly was a hard worker and did an excellent job. Albert didn’t manage the staff directly, having managers in charge of different aspects of the inn to do that for him. His wife, Purla, efficiently ran the kitchen and oversaw the hotel staff, tolerating no foolishness.

The food served to Sheela and the other servants was basic, but well made. It was the best she had eaten in her life and there was always enough for everyone. At first she made a couple of mistakes in doing her job, but Purla and some of the others taught her how to do things correctly, for which she was grateful.

Frath came to visit three times in those two weeks, but she was always too busy to spend more than a few minutes with him. On the first visit, they spent time just holding hands and gazing into each other’s eyes. The next two times they held each other tightly

as though the world might rip them away from each other. Frath would always ask if she was alright and she would happily tell him she was doing wonderfully, which pleased and relieved him all at once.

Purla had finally given her time to spend with Frath on his day off. Sheela waited for him on a small ironbound wooden bench in an expansive garden behind the inn. Brick-paved paths meandered around numerous fruit trees and well-manicured flowerbeds. It was a nice place where she spent what little free time she had. Albert allowed servants to use the garden as long as they didn't bother the guests and gave up seats when asked. The weather had been nice the last few days and everything was dry. The sun was warm enough to keep away the chill of a light morning breeze that rustled through the remaining multicolored leaves in an attempt to shake them off the trees. The aroma of flowers drifted underneath her nose and she inhaled deeply while brushing honey-brown hair out of her eyes each time a gust mused it.

Purla had given her two copper pieces for her work. Normally, she would make seven copper pieces a week, a decent wage that included room and board. However, most of that had gone toward purchasing three dresses, a pair of shoes and basic personal supplies. Sheela stared at the coppers in her hand, not sure what to spend them on or even how to use money.

"Congratulations on your first payday," Frath said softly from behind, startling her. She dropped the coins and scurried to pick them up. Frath bent over to grab one and handed it to her as they both stood straight. "I'm sorry I startled you," he apologized sincerely. His deep voice wrapped around her, making her feel safe and foolishly happy.

"It's alright," she assured him with a cheerful smile. Looking back at the coins, she said, "I'm not sure what to do with them. I've never had money before."

"Keep them in your purse," he told her, pointing at the small leather pouch on her belt. "Then put it between your breasts, otherwise a cutpurse will easily take it from you." Upon seeing Sheela blush at the mention of her breasts, Frath apologized. "I'm not doing well today, am I? You're so innocent and this city makes me rough. I don't deserve you."

Sheela threw her arms around his waist in desperation. "Don't say that! I don't want you to leave me." For all she had remained strong throughout everything in her life, he was the only person who had ever shown her compassion. It had been possible to hold her chin up when she didn't have someone who cared. Now that she had tasted that sensation, there was no way she could survive its loss.

He gripped her tightly and kissed the top of her head. Her hair was clean from the twice-weekly baths she was required to take and she liked how soft it could be. The feel of him wrapped around her and the warmth of his breath comforted her. He breathed deeply and said, "You smell of raspberries. I could breathe your scent all day and be content."

Sheela laughed as she separated from him a little, putting her hands on his chest. "Tonya put raspberry oil in my bath this morning after I got in. She said it would make me smell nice for our date today." Blood drained from her face as she realized that she had called their day a date. "That was what Tonya called it . . ."

Frath tipped her head up by putting a finger under her chin. He did it every time he wanted to make sure she heard his words. Sheela was certain he liked looking into her eyes as much as she liked looking into his. At the same time, she wondered if he knew

how much she willingly surrendered to him every time he did. "It would please me greatly if you would do me the honor of accompanying me on a date this fine day," he requested formally.

She curtsied as she had seen some of the ladies do for their knights. It wasn't as elegant, but she thought she did a decent job. "I would love to go on a date with you, my brave champion."

When Frath put a hand behind her head and kissed her firmly, she froze. A thousand feelings burst into her mind and through her body all at once. Many of them were extremely unpleasant and brought terror to the forefront of her thoughts. Frath pulled back and studied her for a moment. His face paled at the sight of her shock. "I'm so sorry, Sheela. That was inappropriate and I should have asked first."

Sheela didn't know what to say so she burst into tears and seized his waist again, clinging to him for dear life. He held her and they stood there for a few minutes until she could think again. He had a handkerchief for her to wipe her eyes and nose when she took a step back.

"I'm sorry. Please don't leave me," she begged pitifully.

He gently took her arms and knelt so he could look up at her. "I won't leave you. You have nothing to be sorry for. I was too bold."

She shook her head fiercely. "No. You weren't. I liked the kiss and want to try again sometime. I like you . . . I love you." Her gut clenched as she said the last, hoping he wouldn't think her the fool.

"I love you too, Sheela," he responded immediately. "I have since that first day you arrived. It seems foolish to fall in love so fast, but it's how I feel." They embraced again, both desperate to cling to love and hope in a city filled with despair.

"Are you two actually going anywhere today or are you just going to stand there trying to see who can squeeze hardest?" Purla asked from nearby. They jumped and looked guiltily at the woman who was taking freshly washed and folded sheets back to the inn. Purla was the sort of person who worked just as hard as her staff.

Sheela quickly apologized. "I'm sorry, Purla. We'll go right away."

The matronly woman laughed lightly. A life of smiling was beginning to add pleasant wrinkles on her face. Life and vigor filled her in spite of the grey taking over her brown hair. The innkeeper's wife truly cared for the women who worked for her, a thing that had surprised Sheela, especially in such a dark city. "I'm just teasing. You two can stand there like trees if you wish, but it's a beautiful day and you should enjoy yourselves." With that, she briskly went back to her task.

"Will you keep this for me?" Sheela asked, holding out the pouch still in her hand.

"Of course," he agreed, taking it and putting it in an inside pocket of his tunic. Even on a day off, he wore the uniform of the City Guard, sturdy black pants sewn with brown thread and a brown tunic with black seams and buttons. His wavy black hair matched the clothes, but the blue of his eyes stood out, making for a striking effect.

As they walked toward the back gate she asked, "Do you ever wear anything other than your uniform?"

He shook his head. "No. Regulations require guards to wear the uniform at all times. Luckily, we're supplied four, plus the chain shirt. There's a dress uniform for formal events. Pants and tunics are washed for us, but we have to care for our own armor and swords."

The guard at the gate let them through and they walked into a small alley between the inn grounds and the stable area that took up another two blocks. Many of the knights had fine horses and Albert only employed the best stable hands.

Frath continued explaining as they turned onto a side street. "It's a high crime to kill a member of the City Guard. When it happens, every member of the Guard is charged with finding the offender and bringing him to justice." He tugged on his tunic. "Wearing these colors keeps me safe. Only the most insane fool would dare to attack me. It should help keep you safe, too, when you're with me. I reported the incident where someone tried to grab you at the bazaar two weeks ago and it upset my sergeant so much he said a few swear words even *I* didn't understand." Frath chuckled and shook his head.

Sheela had been trying to forget that, but had woken up with nightmares a couple of times, a fact she didn't mention to him. "Thank you for saving me that night . . . for everything you've done."

"You're welcome," he replied with a gigantic smile. "I can't stop thinking about you, honestly, and I'm so glad you came to Dralin. I'd been feeling down about things and now I'm walking on a cloud." Frath did a little skip which shocked a passerby and caused Sheela to laugh pleasantly.

Workers and servants filled the streets, going about their business. A few merchants and nobles could be found in the crowd, in addition to many young entrepreneurs and business people eagerly looking to advance their position in life. Frath led Sheela at a leisurely pace, matching his steps to hers. He was nearly a foot taller; she liked his height because it made her feel safe. She held onto his arm, alternately smiling at him and then looking around at the people and buildings. "What are we going to do?" Sheela asked eventually.

"I was going to take you to Carnival to see some of the shows. They have jugglers, musicians, actors and all sorts of disreputable characters," he told her with a wink. "I think you'll like it and it's not all that dangerous since the City Guard patrols it heavily. It's the only year-round carnival in the world and people from everywhere are attracted to it, so it wouldn't do to have it overrun with crime like the rest of the city." Frath shook his head at the last part and sighed heavily as though it was a great weight on his shoulders.

"The crime in the city bothers you; is that why you joined the Guard?" Sheela asked intuitively.

"Yeah. I saw a lot of things while growing up here and didn't like any of it. It would have been easy for me to fall into a life of crime, real easy. I even got into some trouble as a kid, but I was taken into the Guard's Program for Criminal Youth, which gives children who get in trouble with the law a taste of what the City Guard is like."

"What trouble did you get into?"

Frath stopped suddenly, surprised by the question. They were on the sidewalk near a park where birds sang cheerfully and squirrels scampered after each other. When she stood watching him, he dodged her eyes and glanced at his feet instead. "I . . ."

"You don't have to tell me," Sheela reassured him quickly. "It's none of my business."

"Yes, I do." Frath looked her in the eyes. "I told you, I'm in love with you. You said the same to me. It's important you know."

"Alright," Sheela encouraged, afraid of what he had to say.

Hair blew across her face and Frath brushed it aside. "I killed a man when I was twelve," he confessed, the words coming from his mouth as though weighted with lead. Sheela squeezed his arm supportively in spite of the cold shock that flowed through her body. He explained, "I lived in an orphanage with a lot of other kids and the man was a city official. He . . . hurt . . . a girl there, one of my friends . . ."

Sheela gave his arm an even tighter squeeze. "Go on."

"I stabbed him with a rusty sword some of the other orphans and I had hidden away. He died quickly. I was taken to court and the judge gave me the option of entering the Guard's program or going to jail, where I most likely would have died." The severe look on his face let her know the gravity of the matter. "I entered the program and loved it. Not only that, I did well and was invited to advance into further training. I stayed when I realized I could make a difference, even a small one."

"You've made a difference in my life," Sheela told him urgently, wanting to reassure him after he opened his heart to her. "I didn't know what it was like to have someone protect me or tell me nice things."

"Sheela, I . . . I murdered a man. If you want nothing to do with me, I wouldn't blame you . . ." Frath said as though trying to convince her that he wasn't worth her time. It was clear the incident had taken a deep toll on his spirit.

Nerves threatened to tie her tongue into knots. Here he was telling her about something that had affected him greatly and he expected condemnation. She lifted a tender hand to the side of his cheek. "I have no right to judge you. It sounds to me as though you tried to help a friend, but I wasn't there. I know the man you are *now*, at least I know how you've treated me." She moved closer to him, requiring the feel of the arms he wrapped around her in an unconscious gesture of need. "I believe you're a good man: compassionate, warm and you care for people. Those are good qualities in my eyes."

He pulled her tighter and kissed her again for an instant before remembering her previous reaction. Sheela didn't return the kiss but didn't pull away, only looking at him vulnerably. He kissed her forehead gently before offering his arm again. She took it willingly and they walked in silence awhile.

The old stately manors gave way to a mixture of stone and wooden buildings that didn't match at all. It was as though different architects had a contest to see who could be the most unique. None of it was anything like the poor farm where Sheela had grown up.

The people were just as varied as the buildings. There was the occasional merchant, peasant, worker or older person sitting on steps or talking to each out of upper level windows. Other people bustled about and Sheela had no idea who they might be or what business they might have. Frath waved a hand at the eclectic mix. "This is the Mosh District. It was named after a wizard who saved the city from a horde of ravenous defbats centuries ago."

"That sounds terrible. One of those took our cow a few years ago," Sheela told him with a shudder. "I don't understand how they fly with wings like webs and such an oversized head. The sickly brown color of their skin made me sick. I was terrified when I saw it."

"I've never seen one myself. They don't come into the city. That one time was unusual," Frath admitted. "Anyway, a lot of odd people live in the Mosh District. Many of the performers from Carnival have homes here and there's always a party somewhere."

“It sounds like a lot of fun.” Sheela listened to the murmur of people talking and the occasional shouts and laughter of children playing. There was so much noise in the city as opposed to the oppressive silence of the countryside where she grew up. At times, it had seemed like even the birds weren’t thrilled about blessing the farm with their songs. Sheela didn’t see the look of worry Frath gave her when her smile turned down at the memories.

She shook off the gloom and took a deep breath. In the district where the Shining Shield Inn was, men and ladies wore perfumes, the gutters were kept mostly clean, and smells were mostly gentle. In the Mosh District, odors became stronger, people wore twice as much perfume in place of taking baths and the streets weren’t filthy, but they weren’t clean either. Most of the people seemed to be happy and friendly though, even tipping their hats or nodding in greeting to the two of them on occasion. Frath would always nod back seriously while Sheela smiled and even waved a little bit. It felt good to smile, but odd at the same time. She worried that someone might catch her doing it and tell her she was being insolent.

Noise grew louder when they neared Carnival while the smell of a myriad of food wafted under their noses, drawing them forward. One moment they were walking between buildings and the next, brightly colored tents and banners ruffled in the light breeze.

A garishly dressed performer walked by them on his hands while juggling three multicolored balls with his feet. Sheela turned and gawked at him as he traveled into the Mosh District they had just come from. He somersaulted to his feet and caught all three balls before walking away. She turned to Frath with a wide grin on her face. “Did you see that?” He was watching her reaction joyfully, causing her to blush in embarrassment.

“There are all sorts of performers like that who perform tricks for a copper or two,” he explained.

“Oh, should I give him a copper?” she asked in alarm, looking back for the figure that had disappeared in a crowd.

“No. Don’t you dare spend your coin right now,” Frath admonished. “Keep it for something you really want. Most performers know who can afford a coin or two and often enjoy performing more for those who don’t have a lot. It’s not always like that, but for now you keep what you have.”

“Alright,” Sheela agreed readily, glad she didn’t have to give away the coins. They passed more performers who did their acts on small wooden stages placed at random intervals. Whenever Sheela found one that was particularly fascinating, they would stop so she could watch. Frath seemed to be enjoying himself as much as she was.

Vendors sold all sorts of wares in canvas booths. Sweet treats and specialty foods were common items for sale. Frath bought her a sticky bun and a vegetable shish kabob, both of which she thoroughly enjoyed. Many hawkers sold jewelry, perfumes and incense or outlandish clothing. They shouted about their wares from in front of their tents unless they already had customers. Frath steered her away from some of the more aggressive salespeople who tried to grab her arm to convince her to try a nice skin cream or to get her ears pierced.

They came to a small theatre dug into the ground in a half bowl shape with forty rows of gradually descending, curved benches. “Here we are. It’s crowded, but I think I

see some seats.” He pointed to the right hand side of the bowl and led her in that direction.

A couple of men glared at Frath when he wanted to sit about halfway down into the theatre. He took the hint and moved on. At Sheela’s questioning look he shrugged. “Not everyone likes the Guard. I’m not going to spend our date creating conflict. I think there’s a better seat anyway.” He pointed at a clear space in the tenth row that was closer to the middle.

The people sitting on the bench moved their legs so they could get through and a moment later, the two of them were sitting in excellent seats with a clear view of the stage. A brightly dressed woman with multiple piercings and tattoos, who sat on Sheela’s left, nodded politely and went back to talking to her friends.

Frath positioned his sword so it was comfortably at his waist, but he could still get to it. Not thinking, Sheela reached out and touched a small design on the crossbar. The steel felt cold against her fingers and light rippled through the design. She jerked her finger back, looking guiltily at Frath.

The expression on his face was unreadable. He reached down and touched the design, causing the light to ripple again. “It’s the crest of the City Guard, a hawk holding a sword in one claw and a wand in the other. All swords carried by the Guard have a touch of magic. Dralin has more wizards and magical items than anywhere in the world, so it’s a necessity.”

“It sounds so dangerous.” She wanted to touch it again, but realized it would be inappropriate. “I think you must be very dangerous, too, to be in the Guard, no?”

“Yes, I am . . . *very* dangerous,” he admitted with downcast eyes. Then he looked up. “I promise I’m not dangerous to you. I’ll protect you with my life.”

Sheela returned the gaze intently. “I know. I’m not afraid of you. In fact, you make me feel safer than I’ve ever felt in my life.”

“Ladies, gentleman, women of ill repute and rogues from dark alleys. We welcome you all to the Gilded Lilly Theatre!” The audience hushed as a foppish actor with an enormous hat and booming voice announced the start of the show.

“May I put my arm around you?” Frath whispered in her ear. Sheela nodded and snuggled close to him. The feel of his thigh and armored side sent a thrill through her. She idly noticed that his leg was more than twice as thick as hers before paying attention to the actor again.

“Today we have a most wonderful show for you. Originally we were going to perform a terrible show, but decided against it at the last moment!” His words drew laughter from the crowd and Sheela joined in as well. Frath’s rumbling chuckle fell pleasantly on her ears and she could feel it through his chest too.

Leaning down to her, he said. “Some of the humor is bawdy. I didn’t think of that before . . .”

“It’s alright,” she assured him, although she didn’t have any idea how she would react to it. The thought of watching something bawdy sent a thrill through her veins.

Sheela blushed numerous times throughout the show and laughed loudly even more often. A couple of times, Frath told her they could go if she was uncomfortable, but she just told him to hush so she could listen. A little over an hour later, the show was done and Sheela had a large grin on her face while her cheeks ached from laughter and were heated from blushing.

They spent the rest of the day strolling around Carnival, watching various performers and snacking on treats that Frath bought for her. Sheela was thankful that she didn't eat a lot so he wouldn't spend too much money, not knowing how much he could afford. As the sun lowered to the tops of the buildings in the west, Frath suggested they head back, not wanting to have her out at night when Carnival became more dangerous along with the rest of the city.

Before they reached the Mosh District, Frath drew her into one of the stalls selling jewelry. It wasn't expensive, but not cheap costume jewelry either. "How much for the silver feather chain?" he asked the skinny vendor, pointing at a sturdy but feminine chain with a small feather dipped in silver.

"That's a bargain at eight silver pieces," the man replied. He was so skinny that Sheela thought he might turn into a skeleton if he didn't eat soon. She gasped at the mention of the price, thinking how amazed she was at having two simple coppers, each worth only a tenth of a silver piece.

"Oh," Frath replied with the enthusiasm gone from his voice. He looked guiltily at Sheela, and then back at the necklace.

Both shock and joy jolted her heart as she realized he wanted to buy it for her, followed by panic that he might actually do so. "Frath, no . . ." she told him, putting a hand on his chest. "You've given me the most wonderful day of my life. If you wasted that much money on me, the day would be ruined by guilt."

"Here now, you're a pretty girl and it's not a waste!" the vendor exclaimed in concern at the thought of losing a sale. His voice rose an octave. "I'll lower the price to six silver, a bargain, but just for you!"

Sheela ignored him. "No, Frath. Please. I am so happy just to be with you."

"Five silver, that's my final offer!" the vendor bargained desperately.

"You made the day worth living," Frath told her. "I've enjoyed this day more than any other in my life too. Someday I'll buy you jewelry worthy of your beautiful neck." He offered his arm to Sheela again and they continued on their way as the vendor followed them out of the stall, insisting they take the necklace for four silver.

They went through the gate into the garden, back to the spot where they had started that morning. Frath held her hands and looked into her eyes. The emotion in them was deep and filled with meaning that had no words. Sheela understood what those eyes communicated because her own were telling him similar things.

"I'm scared . . . but you can kiss me now . . ." Sheela whispered.

Frath didn't move right away, causing her to wonder if he would or not. She wasn't sure which she hoped for more. Then he put his right hand on her cheek and his left around her waist. When his lips lightly touched hers, lightning shot through every nerve in her body.

It was a short kiss that seemed to last an eternity at the same time. When it ended, he placed his forehead against hers for a few moments while she digested the emotions she was feeling. Once again, Sheela froze during the kiss, but this time she had been ready and enjoyed it. Wanting to experience more, she tilted her head up to him.

He responded by kissing lightly again. This time she returned the kiss tentatively and liked it even more. After another, they sat on a nearby bench and talked about the day at Carnival. One of the servants came out and lit scattered lanterns in the garden as daylight faded the rest of the way. The two of them continued to talk, interspersing conversation with the occasional kiss. Sheela became more and more comfortable with it.

After Purla walked by the third time and coughed in their direction, they stood reluctantly. “Can I visit you again?” Frath asked hopefully.

“Yes, I get every third day off like today,” Sheela responded eagerly. “And you can visit for a few minutes any other time. Purla says you’re a good man or else she wouldn’t allow it.”

“Then I’ll be back next third day and maybe a few times before then for a kiss . . . If that’s not too bold.”

She shook her head vigorously. “I like kissing now.” To prove her point, she gave him another. Then he walked down the path to the gate, turning and looking back a few times with a foolish grin on his face. “Be careful!” she called out to him, suddenly nervous about him going out into the treacherous city alone at night.

When Purla put her arm around Sheela’s shoulders, she jumped. “He’ll be alright. I’m guessing the two of you had a good time today?” the matronly woman asked in her kindly voice. Sheela’s only response was to nod and grin like a fool. “I thought as much. Will he be visiting again next week?”

“Yes, on the third day. Can I have it off again?” Sheela asked hopefully.

“Of course. You let me know if his day off changes and we’ll see what we can do,” Purla reassured her, leading her back to the inn. “You get some rest now if you can. I don’t want you making mistakes because you’re all doe-eyed,” she admonished good-naturedly.

“Yes, Purla,” Sheela agreed seriously. She picked up her favorite cat, Smokey, who was looking for someone to let him through the door. Before going inside, Sheela took one last look over her shoulder, still worried about Frath’s safety.

Chapter 3

Small snowflakes drifted through the crisp morning air, leaving a dusting of snow covering the ground, but it wasn’t enough to disturb anyone. Winter was knocking, paying no heed to the few remaining faded leaves that clung stubbornly to branches and the dim glow of the sunrise peeked through a break in the cloud cover.

Two weeks had passed since Frath had taken Sheela to Carnival. He smiled happily at the memory of that day in addition to the three evenings he had been able to make it back for a few more kisses before Purla would chase him off. He truly couldn’t stop thinking about Sheela and had even taken extra lumps in drills due to lack of focus. Sheela made him happy and Frath had never been truly happy before.

He knocked on the back gate to the garden. The guard let him in and gave him a friendly smack on the shoulder. Then Frath eagerly went to the small area where Sheela would be waiting for him. She immediately ran into his arms and they held each other for a moment.

“What are we doing today?” The excitement of adventure made her brown eyes sparkle. He loved how much life and hope was in them.

Frath ran fingers lovingly through her soft hair. “Well, that depends,” he replied mysteriously, more focused on the raspberry scent emanating from the strands.

Sheela’s mouth twisted in curiosity, but she leaned into the hand, obviously enjoying his touch. “Oh? . . .”

“There are three places I want to take you, but two of them are dangerous even with me protecting you,” he told her, the look on his face suddenly grave.

She looked up at him trustingly. “Yes.”

Frath studied her for a moment, his eyes soaking in every detail of her beautiful face and petite nose. He briefly wondered why someone so wonderful would like him. “You don’t want to know the details?”

“As long as I get to be with you, I don’t care.” A thoughtful look crossed her face, and then she grinned. “Actually, I like the idea of doing something dangerous. I can feel the blood racing through my veins already.”

He debated for a moment before speaking grimly. “Things could go badly and we could die or be hurt terribly. I’ll defend you with my very life . . . and by that, I mean that I may actually lose my life. If that happens, bad things will happen to you, too . . .” He left the words hanging in the air.

Sheela nodded slowly, taking his words and tone very seriously. “I would rather be in danger with you than safe without you.”

Frath held her close, never wanting to let go. He had thought long and hard about the places they were going. The first had a specific type of danger, but they should be safe as long as they didn’t do anything stupid. The second place was safe, but the third was a deadly, murky place people weren’t supposed to go. He had a need to take her so perhaps she would understand things about his past, even if it meant she wouldn’t love him anymore. “The first place we’re going to is Wraith Park near the center of the city. Have you heard of it?”

Sheela’s eyes widened. “Only a little bit. It’s supposed to be the source of all magic in the world? . . .”

Frath held his arm out for her. She took it instantly and they walked to the gate while he explained. “It’s not the source of all magic, but the lake in the middle has a great deal of power and creates unusual effects.” They smiled at the guard as he held the gate open.

“That’s what you mean by it being dangerous. I heard people get turned into ghosts or something if they drink from it.” Sheela’s face scrunched up as she tried to remember the tales.

“Actually, that part is true,” Frath admitted. They turned on a different street that headed westward toward the center of the city. “The lake has a path along it with a wall that’s magically warded to keep anyone out. There are sitting areas everywhere, but it’s not wise to go there very often. The magic warps everything nearby, which is part of the attraction and the danger.”

“Is that where the Deformed come from?” Sheela asked, her face etched with concern. He liked watching the different expressions that crossed her pretty features.

“No. People warped by the forces of Wraith Lake are different. They’re called Ghost-Touched.” He guided her to the other side of the street they were on to avoid some

of the heavier crowds that were moving about their day's work. "Not too many get that way. Special members of the guard watch for that and keep it from happening, even if it means taking the people out of the city to a monastery."

Sheela gave a little shiver and moved closer, which pleased him to no end. The snow still fell lightly and rested atop her hair like a halo. He liked snow when it wasn't blowing or black from soot in the air. The sky had been mostly clean the past couple of weeks though. "So it's dangerous, but we should be alright if we don't drink the water or stay too long?" Sheela asked.

"Right," Frath confirmed. He pointed to the street ahead where towers of various heights started to appear above the rooftops. We're about to enter the Tower District. Everything here is crazy so don't let go of me."

"I wouldn't dream of it," she replied shyly. Looking ahead, she noticed the air starting to become hazy, as though a fog was creeping in. "I know the Tower District is where most of the wizards live, but do the streets really move?"

"There are a few beliefs about that, but only the most powerful wizards and the Grand Assembly know for certain," Frath said as they crossed into the district. Much like Carnival had been a sudden change, entering the Tower District was an abrupt experience. It felt like the entire world shifted to the left just a tiny bit. "The streets are always in different locations, making it hard to find anything. The wizards like it that way and cast numerous illusions to add to the effect."

"Will we get lost?" Sheela asked, suddenly anxious.

"No. Specific runes are sewn into every guard's uniform to protect against illusion and some basic magics. In addition, we spend a year training in the Tower District, learning how to navigate our way through it." He led her back across the street, avoiding a red robed man juggling yellow balls of lightning. A couple dropped, their little bolts running along the cracks of the cobbled street. Each time it happened, a new one would materialize to replace it. The man's eyes were glowing green and he was laughing like a bird whistles.

"What's wrong with him?" Sheela asked, unable to turn her gaze.

"I don't know, nor do I care at the moment. It's my day off." Frath winked at her. "Even if I were on duty, I wouldn't want to know."

She looked back at the mad-eyed wizard and decided she didn't want to know either. Frath turned down a street heading south and became quiet for a few minutes while watching people around them for any sign of danger. There were a lot of wizards on the streets in addition to a few common workers and other people of various professions.

The snow gave every indication it was going to spend the day with them, but Frath didn't mind too much. He liked snow better than the unbearably hot summer days when the city seemed to melt. While walking, he carefully scanned for pollution. An extraordinary amount of magic was wielded in Dralin, but nowhere more than the Tower District. They were on a main street that was kept clean unlike many of the smaller streets in the district with their puddles of corrupted magic. He definitely didn't want to expose Sheela to that.

Every tower was different. All were at least three levels high while the tops of many disappeared into the sky. "How do the towers stay up? They're so tall it looks like they could tip over any minute, especially the ones that are leaning," Sheela asked, pointing at

an especially precarious one that tilted over the street. She covered her head instinctively as they walked under it.

“Some of it is illusion, some is extraordinary craftsmanship and most is magical enhancements,” Frath answered. “Most of these buildings have been here for centuries. Each wizard that moves in finds it necessary to add more and the only way is to go up.” He pointed to a tower that disappeared into the low clouds above them. Snow fell gently upon his face. They stopped a moment and stared at the white flakes drifting down between the looming towers. Sheela giggled as they landed on her long eyelashes.

She hugged him happily and they continued. Frath told her more details of the district. “Wraith Lake, Dralin Academy, and the Estate of the Grand Assembly surround and hide the City Center. Around all of it in a giant circle is the Tower District. It’s as close as wizards can get to the City Center unless they’re in the Academy or work for the Assembly.”

“What is the City Center? I haven’t heard of it,” Sheela asked out of curiosity. Her arm wrapped around his waist as they walked while his was around her shoulders. It felt good having her so close.

“I don’t know. No one really does except members of the Assembly and some of the heads of the academy. It’s one of the most closely guarded secrets in the world. Look out!” he said in alarm, holding her back. A misshapen figure in a robe lurched out of an alley in front of them. It looked disoriented as it crossed the street and headed for the alley on the other side. People on the street backed away from it in dread.

Frath held Sheela tightly when she gasped in fear. The figure had once been a man, probably a wizard judging from the tattered robe it wore. The left side of its face looked like melted wax and the eye was missing. The right eye had a crazed look. Sickly green light emanated dimly from the mouth and nose.

“That’s one of the Deformed,” Frath told her very quietly. “Stay away from them. If they bite you, or if their blood gets into your eyes, ears, mouth or any open cut, you could catch some of the infection. Once a person is infected, they start craving more of the raw pollution. I’ve seen Deformed on their hands and knees eating it out of gutters.” The tone of his voice was ominous as he remembered some of the things he had seen.

When Sheela buried her face into his chest and sobbed, he realized he was being unintentionally scary. Frath held her. “I’m sorry. It wasn’t my intention to frighten you. I’ve just seen some bad things.”

She quickly wiped her eyes and shook her head. “No, it’s alright. I just didn’t realize it would be as bad as everyone said. Looking at that man made me sick and I hated feeling like that,” she admitted guiltily.

“Don’t be ashamed. Deformed are hard to look at even for seasoned guardsmen,” Frath said earnestly. “We’re not allowed to do anything about them by order of the High Council. I don’t like killing people, but sometimes I wish we could put them out of whatever misery they must be in.”

Sheela stared at the alley the Deformed had entered and nodded slowly, her face ashen. It was obvious the incident had upset her terribly. “If you don’t want to go on, I’ll understand . . .” Frath told her, concerned for her well-being.

“I *do* want to go on,” she replied quickly. “Just . . . stay close?”

“Yes, of course.” He guided her on, moving quickly past the alley. Frath went back to the previous conversation to get her mind off it. “Anyway, nobody really knows how big the Tower District is for certain or how many wizards live here.”

“Does anyone know how many Deformed there are?” Sheela asked solemnly. She hadn’t let the experience escape her mind.

“No. Every once in a while, someone orders a census done of them in addition to a census of all the people in Dralin. It’s impossible to count everyone for a lot of reasons.”

“Such as?” Sheela asked, looking fearfully down another alley while hoping nothing would come out. The snow had lessened to a few light flakes and the streets they were traveling had quite a bit of foot traffic. Occasionally, a carriage would go by or a peddler with a handcart full of exotic goods to sell to some crazy wizard.

“Well, the wizards don’t like to be counted, many of the commoners are transient, a lot of the people are homeless and it’s hard to pin them down, but worst of all there’s a lot of crime in the city and rogues don’t like government officials counting them.” Frath grinned and winked at her. “The last few officials that have suggested a census be taken disappeared mysteriously and the City Guard has been discouraged from looking too hard for them.”

Sheela’s eyes widened in surprise. “That’s terrible.”

Frath hadn’t really thought about it before. “Well . . . yeah, I suppose it is. Maybe this was a bad idea. I didn’t really think about . . .”

“No!” Sheela cut him off, stopping him with a hand on his chest. “This is a wonderful idea. I want to see more of the city and everything you’re telling me is fascinating!” She closed her eyes and did a little spin. “I’ve always dreamed of being in the big dangerous city and now I’m here.” She stopped and put both hands on his chest. “And the best part is you, Frath. I feel so safe when you put your arm around me. You know so much about the city. Listening to everything you tell me and seeing everything you show me is so wonderful.” Sheela became very serious. “Thank you for taking me out. Thank you for being my friend and . . . just thank you for everything.” Once more, she wrapped her arms around his waist and pressed her cheek against his chest.

Frath ran his fingers through her hair and kissed the top of her head, closing his eyes to savor the sensation of having her close. “I love you,” he told her earnestly.

“I love you too, so very much,” she responded, looking into his eyes again. They kissed, ignoring the disapproving looks of people passing by.

A moment later, they were walking again. Frath took up the conversation once more. “So you have the City Center in the middle of Dralin. You have Wraith Lake, Dralin Academy, and the Grand Assembly Estate around that. Both the Academy and the Grand Assembly Estate are larger than most royal castles or palaces,” he said. “In a wide circle around that is the Tower District. Beyond that are the older districts like the Noble District where the Shining Shield Inn is. The Mosh District and Carnival District used to be much different, but have changed into their current forms. There are three other old districts around it too, for a total of six. Beyond that are more than I can easily name, all spreading out in every direction.”

“Dralin is the biggest city in the world, isn’t it?” Sheela asked.

“Well . . . No one’s really certain. It might be. Oimryi, the capital of Mayncal may be the same size or larger. Some say there are larger cities on other continents across the

oceans, but I don't know if it's true." He gestured ahead, to where the towers stopped and an open park took over. "Wraith Park is just ahead."

Once again, the transition between districts was abrupt. One moment, there were buildings on either side. The next there were well-maintained grassy areas cut by meandering paths. Sheela stopped shortly after they entered. It was easy to understand why. Wraith Lake had powerful magic that disrupted everything around it.

The grass was pink instead of green, not a pleasant pink, but the sort that shocks the eyes and makes the stomach turn. The leaves on the trees were odd colors as well. Even more bizarre were the shapes of the trees. No two were alike and all were twisted in different ways. One on their left was as tall as the wizard's towers nearby, but all of its branches grew downward. Another one was low to the ground with branches a hundred feet in every direction, defying gravity by not touching the ground. There was no rhyme or reason to any of it.

"The flowers are glowing," Sheela said softly, pointing at a row of luminescent blue blossoms lining the path. "Is it safe to touch them?"

"It's safe," Frath said. "Don't eat anything that grows here though. You'll likely lose your mind."

Sheela went to the flowers, squatted down next to them and ran fingers carefully along the petals of one. Frath squatted next to her and ran his hand gently up and down her back. Rather than looking at the blossoms, he stared at the curve of her spine through her burgundy dress. He couldn't believe his fortune at finding someone so wonderful.

When Frath had first seen her coming into the city, Sheela's thinness had alarmed him. At the time, he could see bones pushing against her skin through the tattered dress she had worn. Smudges of dirt had covered her delicate features and knotted her hair. In the short time Sheela had lived and worked at the Shining Shield Inn, good food had softened the curves of her bones and added a healthy color to her smooth skin.

He moved his hand to her side and enjoyed the feel of her against his palm and fingers as he ran it up and down to her hip. Frath suddenly realized that Sheela had frozen completely still. "I'm sorry," Frath said, pulling his hand away and standing.

Sheela slowly stood and turned. The look on her face was unreadable. "There's nothing to be sorry for. I like it when . . . when you touch . . ." She brushed hair back over her right ear and gently bit her lower lip. "How far away is the lake? I don't see it." She looked up the street.

Frath didn't answer right away because he was too busy staring at the curve of her jaw. When she looked back at him, he shook his head to clear it. "Umm . . . how far? It's about fifteen minutes away. This is one of the main streets to it, used for heavier traffic. I thought we might walk along the paths awhile," he told her, pointing to one that rounded the low tree.

"I'd like that," Sheela replied, neither smiling nor frowning. Her brown eyes held mystery in them and Frath was intrigued. He took a deep breath and put his arm around her shoulder again, tentatively, not certain if it was wanted. Sheela put hers back around his waist and let him guide her to the path.

They walked in silence for a bit, looking at the different flowers, trees and multihued grasses that were on the sides of the paths they strolled along. One of the trees was translucent and they were able to see through its trunk and leaves. The effect was surreal,

causing both Sheela and Frath to rub their eyes and temples. Frath knew they would get headaches if they looked at everything for too long.

Statues had been placed around the park. Originally, they were statues of important people. The Lake warped them too, although it took much longer than it did for the plants. The formerly important people became malformed clones of what they once were, each twisting in unique ways. Only two statues never deformed. Both were of individuals who had dedicated their lives to the welfare of humanity. It was said that they had been pure of heart, while every other statue had been twisted to reveal the corrupt hearts of those they had been dedicated to. After a while, only abstract sculptures and statues dotted the multihued grasses.

"It's just so . . . *weird*," Sheela finally stated. "Nothing is as it should be. It's making me a little sick, Frath." She took the opportunity to bury her face into his chest again, much to his delight.

Frath closed his eyes and soaked up the closeness. "The lake is just over there. Let's go take a look at it, and then we'll leave." She nodded and moved to his side again. They walked a little quicker, no longer stopping to stare at all the plants.

One thing Frath had always noticed when in the park is that there wasn't a single animal of any kind, not even insects. For some reason plants and trees could grow, but any attempts by government officials to introduce animals either resulted in the animals getting out as quickly as possible, or dying within a few days if trapped in the park. Frath could relate to how they felt about it. The park was unnatural and there was something about it that made him want to run away a little more each time he visited. Patrolling Wraith Park was the least favorite duty within the City Guard, even more so than some of the more violent neighborhoods or the perilous sewers.

When they reached the low wall that prevented anyone from getting too close to the lake, Sheela squeezed him tight. "I don't like it at all," she told him quickly. Frath began to realize that she was a great deal more sensitive than he was and he regretted bringing her to the park.

Wisps of white vapor drifted from the glassy surface of the perfectly still lake. It was large, at least a mile across and two miles to either side. He could barely make out the wall on the other side that protected against anyone using a looking glass to see the City Center. The edge of the water was about a thousand feet away from the wall where they stood and its shore consisted of shiny black rocks. Frath had been told that the lake was ice cold, yet the snowflakes that were coming down heavier again didn't come anywhere near it, evaporating in the air above.

"Something is wrong here . . . everything is wrong here, Frath. Can we leave? Please?" Sheela pleaded timidly. He pulled her in tight and led her away from the lake, heading in a southwardly direction. Looking back at the shadowy waters, he shivered just a little.

Frath didn't take her the way they had come, although he considered taking her back to the inn and just sitting in the garden with her for the rest of the day. "Sheela . . . maybe we shouldn't go on. Coming here was a bad idea and . . ."

She cut him off again. "No. Coming here was a wonderful idea. I've wanted to see the lake and I'm glad you're here to hold me." She gazed at him earnestly as they walked. "I can handle anything when your arm is around me. I want to do everything

you had planned no matter how dangerous or . . . weird,” she finished with a laugh, which Frath echoed.

They entered the Tower District heading south. Along the way, they saw two more of the Deformed, but each was at a distance. Sheela buried her face into Frath’s side each time as he guided her away from them. Before too long, they left the district and entered another with grand estates and well-dressed people.

“This is the Merchant District, which is southwest of the Noble District,” Frath told her. “Many officials of the treasury live here, a number of wizards and others, but mostly it’s filled with the richest and most powerful merchants in Dralin. You’ll discover a lot of people frowning at us.” He pointed at a gaggle of opulently dressed women who looked at them disapprovingly. They had three bodyguards who quietly acknowledged Frath with nods. “It’s the rule that people here have to look down on anyone who has less money than them,” he said sarcastically as they moved to the street to walk around the judgmental women.

Sheela looked up at him, not knowing if she should laugh. He shook his head and sighed. “It gets a little frustrating to be looked down upon. The City Guard spends a great deal of time and effort keeping their houses safe.”

“Aren’t there a lot of merchants in the Noble District too?” Sheela asked.

Frath nodded. “Yeah. At one point, Altordan had a king and nobles and the capital was in a different city. One of the kings decided that the Conclave of Wizards in Dralin had become too powerful, so he sent the military to destroy them. That king and anyone loyal to him died quickly.” Frath moved her back onto the sidewalk out of the way of a carriage. “The Conclave of Wizards took over the military and created the High Council to run the city and the Grand Assembly to run the kingdom. The nobles were allowed to continue owning land and hold power over that land, but only if they were loyal to the Assembly. Now it’s just not all that popular or impressive to be a noble in Altordan, so merchants and wizards have taken over much of the Noble District.”

“You said the High Council runs the city and the Grand Assembly runs the kingdom. I was under the impression that the High Council was more powerful than the Grand Assembly,” Sheela said in confusion.

“It is,” Frath confirmed. He ran his hand up and down her back before resting it on her shoulder again. He realized she had only worn a dress without a jacket or cloak and was a bit chilled. “Do you have anything warm to cover yourself with?”

She shook her head and smiled reassuringly. “No, but it’s alright. I’m used to cold winters and this dress is warm.”

“Hmm . . .” Frath frowned. “We’ll have to take care of that.” Sheela’s cheeks flushed and she looked down in shame, making him feel guilty. The day wasn’t going anything like he had planned. He wanted very much for her to be happy. “Dralin is more important and more powerful than the rest of Altordan,” Frath told her, going back to the original subject in the hopes of settling her mind.

It worked. The redness left her cheeks and she perked back up in interest. “How interesting. I love the way you tell me about everything. Thank you.” Her eyes shined with delight.

“Definitely! I’m having fun talking about it,” Frath replied happily. “Most people don’t care anything about the city, but in the Guard we have to learn a lot of history and details. It helps us do our jobs better.”

“I think you do your job wonderfully,” Sheela gushed.

“Well . . . thank you. I work hard,” Frath acknowledged, knowing she was complimenting him because she liked him.

“Did I say something wrong?” she asked, sensing she had.

“I just . . .” He stopped and took a deep breath. “I don’t always think I do a good job. There are too many people who suffer. I was able to get you a safe place to live and work, but so many girls and young men have passed by and come to terrible fates.” A tight feeling wrenched his gut.

“Frath, what’s wrong?”

He shook his head, but she gripped his arm tightly and put a hand on his cheek. Frath closed his eyes. “Last week a young woman came through wearing a bright yellow dress. She was with her parents, rustic farmers, and smiling brightly at the sights of the city.” He paused for a moment to battle the tightness in his throat. “This week I was moved to patrol in a part of the city I will never take you to,” he told her fiercely. “We found her broken body in an alley, dead and . . .”

Frath stared upward at the flakes falling from the sky, trying to lose himself in the grey of the clouds. Sheela slid her hand to the side of his neck, wrapped the other around him and pressed herself tightly to him. She said nothing, only lending the strength of her slight body to him.

Holding onto Sheela was the best feeling in the world, but at the same time, terror clenched his heart when he thought something like that could happen to her. Very few guardsmen had relationships in Dralin for very good reason. It was impossible to keep a clear head when everyone you cared about was always in danger. A part of him wished he had never met Sheela so he wouldn’t have to care, but he needed her now and had already fallen in love. That knowledge terrified him.

“Her parents were found dead last night, murdered for their few belongings and stuffed in a barrel in some warehouse. They had been killed not long after coming into town.” Frath clenched his teeth. “It hurts so much to know what happened to that young woman and to think the same could have happened to . . .” He just couldn’t say it out loud.

Sheela squeezed him with all her might. He held her tightly in return and buried his face in her hair. The young woman’s death had bothered him more than he had admitted to his unit. There were people he could talk to about things that bothered him, but he couldn’t bring himself to go to them. Being a City Guardsman in Dralin was hard physically, emotionally and spiritually. Every member was encouraged to visit priests or councilors whose job it was to talk to or just to listen to members of the Guard.

“I keep imagining if that had been you and it’s killing me inside, Sheela.” She didn’t answer with words for which he was thankful. The fact that she was there, safe with him for the moment had to be enough. Frath ran his hands up and down her back, wishing they could stay like that forever.

“Are you two going to stand there all day or you going to get a room?” a woman’s voice asked merrily from behind them. They jumped in surprise, having forgotten there was a world around them. The sights, sounds and smells of the city came rushing back. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to startle you, but you were blocking traffic.” The voice came from the other side of a waist-high wall they were next to. A female house guard wearing a red tabard over chain mail leaned on the wall. A smirk cracked her face, showing a gold

tooth that replaced a missing one. There were a couple of small scars on her cheeks and Frath could tell from her easy manner that she would be tough in a fight, not as good as him, but not to be trifled with either.

“No problem,” Frath responded in embarrassment. City Guards were supposed to be tough, not lovey-dovey. With a wave, he led Sheela away, ignoring the kissing sounds the woman made at their backs. He could see Sheela blushing bright red.

Chapter 4

They didn't say anything until reaching a large estate with a high, wrought-iron fence a few minutes later. Tall, dense bushes grew along the inside, preventing anyone from seeing past. They walked up to the gate and Frath pushed a glowing purple button alongside it. There were two large evergreen trees to either side of the gate. A squirrel scurried to the end of a branch near the button and asked in a high-pitched voice, “Yeah, watcha want?”

Sheela gasped in alarm and hid behind Frath, peeking around from his side. “Frath Jornin and company to see Lady Pallon.” The fact that a squirrel was talking didn't seem to bother him at all.

“Oh yeah, the lady is expecting you,” it replied. The squirrel chattered at the gate, which opened in response.

“Thank you,” Frath replied politely. Sheela looked in awe back and forth at the squirrel and the gate as they walked through.

The yard wasn't as well cared for as others, though it wasn't a complete mess. A large, murky pond with lilies and cattails was to the right. Sheela got the distinct impression it was grumpy about the snow that was falling. Long weeping willows bordered it and grew in other areas of the yard. Sheela had the sudden urge to explore.

The grass was knee high and turning brown in the fall air, some of it poking through the stone pavers that made up the main walkway to the large manor. The building was three levels tall and extended two hundred feet in either direction. Scattered around in small garden areas were numerous rosebushes, their buds closed in the cold air. Ivy climbed the front of the building and the stone columns that held up a long balcony extending the length of the building.

“It's spooky and exciting all at the same time,” Sheela said, looking at it in awe. They walked up the wide steps to a large wooden door carved with intricate designs of roses inlaid with red and green resins.

“Lady Pallon is a friend of mine I visit whenever I'm able. I told her about you and she insisted I bring you by,” Frath explained as he lifted the large rose-faced knocker and banged it down a few times, creating a booming sound within.

The door opened with a loud creak that shuddered through the air. An elderly woman appeared in the doorway wearing a light blue dress with excessive ruffles and white lace. Wrinkles created by decades of smiling lined her face. She stood tall and straight despite her age. Dark pink eyes, common in Dralin and much of the world, held vast intelligence and wisdom. She looked into a person rather than at them. Sheela ducked behind Frath, staring from around his arm in awe at the charismatic woman.

“Frath, how wonderful of you to visit,” Lady Pallon said in a strong, clear voice that sounded like a spoon ringing against crystal. “I see you brought your friend, Sheela isn’t it? Well come here child and show me a proper curtsy.”

Purla had taught Sheela how to curtsy because so many nobles visited the inn. She came out from behind Frath and did her absolute best.

“Well, that’s very nice. You need to hold your elbows out a bit more, but it’ll do. Come in, come in, have some lunch and tell me all about yourself.” She held the door open and gracefully gestured for them to enter. Frath put his arm out for Sheela and they walked through.

“Come into the parlor. Lunch is being made as we speak,” she informed them while walking gracefully ahead. Sheela stared at the entry in awe. The floor was russet-brown and beige marble. Balconies overlooked the entry from each wing, and a grand staircase split halfway up, going to both sides.

Lady Pallon led them through the second door on the right, which turned out to be the parlor. Paintings lined the walls of the sophisticated room with its expensive furniture and decorations. A small fire flickered in the fireplace, making the room warm and cozy. While the obvious wealth and affluence of the lady and her estate were intimidating, there was a manner about her that made Frath feel comfortable and he could sense Sheela relaxing as well.

“Here we are. Sit, sit by the fire and get warm,” she said gesturing toward a long couch with thick green cushions. “Where is your cloak, child?” Lady Pallon asked Sheela with a disapproving frown.

“I haven’t got one yet, Milady,” Sheela replied, taking the seat tentatively as though afraid she would get in trouble for sitting in the presence of nobility. Frath sat next to her.

Instead of replying to Sheela, Lady Pallon chastised Frath. “And you didn’t see fit to provide her with one?” His only reaction was to blush in shame. The lady clucked in disapproval. “We shall just have to remedy that.” She walked out of the room, all the while shaking her head and mumbling under her breath about foolish youngsters.

“Are we in trouble?” Sheela asked worriedly, holding onto him.

Frath took his sword off and set it on a nearby table so that he could sit back. “No, not at all. Lady Pallon is a wonderful woman and wants us to be safe and warm, that’s all.” As he put his arm around her shoulders again, she leaned into him and rested both hands on his thigh. The touch sent a thrill through him. He slid the hand on her shoulders down her side to her hip, ready to move it if she protested at all. Her only response was to lean harder against him and run one of her hands slowly up and down his thigh.

Neither of them said a word while they sat there concentrating on each other’s touch. “It’s nice to see young people in love,” Lady Fallon said, startling them. “No, no. Don’t let me stop you from being close,” she insisted when they separated a little. “You get as close as you like. I have your cloak my dear.” She set a folded, dark-green cloak on the arm of the couch next to Sheela who reached over and ran a hand along the smooth fabric.

“Milady, it’s too fine,” Sheela protested.

“Nonsense, it’s an old thing that was my daughter’s and hasn’t been used in years.” Lady Pallon waved off the protest casually as she sat on an elegant, cushioned chair

across from them. “You’ll take it, wear it and I’ll hear no more chirping about it otherwise.” The tone was matter-of-fact and Sheela didn’t even try to argue.

“How *is* your daughter, Milady?” Frath asked gently, knowing it was a sensitive subject.

She clasped her hands in her lap and sighed in frustration. “That girl . . .” Lady Pallon shook her head. Combs held her white hair tight, keeping it from moving with the motion. “Melody is such a mess right now. I swear I don’t know what I’m going to do with her.” Tears welled up in her eyes and one trickled down a cheek. She turned her head to the side, trying to hold them in.

Frath leaned forward in concern. “What’s happened now? Is there anything I can do?”

“No, there’s nothing any of us can do. She won’t see me anymore. Now she’s gone and gotten pregnant, but doesn’t know who the father is.” The dignified lady wiped her eyes carefully with a handkerchief she pulled out of a little purse in her lap. “She’s still doing those drugs though and I’m afraid she’s going to hurt herself and the baby.”

“I can talk to her,” Frath offered earnestly. He wanted very much to help, though he knew there was most likely nothing he could do.

“I’m sorry, Frath, but she wouldn’t give you the time of day. With you being in the City Guard, things could go very badly for you and her and I just . . .” She turned to look toward the fire again to hide more tears that threatened. Frath reached over and held her hand.

“Lunch is ready, Milady,” a red-haired woman in a servant’s dress and apron said from just inside the entrance.

“Thank you, Mary” Lady Pallon replied. She patted Frath’s hand in thanks and they all rose to follow the servant into a dining room. Frath grabbed his sword and efficiently reattached it on the way.

The savory aroma reached them even before they entered. Marvelous dishes of food waited for their pleasure at one end of a large table. Lady Pallon sat at the head while Frath took Sheela to a seat on the left side. Upon seeing that Frath’s place setting was on the opposite side, the lady winked at the servant. “Mary, our guests would like to sit together. They *are* in love after all.”

Mary smiled in quick understanding. “Oh yes, Milady. I’ll correct that right away.” She hurriedly moved the place setting so the blushing couple could be next to each other.

“Have you told your darling how you saved me, Frath?” Lady Pallon asked while Mary filled their glasses with wine. Sheela looked at hers nervously.

Frath blushed and shook his head slowly. “It’s really not that big a deal.” He didn’t like talking about actions that others considered heroic. They were things he felt needed to be done, so he did them. There was no pleasure in boasting while so many people in the city suffered.

“Of course it is. You saved my life in an amazing act of bravery for one so young as you were at that time,” she insisted, dismissing his modesty with a wave of her hand. She turned to Sheela who was tentatively sipping the wine. “He was only fourteen at the time and was in a City Guard program that helps criminal youth. Melody and I were foolishly walking without an escort after dark near the Orphan District where Frath lived. He wasn’t supposed to be out alone, especially not at night.” Frath had filled his plate with food and was focusing on it so he wouldn’t have to look Sheela in the eye.

“A group of disreputable individuals quickly surrounded Melody and I. There were six armed with wicked looking swords,” she said while cutting the lamb chops on her plate. Sheela watched carefully and tried to do the same. “No dear, like this.” Lady Pallon demonstrated the proper way to hold the fork and knife. “I’ve given up trying to get Frath to eat like a proper young man should.” Frath blushed and slowed down when he realized he had been shoving food in his mouth as quickly as possible, the normal way of eating in the guard.

“As I was saying, Melody and I were in mortal danger. Our bodyguard at the time had been sick and I thought we would be just fine going out on our own.” Sheela began eating as she listened in interest. Frath continued to look anywhere else. “Young Frath saw us in trouble and threw a rock at the leader of the men, knocking him out with an *amazing* shot to the head. Two of the others turned on him with their swords while three kept an eye on us.”

Sheela looked at Frath with new admiration. He shrugged while focusing intently on his plate. Lady Pallon continued, “I was worried for the boy against the rough swordsmen, but to my surprise he immediately disarmed one man, retrieved the sword and killed both with it. The other three took him seriously at that point, but Frath never seemed to be where they expected him to be. He tumbled and spun between the three of them and before we knew it, there were six bodies lying on the ground around us.”

“Really?” Sheela asked in awe. “I know he’s strong and brave, but that’s amazing.” Frath ignored them both and took another bite of his food.

“It was also very disturbing. Have you seen a dead body before, child?” Lady Pallon asked. Sheela paled, but didn’t answer. Frath couldn’t tell if she had or not. Lady Pallon nodded. “It’s a terrible sight and the young man was very messy about the whole thing. He had blood all over his clothes and looked quite fierce. For a moment I was just as afraid of him as I had been of the villains.” Her laughter was light and airy as she remembered the moment. Frath wished he could forget it.

“I thanked him for rescuing us and asked him what reward he would have. Do you know what he requested?” Lady Pallon asked Sheela, leaning in.

Sheela shook her head. “I have no idea. Tell me, please.”

“He only asked that we not tell the Guard.” She sat back and took a bite of her food. Sheela looked at Frath in puzzlement, but he just shrugged again. When she was finished chewing the bite, Lady Pallon leaned forward and put an elbow on the corner of the table in a very unladylike gesture. “He wasn’t allowed to get into a fight on his own and he also wasn’t supposed to be out after dark.”

“If anyone had found out, I would have been kicked out of the program and sent to jail,” Frath admitted quietly. “I just couldn’t let those men . . .”

“And I am forever grateful, my friend,” Lady Pallon said earnestly. “In any case, Melody and I brought him home to clean up and gave him a safe place to sleep. We haven’t told anyone about the incident although I don’t think he’d get in trouble for it anymore.” She looked at Frath for verification.

He shook his head. “No. I made it through the program and I’m an official Guardsman now. Every guard’s past is completely forgiven once they take their final oath. That said, I still don’t want to make a big deal out of it.” Frath felt uncomfortable with everything that had happened that night, but finally entered into the conversation.

“The way you’ve treated me and given me a safe place to go to since then has meant everything to me, Milady.”

“But of course! Not only did you save us that night, but I like you, Frath.” She smiled blissfully. “You remind me of my husband, as I’ve told you before. You have the same ideals as he did, rest his soul. This is always a safe place for you and yours.” Lady Pallon gestured to Sheela to include her in the statement.

“Thank you, Milady. This has become as close to a home as I’ve ever had,” Frath told her sincerely. “If anything ever happens to me, would you look after Sheela for me?”

“No!” Sheela exclaimed.

“Of course, but nothing’s going to happen to you. I insist,” Lady Pallon said at the exact same time and stuck out her tongue.

“Frath, nothing’s allowed to happen to you!” Sheela insisted vehemently. Then she burst into tears. “I don’t think I could live anymore if something happened to you.”

He put his arms around her, feeling guilty for upsetting her. Lady Pallon stared at him through narrowed eyes to let him know that she wasn’t thrilled with him either at that moment.

After a minute, Sheela wiped her eyes and sat normally. She took a bite of her food in silence, refusing to look at him. Frath sighed and finished his plate.

Mary came into the dining room. “Will you be having dessert, Milady?”

“We’ll take it in the conservatory with tea, Mary.” Lady Pallon stood as Mary departed for the kitchen. Sheela and Frath also stood, and then followed her out of the room, into a hallway and toward the back of the house.

The conservatory was a large room made primarily out of greenish glass panels. Sheela looked around in awe. Even though Frath had been in the room before, he still felt overwhelmed by it. Glass was rare, owned by those who were well off. Only the wealthy built conservatories as large as Lady Pallon’s. Plants were everywhere, many with beautiful flowers in contrast to winter moisture outside.

She led them to a sitting area at the far end of the room where they could look outside. There was another pond in the vast back yard in addition to more willows, rosebushes and other large trees. Frath knew there were other buildings, of which only one was visible from where they sat. He also knew a couple of them led underground to some of the secret areas of the city, but had never shared that information with anyone.

“So tell us about you, dear,” Lady Pallon said to Sheela after sitting. There was a small wrought iron table in the middle with a glass top. The chair Lady Pallon sat in was wrought iron with a plush cushion. Frath was happy that there was a double seat across from the chair for him and Sheela to sit on. He unhooked his sword and set it on a side table in order to sit comfortably.

Sheela paled and began wringing her hands in her lap. Frath held her a little tighter. Lady Pallon became concerned. “I can see how upset you are, child. Sometimes talking about the things that upset you helps. You’re with friends.”

Frath leaned in to look Sheela in the eyes, she returned the look reluctantly and he could see that tears were already welling there. “I love you and there’s nothing you can tell me that will stop my love.”

The tears broke through and she buried her face in his chest again. After just a moment, she leaned back. “Do you ever take that thing off?” she asked, tugging on the chain shirt peaking under his collar.

“Only when I’m in the barracks. Outside of them, I’m required to wear it at all times.” He took one of her hands in his free one.

“It’s uncomfortable to rest my head against.” When neither he nor Lady Pallon responded, Sheela sighed deeply. “I ran away from home.”

“I remember you telling me that. What happened?” Frath asked encouragingly.

“I . . . I . . .” Her jaw clenched and she gripped his hand tightly.

“Start from the beginning if you can,” Lady Pallon suggested. “Where were you raised?”

Sheela nodded. “I was raised on a small farm a few week’s walk to the southeast of here. I never went anywhere until the day my mother lost the farm.” She took a deep breath to strengthen her resolve. “My father left my mother when I was five. There were three of us daughters, both sons died in childbirth. He didn’t want daughters and life was hard on the farm, so he just left. My mother struggled to care for us, spending most of her time in the fields and the rest working on the household chores, which she wasn’t very good at. At night she would collapse, exhausted.”

Mary brought tea and pastries made with apples. Sheela poked at the pastry with her fork while talking. “My younger sister died when she was only a few years old. My older sister thought it was her fault and killed herself a year later while my mother was out in the fields.” Sheela’s voice gradually became hollow as she told of the horrifying hardships she had experienced. She set the fork down and put her hands back in her lap.

Frath rubbed her shoulder and arm in an attempt to flow strength and support to her. Lady Pallon smiled supportively. “Go on, you’re doing wonderfully. Tell us what happened, it will help heal your heart.”

“My mother spent the next few years in her bed while I did just enough to care for us. The tax collectors took everything we had before kicking us out of our house.” Sheela stopped, gulping deeply and wringing her hands more furiously. They waited for her to gather the fortitude to continue.

“My mother and I walked for days, sleeping in fields when we thought the farmers wouldn’t notice. Then we were caught. The man lived alone and offered us his home if my mother . . .” she trailed off, staring blankly outside.

“A mother does what she has to in order to take care of her child,” Lady Pallon said in understanding.

Sheela shook her head slowly. “She just shrugged and went with him. It wasn’t to take care of me, she had stopped doing that long before. He took us into his house and she just lay down in the bed. He didn’t even sleep with her, going out to work the fields instead.” Sheela took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “I made the food and took care of things inside. When we ate that evening, he stared at me . . .”

Frath felt anger rising in his chest. He understood why she didn’t want to kiss him originally and why she had frozen. Then he felt his cheeks burn in shame at how forward he had been in his advances. Sheela pushed in closer to him for strength, causing him to set aside his own musings in the realization that she needed him right then.

“That night, I bolted the door to my room. He knocked quite a few times through the night. I hid in the corner, terrified he would break it down.” She took another deep

breath, her dessert forgotten. None of them wanted anything else to eat at that moment. “The next day, I got up after he left for the fields. I took care of my mother, but she just continued to lie in bed. The clothes she had worn before were just as they were. The man hadn’t touched her.”

“Do you know the name of the man?” Lady Pallon asked.

Sheela shook her head. “No. He never said, nor did he ask ours. That afternoon, I was collecting eggs from the chicken coop when he suddenly appeared behind me. I dropped the eggs when he put his hands on my arms. He was so quiet and I was so busy trying to think of what to do that I didn’t hear him.”

Frath felt his vision growing red and his heart beating against his chest as though it was going to leap out and hunt the man down on its own. “Frath. Not now,” Lady Pallon told him. He saw her warning look and took a deep breath to calm his anger. Sheela looked at him worriedly.

When Sheela knew he was listening again, she continued. “I pulled away from his hands and ran out of the coop toward the barn. It was closer than the house and I didn’t know what else to do. He followed me in and cornered me. I was so terrified. A part of me wanted to fight or continue to run away, but I couldn’t seem to move as he walked toward me.”

“That is perfectly understandable, dear,” Lady Pallon reassured her. “You’re very brave for telling us this. Go on.”

Frath wasn’t certain he wanted to hear more. The image of a rough, brutal man with evil eyes stalking his love like a hunched over wolf was the only image in his mind and it was taking all his willpower not to give into fury and hunt the man down.

“He took my arms again and pushed me into a pile of hay in the corner of the barn. I remember he smelled so bad.” Sheela thought deeply, no longer crying. Frath knew this was the first time she had had a chance to tell anyone what happened to her. “He lay on top of me and forced kisses on me and I remember he tasted as bad as he smelled. I began to struggle, but he was strong. He hit me in the face twice. I think it was to get me to stop struggling, but it just made me mad.”

Frath held her hands as gently as he could manage, setting his own feelings aside with extraordinary effort because he knew she just needed him to listen at that point. Lady Pallon came over, squeezing next to her on the other side of the seat to lend even more support.

Sheela briefly smiled in gratitude. “I went still, desperately trying to think of what to do. He stood up to take off his clothes. I knew I had to escape then. When he knelt down over me again, I brought my leg up and drove my foot into that thing between his legs. I think men have those. It’s different than girls.” She looked questioningly at them and they both nodded silently. Frath felt his blush go from anger to embarrassment.

“He yelled in pain, so I think it hurt a lot,” Sheela said. Frath nodded a little more briskly. “I got up, but he caught my dress and tore it. I reached back and scratched him in the face and he yelled again. I tried running, but he knocked me down. I kicked him and got up. When he did too, I picked up a spade next to me and hit him in the face with it twice.”

She stopped speaking. They sat there silently for a moment until Lady Pallon handed her a cup of tea. Sheela took a drink, held the cup and saucer in her lap and continued in a lower voice. “He curled up in a ball and started crying. I think he was in

pain. The spade fell out of my hands. I couldn't seem to hold it anymore. It was like all my strength fell to the ground in a puddle with it. I was so scared."

Frath felt her trembling. He wanted to hold her and never let go, but chose to sit silently so she would be able to finish. Lady Pallon took the shaking cup of tea out of her hands and rubbed her back encouragingly. "Go on, dear."

"I ran. I ran out the barn door and toward the road." Sheela frowned while remembering the events. "I ran down the road and didn't stop. The sky was completely clear and there was no one around. Everything was silent except for the buzzing of insects. It was like I was all alone in a different world."

Sheela picked up the tea and took another sip. Her expression was far away as though she were alone in that other world once more. "I just walked and walked. At night I would sleep in haystacks or anywhere else I could find where I thought no one would see me. I stole food wherever I could, but never tasted it. I thought about my mother once . . ." She took another sip of tea. "I wonder . . ."

The tears broke in a great flood, ripping through all the pain, sorrow and suffering the young woman had experienced. The cup spilled to the floor and was quickly picked up by Lady Pallon. Frath pulled Sheela into his lap and clutched her as heaving sobs wracked her body.

Lady Pallon sat quietly next to them, softly running her fingers through Sheela's hair. In a little while, the tears lessened. Then a new round of sobbing began. A few more cycles of crying, where she would get quiet and then begin a new round, occurred over the next half hour. Finally, she fell into an exhausted sleep. Frath held her the entire time, rocking slowly back and forth.

Sheela woke up a few hours later still in Frath's arms. He woke up as soon as she did. Lady Pallon wasn't around, so they stood and stretched out the kinks. Snow was still falling outside, which didn't surprise Frath. When it snowed in Dralin, it tended to do so steadily for days. He felt Sheela duck under his arm, lifting it around her shoulders. She looked up at him questioningly and he smiled at her as he drew her in close.

"Ahh, you're awake," Lady Pallon said from behind them. "I know it probably seems like you just ate, but you slept for hours and it's dinner time. Come eat what you will." She held her arms out to them and they accepted the warm hug she gave.

The meal was hot and delicious, tickling the nose with delight as well as satisfying the tongue. Sheela smiled easily and seemed lighter after having shared her burden. Her eyes shimmered with cheerfulness whenever she looked at Frath.

Frath enjoyed the light conversation about what the weather would be like that winter and the details that Lady Pallon shared with Sheela about the roses and trees in the yard. He didn't participate very much because he was reconsidering his other plan for the day, especially since it would soon be night.

Chapter 5

Lady Pallon saw them to the door. "It will be dark soon, Frath. You should get her home," she admonished.

“I will, Milady,” Frath assured her. “Thank you for having us today.”

“Yes, thank you so very much, Lady Pallon,” Sheela agreed. “It was great to meet you.”

“But of course. You are both welcome back any time.” Lady Pallon stood at the door for a moment while they walked down the path to the gate. Then she disappeared inside.

Sheela wrapped her new cloak around her shoulders and ran her hands up and down it happily. “Thank you for taking me there. She’s so wonderful.”

“I really wanted you to meet her. There are only a few people I consider true friends and she’s one. You can go there if you ever get in trouble or need anyone.”

“Nothing’s allowed to happen to you,” Sheela warned, her eyes flashing anger at his earlier statements.

“I know,” he replied simply, not willing to get into an argument he wouldn’t win.

She narrowed her eyes, looking for any sign to chastise him more. He didn’t give her any. The squirrel came to the end of the branch and opened the gate without any need for explanation. As they walked through and the squirrel scampered up the branch, Sheela asked eagerly, “So what is the last place you’re taking me to?”

“Back to the inn,” he answered, already having decided it would be the best choice.

A few people moved along the street, but it wasn’t as busy as it had been earlier. Sheela stopped and folded her arms stubbornly. “I don’t want to go back. I want to stay with you and do the other dangerous thing.” When Frath didn’t respond, she put her hands on his. “Please let me stay with you tonight. I’ll go back first thing in the morning in time for work.”

Frath looked down the street both ways, trying to decide what to do. The truth was that he still wanted to take her even though he knew it was a terrible idea. The pleading look in her eyes destroyed all sense and resistance. “Can you move quietly?” he asked mysteriously.

“I think so. The slippers Purla gave me don’t make very much noise and neither do I.”

“Alright. Promise you’ll stay with me at all times. If I tell you to get behind me, do so. If I tell you to fall to the ground, do so. If I tell you to kneel, do so. If I tell you to run, do so. Every command I give you will be for your safety and you must obey it instantly, without question. Is that clear?” Frath knew his voice was hard and firm, but she had to understand.

“Yes, it’s clear,” she agreed timidly.

“Promise that you will do what I say, no matter how scared you might be or even if you don’t understand it.”

She nodded solemnly. “I promise.”

Frath looked around again. No one was paying them any attention. Instead of taking her back toward the Noble District where the inn and wisdom were, he led her toward the southwest and foolishness. For a little while, they strolled along streets bordered by estates of different sizes. Sheela was quiet with anticipation of the adventure she was certain they were going on, while Frath spent a great deal of time looking around for any signs of trouble.

The estates gave way to smaller, but still nice, houses. Then those gave way to slightly more ragged buildings including various businesses: a grocer, furniture store and

a market for spirits of high quality, or so the sign said. Others seemed to fascinate Sheela. She kept looking back and forth to either side of the street and down side streets. Frath didn't care about any of that, instead keeping his eyes on the alleyways and rooftops. He spotted a couple of rogues who stared at him, but they made no move to interfere with his business.

Being a guardsman gave him a certain amount of protection. It was a high crime to kill him and the entire City Guard would do everything in its power to find anyone who would commit the murder. At the same time, many of the criminal elements of Dralin were just as dangerous and to openly declare war on them would be foolish for the Guard.

As a result, members of the Guard were required to act with dignity and diplomacy. It was a rule that they not insert themselves into danger unnecessarily. Walking with a pretty woman in some of the darker districts of Dralin was unnecessary danger. It was into one of those districts that Frath was leading her.

The Merchant and Church Districts were the southernmost districts of the Ancient Six around the Tower District. The Orphan District bordered the bottom of both. The change wasn't as drastic as moving from the Tower District to any other district, but it was noticeable.

"Did we enter a different district?" Sheela asked, looking around nervously at the large, dark buildings surrounded by high walls.

Frath realized he hadn't told her anything and she certainly didn't know her way around. "Yeah. This is the Orphan District. It's where I grew up."

Her eyes widened. "It looks dangerous . . . and dirty." Bits of trash floated along top of water in the gutters. The streets were still warm enough that the snow melted and ran into the sewers, but even that wasn't enough to clean the streets. "Most of the buildings have walls around the yards and those that don't, look like they have iron bars on windows and doors." She pointed at a meager clothing store where the windows and doors did indeed have bars on them.

Frath tried to imagine what it would be like to someone who hadn't grown up among the shabby streets and orphanages that looked more like high security prisons than places to raise children. There was a prevailing sense of sadness that always lingered in the air, as though the city itself realized what tragedies had befallen these children.

And it truly was tragedy. Thousands of children in the orphanages had lost their parents, whether to disease, abandonment or violent deaths in the streets. A sub-council of the High Council ran the orphanages. The truth was that most of those council members were corrupt, lower-ranking officials that, for a price, let profit-making merchants put their own employees in to manage the orphanages as cheaply as possible. They shuffled children between orphanages to keep things murky. Frath had lived in eighteen different ones throughout his childhood.

Some of the more troubled kids lived in high security orphanages with barbed wire atop the walls. Those kids became hard and crafty to stay alive, adding to the criminal elements of the city in most cases. Frath had lived in one of those for a year before he killed a man. After that, they moved him to a special orphanage run in coordination with the City Guard.

"Frath . . . Are we safe?" Sheela asked timidly, pushing close against his side as they walked.

He jerked out of his reverie and looked around, mentally kicking himself for not being alert. There was a group of seven rough, young men on a street corner and they were sizing up Frath and Sheela. He sized them up in return as they walked through the intersection on the other side. "Yes, they're not a match for me and they know it."

Sheela looked at him, back at the group, then at him again with admiration in her eyes. Frath had made the statement as a fact, not as a boast. The group was tough enough, but they had no real weapons or training. They would fight dirty, but the City Guard was trained to fight dirtier when the situation required it.

The young men went in a different direction, throwing a few last glances over their shoulders. Sheela looked back at them, staring in curiosity. Frath noticed. "You don't want to stare at people in Dralin." She turned back to him and he clarified. "There are a lot of interesting people, but if you stare at them, they take it as a challenge or think you're watching them to turn them in for something. Just avoid anything but minimal eye contact and you'll stay a lot safer."

Sheela frowned in thought and looked back over her shoulder one last time. Then she nodded. "Alright. I'll keep that in mind." The agreement only lasted a minute before she stared into an alley they passed. A group of shadowy figures hunched over another on the ground. "Frath, should we do something?"

"I can't. I'm not allowed to be here alone and it could be a trap. I'll be kicked out of the guard if I interfere."

They walked past the alley and its mysterious figures. Frath glanced back a couple of times to make sure no one would follow them. He didn't like walking by, but had learned early on that he wouldn't be able to save everyone. That knowledge ate at him a little bit each time though. Sheela kept looking behind them. What bothered Frath the most was that she repeatedly glanced at him with disappointment on her face.

A few people traveled on the streets with their heads down, trying to get to their destination safely. The clouds obscured the setting sun, bringing night along a little sooner. A lamplighter accompanied by a swordsman to keep him safe was lighting lanterns. Kids who weren't locked away in their orphanages for the night lurked through shadows rather than playing in the streets. Frath remembered the days when he used to lurk. He never joined any of the gangs, finding ways to be alone instead. He still preferred to be alone most days, although he liked being with Sheela even more.

The street ended at a towering wall lined by neglected buildings, some of which were houses whereas others were seedy shops open at night rather than the day. Frath led her south into a poorly lit, narrow alley between some of the more ragged buildings. When Sheela plastered herself to his side, he knew she was re-thinking the wisdom of going on a dangerous adventure with him. At that point, it would be more dangerous to go back than to go forward though, so he continued.

Sheela gave a little squeak when a rat bigger than her head ran across the ground in front of them. A few others prowled along the edge of buildings, much as the orphans had done in the streets past. Puddles of grimy water combined with strewn trash to make the walk unpleasant while pungent odors of food too rotten for vagrants attacked the nose.

"Coin for food?" a voice croaked from underneath some blankets, eliciting another squeak from Sheela. Frath looked at the milky eyes of a blind beggar huddled in a corner

and moved on quickly. Once again, Sheela stared. There didn't seem to be anything he could say to stop her from doing so.

There was no snow in the alley due to the fact that upper levels of the buildings were so close together above them. Melt water dripped down through openings and Frath did his best to shield Sheela from it. The tunnel he was looking for was on the right. Iron bars had once kept people out, but they were rusted and half fallen, giving them room to pass. Sheela resisted for a second before reluctantly going into the darkness. An instant later, only dim reflections of light shone from unknown sources. The echo of their footsteps splashing in unavoidable puddles was the only sound. Moss and mold was strong in the nostrils, indicating that few people walked through.

It didn't take long for them to reach another alley. It didn't have so much trash, but it was darker and gloomier as though the buildings were holding up a great burden that was too much to bear.

Frath turned south again, walking as quietly as possible. The soles of his boots were thick to protect against rough terrain and debris, but at the same time they were made to bend and land softly, muffling his steps. Sheela walked quieter, startling at every little sound or skitter of rat feet.

The alley let out onto a street, but the darkness didn't go away as much as one might have expected. The sun had set and only the red moon, Piohray, was out that night, although it was full. The effect was that it made the clouds glow a dim pink color, casting a surreal illumination over the foreboding streets.

"Why aren't the lanterns lit?" Sheela asked in a harsh whisper that seemed to roll clumsily along the cobble in front of them.

"Lamplighters don't come to the Forlorn District," Frath told her, not speaking loudly at all. "People foolish enough to enter it tend to disappear."

Sheela stopped to glare at him in disbelief. "Then why are we here?" she whispered.

"Because you said you wanted to stay with me tonight and do the other dangerous thing. This is the other dangerous thing," Frath pointed out matter-of-factly. "We're almost there."

"Where?"

"You'll see when we get there," Frath told her, tugging her along.

She continued to glare, but followed quickly. "What are those shapes?" she asked, pointing at a group of hunched shadows down a side street.

"I honestly don't know," Frath replied. "There are a lot of things that aren't understood here. It's best not to investigate."

"Are they people?" she asked with panic rising in her voice. "I don't see any people. Where are all the people?"

"People don't come here. We're in the Forlorn District." Frath told her much more casually than the situation probably called for. He had been coming here since childhood and actually liked the place, even though he had never seen another living, normal person in it. "A few centuries ago, the High Council had it walled off to keep people out because it's so haunted that even a consortium of priests couldn't exorcise the ghosts and whatever else is here."

"So we're not supposed to be here?" Sheela asked in alarm.

"Nope." Frath answered.

“Is that a ghost?” she asked in a shaky voice, pointing fearfully at a pair of glowing human figures that were staring at them from a window, even though they didn’t have eyes to stare with.

“No, it’s two ghosts. They’ll probably leave us alone. Ghosts aren’t that dangerous anyways. There are other things a lot worse.”

“Probably? . . . Worse? . . .” Sheela had a death grip on his arm by that point and he was pretty sure that if anything came at her, she would probably crawl up his back and over his head to get away.

“Here’s our destination,” Frath told her, pointing at an ominous building ahead. It was an ancient two-story church with a tall steeple at one end. Dark stones made up the walls and it had a red, iron shingled, A-frame roof that was rusting. Past rains falling on the roof had left red trails down the stone, making it appear as though the church was bleeding.

Crows stared at them from the eaves and the low stone wall surrounding it. Frath led Sheela past a rusted iron gate lying ineffectively on the ground nearby. The sparse grass was brown and covered with a dusting of snow, while the skeletons of trees looked as though they had never had leaves.

“This doesn’t look like a very pleasant place,” Sheela said apprehensively.

“Well . . . yes and no. It’s a safe place for me though. I found it when I was very young. I ran away from some guys who were going to kill me.” They reached the arched double doors, which were grey with black carvings of crows surrounded by curving rose stems. The petals on the roses were purple as were the eyes of the crows. It was the only color on them, but Frath had never figured out what material it was. He opened the left door easily. Neither door ever made a sound, which had always fascinated him. “I went through that tunnel back there. The guys weren’t brave enough to follow me into the district. It scared me too, but I knew I would die if I went back, so I tried to find another way out.”

Inside were twenty rows of dark stone pews to either side. A pure-black stone statue of a hooded woman kneeling on a dais was at the end of the aisle. When they entered, the statue looked up with glowing purple eyes that radiated vast power throughout the church. Sheela gasped, wrapped her legs around Frath’s waist and grabbed his shoulder in an attempt to scale his height. Frath felt the statue gaze into his soul before it went back to its praying position.

“Fraaaathhhh!” Sheela wailed in terror.

“It’s alright. We’re welcome here,” he reassured her. It didn’t do much good. Her feet hit the ground, but she buried her face in his chest and trembled from fright. “This is the Church of Distra, Goddess of Sorrow. I like her a lot and she tolerates me.”

Sheela looked up at him, brow furrowed in bewilderment. “Goddess of Sorrow? I’ve never heard of her.”

“Most people haven’t. She doesn’t like for people to know about her.” Frath thought about it for a moment. He looked down at Sheela. “Don’t tell anyone about her, actually. She’s letting you in, but it’ll upset her if you go around telling people.”

“Oh . . . alright.” Sheela let go of him, relaxing more quickly than he had expected. She stepped forward down the aisle a little bit, folded her arms and stared at the statue for a moment. The statue didn’t react. Frath stood there quietly, waiting to see how Sheela would respond.

She walked up the aisle a little ways, looking around at the tall arched windows along the wall. Multiple pieces of red and purple glass were set in iron framework within each window. “Frath, is there someone here?”

“No. There’s never anyone here. Why do you ask?” Frath looked around carefully to see if anyone else might have shown up.

“The candles are lit.” She pointed at iron candleholders lined along the wall and at tables with stepped shelves to either side of the statue. They all had candles with violet flames that flickered dimly, making the shadows dance slowly.

“No. Those are always lit. Distr’s divine power keeps them aflame.” He walked up to her, put his left hand on the small of her back and his right hand on her shoulder. Frath wanted to be close to her, but mentally vowed he would immediately back away if anything made her uncomfortable.

She leaned back into his hands, showing no discomfort at all. “I’m curious why you like Distr instead of another god.”

“I’ve seen a lot of bad things in my life. They make me sad to the point where my entire body hurts. When I’m here, that hurt feels good.” Frath ran his right hand slowly down her arm to the elbow.

She turned unhurriedly and put her own hands on his waist. “It feels good to hurt?” she asked in confusion.

“You say it differently than I mean it, but yeah. When I went through that tunnel the first time and found this district, strange things happened.” He ran both hands up her arms to her shoulders. It pleased him a lot when she moved hers up and down his sides even with the chain shirt muffling the sensation. “Things started appearing on the streets. They were hunched over like those things we saw outside.” Using his right hand, Frath caressed her cheek and neck, drawing a soft sigh of pleasure from her. “Then I saw a couple of Deformed down another street. Ghosts didn’t just stand behind the windows, they floated through the sky. Even with all that, I wasn’t willing to go back. I ran until I found this church.”

“How old were you?” Sheela asked. She pulled at his shirt and sighed in frustration at the chainmail underneath.

“I was eight. Let’s go upstairs.” He took her hand and led her around the raised dais. Along the back wall were a few rooms and a door that led to a spiral staircase with purple-flamed candles in brackets on its walls. They went up that to a corridor on the second level above the church. From there he took her to the end of the passage where there was a silver door with gold etching. It was the only bright thing in the entire building. As far as he knew, it was made entirely of silver and gold. The etching was similar to the entry to the church, with a crow and rose stems.

When he was a child, it had been locked. Then one day after he had been coming for a few years, it suddenly opened for him. Now he had access to every room in the church, including the basement with its secrets.

“What is this room?” Sheela asked as they entered. She looked at a dark tapestry that took up the whole wall to the left. It was a crow and roses motif like nearly everything else about the church. More iron candleholders were lit, two against each wall of the big room.

“I don’t know. It was a sleeping quarters of some sort. There’s a hole in the roof over there.” He pointed at the far corner to the right. “But other than that, it’s still in

good shape. I have blankets and pillows over on this side,” he told her, pointing behind them at the opposite corner near the wall the door was on.

“How often do you come here?” Sheela asked, walking slowly over to the hole in the ceiling.

“Ohh . . . I don’t know. Until I met you, I came nearly every day I had off. Before that, I used to come here whenever I could get out of the orphanage.” Frath moved behind her and put a hand on the small of her back again. “Distra lets me practice my swordwork in one of the empty rooms down the hall. Once I learned how to fight, I spent as much time as possible there.”

The clouds suddenly parted, letting the full light of Piohray through. It was said that Piohray’s light had an intoxicating effect that aroused passion within lovers. “Are we going to spend the night here?” Sheela asked throatily. The moonlight gave her skin a beguiling pink cast that he wanted to caress. He turned her to face him. The look in her eyes was completely wanton, the moonlight having amplified her natural desires

Frath knelt on one knee and pulled a ring out of his pocket. He had a habit of talking to the statue of Distra when something was on his mind and had told it about Sheela after their date the week before. When he was finished speaking, he had looked at the base of the statue where a small box had mysteriously appeared. The ring was inside.

“I know we just met, but I love you with every nerve of my body . . . and my heart too . . . and my soul . . . and mind . . . I love you with everything.” The proposal wasn’t going as well as Frath had expected, but that wasn’t going to deter him. “I want to marry you . . . but I won’t if you don’t want to . . . I mean I won’t force you to do anything . . . or marry me . . . or anything else if you don’t want to.” He hoped he had just proposed, but thinking back, it had been confusing and he might not have. Sheela just stood there staring at him. Even though there were thousands of things Frath wanted to say, he decided to keep it simple. “Will you please marry me, Sheela?”

She stared at him for a moment longer before nodding.

“You will?” he asked just to be on the safe side.

“Yes. I’ll marry you.” She smiled.

“Oh . . . great!” That sounded lame even to his ears. “Thank you.” That sounded lame too. He put the ring on her finger and studied the perfect fit for a moment. It was silver with golden etchings of crows and roses, much like the door. “I’ll take you back to the inn if you want me to, but I’d like you to . . . spend the night with me here.” He stood. “It’s safe. Nobody bothers Distra.” Sheela’s silence was unnerving him. “Will you spend the night with me? . . .”

“Only if you take that metal shirt off.” She poked him in the chest with a finger.

Frath quickly shucked the tunic, chain and thick undershirt that protected him from the metal links. They got stuck over his head for a moment, but he yanked them off fiercely and stood in front of her.

Sheela ran her hands through the dark hair on his muscular chest and stomach. It sent tiny bolts of lightning through his body and he drew in ragged breaths to help fight off the goosebumps that suddenly appeared. She leaned forward and touched her lips lightly to his chest.

He took a deep breath and ran his hands up her arms and shoulders. He could smell the faint raspberry scent lingering in her hair and inhaled deeply. Then he slid a hand down to the small of her back, which he was realizing was one of his favorite places to

touch her, and the other into her hair. He tilted her head up to his and leaned over to kiss her. Her lips parted for him and he kissed deeply. A brief thought crossed his mind that he was surprised she didn't react negatively after what she had been through. It disappeared when she opened her mouth more and he pulled her even more tightly to him.

They finally broke the kiss and stood there gasping. At some point, the clouds had swallowed the moon again, but they still radiated with the pink glow, allowing the mystical power to flow. Frath dropped to his knees and ran both his hands down her body to the backs of her calves. He pulled her dress up to her thighs. Then he stood and lifted her so they were face to face.

Sheela gasped and wrapped her legs around him. Frath carried her over to the blankets, enjoying the feel of her breath on his face and the look of desire in her eyes. He set her back on her feet and undid the clasp of her cloak, letting it fall to the ground while she resumed running her hands up and down his chest. Frath then bent his knees again and grabbed her dress near the bottom. He gradually pulled it up, giving her time to protest if she became uncomfortable.

He studied every inch of her skin as it was exposed, wanting her more and more. Sheela raised her arms above her head to let him take the dress off completely. He slid his right hand behind her to its favorite resting place and pulled her close. They kissed again, savoring each other's taste and touch.

Frath lowered her gently to the blankets, resting her head on one of the softer pillows. "The first time hurts some. If you don't want to . . ." he left the question open.

"I want to. I want to very much." Her voice was deeper and thicker than he had imagined it could be. Frath removed his sword belt, stood up and removed his trousers as well. Her eyes widened when she saw him naked.

"I'm not willing to force you . . ." Frath insisted. Sheela reached her arms up and bit her lower lip in anticipation as he positioned himself. Even though he entered slowly, she cried out.

From that point on, Frath watched closely for signs of distress and listened carefully for the word no. She never uttered it and her expression quickly turned to pleasure as he moved back and forth above her. Wordless sounds of ecstasy came from their throats. Sheela's body bucked underneath his as they climaxed together in the perfect culmination of love, both crying out with abandon.

Eventually, he rolled onto his back and she rested her head on his chest while draping a leg and half her body over his. "That was so much more wonderful than I thought it would ever be. My mother always told me it would be nothing but pain for the rest of my life."

"I'm sorry your mother suffered like that," Frath told her sadly.

"Thank you," she replied quietly.

They lay there for a bit and Frath stared at the ceiling. "Do you really want to marry me?" he asked eventually.

"Yes." Sheela didn't say anything else, but kissed his shoulder. Then she kissed it again before moving up to his neck. Frath lay still while she kissed his chest and stomach. Before long, they were making love again.

The influence of Piohray's light was said to drive lovers to feats of stamina not possible at any other time. When they put their clothes back on the next morning, neither had slept at all.

Chapter 6

Sheela tucked the corner of the sheet tightly underneath the mattress. It had been a little more than eight months since Frath proposed to her and they were the happiest of her life. The fact that they hadn't been able to get married yet didn't make her any less happy that she would soon be having a baby. Purla had already agreed to let Sheela keep the child in a crib in the basement and was giving her a little extra free time to care for it. It helped that Sheela was such an excellent worker.

When Frath brought her home that morning so many months ago, both Purla and Albert yelled at him for being irresponsible. Throughout all of it, he remained silent with his arms folded. He hadn't been defiant, instead standing his ground, feeling fine with what had occurred. Their fury scared Sheela on one hand, but pleased her on the other because they were concerned for her well-being, a thing she had never experienced.

Purla and Albert stopped yelling at Frath after a few minutes, something about his stance and the expression on his face giving them pause. Then they listened while Frath explained. "Sheela and I are betrothed. We are deeply in love with each other and that means a lot in this horrible city. I'm going to marry her once I'm able to rent a nice enough place for us, which will be in about two or three years. I know I'm a young fool, but I don't care. I'm going to live my life as fiercely as I can and make the decisions *I* think are right whether they are or not."

Purla and Albert exchanged glances. "Alright, Frath," Albert finally relented. "You're a good man, a bit of a fool in my opinion, but we like you and Sheela both." He pointed at Sheela and narrowed his eyes. "I expect you to continue doing excellent, hard work. Just because I like you doesn't mean I'll tolerate a slacker."

"Yes, Master Albert," Sheela agreed quickly and sincerely.

"I promise to treat Sheela with respect and keep her safe, Master Albert," Frath said sincerely. "I have complete respect for you, Sir. You're an amazing man and a bright light in this dark city. I can't tell you how much I appreciate you giving her a job and letting me visit her."

In an uncharacteristic display of affection, Albert gave Frath a brief hug, which included powerful smacks on each other's shoulders before stepping back. "You're a fine young man, Frath. You're also headstrong, but it was that very quality that saved my life, so I can't fault you for it." He gestured at Sheela. "It is I who has benefited by having such a lovely young woman working for me. Come by whenever you can."

After the conversation, Purla had taken Sheela back inside and let her sleep for the rest of that day. Since that time, Sheela had worked harder than anyone else. In addition, she always smiled and was polite to everyone, developing friendships with all the other servants at the inn.

A sharp pain in her side made her gasp and fall to a knee, snapping the memories away. Sheela concentrated on breathing as a hot tear rolled down her cheek. When the pain subsided enough, she stood and resumed making the bed.

Sheela had managed to hide the fact that the pregnancy wasn't going well. The pains had begun about the fifth month and progressively got worse. There was no way she was going to complain to anyone. Master Albert and Purla were doing her and Frath a huge favor by letting her continue to live there unmarried while she was pregnant. It would be a burden on them while she was caring for a newborn. The other women who worked there had agreed to chip in with watching the baby though and it looked like everything would work out alright.

Before they were aware, she had become pregnant, Frath took her to Distras church every week and they would spend the night together. He also took her to Lady Pallons estate most of the days. Lady Pallon adored the two of them and they had an open invitation to show up at any time, day or night, that included a room for them to share. "I want you have a safe place to be together," she told them on more than one occasion.

They preferred the church even if it was a dangerous journey, but when the weather was bad, and then when the pregnancy had advanced enough that she wouldn't be able to escape danger easily, they took Lady Pallon up on her offer, spending that one night a week at her estate.

Frath took her to other parts of the city before the pregnancy developed too much to walk around comfortably. They went to Carnival a few times and he took her to a safer marketplace than the East Bazaar. He also took her to Wizard's Mall, where the most amazing shops of magical items anywhere in the world existed. It took an entire day just to visit a tenth of the shops and she insisted they go back other times. They also visited parks that weren't as extreme as Wraith Lake Park.

Sheela loved spending time with Frath no matter where they went. Her favorite places were the church and Lady Pallons estate. Even though Distras Church was in the Forlorn District and really quite a scary place, she felt safe there. They could also be completely alone in the large upstairs room and there was a great deal of freedom in that.

The room she was cleaning came back into focus when her side twinged. Drenched in sweat, she knelt beside the bed while clutching the sheet she had just tucked in. The sweat covered her cheeks and ran down her spine, tickling it uncomfortably. Dralin summers were miserably hot, just as the winters were miserably cold. Being pregnant made it worse.

Lady Pallons estate was magically cool and Sheela wished she could visit there, but it wasn't her day off. Another pain shot through her side and up her back. Sheela cried out involuntarily before biting it off.

Closing her eyes, she concentrated on how nice it would be to sit in the cool parlor, or sit among the plants in the conservatory. Even better were the days she and Frath would explore the expansive grounds and all their hiding places. He had taken her into one building that had a secret trapdoor leading down to secret places under the city.

"Some say there's been a city in this location since humans were created by the Gods. Dralin is just the latest, even though it's over a thousand years old," Frath had told her as they slowly made their way down a dark tunnel with only a torch to light the way. "What is known for certain is that there's at least three ruined cities underneath Dralin with passages that run deep into the world. The only things that keep everything from caving in are a lot of stone braces set deep into the ground by some sort of genius craftsmen and a network of strong runes placed at key points."

He didn't take her very far, just to an ancient room he had found when younger. It hadn't been inhabited for centuries and had the cobwebs to prove it. The most extraordinary thing was the fact that the furniture was still intact. "See that etching," Frath had asked, pointing to a large, intricate design that took up one wall. "It's one of the runes that keep the city stable. They last for thousands of years and don't need maintenance. Don't touch it though. It'll activate an alarm that alerts a special arm of wizards under the control of the High Council. They'll investigate and we could be arrested," he warned her sternly. "That rune has a preservation effect so powerful that it keeps things in the immediate vicinity from decaying. That's why everything in this room is so well preserved."

Actually, everything in the room looked ancient and shabby although it had been fine at one time. Still, it should have completely rotted. There were cushioned chairs, lounges and couches in the room along with once elegant tables, now cracking and dust covered. They enjoyed imagining that ancient city and played at having a cup of tea.

Back in present time, Sheela wiped more sweat off her forehead and looked at the crumpled sheet. She needed to smooth it out and finish making the bed, but the pain was getting worse. She cried out when another spasm wracked her body. Instead of being brave and strong like before, she let the tears come. It felt like something was wrong and Sheela was scared. "Frath," she called out weakly, wishing he would magically show up and make her better.

Everything with Frath seemed like an adventure. Sheela was having the time of her life and couldn't wait to get married. She looked at the ring he had given her. The golden roses and crows were beautiful. It meant so much to her and she knew it was magical somehow. Her eyes grew heavy and she rested her forehead against the mattress.

"Sheela!" Oh no, what's wrong?!" Yvelle, one of the other servants knelt down in front of her. "You're bleeding!" She put her hands on Sheela's cheeks and lifted her head up. When Yvelle pulled a hand back, they both looked at the blood on it. "Purla!" Yvelle yelled desperately toward the doorway. Sheela realized the blood was coming from her mouth and that she had been wondering what the taste was over the last few minutes. Now she knew and it made her queasy.

"What is it, Yvelle? Why are you yelli . . . Sheela!" Purla rushed into the room in alarm.

Sheela looked up at her with tears flowing down her cheeks. "It hurts really bad, Purla. I want Frath."

"Frath!" You're needed right away," a gruff voice said from behind. There was a sense of urgency in the tone. Frath turned to look, brushing aside his wavy black hair. Trib, one of the guards at the Shining Shield was coming up to him quickly. He was a thick man with neatly trimmed facial hair and a shaven head. Frath knew he was also very good with a sword and had even sparred against him a few times. Trib was followed by Sergeant Gorman, who wouldn't have let him into the barracks if it wasn't important.

"What is it, Trib? Is Sheela alright?" Frath asked with concern. The sense that something was wrong filled him with dread. His gut twisted and adrenaline poured into his veins.

“I don’t think so. Yvelle and Purla found her in a room. There was blood coming from her mouth and she passed out. I’m not gonna lie, Purla’s worried. She wants you there right away.” Trib’s scarred face was normally grim, but looked even more like rock than usual.

Frath couldn’t move. The burst of energy in his muscles didn’t have direction. There was no foe he could face, only fear to make his hands shake and his legs tremble. Sergeant Gorman put a strong hand on his shoulder and gripped firmly. “Come on, private. I’ll go with you and we’ll see what we can do.” He turned to another man. “Corporal Willmas, you’re in charge here. I’ll expect no problems.”

“Yes, sergeant.” The corporal, a short but stout man, banged his fist to chest.

Trib turned and led the way at a brisk pace. Sergeant Gorman moved his hand to Frath’s back and pushed him forward. Frath followed Trib in a fog of fear and worry.

They walked quickly through the streets, but it took them half an hour to reach the inn. Trib led them into a side door and they clattered quickly down the stairs to the basement. At the bottom, they were shushed by a crowd of servants who were straining to see into one of the rooms.

“Frath is here. Make way,” one said, stepping aside. Frath moved ahead with Sergeant Gorman while Trib stayed with the servants.

Albert met Frath outside the door to Sheela’s room, worry etched on his face. “You need to go in there Frath, but I warn you that she’s not doing well. I’ve brought in a healer and the midwife. Don’t worry about the expense. I’ll take care of it.”

A ragged “Thank you,” was all Frath could get past his lips.

Albert stepped aside and let him through the door. Then he yelled at the rest of the servants in frustration. “Why are you all standing here?! Get back to work. There’re customers to take care of.” They scurried back upstairs as he shooed them off.

“Oh, Frath, I’m so glad you’re here,” Purla said, coming over to him. She’d been crying and her face sagged wearily. “She’s been asking for you.” He nodded and quickly went to Sheela’s side. The reactions of Purla and Albert were worrying him.

Sheela’s eyes were open, but glazed. There was a healer putting a cloth on her forehead and whispering words of magical healing. The woman had blonde hair and wore a long blue robe. Grey eyes focused intently on her patient.

A blanket covered Sheela’s legs and they were in position for delivery. Concern was on the midwife’s face as well, which bothered Frath that much more. It was a little too soon for the birth, but not dangerously so from what he understood of a first pregnancy.

Frath took Sheela’s hand. At the touch, her eyes cleared a bit and she looked at him. “Frath . . .”

“I’m here now. It’s going to be alright,” he reassured her in spite of the wrenching feeling in his gut that told him everything was *not* going to be alright.

“It hurts. It hurts so much.” Sheela’s voice was laced with pain and her eyes were glazing over again.

He looked at the healer in desperation. “Can’t you do anything to ease it?”

The woman stopped the chanting, her eyes grim as she spoke. “I’m easing the pain with everything I have.” Then she turned her attention back to Sheela and resumed the quiet chanting. Frath knew with certainty that he was not to interrupt her again at the cost of Sheela’s comfort.

“Almost here,” the midwife declared. Frath saw the woman was sweating profusely even though it was cooler in the basement. Blood spotted her tan apron, and Frath realized the baby was being delivered at that moment. Then he saw the blood soaking the front of Sheela’s dress. Panic rose as his heart began to pound.

“Frath . . .” Sheela said in a quiet voice, raising her free hand to touch his cheek gently. He looked into her beautiful eyes, which were clear again. The pain was gone from her face and she was smiling. “Thank you so much for making me happy. I love you, Frath.”

Then the light disappeared from her eyes and her hand fell.

Silence enveloped Frath for an instant that seemed like an eternity. Then a baby’s wail pierced the silence and everything happened at once.

“It’s a girl,” the midwife said loudly while wrapping the infant in a blanket handed to her by an assistant.

The healer stopped chanting and carefully closed Sheela’s eyes. “She is gone from this life, may she know joy in her journey from this point on.”

Behind Frath, Purla burst into tears and wailed, “No!” in a ragged voice.

Sergeant Gorman put a strong hand on his shoulder and squeezed. “I’m sorry, Frath.” His gravelly voice was filled with compassion.

And Frath did nothing but sit there, staring at the face of the woman he loved. None of it was real. Nothing else meant anything. He had spent his life alone regardless of how many people surrounded him at any given time. Sheela was the only one he had *ever* let in and shown the things he knew. She was the only person who had *ever* made him happy.

The thought that she could truly be gone was creeping up on him and he wanted to run away from it. He reached out and touched her face, noticing the peaceful expression upon it as though she were just asleep. Her skin felt warm, not cold like every other dead body he had touched. She *couldn’t* be gone.

“Frath . . .” Sergeant Gorman said.

The word brought reality rushing in and the thought that had been creeping up on him suddenly dashed forward, hitting Frath with the immensity of his loss. It was as though a thousand swords pierced his skin at once and he screamed at the pain. A long keened ripped from his throat to shred the air in the room and beyond.

All who heard it stopped moving completely as the hair on their necks stood on edge. The scream was one of terrible loss and despair. Even shadows cringed at the sound and paused for a moment of sorrow.

When the last of it died down, Frath became silent again. He stared at the beautiful face of the only woman he would ever truly love, a fact he accepted deep in his heart. Everyone else in the room and outside in the basement remained completely still and silent, stunned by the power of the voice that had keened so despairingly. Even the babe lay quiet.

Frath kissed Sheela’s forehead tenderly, then stood slowly and deliberately. “I love you too,” he told her, knowing somehow she would hear him. Then he reached down and carefully took the ring off her finger and hung it on a plain chain he always wore around his neck. When he was done, he turned to the midwife who was holding his child. Frath solemnly told the babe, “I’ll give this ring to you when you’re older. Your mother would want you to have it.”

“Do you have a name for her?” the midwife asked as she handed over the bundle.

“Her name is Pelya,” Frath answered in clear tones for all to hear. Pelya’s eyes were open and she looked into his with gravity and wisdom greater than those of a sage. Frath gazed back, silently letting her know that he would protect her with his entire being. It was a moment he would remember for the rest of his life.

“That’s an unusual name,” the midwife stated. “I don’t believe I’ve ever heard it before.”

“It’s a name Sheela and I found on three different occasions. We like it and decided to use it,” Frath explained, putting a pinkie into his daughter’s tiny hand and feeling the unexpectedly strong grip.

“What if it had been a boy?” Gorman asked in curiosity, looking over Frath’s shoulder and waving at Pelya.

“Sheela knew it was going to be a girl. I don’t know how, but I knew she was right. We never considered a boy’s name.”

“Huh . . . interesting,” the sergeant replied.

“No!” a woman cried out from the doorway. They all turned to see Tonya, the woman who had shown Sheela to her room that first night, in the doorway. She sobbed at the sight of her dear friend lying on the bed, and then ran away weeping.

It brought back the reality of what had happened. Frath fell to his knees as though a mortal blow had been struck. He couldn’t breathe. He felt as though he would never breathe again. He managed to keep the baby safely in his arms until the midwife quickly took Pelya.

Gorman helped Frath to his feet and guided him out of the room. Purla watched them pass by through tears that had never stopped. Sheela was like a daughter to her and Albert and the loss was nearly as devastating to them.

Frath didn’t remember walking up the stairs or outside into the garden, but suddenly he realized he was sitting on a bench next to a birdbath under the shade of thick trees. The birds were singing merrily, not understanding that the moment called for silence and mourning.

“There you are,” Gorman said, patting him on the back. “I thought you had gone to some other realm behind your eyes for a while.”

Frath inhaled the sweet, sticky air. Flowers in the garden let forth a beautiful aroma, but it was cloying instead of pleasant. The drone of insects buzzing was loud, distracting him from his thoughts. Frath wanted very much to go somewhere quiet so he could think. He wanted to dwell on everything for a long time. What he *didn’t* want to do was be in that particular moment. Frath very much hated that particular moment. It was the worst one in his life.

“Frath, I need to speak to you,” Albert said solemnly, walking toward them. “Do you have enough of your senses to listen to what I have to say?”

He thought about it for a moment before nodding. “Yes Sir.”

“Good. What I’m going to say may sound harsh, but I have no choice,” the Innkeeper began. Frath frowned, not being in the mood for any sort of lecture. “We cannot raise your child, Frath,” Albert stated, spreading his arms helplessly. “I was willing to make allowances for Sheela, but the girls are already distracted and no one is getting any work done.”

Frath nodded in understanding. He had expected a lecture on how terrible he was for getting Sheela pregnant and letting her die. Shame ran through his veins and he was ready for condemnation.

“I’m going to pay for Sheela’s services, so you don’t need to worry about that. Do you have a place where you want her buried, or do you prefer cremation?”

Cold searing pain stabbed Frath’s heart and his eyes widened at the words.

“Don’t look at me like that!” Albert protested. Tears were welling in his eyes. “I know you’re suffering, we all are, but there are matters to take care of and you’re not in any position to do so.”

Frath nodded quickly, understanding his friend’s position. Gorman’s hand was still gripping his shoulder firmly and it was helping him to keep his mind. “Cremation. Bad things happen to bodies in this city.”

“And the babe . . . what will you do?” Albert asked hesitantly.

Frath stood suddenly and violently. “I will *never* give her to an orphanage!” he vowed.

Gorman stood immediately and put an arm in front of him while Albert took a step back with his one hand up in defense. The innkeeper was afraid of very few things in the world, but the look on Frath’s face gave him pause. “Here now, I didn’t say you should! I know your past, friend and would never suggest that.”

Realizing he had reacted irrationally, Frath put his hands on his face and took a deep breath. “I’m sorry,” he told Albert. “I just . . . I don’t know what I’m going to do, but I’m going to raise her myself for better or worse.”

Albert put his hand on Frath’s shoulder. “I know. You’re a good man, one I’m proud to call friend.” Frath nodded and returned the gesture with a hand on the innkeeper’s shoulder. Albert squeezed and let go. “The child is inside. The midwife brought a wet nurse to feed her so she should be fine for a little while. There’s also a pack with supplies gifted to Sheela. You’ll find diapers and . . . whatever else babies need. I don’t know. I try to stay away from babies.” He and Gorman laughed briefly, but stopped when Frath didn’t join in.

Frath nodded and began walking toward the inn. Gorman and Albert exchanged worried glances before following. They found the baby in the arms of a noblewoman in the common room of the inn. It surprised Frath that Pelya had been taken there because he was certain Albert didn’t want to disrupt the patrons.

Confirming his thoughts, Albert spoke out. “Here, what is this then? Why has the baby been brought to the common room?”

“I wished to see the child, Albert,” the noblewoman holding Pelya stated haughtily. She was about a foot shorter than Frath and was wearing an expensive crimson dress accessorized by a silk hat with fresh flowers embroidered into it. “I liked the young woman. Sheela was pleasant to me. It saddens me that she is gone.” She looked at the two guardsmen then pointed at Frath. “Is this the father? The one who looks as though all the light in the world has disappeared? Yes, that is him isn’t it?” She came over to Frath with the baby. “Your betrothed spoke highly of you and I could see love in her eyes whenever she said your name.”

She placed Pelya in Frath’s arms and he nestled her as securely as possible. The little eyes opened for a moment, recognized him, and then closed to go back to sleep.

The noble lady rubbed Pelya's cheek with the back of a finger. "What will you do with her, young man?"

"I'm going to raise her," Frath answered with head held high.

She gave him an appraising look. "I am very pleased to hear that. I believe you may just do a decent job of it. There's something about the dedication in your eyes and the resolve in your spine that I like." She opened the small bag that was over her shoulder and took out a pouch. From it, she pulled a gold piece and a silver piece and tucked them into Pelya's blankets. "Care well for her."

"Th . . . thank you, Milady," Frath stammered gratefully. It was a lot of money to give. The noble lady curtsied and went back to her seat.

As Frath turned to leave, a knight wearing normal clothing stood and walked over. Dark blonde hair washed over his shoulders. His beard and mustache were thick, but neatly trimmed. Sky blue eyes were soft and compassionate as he placed a silver piece in the blanket. "May Reanna's light shine on you and bless you, child." He kissed Pelya's forehead, a great honor. There weren't many Knights of Reanna, Goddess of the Sun, and they were some of the most valiant in the world.

As he stepped back, another knight and his lady approached arm in arm. They each tucked a silver in the child's blankets and spoke a blessing. Frath couldn't keep tears from flowing down his cheeks as he stood there while twelve other nobles, knights and ladies came and deposited silver pieces in the blankets.

When they were done, Sergeant Gorman led Frath through the front door. Everyone watched sadly as the desolate man and his infant child entered the terrible city.

Chapter 7

No one bothered them on the way to the barracks. Sergeant Gorman was known as a fierce swordsman and Frath was an imposing presence even with a baby in his arms. There was only a dim glow of sunlight in the west as nighttime was creeping in. Lanterns were lit, but Frath in his grief preferred the darkness.

The Dralin City Guard District, or Guard District as most people called it, was more of a military fortress than a real district. An Altordan army general, Izamel, built it long ago for his personal use. He redirected military funds to do so rather than use his own money. In addition to some of the best military architects and engineers, he hired wizards to help strengthen the entire fortress and to protect it from magic.

Once the fortress was finished, Izamel decided that *he* should run the kingdom instead of letting a bunch of wizards do it. He declared war on the Grand Assembly of Wizards and then sat in the safety of his fortress while his troops attacked the Grand Assembly's Estate.

General Izamel and every officer who had sworn loyalty to him died a few hours later. The wizards were vastly more powerful than a silly general sitting in a fortress. It took very little effort to defeat him once the wizards who had created the wards protecting the fortress realized that they would suffer under Izamel's rule. They deactivated the wards and shortly thereafter, wizards overran the fortress, easily incapacitating whatever swordsmen hadn't foolishly attacked the Grand Assembly.

Other than the officers, there was very little loss of life. Every soldier in Dralin was rounded up and forced to the fortress. Powerful spells kept them from attacking or

fighting in any way. An announcement was made that they would each be given a chance to serve the High Council. They would swear fealty and be magically bound to it. If they betrayed that oath, they would instantly die a terrible death. The alternative was to suffer the horrible death immediately for the crime of treason.

Thus was born the Dralin City Guard. Dralin had become overrun with crime and no one was safe. General Izamel may have been an idiot for attacking the wizards, but he had the best training regimens in Altordan or any other country. The City Guard began restoring order and destroying crime. However, the purveyors of that crime were so powerful that the guard lost half its number in the first year without fully eradicating the problem.

More recruits were hired and trained under the vigorous regimen. The city settled into a balance of order versus chaos. Order hadn't gained much ground in the centuries since, but the City Guard prevented things from becoming so terrible again.

Each thirty foot thick wall of the eight-sided district had two gates for people to walk through and a large double gate for large deliveries. Gorman and Frath reentered through the main gate of the northwest wall and returned to the barracks. Corporal Willmas and other members of Gorman's squad were waiting for them. The corporal had made certain that everything was spotless, not wanting to risk Gorman's wrath by letting the squad remain idle. The squad consisted of four units of six guards, men and women, plus a sergeant and corporal.

They walked to Frath's bunk where Gorman had him sit down on the footlocker. The bunks were made of wrought iron with simple mattresses sitting atop thin wooden box frames. There were rows of fifteen on each side of the wide center aisle, leaving a few extra. The walls and floor were stone that helped keep it cool in the summer and warm in the winter. Small mats at the side of each bunk were a measure of comfort for the feet of the tough guards.

Pelya continued to sleep peacefully in Frath's arms. He liked holding her even though he was terrified by how fragile she was. He just wished Sheela could hold her. The thought drove another chill dagger through his heart. Frath had never realized pain could be so cold. He didn't hear Gorman quietly tell the others that Sheela had died, nor did he see the sympathetic reactions and even tears from a few for his loss.

"What are you going to do with it, private?" Gorman asked with his arms folded.

Frath looked up. There was nothing but compassion and concern in the sergeant's face. Frath had never seen this side of him. Sergeant Gorman was one of the toughest and most respected men in the City Guard. He brooked no nonsense and Frath admired the man more than anyone. The sergeant's going with him to the inn was surprising. Even more so was his bringing Frath back to the barracks with the baby. "It, Sergeant?" Frath asked.

"It. The baby," he clarified, pointing at the bundle. "You said you're going to keep it, but what are you doing with it?"

"I . . . I don't know. I know I can't stay here, but . . ." Frath sighed. "Maybe I can find a job where they'll let me care for her."

"What about Lady Pallon?" a female private named Bava asked. She had been in the same unit as Frath for over a year. Her personality was normally as fiery as her red hair.

Frath shook his head. “Lady Pallon’s daughter left a newborn baby on the doorstep a couple of months ago then disappeared. Lady Pallon is raising the babe because it’s family, but she’s angry at being put in that situation and there’s no way I can take Pelya to her.”

“Pelya, that’s an odd name,” said a tinny voiced private named Bobbell. He was short and thin-faced, but very fast. Frath got along well with him.

“Sheela and I like it,” Frath replied without further explanation. Bobbell shrugged, not willing to upset his friend. Not many people pushed Frath to talk too much. Not only was he quiet, but he was the best fighter in the squad by far.

Sergeant Gorman began pacing back and forth. After a moment, he stopped and looked around at everyone. It looked as though he was about to issue an order, but he went back to pacing instead. The squad exchanged glances of surprise.

The sergeant stopped in front of Frath. “What if you could raise the child in the barracks? Would you stay?”

Jaws literally dropped. Frath opened his mouth to speak, but closed it again when words failed to come. His face twisted slightly in the opposite direction of his nose. “Huh?” he finally asked with great eloquence.

Gorman kicked the corner of the bunk, needing to let out steam. His hands were folded behind his back and his forehead was creased in thought. The man who made officers shake in their boots when he yelled looked unsure of himself. “You’re a good soldier, Frath. You have a lot of potential and I’m not willing to lose you.”

Frath’s heart filled with pride at the high praise. The pride deflated quickly when he remembered the circumstances of the day. Every time he thought about Sheela, the pain felt new and raw.

“I see how much you hurt, Frath, and I’m sorry.” Gorman took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. “Keep the babe here with you. We’ll move you to the room in the back where she won’t disturb the others too much if she cries. Albert told me that we could come get the crib Sheela had in her room.”

The squad exchanged looks of amazement. Raise a child in the barracks? The mere suggestion was a shock. Frath frowned. “What about everyone else?” he asked, gesturing at the other members of the squad. “It doesn’t seem fair to ask them to put up with a child.”

“I think it’s a great idea. You’d better stay!” Bava demanded, her strong alto voice filling the barracks. Suddenly every one of them chimed in, yelling words of encouragement and pumping their fists in the air.

“I’m not great with kids, but I’ll do whatever I can to help, Frath,” Bobbell said. Others chimed in, offering to help as well. A few even began working out a schedule of who would watch Pelya when Frath couldn’t. Frath observed the reactions and felt tears begin to flow down his face again. His shoulders shook and it took all his fortitude not to disturb Pelya.

Bava took the babe from his arms. “I promise to protect her with my life,” she told him, tears flowing down her own cheeks. Pelya opened her eyes again and decided that the red headed woman was alright before yawning and falling right back asleep.

“We’ll feed her goat’s milk. Even with the extra coin, you can’t afford a wet nurse and getting one in here along with the baby would be impossible,” Gorman said, pacing back and forth again. He ran fingers through his short-cropped, light-brown hair. The

sergeant was one of the few who never went with the popular style, claiming that long hair was for sissies. He stopped and leaned over Frath. "You're serious about raising her?" His chocolate-brown eyes pierced Frath's, looking straight into his soul. Gorman's stare unnerved Frath, along with everyone else who had ever been pinned by those eyes.

"Yes, Sergeant. She's my daughter and I'm going to raise her," Frath answered with conviction.

Gorman stepped back and nodded. "Then it's settled. Pelya is a member of our squad."

A cheer burst from the squad, but it ended abruptly when the baby cried. Her sleep had been disturbed and she was angry about it. Bava spoke up, "How soon can we get that goat's milk?"

The sergeant barked out an order for a couple of privates to run to get some. He sent a few more to get the crib and anything else that might be at the inn. Frath dug through the supplies in the bag for a pacifier he had bought at the market with Sheela. The loss iced his veins again as he wished she could see the child they'd created.

When he brought the pacifier to Pelya's mouth, she took it and quieted down, but her eyes expressed displeasure at being silenced. Bava chuckled. "Oh my. She's going to be a spitfire, she is. You . . . we have our hands full."

"Sergeant," Corporal Willmas said with a finger in the air.

"Yeah, Corporal?"

"What about Captain Duuth? There's no way he'll allow a child in the barracks. He looks for every opportunity to crush our spirit." The corporal's words immediately dampened the mood in the room.

Gorman grinned slyly and a cunning gleam lit his eyes. "Oh yes he will." He turned to Frath. "Bava looks to have the babe well in hand. You come with me, Private. We're going to go have a talk with the good captain. I know a few things about him that powerful people might find extremely interesting. I've been keeping them to myself, but perhaps this is a good time to mention them."

More shocked looks were exchanged. Blackmailing an officer was punishable by death, but Gorman's squad knew their leader wasn't just strong and good with a sword, he also had a sharp mind that made him ten times more dangerous.

A few minutes later, they walked into the Captain's offices. Gorman walked past the lieutenant at the desk too quickly for the man to do anything more than jump up and say, "Ahh, what is your busi . . ." The lieutenant's arm was outstretched with an index finger in the air as though to protest. Frath followed the sergeant through the door.

Captain Duuth was a slaving weasel of a man, if one were to put it nicely. He had only been promoted to captain because of his ability to connect his lips to the behinds of very powerful mages within the High Council's offices. Some people said he did so literally. His squads tended to do a great deal of unproductive work and make arrests that were questionable and often politically motivated. Duuth would order units not to patrol certain areas at certain times and even give a squad the day off if it suited his ulterior

motives. It was a testament to men like Gorman and a couple of other sergeants that they accomplished their duty and protected the city in spite of their captain.

When Gorman burst through the door, Captain Duuth jumped in surprise. With a guilty look on his face, the captain quickly stuffed papers into a drawer. Candles along the wall and a single lantern on the desk provided the only light. A large fireplace to the right had been unlit for a few months. There were crossed swords on the wall behind the desk and a window on the wall to the left. Other than that, the stone walls were bare as was the floor. Frath was surprised that an officer wouldn't have carpets to keep his feet warm and comfortable.

The lieutenant ran in after them with a look of consternation on his face. "That will be all, Lieutenant," Duuth said in a nasal whine. He waved the junior officer away with a look of contempt on his face. "Well, what is it, Sergeant?" the captain asked, turning his attention to Gorman. "Why are you barging into my office like some hulking barbarian?" He flicked his gaze in Frath's direction. Upon seeing the private's markings and youth, he ignored Frath's presence entirely.

Duuth's scraggly eyebrows rose for his next comment, pushing his balding brown hair even farther back on his head. "Civilized people set appointments you know . . . then again *you* wouldn't know because you're not civilized!" He looked as though he was telling the best joke in the world, jabbing his finger at the sergeant and leaning forward. "You've been hit in the head with a sword too often!" The captain then burst out with a horribly nasal laugh that made the hairs on the back of Frath's neck stand up. It was a good thing Duuth thought himself funny, because neither of the other men did. Frath thought the chinless weasel's laugh sounded a bit strained, so perhaps the captain was only stroking his own ego.

Sergeant Gorman abruptly turned and marched to the door, yanking it open. The lieutenant fell through and landed in a heap on the floor. Gorman picked the man up by the scruff of the neck and slammed him against the wall. "Get back to work, you diseased worm!" He physically threw the man out of the office and slammed the door.

Duuth visibly cowered as Gorman turned around and strode purposefully to the desk, placed his burly hands on the top and spoke with a growl. "We have a dire situation, Captain."

The rodent-faced officer sat down in his chair and fearfully wiped his perspiring brow with a stained, lacy handkerchief. "Uh . . . oh . . . Oh? We do? What situation is dire?"

Gorman stabbed a finger in Frath's direction. "That . . . is Private Frath Jornin. He is one of our best men and has a lot of potential. The problem is that we're about to lose him and we *don't* want that."

It was the highest praise Frath had ever heard his sergeant give anyone and he felt a blush rising in his face. Captain Duuth leaned forward and squinted at Frath. "I haven't heard of him. Why are we going to lose him?" His dull green eyes glinted with the smallest amount of curiosity.

The Sergeant slammed a fist against the desk, causing the captain and Frath to jump at the loud thump. In a low, raspy voice he said, "Because Frath is stuck raising a baby girl all by himself. The only way he can stay is if he raises her in the barracks." Gorman straightened and gave a sharp nod. "We all know that's against policy of course," he finished matter-of-factly.

Duuth responded with a little surprise and a lot of disdain. “Well of course it’s against policy! What a silly idea, raising a baby in the barracks. What a stupid thought.” The terrible whine of a laugh emanated from the captain’s bent nose again. Frath cringed at the sound as he wondered what his sergeant was working toward.

“Exactly what policy is it that says children can’t be raised in the barracks, Captain?” Gorman asked while scratching his stubbly head.

The horrible laugh ceased instantly, leaving silence hanging thickly in the room. Captain Duuth rubbed the side of his oblong head as though he had been smacked in the face. “Ehh? What do you mean, ‘what policy?’”

The sergeant leaned with one hand on the desk and an inquisitive look on his face. “Well . . . there must be a policy against raising children in the barracks of course.” He gestured at a bookshelf standing beside the door. Thick books about law and policy filled its shelves. “You know every single policy in the Guard. You’ve even written a few. I was just wondering exactly which policy forbids raising kids in the barracks.”

Captain Duuth sat there looking dumfounded at Gorman. It was a look that actually fit his face. Then his features began to pinch. Frath had never seen someone’s face pinch before. He stared in fascination.

As it happened, the Captain was responsible for teaching law and policy. It also happened that Sergeant Gorman was his best student and knew every policy of the Guard almost as well as Duuth. Because of his intelligence and fighting ability combined, Gorman was expected to become an officer in a few years and advance high in rank.

Duuth’s eyes squinted in suspicion. “What are you getting at, Sergeant?” he asked slowly and deliberately. Then his eyes widened. “Oh no. No. Ohhh no!” He stood up in alarm. “You can’t be serious?! Of course there’s no actual policy written against it. Because no one has ever been stupid enough to consider raising a child in the barracks.” He stared at Gorman. Then he turned his gaze on Frath. Both men looked grimly back at their captain. “You really *are* serious! You want to raise a *child* in the barracks?! I’ve never heard of such a thing.” His voice became thoughtful as he considered the matter inwardly. “How extraordinary.” Captain Duuth pulled open a drawer and grabbed a piece of parchment, setting it on the desk while sitting down. “I’ll just go ahead and write that policy right now.”

Sergeant Gorman’s hand smacked down loudly on the page, causing Duuth to jump. “No . . . You will *not* write that policy, Captain,” he said in a quiet, deadly tone that had terrified greater men. Duuth gulped loudly, his protruding Adam’s apple bouncing up and down. He shrank into his chair as Gorman leaned over him, hand still on the parchment. “You *will* allow this man to raise his child in the barracks. You will *not* throw a fuss about it and everything *will* be done very quietly.”

Gorman slowly straightened. “We won’t ask you to approve of it or sign anything. The only thing we *will* ask of you is to turn a blind eye . . . just like I’ve been turning a blind eye to the fact that you are having an affair with Assembly Member Beautilla’s lovely daughter, taking her to very seedy clubs within the Orange Sash District.” Gorman winked at the captain. “There’s not exactly a policy against that either, is there?” he asked with a short laugh.

Captain Duuth became angrier and angrier until Gorman mentioned the assembly member’s daughter, and then his face went white. It didn’t have far to go to reach that color, having been rather chalky to begin with. “You can’t know about . . . You can’t

tell! . . . Get out!” he shouted, standing up and waving an arm furiously. His bony hands shook. “You get out of my office right now! Keep the brat in the barracks for all I care. *Get out!*” His eyes narrowed until they were thin slits. “Just get out,” he finished in a harsh whisper as the two guardsmen walked through the door.

Chapter 8

“Pelya is the most wonderful baby I’ve ever seen,” Private Malwy told Frath. He was short, stocky and had a jolly manner that made people smile. His green eyes lit up whenever he came around the baby and he was always one of the first in line to take care of her. “I only wish you were behaving as well as her,” he told Frath with crossed arms and lowered brow.

They were in the barracks a week after Sheela’s death. Malwy had just put Pelya to bed and was standing in front of Frath along with Bobbell and another private named Herman. Frath glared at them, annoyed that they had cornered him.

“You can glare at us all you like, Frath,” Herman said in irritation. Average height with brown hair and eyes, he was unremarkable in most ways, which made him dangerous because his opponents tended to dismiss or underestimate him. Added to that, he fought dirty. “You’re not eating, you’re hardly sleeping, you have bags under your eyes and you’re angry all the time. You take good care of Pelya, but not yourself.”

“What’s going on here?” Gorman asked, coming up behind the men.

“It’s Frath, Sergeant,” Bobbell said with a gesture of disgust at their friend. “He’s acting like a petulant child. I know he’s still upset, but at some point he’s going to have to figure out how to rejoin the squad and we’ve all been helping with the baby.”

Gorman folded his arms and studied Frath for a moment. Frath stared back sullenly. He couldn’t stop being angry. It was eating away at him from the inside out. Taking care of Pelya was the only thing he wanted to do, but he was starting to resent the child for causing her mother’s death and it was a dangerous feeling that frightened him to no end.

“You have one day to get your head on straight, Private.” It was a command that brooked no disobedience. “Take this day off and go wherever it is you always disappear to. I expect you to come back here first thing in the morning with a healthy appetite and a positive attitude.”

Frath looked at him incredulously, wondering how in the world his sergeant could think it to be that easy. He then glared at each of the privates, but they didn’t budge a bit. Herman jabbed a finger in his face. “It’s for your own good. You have things to figure out and not a lot of time to do it, so I suggest you get started.”

“What about Pelya?” Frath demanded stubbornly as he stood.

“You know she’s fine here. We’ll take good care of her,” Malwy stated firmly. “We’re her family too.”

Frath knew it was true and nodded slowly. Everyone in the squad loved Pelya. There was something about her that made them fall in love right away. She cried only when she needed something like a bottle or a diaper change. Her tiny grip was strong and she loved to gnaw on people’s fingers. She inherited black hair from her father and it looked like her eyes would remain just as brilliantly blue. Luckily, she received her mother’s pretty nose and face.

“Go, Private,” Gorman ordered.

Frath looked back toward his room where Pelya was sleeping quietly, and then he left the barracks.

Frath stood in front of the Shining Shield Inn, staring at it blankly. He didn't remember walking there or know why he had come. Sheela wasn't there anymore. Albert and Purla had brought the ashes to Lady Pallon's estate the day after her death. Sergeant Gorman and Private Bava had come with Frath and Pelya as they spread the ashes in the vast backyard. It was a small service that included some of the servants and guards from the inn.

The Knight of Reanna that had kissed Pelya on the forehead the day she was born had attended as did the noblewoman. Upon realizing Frath had not invited any priests, nor had he allowed Lady Pallon to do so, the knight delivered the blessings of the Sun Goddess upon the ashes and the ground they were spread over. While Frath didn't like priests, the knight's blessing felt right. Something about the man was powerful and awe inspiring. Frath wished he had learned his name.

"Hello, Frath. Are you alright?" Albert asked, coming down the steps from the inn, startling him.

"I . . . yes . . . I don't know," he stammered.

Concern covered Albert's face. "Frath, you look gaunt. Come inside and eat something." He put his hand on Frath's back and guided him firmly up the stairs into the inn. Albert led him to the kitchen and had him sit at a table out of the way of the busy cooks. "A plate of food here," he ordered, snapping fingers in the direction of a serving girl.

Purla came over immediately upon seeing the young guardsman. "What is it? Is Pelya alright?" she asked worriedly.

Frath nodded quickly. "Yes, she's wonderful."

"Are *you* alright?" she asked intuitively.

"Of course he's not," Albert said with a roll of his eyes. "He looks miserable. Obviously he's still grieving."

Purla nodded in agreement. "Yes, you're right." She put a hand on Frath's while the serving girl set a plate of eggs, meat and fruits down in front of him. "Grief is only useful for a day or two. After a week, it damages you and can send you into the gutter, which you know better than most is a terrible place to find people." She patted his hand and sat down next to him. "Eat," she commanded, pointing at the food.

His mouth was already watering from the aroma wafting up. It had been a while since he had eaten more than a few bites, but suddenly his stomach made its emptiness known. Frath dug into the meal with fervor, making amends to his belly.

"There now, that's what I like to see," Albert said with a nod. "My wife is correct in what she told you. Life will be terrible at times, I know that for certain." He held up the stump where his arm had once been. "I tried drinking myself to death when this happened, but Purla set me straight. You get yourself straight now. You're young yet and there's a lot of life ahead of you." He pushed up from the table with his other arm. "I have business to take care of. Eat until you're full."

Purla wordlessly patted Frath on the shoulder and also went back to her work. When he finished the plate, she made certain another was put in front of him with even more variety. It felt good to eat something decent again and he realized that he really *had* been neglecting himself badly.

Frath stretched his arms and legs, feeling the weakness from not eating or exercising. The next time he went to the practice grounds, he would have to be careful to warm up and not get foolishly beat down.

Albert came back to look in on him. "How are you? Did the food help?"

"Yes. Thank you, friend," Frath replied, standing and putting a hand on the innkeeper's solid shoulder. "Thank you for everything you've done for me and let me know if there's anything I can do for you in the future."

"You saved my life," he responded, returning the gesture. "And you've been a good friend to me. Come by any time you need to talk or just need a good meal."

"And bring that child by now and then. Everyone wants to see her," Purla added, coming up behind Albert. She gave Frath a huge, warm hug.

"I will," he replied as they parted. "I'll have to get her away from everyone in the squad first though." He almost smiled at the thought.

"How is that going? Are they really going to let you raise her there?" Albert asked in curiosity.

"They are, but I can't give you the details and we're not making a big deal about it," he said.

"Of course. It's all very mysterious and interesting," Albert agreed. He smacked Frath on the shoulder. "Back to work for me. Take care of yourself and that baby."

"I will. Thank you."

Purla gave him one more hug. "Go on your way now and clear your head. Come to the kitchen whenever you need a meal."

"Thank you, Purla." He exited the kitchen's delivery door to the side street and said hello to the guard there, a huge scar-faced man named Damen who had a wooden leg and wielded a wicked double-bladed scythe. The weapon and the man were so intimidating that no one ever messed with him. Frath knew Damen had an amazing sense of humor and was very friendly though. Sheela had really liked him and always brought him treats she snuck from the kitchen.

As he turned back down the street, Frath felt the agony of loss again. His jaw clenched as he tried to control it. How he was supposed to continue was beyond him. Once he was out of sight of the inn, he leaned against a wall and tried to decide what to do next.

The thought of going to Carnival and watching merriment brought anguish to his mind, so did the thought of going to the market and not having anyone to buy for. Frath decided to go to Lady Pallon's Estate to talk to her and to visit where Sheela's ashes had been scattered.

The squirrel let him in right away, not even asking his business. Frath wondered how long it could live considering it had been there since the first time he visited. Of course it was a talking squirrel, so normal rules probably didn't apply.

Lady Pallon met him at the door, not even waiting for him to knock. She was wearing a cream-colored dress with pearly beads sewn throughout the top. As always, she had a hat to match it with fresh flowers sewn into it. "Come with me, Frath. You

need to see this.” She led him through the house, not waiting for an answer. Frath closed the front door behind him and quickly followed.

A moment later, they were in the grounds behind the house. Frath had chosen a back corner to spread the ashes, near some of the willows by an old fountain with a small statue of a woman pouring water in the center. The fountain didn’t work and the woman’s jug was empty of water. It was to that spot that Lady Pallon took him.

His heart skipped a beat when he saw the transformation. The fountain was working again. The statue’s clothing was yellow with gold lacework. Her hair was black and she leaned over, pouring water from the jug that had become blue. The water within glistened with the radiance of the sun.

The area around the fountain had originally been dried grass, but rosebushes now grew wild and the grass was green and fresh. The roses had three times as many thorns as normal and the blossoms were all dark violet.

“Frath . . .” Lady Pallon began, trying to form the words. “The Knight of Reanna’s blessing may have been responsible for the fountain and grass, but the roses . . .”

“That’s . . . unusual,” Frath responded lamely.

“I like them, but I’ve never seen that color in roses before.” She crossed her arms. “They seem to be getting along well enough with the fountain . . . That sounds odd, but . . .”

“They’re pretty. Do you really think this is all because of Sheela?” he asked thoughtfully.

“Yes, I do. There was something special about that girl, but I can’t put a finger on it.” She turned and dusted off her dress, although there wasn’t a speck on it. “Now . . . what about you? You look terrible, even more unhappy than you did before you met her. You have got to be the gloomiest young man I’ve ever met.” She slapped his upper arm, ignoring the fact that the chain shirt absorbed the blow.

“I’m . . . I *am* more miserable and I don’t know how to deal with how much my heart hurts, even though I know I need to get on with life.”

“No you don’t,” Lady Pallon replied. “Let’s have tea.”

Frath frowned in puzzlement. “I don’t?” She didn’t answer, so he followed her into the conservatory.

They sat down at their normal table and Frath stared at the vacant seat Sheela normally took. Next to the table was a white wicker crib with a sleeping baby in it. A nanny curtsied to Lady Pallon who told her to get tea.

“It’s nice when Ebudae is asleep instead of crying about some tooth, a bottle or a silly diaper,” Lady Pallon declared with a dramatic sigh. “I didn’t enjoy raising her mother and I’m certainly too old to raise her.” Lady Pallon was furious at her daughter for leaving Ebudae on the doorstep and then disappearing. She paid two nannies to do most of the raising, but insisted on suffering visibly every once in a while.

“I’d take her and raise her with Pelya, but I don’t think they’d let me,” Frath said sadly.

“No, no. Of course not,” she replied with a dismissive wave. “Don’t be silly. I’m just happy that you didn’t dump *your* daughter off on me too,” she told him, resting her chin on the backs of her hands.

Her words irritated Frath. He knew her feelings on raising children and never even asked to bring Pelya. The casual disregard for another life made him angry though. Frath respected Lady Pallon except for this one trait.

He must have been glaring, because Lady Pallon raised an eyebrow. “My, my. Such a fierce look. Whatever is it for?”

“I have never asked you to care for Pelya, *never*. And I certainly wouldn’t *dump* her off on you.” Frath said in livid tones. “You invited me and Sheela into your home and we only came if we felt it wouldn’t be a burden. If my friendship is unwanted because I now have a child, I’ll leave.”

“My, my. You *are* in a foul mood.” Lady Pallon was completely unfazed by the reaction. “Of course I want you around. You are my best friend, even if you do have a child.” She leaned forward and winked. “I’ve decided not to hold that against you.”

Frath stared at her, and then laughed in spite of himself. It only lasted a second, but that was enough to defuse the anger. “What do you mean when you say I don’t have to get on with my life?” he asked, going back to the statement from the garden.

“I mean you can lie down and die if you wish,” she answered with a flip of a hand. “You don’t *have* to get on with your life. Many people don’t.”

He rolled his eyes, stood and looked into the crib. Ebudae had brown hair a little thinner than Pelya’s but her eyes were pink like her mother and grandmother. They were closed at the moment, but Frath knew there was just as much attitude in them as in Pelya’s. Both girls were going to be spitfires.

“When they grow older, I’d like them to become playmates, if you’re willing,” Lady Pallon said.

Frath stood and nodded. “I’d like that too, although I have a feeling they’ll get into all sorts of trouble.”

“Of course they will. But at least they’ll do it together. It’s much better than getting into trouble alone,” she pointed out.

“Yeah. Good point,” he agreed. Turning back to her, he said, “I have someplace to go. Thank you again for showing me the fountain and roses. I’ll stop by now and then. When the girls are older they can get into all kinds of trouble and then get each other out of it.”

“Take care of you, Frath,” she told him as they hugged. “You’re my favorite person and I worry about you.”

“I will.” He saw himself out and walked to the street. From there he went through the Orphan District to the tunnel. Soon he was standing in front of the doors to the church.

The flowers growing where Sheela’s ashes had been spread were Distras, of that he was certain. What Frath didn’t understand was why the goddess had given him the ring and then let them be happy, only to take Sheela away from him.

He pushed through the doors and marched down the aisle toward the statue. It made no movement. Frath debated what to say, but the words just weren’t coming. He paced back and forth in front of it, pounding his fists into his thighs. Tears of frustration welled up.

Finally, he stopped and faced the statue. “Why, Distras?” Frath pleaded. “Why did you take her from me? Why couldn’t you let her live?” It remained silent and motionless.

Frath screamed. “Why?! Why couldn’t she live?!” When there was no answer, he screamed wordlessly toward the ceiling. From deep in his legs, up through his gut and chest, an angry roar burst from his throat.

He fell to his knees and sobbed heavily. The loss didn’t just hurt, it ripped open his chest and poured agonizing fire into it. He couldn’t sleep at night because whenever he closed his eyes, he remembered the feel of her and the smile on her face. His muscles were tense all the time with no way to relax.

“You gave me the ring to give to her,” Frath accused hoarsely out of frustration and bewilderment, looking up at the cowed head. “I thought you liked her. I thought you would save her. I thought she could live a life of happiness after having a life of despair.” He hung his head again. His shoulders slumped in defeat while a new batch of tears began to flow. “Why Distrax? Why couldn’t she be happy?”

The voice moved through the church like a whisper on the breeze. “She knew more happiness in her time with you than most experience in their entire lives.” There was an edge to it like a blade that had just drawn blood.

Frath looked up at the piercing, violet eyes. They were the only thing he could see from that point on. The statue and everything else faded into shadows.

“She wasn’t fated to be happy at all. Had she not met you, her remaining life would have been short and filled with terror.” Distrax’s voice ruthlessly filled his skull. It hurt and felt good all at the same time. Blood began to trickle from his nose and ears.

“*You* saved her. You gave her a level of joy few in this world ever know.” The purple eyes flared. “I do not *like* joy. It is *not* my friend, Frath Jorin. However, I like you and I like her, therefore I tolerated joy in my church. I even caused flowers to grow next to that accursed fountain of the Sun Goddess because of it.”

Frath took a deep, shuddering breath as the force of his goddess pushed him back along the floor. It was uncommon for a deity to speak directly to a person. Most mortals could not endure the contact.

“She was not able to survive in this world, this lifetime. You gave her happiness and received a daughter in return. Be miserable if you wish, *but do not whine and wail at me!*” The last words blasted him across the church to slam into the doors.

As he crumpled to the ground, Frath saw the eyes fading back into the darkness of the statue’s cowl.

[Chapter 9](#)

Frath’s head felt like an anvil. As his mind began to focus, he realized the miserable groaning sound he was hearing came from *his* throat. Every fiber of his body hurt and his own odor assaulted his senses. Between groans, the silence around him pounded against his ears.

The first clear thought he had was that it was dangerous to be in a weakened state. His training kicked in at that point and he began a mental checklist drilled into all members of the guard. He took a slow, deep breath. It was ragged and his throat hurt, but he could breathe. His mouth was dry, scummy and cracked. Next, he listened carefully for any sounds. There was nothing but the heavy silence. Then he sniffed the air for anything dangerous like smoke or the acrid stench of polluted magic. All he smelled was his own urine and feces, which let him know he had been unconscious

deeply enough to lose control of his bodily functions. Next, he focused on his bones, muscles and skin to determine whether anything was broken, torn or bleeding. It was an excruciating experience, but for all the pain, he was still whole.

Frath was mostly certain he was alive, so he concentrated on the last thing he remembered before losing consciousness. The memory of Distras purple eyes filled his skull and stabbing pain shot through his head. Everything came flooding back: the words of Distras, the promise that Pelya and Ebudae would become playmates, the meal at the Shining Shield Inn, the birth of his daughter, and the death of his betrothed. The stabbing pains in his skull were joined by more in his heart.

His body refused to cooperate when he decided to stand up. Focusing his willpower, he forced his arms underneath him. Frath pushed to his hands and knees with a mighty yell. He stayed there for a few moments, trembling from the effort.

It took effort to open his crusty eyes. Frath wondered how long he had been unconscious. As if on cue, his stomach squeezed in hunger to inform him that it had been much too long. He looked around and saw movement in the dim candlelight.

Alarm seized him and the trembling in his body froze. Then he realized that the movement was just shadows dancing sadly wherever light cast them. Frath blinked his eyes a few times and managed to bring up one of his arms to wipe some of the crust away.

Expecting to see normal shadows, he looked around again. The scene didn't change. Shadows were, in fact, dancing sadly throughout the church. He could see the mournful movements of each one. They weren't human shadows, but they felt grief nonetheless.

He took a hand that was being held out to help him up. As he reached his feet and stumbled, realization dawned that the hand had been offered by his own shadow. A flickering candle caused it to jump away then leap back against the doors before it waved at him with an insincere motion.

Frath smacked himself in the face, startling the shadow. It was the only thing he could think of to make his sanity come back. All it did was make his head hurt worse.

It was more than Frath could take, so he made a run for it, only to bump into the door when his hand didn't open it quickly enough. He barely managed to stay on his feet while he refocused. The next thing he knew, his shadow was opening it for him. Goosebumps danced on his skin, but Frath had a personal policy to be polite when the situation called for it. "Thank you," he told the shadow in a voice that was more of a croak. The shadow bowed and let him walk through the door before following and closing it behind them.

The ground in front of Frath shifted back and forth, swaying like one of those ships he had heard about but hadn't seen, never having been out of Dralin. It was early morning judging by the glow to his left. The entrance was on the south side of the church, so he knew left was east. Frath concentrated on putting one foot in front of the other, staggering to the gate and into the dark street.

Piohray and Siahray, the two moons of Ryallon, were both partially full in the early dawn sky. When the red light of Piohray mixed with the bluish-green light of Siahray, it made the world glow lavender in most places. In Dralin, it just looked dirty. It was bright enough to cast shadows everywhere. He had hoped things would become normal once outside, but even these shadows were swaying sadly. They didn't move nearly as much as the shadows cast by the flickering candles though.

Why are they sad? Does Distra have something to do with it? Thinking about it made his head ache, so he focused on where he was going instead.

Nightmarish figures were shuffling nearby along a side street. They noticed him. Normally he would jog away, but his legs told him that wasn't an option at that particular moment and he would have to think of something else.

Frath stopped and put a hand on the hilt of his sword, but the arm was in the same camp as the legs. His eyes confronted the danger alone.

His eyes couldn't believe what they saw next. Shadows moved along the ground and rose up in front of the figures. The shuffling creatures turned and moved away as quickly as possible. Then the shadows flowed back to their proper spots.

Frath shook his head in disbelief, but instantly regretted it as pain nauseated him. He took a few deep breaths before lurching toward the tunnel out of the district. All his bones and muscles ached badly. Being thrown though the air to slam against a door was the least of what was causing the distress. The effects from having the goddess take hold of his mind made his eyes hurt and his skin feel warped.

He didn't know how long he had been unconscious, but Frath had the impression more than a day had passed. He hoped Pelya was alright and that the sergeant hadn't turned her over to an orphanage. Frath would die if his daughter had to suffer a childhood anything like his.

A group of young men started following him shortly after he reached the streets of the Orphan District. Frath did his best to ignore them since he wasn't in any condition to fight. He knew he couldn't withstand another beating and hoped they would just let him be.

It wasn't his lucky morning. One of the young men moved in front of him and started smacking a club in his hand. "Well, what do we have here? It looks like a City Guardsman out by himself in the Orphan District. Perhaps he's looking for a little girl to molest."

Another one behind Frath spoke up. "Or perhaps a little boy?" They laughed at their cleverness while Frath concentrated on putting one foot in front of the other.

"It looks like the little girl messed him up good!" another voice taunted, eliciting more laughter.

"Look at his eyes. Maybe he found a puddle of magical pollution to suck on," yet another mocked. "Maybe we shouldn't get too close." The mocking changed to concern and Frath became worried about the comments. He didn't think he had run afoul of any pollution, but becoming one of the Deformed was one of the worst nightmares in Dralin.

The club flew out of the first young man's hand. Laughter ceased as everyone watched it clatter along the cobble. "What? Hey?" Then he was knocked down. The others also fell suddenly, scattering in all directions as though they pulled backward. Whenever one would try to get up with yells of surprise and panic, they were knocked back down. After a minute of that, they started crawling off and running away as fast as possible.

Frath thought it must have looked extremely odd to anyone watching to see a guardsman limping along in the middle of a street while a bunch of thugs kept falling down around him with no apparent cause. What the inexperienced thugs hadn't seen were the shadows that pulled on their legs and arms, keeping them away from Frath.

A shadow patted him on the back and gestured with an arm that he was free to continue. *Either Distr is protecting me with shadows or I've gone mad.* Frath realized he couldn't think about that right then. It took all his concentration to put one foot in front of the other. His chest burned with each ragged breath and he could barely stand his own foul stench.

He left the Orphan District heading toward the Guard District. Between them were two housing districts and the South Highway. More people were starting to appear on the streets. Everyone who saw him moved as far away as possible before rushing off. A few individuals stepped out of their houses only to step right back inside as he passed by.

Frath was beginning to pick up speed and walk with a little less stiffness. He knew he would collapse at some point, but didn't care, only wanting to get to the barracks and Pelya before anything else happened. It was frustrating that so many people were seeing him in such a terrible condition. Frath hated showing weakness to anyone.

Each step was white-hot agony and it felt like an eternity until he saw the wall of the Guard District. He wasn't able to yell or speak to get the attention of the guards. Only a feeble croak managed to escape from his throat. He trudged forward toward the large, open gates.

"Guard in distress!" a woman's voice rang out through the morning air from atop the wall. It was as though an anthill had been poked. Guards rushed out with weapons drawn. Nearby civilians put their hands up in the air quickly while they looked for the disturbance.

The first few guards ran past Frath in order to defend him from danger and to provide a protective barrier. The next two were strong men who put Frath's arms around their shoulders and then lifted him up underneath his knees, locking wrists underneath. They ran ahead as fast as possible, flanked by other guards.

The first priority when rescuing a guard in distress was to get him to safety before anything else. Guards were drilled in rescue procedures until they were completely prepared to handle any situation, then they were drilled even more. Frath was safely within the walls less than a minute after being spotted.

"He's injured. Take him to the healing hall immediately," a female lieutenant said, coming out of an office responsible for overseeing the traffic in and out of the gate.

"It's Frath Jornin, the missing guard," a man said from the side.

"What's wrong with his eyes?" another said.

The two men were carrying him too far away for Frath to be able to hear anything else. The comment about his eyes terrified him though. Frath needed his eyesight. Shadows having a life of their own along with sensitivity to the growing light were the only things that had changed from what he could tell. If he were being honest with himself, he would have to admit that his peripheral vision was clouded, but he was sure that was just from pain, exhaustion and lack of nourishment.

Frath closed his eyes for a moment. They snapped open when water splashed over his naked body. "Aghh!" he croaked in protest. He must have passed out, because he had been stripped and was being scrubbed by numerous hands.

"Be careful with him, but we have to find any injuries. They may have become septic," a man's voice said somewhere nearby. Frath found the smooth voice reassuring. His eyelids slid down again as he began to relax. More water splashed over Frath's head and fingers ran through his hair. He shivered even though the water was warm.

Frath opened his eyes. A robed healer in front of him was scrubbing his face. The man had blonde hair and beard and he was studying Frath closely. “What the?! . . . Something’s wrong with his eyes.” The words sent a new wave of fear through Frath. He blinked a couple more times to help focus. His sight was still cloudy on the edges, but other than that, he could see normally. A healer with grey hair moved next to the other and took Frath’s chin. “Interesting. I’ve never seen that before.” It was the first man who had spoken.

“I don’t see any other injuries, Master Verbo,” someone said from behind Frath.

“I don’t think his injuries are physical, in spite of the blood that was on his chest,” the grey-haired healer replied. “Dry him off, get him in a gown and take him to a bed.” Master Verbo put his face near Frath’s. “Do you need food and liquid?”

Frath nodded weakly and croaked, “Yes.”

Master Verbo turned to the blonde-haired healer. “Irmin, get him water, juices, and simple food.”

A towel covered Frath’s head as someone dried him. Other towels worked the rest of his body. Everything they did hurt his skin, muscles and bones. They pushed his arms through the sleeves of a gown. Frath concentrated on breathing rather than the pain and managed not to moan too badly at the treatment.

Healers guided him to a bed where they made him sit. Irmin sat next to him and instantly put a spoonful of warm soup into his mouth. Frath swallowed it down the best he could, spilling some over his chin. Someone else immediately wiped the dribble away.

“Where is he?” the familiar voice of Sergeant Gorman sounded through the hall.

Irmin stood abruptly, handed the soup off to an assistant and then moved to intercept the approaching sergeant “You will keep your voice down,” he demanded in a stern tone. Frath figured the healer to be second in command to Master Verbo, who was nowhere to be seen. The assistant gave Frath another spoonful of soup and he did a better job of keeping it in his mouth.

Gorman stopped in his tracks and glared at the healer. Irmin leaned forward with arms folded. The staredown only lasted a moment before the sergeant backed down. “I apologize, Healer Irmin. Is he alright?”

“No. He’s in terrible shape even though there’s no obvious injury. Come see.”

Frath didn’t like those words so much, but set aside his feelings about it and asked a much more important question before anyone else spoke. “Pelya?” His voice worked a little better that time.

“She’s fine, Private. Bava and Herman are taking good care of her at the moment,” Sergeant Gorman reassured him. He put his hands on his hips and stared at Frath. Then he blinked and took a step back. “What in the world happened to your eyes?”

It was really starting to irritate Frath, but he couldn’t answer because another helping of soup was shoved into his mouth. Irmin spoke instead. “We don’t know, but it doesn’t look good. I believe Master Verbo is trying to find out.”

“Will he be able to continue his duties with his eyes like that?” Gorman asked worriedly while leaning forward to stare at them.

“I don’t know. I’m not sure what other side effects there may be from it,” Irmin admitted, also leaning forward.

“What’s wrong with my eyes?!” Frath demanded, unable to take anymore. It felt like sandpaper running up his throat as he rasped out the words and he clutched his neck with both hands.

“Shh. Don’t speak,” Irmin ordered. “You need to take it easy.” Frath became more irritated by the fact that the healer didn’t answer the question. He looked at Sergeant Gorman with pleading eyes.

The sergeant took a deep breath and then exhaled slowly. “Your eyes are glowing purple. It’s weird. Can you see?” he asked with a questioning eyebrow raised.

Frath nodded, unwilling to draw Irmin’s ire by talking. The healer was glaring at both men and was about to speak when Master Verbo came in with another person. “This is the man, Priestess Calla. Before I try any healing methods, I want to make certain there’s nothing supernatural about it. I think magic may have been cast against him.”

She nodded and sat on the opposite side of the bed from the assistant feeding Frath soup. Everyone else stepped back respectfully, including the assistant. The priestess was short with hair grey from many decades of life. She was physically frail just like most priests and priestesses who tended to spend their time fasting and praying to their various gods.

Her eyes were just as grey as her hair, and the power in them was undeniable. Frath didn’t like priests and priestesses, but he didn’t deny their holy powers. Priestess Calla didn’t touch him, instead grabbing the focus of his eyes with her own.

He felt her look into his soul and didn’t resist the invasion. At other times he might have tried, but being open seemed the best choice considering the situation he was in.

Suddenly, a door slammed shut and forcefully shoved the priestess out. Calla gasped and jerked her head back. Frath became even more concerned. *Someone else* had closed his mind.

The priestess gripped his head in between her hands and came close. He felt her push into his soul again. Whatever had shut the door pushed back. The woman gasped again, except this time she wasn’t kicked out. Frath suddenly saw into *her* soul. Not much, but a little bit. He didn’t understand any of it, but was still awed by the sensation. Then the priestess pried herself away with a low wail, shaking her head. She stood and swayed, only to be caught by Master Verbo. “Priestess Calla, are you alright?”

“Yes, yes. I’m fine,” she answered weakly, patting the man’s arm.

“What happened?” Healer Irmin asked.

“Will he be alright?” Gorman asked over him, eliciting a glare from Irmin.

“Alright?” she replied incredulously. “Will he be alright?” Priestess Calla turned to Frath with narrowed eyes and jutting jaw. “You’ll just have to ask whatever god or goddess touched him.” The room fell silent and they all stared at Frath.

He had no desire to enlighten them, which was good, because he felt his jaw lock and instantly knew he would never be able to tell anyone.

“God-Touched?” Healer Irmin asked in awe. “I’ve heard of it, but never seen it myself.”

“That’s because almost everyone dies when it happens. The very few who do live go mad instantly.” The priestess was refusing to look at Frath anymore.

“Then he’s mad,” Gorman said dejectedly, hanging his head.

“No, he’s not. I was able to see that much before being shut out.” Priestess Calla sighed and rubbed her temples, suddenly looking her age.

“Really? That’s great. Can you do anything to fix his eyes?” Gorman pressed.

The priestess glared at the sergeant, causing him to take a step back. “I can’t lay a hand on him anymore. He’s God-Touched and it would kill me to do so. No priest can undo the work of a god without that god’s permission.” She took a deep breath and rubbed her temples again. “I was specifically forbidden permission and might have died had I not detached myself quickly.”

Sergeant Gorman stared at the priestess, then Master Verbo, and then Healer Irmin. When none of them responded with anything more than a shrug, he turned to Frath. “Well? What god touched you? Help me out here.”

Frath’s jaw froze shut. He was extremely worried by how much Distra was controlling him. At that thought, the presence in his mind retreated, leaving behind locks only on the details of everything about Distra and her church.

“I can’t tell you,” he finally croaked.

“Have you been giving him liquids?” Master Verbo demanded of Healer Irmin. The blonde-bearded man reddened in embarrassment. Meanwhile the assistants sat back down quickly and tried to give him soup and juice all at once.

He took the drink first to try to quench the fiery soreness in his throat. It helped some, but he couldn’t talk because soup followed it too quickly. Healer Irmin turned to the sergeant and pushed him away, or at least he tried to. Gorman was a rock of a man and didn’t budge unless he chose to. The healer glared at him. “You can talk to him after he’s had some nourishment. He might be able to answer questions without sounding like a demented frog then. Now go away. I’ll send someone for you.”

Gorman crossed his arms and set his jaw stubbornly. Master Verbo became irritated by the exchange. “Shall I report to Captain Duuth that you are interfering with the ability of a healer to care for a patient?” His voice was hard with the very real threat.

Sergeant Gorman relented immediately. “You’ll let me know right away?” he asked Irmin, concern filling his words.

The healer softened a bit. “Yes. I’ll send someone as soon as he is feeling better and can talk.”

Gorman patted Frath on the leg through the blanket. “Pelya’s just fine. You get better and come back as soon as possible.” The sergeant looked over his shoulder a few times as he left the hall.

Chapter 10

A few days later, Frath was back in the barracks with his squad. They greeted him with cheers and claps on the back, but also with some hesitation. No one would look into his eyes for long. He couldn’t blame them. Frath had looked in a mirror. The glow was gone, but they were still dark purple in color. The irises glistened like amethyst gems around the pupils and the whites had a lavender tint to them, much like the combined light of the two moons.

It was the middle of the night and he sat on his footlocker feeding Pelya. Everyone was asleep in their bunks and it was quiet in the room even with the door open. Pelya

kept staring into his eyes. What unnerved Frath was that he got the distinct impression that Distra was staring back at the baby.

A shadow wiggled along the wall, amusing itself in the steady light cast by the lone lantern. Frath remembered paying attention to shadows when he was a child, but they had faded from his mind as he grew. Now he noticed them all the time. They moved, they danced and they wiggled, but mostly they were sad.

He wondered again why the shadows were sad. Were they sad only in Dralin, which was a city filled with pain and suffering? Perhaps shadows in other cities were happy and danced for joy. Frath wished he knew. Perhaps it was because Distra was sad.

The thought of the goddess brought his memory back to the incident at the church. She still touched his mind and he knew she would never let go. Distra wasn't there all the time, but she could peek in whenever she wanted to. Frath didn't know if that fact should upset him.

He didn't like priests, gods or churches. They had tried to convert him when he was in the orphanages, often by means of a whip. He still had thin white scars on his back from some of the beatings received when he had refused to pray or worship.

The lonely church in the Forlorn District was the only place he had ever felt safe. As a boy, he would escape to there whenever possible and curl up underneath the statue. Judging by his current condition, Distra had accepted him as a follower whether that was his intention or not.

Frath sighed as he considered his feelings. It wouldn't be fair to ask for a lifetime of comfort and solace, only to reject the one who gave it. At that moment, he decided to give his heart to Distra, especially since his mind was already possessed anyway. Perhaps the goddess needed a friend too. So it was settled that he would follow Distra, but the church wasn't a good place to raise Pelya if they couldn't stay in the guard. He worried about her fate. The world was a terrible place to raise a child and Dralin was worst of all.

He had been unconscious for three nights before waking up and staggering back to the barracks. The healers had given him nourishment and healed his body as much as they could. Even then, it had taken some time to recover enough to speak. His voice was still hoarse.

"Frath?" Bava said from the doorway. "I'm sorry, I didn't hear her cry." She wore the basic cotton leggings and shirt that were standard issue for men and women in the Guard, just as he was wearing. They were cool and comfortable.

"She didn't. I was awake and she made noises at me, so I changed her diaper and I'm feeding her." He attempted a smile at Bava and managed to turn his lips up a tiny bit.

She pushed her hair back over her ears to keep it out of her face and then came over to sit down next to him, her leg touching his as she leaned over and waved hi to Pelya. The child stared at her solemnly as she tended to do. Frath felt Bava's left hand on his back and her right placed on his thigh. Then she looked at him questioningly. "Would you like company to help ease the stress?"

It wouldn't be the first time they had lain together, but it would be the first since Frath had met Sheela. The City Guard had a very liberal policy of letting guardspeople share each other's beds as long as it was never forced. Life in the Guard was hard and

the chances of death were high. Casual relations were encouraged to help keep everyone relaxed and morale high. They were also very liberal about same-sex relationships.

Bava slid her hand a little higher up his thigh. "I know the hearing tomorrow has you on edge, Frath. Some relief might do you good." He chewed on his lower lip and frowned in thought. Bava took her hands away and moved to face him with her left leg folded up so she could rest her chin on the knee. "They won't kick you out of the guard. Sarge will see to that."

He shook his head and spoke quietly so as not to disturb Pelya who was beginning to fall back to sleep. "He's done far too much for me already. At this point, I owe him a debt I'll never be able to repay. Now he's going to stick his neck out for me even more?"

"That's his decision to make. Sarge does what he wants and he has his reasons." Her voice was mellow and soothing when she wasn't screaming at an enemy. It was one of the reasons he liked talking to her about troubling things.

"But why is he doing so much for me?" Frath asked, looking into her dusky green eyes. The dim light of the lantern combined with the late hour gave them a smoky quality, an effect increased by the desire that was coming through.

"Sarge sees something in you. We all do, even if we don't know what it is."

"I'm not special," Frath protested. "I'm just trying to survive like everyone else and I'm in the guard because I want to make the world a little easier for people to survive, even if it seems like a lost cause."

"Well maybe that's part of what makes you special." She told him as she stood and took Pelya. "You truly care about people and it shows." Bava gently rested the baby on her shoulder and patted her back while Frath rinsed out the bottle using clean water out of a pitcher.

"There are others that care. I know you do, Sarge does and most of the squad does. There are others." Frath wiped the bottle off and set it down.

"Yes, but you're strong, fast and skilled," Bava said, smiling at the oversized burp Pelya let out. "You look after the rest of us and you protect Sarge's back. Don't think he hasn't noticed."

It was true that Frath had gone out of his way to protect the sergeant. There had been a few battles where he had turned away a sword aimed at Gorman's back even though the sergeant most likely would have been able to avoid them. In addition, he had stood up for the man when others would cast insults or disparaging remarks.

Bava put Pelya back in the crib and gently caressed the thin black hair that was growing in nicely. "You also go out of your way to defend every member of your squad and we all know it. That's why you're so popular among the rest of us."

Frath nodded silently, blushing a little at the compliment.

"You're also fast with your mind, well read on law and policy, and a quick thinker in battle. That's more reason to keep you around." She came over and put her arms on his shoulders. She was five eleven, but still had to look up at him. "You're also very, very handsome, even with purple eyes." Bava grinned.

"I don't think Sarge keeps me around for that reason," Frath replied wryly.

"No, but I do." She tiptoed to kiss him.

Frath returned the kiss hesitantly and put his hands on her waist, trying to decide how it felt.

The kiss lasted a few moments and she smiled at him. "I'm not trying to replace her and I'm not asking for commitment, just warmth and relief for both of us." Bava studied his face for a moment and then kissed him again. He returned it sincerely, though not with the love he had felt for Sheela. He would never kiss a woman like that again.

People filled the hearing chamber, waiting to discover what would happen to Frath. Master Verbo and Healer Irmin were there as was Frath's entire squad. There were other people from the guard who had heard of the God-Touched Private and they had enough influence to join the audience. The committee of three officers sitting behind a raised desk didn't look at all happy about the crowd though.

One individual was noticeably absent. Frath leaned toward Sergeant Gorman's ear. "Where is Captain Duuth?"

Gorman answered back into his ear. "I convinced him not to be here. Don't ask." Frath looked at him incredulously, but he just grinned.

"Why are there so many people in here?" The individual sitting at the center of the desk asked in a powerful voice. He was the Commander of Internal Justice, a man with a strong face and mostly grey hair. A captain sat to his left and a low ranking member of the High Council's Office on his right. Together they made the more important decisions of law and order within the City Guard.

A lanky bailiff with long, straight brown hair stepped toward the desk. "Everyone is fascinated with the case because the private is God-Touched," he said laconically. "It looks like every member of his squad was given the day off too." The man obviously didn't care what anyone in the room thought about him.

"We don't need this many people. It's distracting. Everyone not important to the matter is to leave," the commander ordered, banging his gavel. The audience started protesting, making a loud racket. The commander pounded the gavel on the desk in order to silence the room. It was ineffective until the gavel broke with a loud crack. The head of it went flying through the air only to be caught by the bailiff who dramatically dusted it off and set it back on the desk, ignoring the commander's glare.

"That was my favorite gavel, a gift from my wife!" the commander slowly stood while speaking his next sentence. "Anyone not necessary to the matter at hand is to leave immediately before I have you all arrested!" He shouted the last while leaning forward over the desk, his face ruddy in anger.

Everyone rushed to get out, pushing and shoving regardless of rank. Gorman dismissed all the squad except Bava, who he kept to provide moral support for Frath. The squad members left in an orderly fashion after everyone else had exited.

Remaining were the healers, a couple of priests and wizards, a few assorted members of the Guard who might act as professional advisors, the bailiff, a recorder of minutes, and legal students there to study. The latter looked nervous about not having left.

The commander motioned that the students were alright where they were, causing most of them to sigh in relief. He then looked at some papers in his hands. "The matter at hand is the issue of whether or not to allow Private Frath Jornin to remain in the Dralin City Guard due to the fact that he has been God-Touched."

Frath was surprised that nothing was said about having a child in the barracks but decided to keep it to himself. There was no sense in complicating things.

The commander flipped through his documents a moment longer while the other two stared at Frath, examining his eyes especially. "First of all, how do we know he's God-Touched?" the commander finally asked. He had an authoritative voice that dominated the room even when he wasn't screaming in anger.

Priestess Calla stood from the rows of benches behind Frath. "I attest to the fact that Private Frath Jornin is God-Touched. In examining him shortly after he was taken into the healing hall, I discovered it to be true. It is not quite as noticeable now that his eyes are no longer glowing, but it is so." She sat.

"Hmm," the commander looked at Priestess Calla for a moment before glancing at the other two members of the committee. When they nodded in acceptance of the words, he did as well. "Very well. He's God-Touched. Why doesn't somebody just fix that?"

Frath turned back just in time to see Priestess Calla roll her eyes. Another, even older priestess on the other side of the room stood. She was the Head Priestess of the City Guard and worshipped a completely different god than Calla. The two women didn't like each other at all. "Only a god or goddess can cure the young man and that's just not going to happen. I wouldn't waste your time following that direction, Commander." She sat down.

This time the commander didn't even look at the others before accepting the information. "Very well. So he's going to stay God-Touched. Why would that make him unable to perform his duties?"

Nobody responded. All three members of the committee looked around, waiting for an answer before Master Verbo finally stood. "Every other person I've ever seen who was God-Touched lost their minds and ability to function," he explained.

The council wizard frowned. "Being God-Touched is extraordinarily rare," he said in a high, formal voice. "Precisely how many other God-Touched have you seen?"

"Oh . . . well . . . one," Master Verbo stammered, the last word lowering in volume to just above a mumble. "But I've heard of others," he pointed out with a finger in the air.

"Of course," the wizard agreed condescendingly, drawing a narrowed look of irritation from the master healer.

The captain on the other side asked, "You had him in your healing hall. In your opinion, has he lost his mind or ability to function?"

"Well . . ." Master Verbo looked at Frath for a moment and then back at the committee. "I honestly have no idea. He seems alright other than some weakness from being unconscious for three days. He also doesn't seem to be able to talk about what happened."

Priestess Calla stood and interrupted. "Whatever god or goddess touched him put a geas on him that prevents him from speaking of it. Nothing less than a divine being would be able to remove that geas."

"Where is his commanding officer?" the captain asked suddenly.

Sergeant Gorman stood. "Captain Duuth is in a meeting at the Estate of the Grand Assembly, Sir. I'm his squad sergeant."

“Duuth?” the commander said with an expression of distaste that was shared by the others. “Just as well then,” he said gratefully. “Well, Sergeant, do you think he’s able to perform his duties properly?”

“Yes Sir,” Gorman answered.

The committee members stared at him. “That’s all you have to say? Yes Sir? Would you like to clarify, Sergeant?” the commander asked.

Gorman nodded. “He is physically able to perform his duties. He’s been recovering this week so he could use a day or two on the practice field, but I’ll be making sure that happens,” he assured them. “His mind is strong even after whatever happened to him. There’s no slurring to his speech and he remembers everything I’ve asked him. His vision is fine even though his eyes turned purple.”

“I’m curious as to what color they were before,” the wizard said.

“They were blue, Sir,” Gorman answered. The wizard nodded as though it meant something. Frath figured it was just because the man wanted to look wise.

“Private Jorin,” the commander said. “Do you feel, without reservation, that you are able to do your duties?”

Frath honestly didn’t know, but wasn’t about to say so and jeopardize his chances of staying. “Yes Sir. I am able to do my duties,” he answered immediately while standing.

“I figured as much. Just checking,” the commander stated as though growing bored with the hearing. “Captain Unermin,” he said to one of the Guard’s experts sitting in a gallery to the right of Frath. “I want you to test him in the training yard and determine if he’s physically and mentally capable to handle combat and . . . whatever else he needs to be able to do.”

A man nearly as tall as Frath stood and smacked his fist to his chest in acknowledgement. Frath had never sparred against the man, but knew that Captain Unermin was one of the five best swordsmen in the Guard. He was also excellent in every other form of fighting and lighting fast too. Fortunately, Frath didn’t have to defeat him, just show that he would be able to handle himself mentally and physically.

“This way private,” Captain Unermin ordered in a commanding voice. Frath jumped to his feet and quickly followed the officer. They walked through a short hall before exiting into an open practice area. The sun instantly beat down on them with the full force of a humid summer. There was no breeze to move the air and keep them cool, so they all began to sweat immediately.

A lieutenant ran ahead and grabbed dull-bladed practice swords from a covered rack along the wall. They were similar to the swords normally worn, but a little off balance from use in practice.

Frath easily caught the one tossed at him and instantly had to roll to the side as the captain came at him, catching his own in a mid-air leap. It was an excellent test to check his reflexes, but Frath really wished he had been given time to warm up. It wasn’t as if Unermin needed any kind of advantage.

Then the strangest thing happened. As he rolled into a defensive position, Frath saw the captain’s shadow move before the captain did. On a gut instinct, he countered the captain’s motion before it happened. Their swords met and Frath leveraged his fists to the captain’s face. He was surprised when they made contact and the captain fell down with a bloody nose.

Frath stepped back, disengaging from combat. Captain Unermin rolled back and to his feet, coming up ready. “Hold!” the lieutenant who had thrown them the swords ordered, coming between the two. Frath stepped back and put the tip of the practice sword between his feet in an indication he would press no further.

Captain Unermin threw his sword to the ground and said a few choice words as Master Verbo and Healer Irmin rushed up to stop the blood gushing down the front of the officer’s tunic. Frath looked around and saw everyone looking at him in awe. More than a few had jaws hanging open. Even Sergeant Gorman and Bava were staring in amazement at the fact that a private had so quickly bested one of the best warriors in the city.

It didn’t take long for the two healers to fix the nose completely. Their healing magic was strong and a little thing like a bloody nose didn’t faze them at all. Frath wished they had been around the few times *his* nose had been busted.

The healers went back to the benches everyone had settled on. Frath didn’t know if the test would continue and it didn’t appear that they did either, but it certainly appeared as if they were hoping so. Members of the Guard liked good sparring matches.

Frath didn’t really want to spar at that moment. His heart wasn’t in it, but when the captain bent over to pick up the sword, Frath decided his heart was just going to have to deal. He took a defensive posture while the captain twirled his sword and started circling. Frath heard a couple of cheers from the audience that were quickly cut off. He wanted to glare at them, but knew better than to take his eyes off his opponent.

The captain’s shadow did another odd thing. It silently warned that the captain was going to attack without relenting. Frath didn’t know how he understood the mysterious message, but he did. When the attack came, the shadow did everything the captain did, but an instant sooner.

Even with the forewarnings of movement, it took everything Frath had to keep up with the man. Two weeks of no real exercise combined with being thrown across the church by a goddess and lying unconscious for three days had taken a toll on his body.

The other problem was that the captain knew moves Frath had never seen before. Fortunately, Frath was a rapid study and learned a great deal from the battle. Unfortunately, even the shadow’s forewarning wasn’t enough to enable him to keep up and eventually Captain Unermin began landing hits.

Frath wore out more rapidly than usual, struggling to fight off the blows. Finally, the lieutenant intervened. “Disengage!” he ordered. Frath stumbled back and dropped his sword, panting heavily. Captain Unermin raised his sword as if to deliver another blow, but only for a second before stepping back and throwing it to the ground in disgust.

They stood there for a minute, staring at each other. Frath panted heavily, but wasn’t about to back down even if the captain were to kill him for it. He was certain he had failed the test miserably.

The Commander came forward with a frown on his face. “Captain Unermin, I see that you’re upset. Did the private fail the test?”

“Fail?” the captain asked incredulously, his expression still livid. “Commander, if you let this man out of the Guard, you’re a *fool!*” The commander raised an eyebrow. Captain Unermin explained, “I haven’t been caught by surprise in years, let alone hit in the face. I threw down everything I had and that man held his own.” He pointed angrily at Frath. “It was as if he knew what was going to happen next. If he wasn’t so out of

shape from whatever happened to him, he might have been able to keep up with me a little longer.”

“Interesting,” the commander said thoughtfully while looking at Frath. He turned to the other two committee members. “It seems as if being God-Touched will not interfere with his duties. It also seems as though we would be . . . what was the word, Captain?” he asked Unermin, who had the good grace to blush just a bit. “Fools? Yes, that was it. We would be fools if we let Private Jornin out of the Guard.”

“Well, I certainly wouldn’t want to be a fool,” The wizard stated dryly. “I say we keep him in the guard.”

“I concur,” the committee captain agreed with a smirk.

“So be it,” the commander declared for all to hear. “Frath Jornin is capable of performing his duties. This hearing is over.”

“Yeah!” Sergeant Gorman threw a fist in the air and came over to pat Frath on the back heartily with Bava right behind. Frath took the abuse as he was led away. He worriedly noticed Captain Unermin watching him all the way out of the practice yard.

Chapter 11

Frath’s purple eyes sparkled in the sunlight as he stood next to the weaponmaster while they watched Pelya practice basic moves with a wooden sword. The seven-year-old girl was frighteningly good with it for someone so young. Up to that point, he had never seen a child wield a sword the way a grown guardsperson would.

She was wearing small pieces of wood on her chest and back for armor in addition to small pieces of wood tied to her shins as greaves. They had been made by a couple of talented guardsmen specifically for her. Shoulder-length wavy black hair was tied back in a ponytail and her face was twisted in concentration.

Pelya was swinging the sword in the exact same patterns that students were supposed to learn, only she was more precise in the movements than most of them. The practice yard was filled with other students being drilled in various routines by tough instructors with loud voices. The clatter of wooden and metal swords filled the air while the odor of leather-covered bodies sweating in the morning sun filled the nostrils.

Frath had seen the grizzled weaponmaster, Commander Gilron Coodmur showing Pelya a few things here and there. Each time he demonstrated something new, the commander would stand back and look on in amazement as she immediately executed the routines.

After a while, the weaponmaster began using Pelya as an example of a good student who listened whenever one of the other trainees was being particularly dense. He even told a couple that the little girl would wipe the floor clean with them if it ever came down to a fight. It was an effective tactic that got many to work harder.

The weaponmaster enjoyed having Pelya around and was very protective of her. Perhaps it was because she was the one person he didn’t have to boss around, or perhaps it was because of her precocious smile.

Gilron Coodmur was forty-five years old and was still the best person in the Guard with a sword, even better than Captain Unermin. In addition, he knew how to use every other weapon ever made and had a knack with improvised weapons. His training yard had tables, chairs, bottles, wagon wheels and just about everything else imaginable. He

taught recruits how to confront people fighting with the objects and even how to use most in a pinch. Gorman was now a master sergeant working for the weaponmaster and Frath was a corporal, working with new recruits out in the city most days.

The commander's hair was mostly grey and there were numerous hard-earned battle scars all over his sun-baked body and face. He had been in wars and seen the worst humanity had to offer. At times, he would begin talking about a battle and then a look would pass through his hazel eyes before he took a deep breath and changed the subject.

"You know, when I first heard that a baby had been brought into the barracks, I was furious," he told Frath in his low, gravelly voice that sounded like rocks being tumbled through a river. "Then I saw the little thing. She looked at me with those lively blue eyes and I knew there was something about her . . . she's growing up to be quite the little warrior."

"Yeah," Frath agreed. ". . . I don't know how to feel about it. I'm scared every time I think about what could happen to her in this forsaken city." What he didn't say was that he had nightmares about it nearly every other night. He tried distancing himself from the emotions and fear, but Pelya was the only thing he loved in the world and he had seriously debated how he would end his own life if anything happened to her.

"You're doing a fine job, Corporal. Not only that, but every person in the Guard is her aunt or uncle and would die for her," the commander said, putting a hand of reassurance on his shoulder. Gilron looked around the busy practice area and at the blue sky that was clean from early spring rains the night before. "You know, a few people have thought to complain about the girl, but I've always gone and talked to them about the matter. I listened to their concerns, of course, but then I set them straight as to how things were going to be." He winked at Frath.

"Umm . . . Thank you, Sir," Frath replied, not really knowing how to respond. Mostly he was grateful for having such a well-respected man in his corner.

"Not at all. Pelya is a delight to have around. I'm pretty sure everyone in the guard showed up for her birthday yesterday. You're taking her to Lady Pallon's today aren't you?"

"Yeah, she wants Pelya to meet Ebudae so they can get into trouble together."

Gilron laughed loudly. "That sounds about right. The old lady is an odd duck from everything I've heard about her and her granddaughter is said to have inherited that oddness."

"Lady Pallon has been a good friend to me," Frath stated defensively. "She's not great with children, which is why I haven't brought Pelya before, but I still like her."

The commander patted his back in a friendly gesture. "Of course. I meant no offense. I like odd people. I'm *your* friend after all, aren't I?" he asked with a wink.

"Yes Sir . . . I mean if . . . I'm just a corporal, Sir," Frath stammered, overwhelmed by the officer's words.

"Nonsense. You're my friend. Don't abuse it, but I'm here if you need me for anything." He nodded at Pelya. "I'll kill or die for your daughter, both if need be, my friend." Frath could only nod. There were a lot of people who felt that way, but the commander wasn't just anybody.

"Pelya!" Gilron shouted. "Your father's here. Time to go."

"Aww." Her shoulders slumped, but then she straightened quickly and held her wooden sword upright. "Yes Sir!" she said loudly before going to replace her practice

sword and armor in the locker that had been made specifically for her. Her voice was that of a child, but had the volume of an adult.

She enthusiastically ran into Frath at full hug. He laughed and returned the hug, squatting down to be at the same level. It was the best feeling in the world to hold his daughter. Pelya was dressed in a bright shirt that matched her eyes, given to her the day before. Her leggings were sturdy, brown and plain -- also a gift. In addition, she wore new black boots and a silver necklace with a hawk, the Guard's icon. Gilron patted Frath on the shoulder again. "Have a good day, you two."

"Thank you, Sir," he replied.

"I love you, Uncle Gilron," Pelya said, attacking the commander with a hug.

"I love you too, little one. Be good for your father now," he told her with a genuine smile as he tousled her hair.

"I will!" She took Frath's hand. "I'm ready, Daddy."

"Alright, let's go." They strolled out of the practice yard, down numerous halls and finally through the gate into the city beyond.

"I don't have to wear dresses or anything, do I, Daddy?" Pelya asked, scrunching her face in disgust at the idea. They had been walking quietly awhile and she spent her time looking at everything. When they reached the Merchant District where Lady Pallon's estate was, people wearing suits and fine dresses became more common. Pelya was staring at a couple of girls in frilly dresses who had stuck their tongues out at her.

"It'd be nice to see you in a dress every now and then," Frath suggested. At his daughter's look of horror, he chuckled and held up his free hand. "Alright, alright. I won't insist. I'm just saying . . ."

Pelya chewed on her lower lip and stared at another girl wearing a dress. That one looked sad and didn't even notice them. "I'll think about it, Daddy, but not so many frills and I don't really want to," she finally said somberly.

"I'll keep that in mind," Frath replied, trying to restrain a grin. His amusement went away a moment later when they passed a group of well-dressed women who turned their backs. "That's the girl being raised in the barracks of the City Guard, the poor child," one of the women whispered loudly. Frath didn't think they meant him to hear the words, but his hearing had sharpened since the incident with Distrax, in addition to his improved eyesight.

"Disgraceful, subjecting the poor child to that," another one stated disapprovingly.

"Imagine her being allowed to play with swords and having to listen to all of that vulgar language the guards use," a third said.

The first nodded. "The little girl will probably become a terrible person. It's really too bad she didn't die with her mother." They all turned and looked at Frath and Pelya in disgust.

It took all of Frath's willpower not to scream at the women for being so judgmental. They knew nothing of him or how well everyone treated Pelya. His daughter's life was much better than that of most children in Dralin. It was better than Sheela's life had been.

"What's wrong, Daddy?" Pelya asked. "A minute ago, you were really mad. Now you look really sad and I think you're crying."

Frath wiped away the renegade tear that had snuck its way down his cheek. Sheela's death still hurt badly and the malicious words of the women had made him vulnerable. Still, he forced a smile. "I'm alright. I was just remembering . . ."

"Mommy?" she asked with amazing intuitiveness. "Do you think she would like me?" The question pulled hard on Frath's heart.

He stopped and squatted down to eye level. "Your mother would love you and be so proud of you," he told her fiercely, trying to keep the tears that were welling in his eyes from flowing over. "You are an amazing person, Pelya. I wish *so much* that she was here to see you."

"I miss her," Pelya said, tears flowing from her eyes. "I wish she didn't die." Frath picked her up in both arms and carried her the rest of the way, not wanting to let her go.

He finally set her down at the gate. When the squirrel came down the branch and asked, "Yeah, watcha want?" she gasped and hid behind her father just as her mother had all those years ago.

"Frath and Pelya Jornin to see Lady Pallon."

"Oh yeah, the lady is expecting you." The squirrel chattered at the gate, which opened in response just as before.

"That was neat," Pelya said, looking over her shoulder at the squirrel that had disappeared into the tree. She then tried to look at everything in the yard: the pond, the willows and rosebushes that were blooming nicely in the spring air. Her head turned back and forth like it was on a swivel. "I like it here! There are lots of places to explore."

"Yes there are. There are also a lot of places to get into trouble," he admonished. "I expect you to stay out of them." He knew in his heart that she wouldn't, but had to say it anyway.

Lady Pallon opened the door before he even had a chance to knock. "There you are. You're late," she scolded him. Then she turned to Pelya. "Well, you don't look too bad for a little child. Show me a curtsy then."

Pelya frowned at the words, but did as she was told.

"Well, that's very nice except for the fact that you're not wearing a dress. Do you even own a dress, child? Or is your father raising you to be a barbarian?"

Frath just sighed, but Pelya narrowed her eyes and responded defiantly. "I own two dresses. They were gifts. And Daddy is raising me the best he can. I'll thank you not to speak ill of him."

Lady Pallon raised an eyebrow and looked at the girl with admiration. "Well, well. You have some fire in you. I like that. Plus you stand up for your family. You'll do just fine." She stepped aside and motioned for them to enter. "Come in. Ebudae is eagerly awaiting you. You won't be able to notice her excitement though because she's the gloomiest little girl you'd ever want to meet."

Frath was suddenly even more grateful he hadn't left Pelya in her care. He still liked Lady Pallon, but the woman's attitude toward children was appalling. They followed her out to the conservatory, which was still Frath's favorite place in the manor.

"Here we are. We have tea and cake for everyone." She gestured grandly at a table that had been set with a lace tablecloth, fine dishes, silverware and teacups, in addition to plates for the cake that was sitting in the middle. "Ebudae, do say hello to our guests."

A brown-haired girl with pink eyes the color of her grandmother's was sitting with her arms folded in a chair. She wore a frilly pink dress with white ruffles and looked miserable in it. "Hello," she said to them in sullen tones. It was clear that she wasn't thrilled with company, or her dress, or . . . anything really.

"Hello," Pelya said in return, frowning at the girl as though trying to understand what was wrong with her.

Frath had met her a few times and was used to the melancholy attitude. "Hello, Ebudae. It's good to see you again." He actually liked the young lady and was always pleasant to her, figuring she needed some kind of smiling face since Lady Pallon never let her out of the estate.

"Pelya dear, why don't you sit in the chair next to Ebudae," Lady Pallon suggested. "Mary, give them each a slice of cake and cup of tea." She then sat down in the chair Frath held for her while Mary served everyone. Frath sat next to her. "How are you, my friend?" she asked him.

"I'm well," he answered sincerely. "I like my position training recruits, my sergeant is a good man, I respect Commander Coodmur more than anyone I've ever met, and Pelya is doing well."

"That's wonderful. Gorman is your sergeant's name, right?" she asked, sipping her tea. Pelya and Ebudae were both sipping theirs while staring at each other suspiciously.

Frath shook his head. "Master Sergeant Gorman works directly with the commander. Sergeant Yengin is my squad sergeant. She's quick with a sword and with a smile. It's been fun."

"You have to start coming more often, my friend," Lady Pallon insisted. "Once or twice a year simply isn't enough."

"Alright. I will," Frath agreed. He took a large mouthful of the delicious cake and watched the two girls for a minute. Neither was saying anything, nor did they look as though they had any desire to do so. Lady Pallon discussed boring details about the way wizards were running the city. Frath enjoyed it, relaxing in the comfortable atmosphere and breathing the aroma of plants and flowers while sipping the excellent tea.

When everyone had eaten their cake, Frath asked, "Pelya, would you like to see where your mother's ashes were scattered?" Pelya had asked recently about her mother's death and how the body had been handled. Frath hadn't known the proper way to answer, so he had just told her the truth about everything. When he was done, she nodded and gave him a hug before going back to playing.

She didn't answer right away, but looked thoughtful. Frath noticed that Ebudae was sitting up straighter, waiting for the answer. Finally, Pelya nodded. "Yes, Daddy. I'd like that very much."

He stood and held Lady Pallon's chair again while she stood. The girls followed the adults into the backyard. Glancing over his shoulder, Frath noticed Pelya looking at the few buildings in the yard as well as all the secret areas the willows seemed to hide. In addition to the ponds, various old statues lent it a creepy feel.

They reached the fountain and rosebushes, which were just the same as when Frath had visited a week after the ceremony. The water still sparkled in the sunlight and the roses were dark purple, growing with no regard to anything around them. He would come there sometimes and sit on the edge of the fountain for hours just thinking of Sheela.

“The flowers are beautiful, like mother’s ring, only purple instead of gold,” Pelya stated intuitively. She stood next to one bush and sniffed. Frath knew they had an aroma a bit sharper and earthier than most rosebushes. He had come to enjoy the scent where others might not.

“They also have three times as many thorns as normal roses and they’re extremely sharp,” Ebudae said, coming up next to her. She stuck a finger out and tapped it against one of the thorns. Then she held it up so Pelya could see the blood running down her finger. The fact that she hadn’t flinched or reacted to the pain at all worried Frath a great deal.

Pelya looked at the blood for a second then reached out and tapped one of the thorns too. “Ow,” she yelped instinctively before looking at the blood on her finger.

“Pelya!” Frath reached his hand out too late to do anything.

Ebudae stuck her finger in her mouth and sucked on the blood while watching her new friend. Pelya looked at her, looked at her finger, and then back at her before shrugging and sticking her own finger in her mouth.

Frath closed his eyes and rubbed his temples. Lady Pallon put a hand on his shoulder. “See, I told you they’d be perfect for each other.”

Chapter 12

“By the Gods, man, how could you let an eleven-year-old girl beat you so easily?” Commander Gilron Coodmur asked the stunned recruit who was sitting on his behind in the hard dirt. The warmth of a late spring day caused sweat to bead on their foreheads. They were in a practice yard for new recruits and the young man being spoken to had just joined the Guard.

Gilron was doing inspections and had come over to see how the lanky girl was doing. Pelya had been helping Sergeant Bava test and train young men and women who were in basic training. The man on the ground was a cocky sort of a person who thought he was better than anyone else, so Bava had placed him against Pelya to teach him a lesson in humility.

Now all the new trainees in their practice leathers were standing around to listen. Pelya shook her head as she stood over the man with one hand on her hip and a look of contempt on her face. The flat blade of the wooden sword was resting on her right shoulder. The commander studied her for a minute. “Why are you staring at him in such a manner, lass?”

It startled Pelya and she stood straight, resting the tip of the sword on the ground in front of her. Commander Coodmur was someone she respected and loved. The thought that he might be upset with her sent a jolt of panic through her nerves. Ignoring the man’s groaning, she answered, “He did terribly, Sir. His form was bad, his balance was nonexistent, and he was overconfident. It was almost as though he’s never held a sword before.” Her sapphire eyes flashed in disdain as she shook her head, flinging her ponytail to the side. Unlike most of the guards who kept their hair to the shoulders, she let hers grow to the middle of the back.

“Well now, that’s probably because he *hasn’t* held a sword before.” Mirth danced behind the sternness in Gilron’s eyes. Shock crossed her lightly tanned face while she considered the concept. “Few people are raised with a sword in their hands like you.

Fewer still have your talent and . . . umm . . . *intensity*, shall we say?" His chuckling grew into a rumbling laugh. A few other recruits joined in half-heartedly, not sure whether or not they were allowed to laugh.

Pelya's face reddened because of the laughter aimed at her, but she considered his words seriously. The thought that anyone would grow up without learning how to use a sword seemed foreign to her. Ever since she could remember, a sword had been part of her life. Theoretically, she knew that other people in the world lived in nice houses and never used one, but it didn't seem real to her.

The commander had stopped laughing and was helping the man back to his feet. Gilron looked closely at Pelya. "I'm serious about the words, but you don't have to take it so gravely, lass."

She took all things regarding weaponry very seriously. Looking at the commander, she saw the humor dancing across his eyes. "Are you jesting me?" she asked suspiciously. "Has he truly never used a sword before?"

"Nay, lass. You have an amazing amount of skill, talent and knowledge, but you're very naïve about the world. Most of these recruits come here without experience. As you know, it's our job to train them so they can survive within the guard." He stood tall and his tone became serious, taking his familiar air of command. "Everybody's path in life is different. You and your father hate it when people say that you are disadvantaged for being raised in the Guard. Why would you judge someone else's abilities?" His manner changed to disappointment. "You are an amazing person, but you're still a child and I'll not have you looking down your nose on anyone. Is that clear, Pelya?"

She felt her face heat in mortification and lowered her head. "Yes Sir."

"Keep your head up," he commanded. She snapped her chin up in the air, but her jaw was set firmly in an attempt to control her emotions. Pelya's least favorite thing in the world was being reprimanded. Gilron put a gentle hand on her shoulder. "You're young, only eleven. Even at such a young age, you're better with hand-to-hand combat and the sword than many adults, but there's still a lot left to learn about life."

He folded his arms and stared at her for a minute. She looked up at him nervously, wondering what was going through his mind. "I'm sorry I judged him. I didn't mean to, Sir."

"No, no. It's alright. He was being an oaf," Gilron said, dismissing the recruit with a wave of his hand, much to the embarrassment of the man. "Here's the thing, Pelya . . ." He paused, considering his phrasing. "You need a little less combat training and a little more life experience. Come with me." The weaponmaster wrapped his arm around her shoulders, took the sword gently from her and tossed it to one of the recruits who immediately fumbled and dropped it. "The rest of you get back to work!" he boomed suddenly. The frightened trainees scurried in all directions, not knowing what to do.

Gilron led Pelya out of the practice yard back toward the barracks where she lived with her father and his squad, a different barracks than when she was a baby. He didn't say anything right away because there were a lot of people around. In addition to saluting the commander, they all said hi or gave a little wave to Pelya, who smiled weakly in return. She had a sick feeling in her stomach from worrying about what he was going to say to her.

A few minutes later, they were at the squad's quarters. She now had her own small room in the back where she slept and was able to keep the things she had been given. For

a young child, Pelya was pretty well off. Her aunts and uncles, as she liked to call nearly everyone in the City Guard, kept giving her little gifts even when it wasn't her birthday. They also gave her the occasional copper or even a silver piece now and then so she could get a treat or something nice for herself. With thousands of aunts and uncles, it translated into quite a bit of money over time. She tried to refuse after a while, but everyone still kept slipping her coins.

Pelya was one of the few people in the guard who had a room with a lock. She unlocked the door and invited the commander in. A few coppers had been shoved under the door and she kicked them aside. "How much money do you have?" Gilron asked, noticing the motion.

She shrugged and did a quick count of the coins on the floor. "With those, I have sixty eight gold, nine silver and four copper. Most of it's in the City Guard's bank, and I converted the values like I learned in math classes."

The commander stared at her incredulously. "I don't have that much money," he whispered in awe, looking at the coppers on the floor.

"I get money everyday," she replied with arms spread. "I've been telling everyone they don't need to do that, but they keep giving coins to me anyway. It's usually coppers, but there are so many of them that they add up."

"You said you have it in the bank. Is it under Frath's name?" Gilron asked. He sat on one of the two chairs by the small table in the room and gestured for her to sit in the other. There was also a bed, nightstand, water basin and a sturdy chest of drawers in the room. A carpet given to her by Lady Pallon covered most of the floor and she even had two paintings and a small tapestry on the walls.

"No, Daddy made them put it all under my name. He said he makes enough to support us and the Guard takes care of most basic expenses anyway."

"I see," he replied. For a minute, he just stared at her. It made Pelya uncomfortable. The commander made almost everyone uncomfortable because he had the ability to stare into a person's soul and take their measure. He rarely did it to her though. She decided to stare back.

He chuckled. "You're not at all intimidated by me. I like that, lass. You weren't intimidated as a baby and you're still not." Then he sighed and drummed his fingers on the table. "You're my favorite person ever, Pelya. I don't like anyone as much as I like you. Thank you for being in my life."

"Thank you, Uncle. You're one of my favorite people too," she replied with a smile, realizing that he was speaking to her on a personal level, not as an officer.

"You can practice for one hour per day, but that's it from now on. The rest of the time, you need to do anything else," he told her abruptly. "In fact, you don't have to do even that hour if you don't want to."

With her worst fears realized, Pelya's heart instantly sank into her stomach and bobbed there unhappily. Tears flowed and she didn't even care. "I don't want to do anything else. I like being in the Guard," she said, her voice broken and trembling. Pelya had nightmares that she would be kicked out of the Guard someday and it sounded to her like the weaponmaster was doing exactly that.

He held her hand with one of his and patted it gently with the other. "This is not a punishment. You need to learn a little bit more about the world outside."

“But I’m not allowed outside the Guard District!” she wailed. “I don’t want to go into the city. It’s evil and everyone wants to kill everyone else and it’s terrible.” Pelya almost never cried, but she was young and this was the worst news she had ever had. All she could do was cry.

“What’s going on, Commander?” a voice asked. It was Herman, one of her best uncles who had remained with Frath and Pelya. She liked him because he always had a quick joke and smile ready for her. Now he was concerned and possibly a little angry.

Pelya rushed to him and held onto him while crying uncontrollably. Her life was ending. She wasn’t allowed in the Guard anymore. She was sure that was what was happening. All her life Pelya had known that she would be a member of the Dralin City Guard. “I have to leave!” she wailed at Herman.

“Leave?! What?!” Herman bared his teeth at the weaponmaster. “What has she done? Tell me!”

“NO!” Gilron yelled. “I didn’t tell her she had to leave. She misunderstood.” He buried his face in his palm as the other five members of the squad who were in the barracks at that moment rushed in, demanding to know what in the world had happened.

It took a moment for things to calm down and the commander was unable to stop one of the squad from rushing out to find Frath. Gilron leaned back in the chair and crossed his legs out in front of him until Frath got there. Pelya stopped crying after a few minutes and finally sat back down. She took the handkerchief one of the guards handed her to blow her nose. The sniffles didn’t go away though.

A few minutes later, Frath came running in. “Who says Pelya has to leave?! Over my dead body!” He saw Gilron. “Commander! What’s going on?” Pelya immediately latched onto his waist and he put an arm around her shoulders protectively.

“Relax, Corporal. I didn’t say she had to leave,” he replied with a weary wave of his hand.

“That’s good, because she’s not!” Frath insisted, supported loudly by the others crammed in the room. Pelya began to feel hope.

“At attention!” Commander Coodmur yelled, jumping up from the chair. It sounded like an avalanche of rocks falling down a mountain. To an individual they snapped to attention facing the commander and put fists on their hearts in the worldwide gesture of a salute, even Pelya. “Are you listening?” he asked testily, hands on hips.

“Yes Sir!” they yelled in unison.

“Good. First of all, Pelya does not have to leave. Nobody has to leave. Is that clear?” he barked out firmly.

“Yes Sir!”

“Good.” He folded his arms. Pelya could see he was mad and she didn’t like it when the weaponmaster was mad at her. Gilron ground his teeth side to side for a moment and then said, “I told her that she needs to learn about life outside of the Guard. All she knows *is* the City Guard. She has no empathy, compassion or even a simple, basic understanding of anything else.”

Frath broke attention and rested his hands on her shoulders, gripping them gently in relief and reassurance. Pelya realized she was still at attention and relaxed too. The others gradually took their ease and considered the words.

“I told the lass that she’s allowed to exercise for an hour per day. She may also continue her studies, but that needs to be kept reasonable too, perhaps two hours a day or

so. After that, she needs to do something else,” Gilron insisted. “Perhaps she can find someone to play with. She is a child after all.”

“I am not!” Pelya protested vehemently, even though she knew, technically, that she was.

The weaponmaster chuckled. “Yes, you are.” He squatted down so they were eye level. Pelya was tall for her age, so he didn’t have to bend too much. “Pelya, you’re more mature, well read, stronger, and wiser than many adults, but you’re still a child and you need to get a better understanding of . . . things,” he finished lamely.

Pelya stared at him, not having a clue what he was talking about and not liking it. She folded her arms and glared at him. The second his expression firmed, Pelya knew it was a battle she wasn’t going to win.

“Frath, you need to find something for the girl to do. She can’t go into the city alone, but with all the aunts and uncles she seems to have.” Gilron waggled his fingers at the others packed shoulder to shoulder in the small room, “perhaps someone can take her out for a day here and there,” he suggested.

Pelya looked up over her shoulder at her father, not really knowing how she felt about the suggestion. On one hand, the thought of not drilling every day was terrifying. On the other hand, having a lot of days out to go see the city seemed like it might be fun.

Frath squeezed her shoulders and nodded. “Alright. For today, I’ll take her to Lady Pallon’s. After that, we’ll figure out some sort of schedule.”

Pelya hung her head. She briefly considered throwing a tantrum, but they never really worked and she was trying to act like an adult. It wasn’t going to keep her from pouting though.

“Can we let me out now?” Gilron asked. The squad members, who now included members of Frath’s unit bunched up at the door, scattered out of the weaponmaster’s way. Frath shooed the rest of them out and they left reluctantly, saying goodbye to Pelya and patting her shoulders in sympathy.

When they were gone, Frath closed the door and sat down on the chair the weaponmaster had vacated. Pelya instantly climbed into his lap and curled up while he held her. They sat there quietly for a few minutes before he patted her on the back. “Alright. Let’s take you to Lady Pallon’s for the rest of the day. We’ll go with my unit. They’re not too incompetent and shouldn’t get us killed,” he told her with a wink. She winked back sadly then grabbed a change of clothes as he left the room and shut the door.

Lady Pallon liked Pelya to wear nice clothes even if it wasn’t a dress. Blue was her favorite color, so she put on the silk tunic with silver embroidery her father had bought for her on her last birthday. Then she matched that with black leggings that also had silver embroidery. She liked the look of silver and steel much more than gold. Her silver-buckled belt and nice boots were high-quality leather, and she kept a longknife in a sheath at her side. No one would let her carry a sword, so it was the next best thing, even though most people didn’t realize how deadly she could be with it.

When she came out of the room, Frath stared at her with his arms crossed. Pelya stopped and looked down. Everything was in place and it was a good outfit. “What’s wrong, Daddy?” she asked.

He looked at the waiting guardspeople and then back at Pelya, scratching his head thoughtfully. “Come into your room with me. I want to talk to you about something before we go.”

Pelya was beginning to develop a powerful distaste for adults talking to her, but she followed him obediently and sat down as he shut the door. She decided not to say anything, waiting for him to speak instead.

He sat down across from her. Frath looked her in the eyes with his brilliantly faceted purple ones that she loved so much, took a deep breath and asked, "Have you killed anyone yet?"

The words were like ice down her spine. There was a severity to the question she hadn't heard from her father before and she got the impression that her answer would be extremely important. She answered, "No, Father. I haven't. I promise."

"Has anyone spoken to you about it? What it feels like?" he asked gravely.

She didn't like the questions at all. "No. Nobody's spoken to me about it. Why are you asking me all this, Daddy? I don't understand."

"I'm asking because you're wearing such a dangerous knife at your side." He pointed at it and she looked down, running her fingers over leather wrapped hilt and perfectly balanced crossbar. "You know how to use it and you've been trained in fighting." He took a deep breath and blew it out slowly. "Have you considered that the time may come when you have to use it? Perhaps not now, perhaps not until you're older, but the time may come."

Pelya had drilled with practice swords and studied about how to kill people, but had always taken it for granted. It never occurred to her to consider it as anything but part of the duty of a guardsperson. She scrunched up her face and thought about it for a moment while Frath watched her. Try as she would, Pelya couldn't think of why it would be a problem, so she shrugged.

"Listen carefully," Frath said, getting her full attention. "If you are attacked or find a need to defend yourself, you already know to take your weapon and how to use it, yes?"

Pelya nodded.

The look in her father's violet eyes became even more intense. "What you don't know is what it *feels* like when your knife slides into a person's skin and wedges into a bone. You don't know what it feels like when hot blood that tastes like salty iron hits you in the face and leaks through your lips to your tongue. You don't know what it feels like when the person looks at you in confusion as they gasp for breath that isn't there anymore and blood gurgles out the side of their mouth. You don't know what it's like when they fall to the ground and the life visibly fades from their eyes, which become dull and empty. You don't know what it feels like to stand over them and *know* that they died because you just killed them."

Tears streamed down Pelya's eyes as he spoke and her face was twisted in fear and confusion. In her lap, her hands clenched each other tightly, becoming white with the pressure. Pelya didn't know why everyone suddenly wanted her to be miserable, but she felt worse than she had in her entire life.

Frath took her hands in his. "I'm saying this to you because the reality is much worse. It looks like you're going to be a member of the Guard when you grow up, even though you don't have to be. In the Guard, there comes a time for most where they end up in a situation where it's kill or be killed. It feels bad to kill someone. Probably not as bad as being the one who gets killed, but bad nonetheless," he told her with a half-hearted chuckle.

Pelya wasn't remotely amused. She didn't want to kill anyone or use a weapon anymore. Undoing the silver buckle on her belt, she slid off the knife with its sheath and threw it on the ground.

"Here now. That's not what I'm trying to accomplish," Frath told her, picking it up.

"I don't want to kill anyone or use a sword anymore!" she yelled in confusion. "I'll be a child and do whatever you want. Please stop being mad at me. I'm sorry! Please stop being mad" she pleaded desperately.

"Oh no! I'm not mad at you at all," Frath responded earnestly. He pulled her from her chair into his lap with one big sweeping movement. Even though she was eleven, her father could easily pick her up at any time. She liked that he was so strong. It made her feel safe most of the time. "No. I'm not mad at you. No one's mad at you. Shh," he said, rocking her back and forth in the chair.

Pelya held on as tight as possible and cried. The day had started out so nice, but turned into a nightmare and she didn't know what else to do.

She clung to him until he finally stopped rocking a little while later. He offered her back the knife, but she shook her head vigorously and pulled away, not wanting anything to do with it anymore. She just wanted to hide away somewhere in a corner where no one would yell at her anymore.

Frath set the knife down on the table and stood up. Instead of standing on her own two feet, she remained clinging around his neck and wrapped her legs around his waist. Even though he was mad at her, her father was the safest place in the world. He shifted her into a comfortable position on his hip and carried her out of the room.

Everyone was sitting or standing around the bunks while they waited. Pelya hid her face in her father's chest so they wouldn't see that she had been crying and that she was in trouble. As Frath passed through, he ordered, "My unit with me." After leaving the squad quarters, he tapped her leg. "You're getting a little big to carry all the way. Chin up and walk with me."

She got down and began walking, but still held onto his left hand. His right hand remained free so he could access his sword if need be. She didn't keep her chin up though. Pelya wasn't going to look at anything but the ground.

Frath didn't say anything else as they walked, letting her mope in silence. It seemed like an eternity before they reached the estate of Lady Pallon. Pelya didn't really enjoy going there. Lady Pallon didn't like kids and Ebudae almost never spoke. Usually, Pelya would practice her footwork and other moves while Ebudae sat quietly at a table, engaging in staring contests with her dolls. Pelya was pretty sure the girl actually won a few of those contests too.

The unit stayed at the gate while Frath walked her up to the door. Mary answered it and had them sit on a bench to the side of the entry. Pelya stared at the floor. A minute later, Lady Pallon approached. "My dearest Frath, I wasn't expecting you. To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"I was hoping that Pelya could play with Ebudae until my shift is done tonight."

She studied the two of them for a moment. "What happened? Something is definitely wrong."

"Commander Coodmur, the weaponmaster, decided that Pelya needs to spend time away from the Guard in order to experience other aspects of life," Frath explained.

“Different members of the Guard will take her out to do things each day, but I was hoping she could stay here just for today.”

“Hmm . . . Interesting.” Lady Pallon rubbed her chin. “Leave her here for a week,” she said abruptly.

Pelya looked up in horror while Frath said, “Huh?” The statement shocked both.

“Ebudae has been especially weird lately and it seems your daughter is being that way too. It’s not surprising, considering little girls are always odd,” she declared with an exasperated wave of an arm. “I think a week away from the barracks would be wonderful for her. Perhaps the girls will keep each other busy and they can deal with each other’s weirdness, which would give us adults a break.”

Frath turned to Pelya with a thoughtful expression. She shook her head desperately, praying he wouldn’t agree. He did. “I think it might be good for both of them although I disagree with your reasoning,” he told Lady Pallon as he stood.

Pelya jumped to her feet and gripped his hand with all her might. “Daddy, no! I’m sorry! Please don’t leave me here! I’m sorry for everything!”

He got to one knee and hugged her. She threw her arms around his neck and locked them tightly so he couldn’t get away. “I love you more than life itself,” he whispered in her ear. “There are secret places below the buildings in the gardens. Go exploring, but not too deep. There are deadly things you must stay away from. Use good sense.”

Frath pried Pelya’s arms from his neck and stood. She pleaded with her eyes, which were streaming with tears again, but he stayed resolute in his decision. He kissed the top of her head. “I love you and I’ll be back next week.” Then he tried to pry her hands from his arm, which she had latched onto. It wasn’t until he had closed the door behind him after dragging her the entire way that she finally let go.

She stared at the door, lost in despair and hoping desperately that her father would come back and tell her it was all a cruel prank. Lady Pallon’s voice came from directly behind her, causing her to jump and turn, pushing back against the door. “Ebudae is in her room. Go get into trouble or something, child,” she insisted, shooing her off. “Go on. Run off.”

Pelya disliked Lady Pallon with all her heart. She treated Ebudae terribly and Pelya not much better. It wasn’t that she beat them or anything, it was that she looked down on them as inconveniences to be hidden away and not seen. Pelya dashed toward the stairs, up them and away from the noblewoman as quickly as possible. It was by far the worst day in the history of all days.

[Chapter 13](#)

Ebudae’s grand suite was on the third level of the west wing. It consisted of three bedrooms, a bathroom, an office, a library and two other rooms Ebudae kept locked and wouldn’t show Pelya. Lady Pallon didn’t know what the rooms were for and honestly didn’t care what the girl did. Frath had mentioned once that the lady was angry at her daughter for dumping the child off. He told Pelya that Lady Pallon wanted Ebudae to grow wild as revenge.

Pelya didn’t even bother knocking. She went inside, slammed the door and ran over to the window seat where she could see the backyard with her mother’s fountain and rosebushes in the distance. She could see that the roses were blooming and considered

going down to sit at the fountain, but didn't want to risk running into Lady Pallon or anyone else. There was no way she was going to let anyone ruin her day further.

Tears started to flow again. She looked around in panic for Ebudae in fear that the girl might observe her weakness, but didn't see her in the room. There was a good chance she would be in her secret rooms, which was fine with Pelya. Looking back through the windows at the top of the fountain, she wished her mother hadn't died and could come hold her. The tears turned into heaving sobs that racked her body as she curled up into a ball.

When the anguish had finally lessened to the point where she was staring out the window miserably, Ebudae came in. Pelya didn't hear her or notice the look of shock in the girl's pearly pink eyes at seeing her there. For a minute, Ebudae studied the warrior girl. Realizing she had something in her hands that she didn't want anyone to see, Ebudae snuck back to her room. A minute later, she came back out and approached the window seat.

Pelya was startled when Ebudae sat down in front of her. The girl was wearing a fancy black and white dress decorated with lace. When Ebudae had learned to sew, she started making dresses out of anything but pink. In addition to that, she had a black hat with purple roses in it. The use of the roses out of the garden was a habit that bothered Pelya deeply, but she didn't say anything out of sympathy for the girl having to live with Lady Pallon. The lack of color in her dress made the pink eyes stick out all that much more.

Tears began to well in Pelya's eyes again and she looked helplessly at the girl who didn't really like her. Ebudae's eyes widened at the sight and then became sympathetic. Pelya felt her bottom lip quivering and just didn't know how to stop it. Everything seemed so hopeless and terrible.

Ebudae held out a hand and wiggled her fingers for Pelya to take it. She did so, and the girl led her into the bedroom where she normally slept. Pelya usually had a different room in the suite for the rare occasion when she spent the night. Ebudae climbed onto the bed, dragging Pelya along. She sat up against some pillows at the headboard and then patted her lap.

Pelya stared at her for a moment. Ebudae patted her lap again, so Pelya put her head down in it and curled up. When Ebudae pulled the ponytail out of Pelya's hair and began running fingers through it, Pelya burst into tears again and lay there shaking.

She finally fell asleep in exhaustion. The day had been emotionally draining and there was no need to stay awake for any more abuse.

Pelya didn't open her eyes right away after waking up. Fingers were slowly running through her hair still, although it felt like she was lying on a pillow instead of a lap. Someone had covered her and it was nice and warm.

"You don't have your longknife," Ebudae said. Her voice was tranquil and low. On the rare occasion she did speak, it reminded Pelya of a silk blanket.

She finally opened her eyes slowly and discovered that her head was on a pillow next to Ebudae who was wearing a purple nightgown and reading a book. "How did you know I was awake?"

“I know when people are awake or asleep. It’s a special ability I have,” she answered mysteriously. Ebudae put the book down on her lap then rested both hands on it.

Pelya sat up next to her. She was still in her regular clothes on top of the bed covers. A soft black blanket kept her warm. Looking around, she saw it was night outside and the room was lit with a couple of candles and a magical lantern that glowed greenish-yellow. Siahray was full that night and cast its greenish-blue glow in through the open window, which also let in a fresh breeze. “What time is it?”

“It’s midnight, my favorite time. Night is when the energy of the moons flows the strongest. The most mysterious things happen and dangerous creatures roam the streets.” Ebudae grinned excitedly, something Pelya had never seen before. When Pelya didn’t respond, the grin went away. “There’s bread, cheese and cold cuts of meat on the platter and fruit juice next to it.” She went back to reading her book. Pelya watched her read for a moment until Ebudae looked back. “What?”

“Thank you.”

Ebudae stared at her, flicked her eyes each way and then turned her hand aside, perplexed. “For what?”

Pelya looked around for the answer and didn’t find it. “Umm . . . I don’t know.”

“Alright . . . You’re welcome?” she replied in confusion.

“I had a bad day. You were the only person who was nice to me . . . and it felt good when you ran your fingers through my hair. I bet my mother would have done that.” She felt melancholy, an emotion she wasn’t used to.

“My mother wouldn’t have. She abandoned me to live with my old bat of a grandmother,” Ebudae responded, just as melancholy.

“I’m sorry. Your mother and grandmother nibble rotten plum tarts and you deserve better,” Pelya said.

Ebudae smiled just a little before it disappeared. “I don’t think I like you . . .”

Pelya looked down. “I know. I’m sorry.”

“I might like you. I don’t know anymore,” Ebudae said with a twist of her lips. “I’m thinking about it.”

“I don’t have any friends, you know,” Pelya said suddenly. “Everyone in the guard is an adult and I call them aunts and uncles, but they’re not really friends. I don’t have any friends.”

“I don’t have any friends either.” Ebudae set her book aside and faced Pelya with her legs crossed. “Nobody likes grandmother and all the other kids think I’m weird.”

Pelya sat cross-legged with her knees touching Ebudae’s. “Everyone thinks I’m weird too, only a different kind of weird. Adults say I should have died with my mother. They didn’t know I heard them, but my hearing is really good and we’re trained in the guard to listen and pick things out.”

“You like the guard a lot, don’t you,” Ebudae asked with an obvious look of distaste.

She shrugged. “It’s my life, or it *was*.” Her chest tightened and she felt like she could cry again, but shook it off. Tears wouldn’t do any good.

“Your knife is gone. Why did they take it away? You never go anywhere without it.” Ebudae was persistent about the subject.

“Daddy asked if I ever killed anyone,” she answered in a loud whisper.

Ebudae's interest was aroused and she leaned forward. "Have you?" she whispered back.

Pelya shook her head briskly. "No. But Daddy told me what it would be like to kill someone and it scared me. I don't want to do it, ever."

Ebudae stared at her intently. "So?"

"So? What do you mean, so?"

"So what's it like to kill someone? What did he say?"

Pelya stared at her, appalled that she would ask, but the pink eyes showed genuine curiosity. She thought about it for a moment and ended up telling Ebudae everything Frath had said about killing someone and how it felt. She remembered the words pretty well because they had stuck in her mind. It actually helped to think about them again.

"That's really neat," Ebudae said after Pelya finished. There was a look of exhilaration in her eyes. "Thank you for telling me."

"You're welcome. I never really thought about it before. I don't know that it's neat though." Pelya was somewhat creeped out by the odd girl's apparent fascination.

"I want to tell you a secret, but I'm afraid you'll arrest me or tell the Guard on me," Ebudae said mysteriously.

Pelya thought about it. "I live in the Guard, but I'm not part of it. That was made clear today." It still hurt a lot.

"I know. Grandmother told me you're staying for a week when I went down to get the food. But I know the Guard is your life and you think that everybody has to obey the law all the time."

She shrugged. "Well . . . yeah." It didn't seem all that complicated to her.

"Right. Then I can't tell you. You should eat something, at least that's what grandmother says." She pointed at the tray on the nightstand on Pelya's side. Then she sat back against the pillows and went back to reading.

All the furniture in the room was dark polished wood of high quality. It was very old and very sturdy. The bed had four posts and a canopy with pearl colored curtains that were open. Old paintings of flowery fields and mountains were on two of the walls while a third had a large tapestry of the city as it was a few centuries ago. The fourth wall had the bed and two windows on either side.

The tray Pelya picked up and set on the bed in front of her was made of etched silver. She pulled the cloth off and put together slices of bread, cheese and cold cuts. Then she took a bite and chewed while she thought about whether or not she wanted to know the secret well enough to keep it even if it was something illegal.

Pelya really *didn't* have any friends now that she thought about it. Everyone she knew was in the Guard and always obeyed the law. From what she knew, everyone else in Dralin always broke the law. At least it seemed that way when her father talked about the city. Ebudae glanced at her a couple of times. Pelya knew the girl stared at her sometimes as though trying to figure out the young warrior.

Weaponmaster Coodmur and her father wanted her to experience life outside the Guard and this was where her father put her. Pelya concluded that this must be the life she was supposed to experience. She turned to Ebudae, who instantly put her book down. They sat cross-legged with knees touching again. "Alright. I promise I'll keep your secret."

She frowned suspiciously, looking to see if Pelya meant it. “Hmm . . . I did something illegal. It was *really* illegal.”

Pelya chewed on her lower lip for a moment. That would be a hard secret to keep. Finally she decided she didn't care. Pelya suddenly liked Ebudae. The girl was mysterious and moody. Right now that was exactly the kind of friend she needed. “I promise I'll keep your secret, even knowing that it's really illegal.”

“Blood swear,” Ebudae demanded, holding her chin up. Pelya knew that blood swearing was only done in the direst of circumstances. It must be a bigger secret than she imagined. The thought excited her. She had never had a chance to blood swear to anything, so she nodded eagerly.

Ebudae scrambled over to draw a long, slender silver knife out of a drawer in her nightstand, eliciting a gasp from Pelya. It was beautiful with scrollwork along the blade and crossbar. There were small precious gems on the tip of the hilt and ends of the crossbars. She took Pelya's arm and pulled up the sleeve. “It'll only hurt a little bit.”

Pelya nodded and watched as the blade touched her skin. “Promise that you'll keep my secret,” Ebudae demanded.

She cut as Pelya spoke. “I promise to keep your secret.” Ebudae lifted the tip of the knife and they both stared at the small line of blood on the arm.

When Ebudae wiped the blood and sucked it off her finger, it unnerved Pelya. Her heart skipped a beat when Ebudae said, “I killed a man.” Pelya stared at her, not knowing what to say.

A little more blood seeped through the cut and Ebudae wiped it and brought it to her lips again. “Grandmother took me for tea to some crusty old lady's house in the Noble District. They made me play with a snobby girl that didn't like me. The girl took me to sit with her grandfather so she could sneak away and get food to stuff in her fat face.”

Pelya thought that Ebudae had a little bit of her grandmother's rudeness on top of being weird, but she kind of liked it. It was different from anything she had ever heard before.

“The grandfather started talking about some war that happened an eternity ago and it bored me right away.” She leaned forward until her nose was almost next to Pelya's. “I like magic,” she whispered ominously. “I found magic books and they have lots of spells that are really dangerous. One of those is a spell that stops the lungs from working.” She sat back. “Do you know what lungs are?”

Pelya nodded, her eyes wide. “They take in air, which is needed for the blood or something. If you stab someone there, they gurgle blood and die if not healed soon. I read about it in one of the books in the Guard's library. I don't think I was supposed to though.” The secret was turning out to be a lot bigger than she had ever imagined.

“Yes. If you stop them, a person dies. One book had a spell to stop the lungs from moving. I keep a pouch with me . . .” She reached into the drawer on the nightstand again and pulled out the pouch. Ebudae opened it and showed Pelya. There were tiny pouches and vials inside. “These are ingredients for spells. The spell I used needed two that I had with me. It also required some gestures and an incantation.”

“Did you really? . . .” Pelya asked, afraid of the answer.

“He wouldn't stop talking,” she said, desperately wanting Pelya to understand. “He didn't even know what he was saying, he was so old and feeble. He hadn't walked in forever and he smelled really bad. I swear he would have died soon anyway.” Pelya just

stared at her with wide eyes. “You promised. You blood swore . . .” Ebudae pointed at the cut.

“I’m not going to tell,” Pelya reassured her weakly.

“It only took a minute to cast the spell. I had already practiced the gestures and incantations. You have to do that with magic, you know. Everything has to be perfect, so you have to practice everything over and over.”

“I’ve heard that. I’m hoping to learn a little bit, but I’m not allowed yet.” Pelya frowned. “Kids aren’t supposed to do magic. Our bodies aren’t strong enough to handle the energies.”

Ebudae grinned. “I know, but there are potions and . . . other things that can help. I found a lot of stuff that I don’t think I’m supposed to have. I have as much fun doing magic as you do with your sword drills,” she explained, wanting Pelya to understand.

It was something Pelya could relate to, especially now that she wasn’t allowed to do it anymore. Technically, little girls weren’t supposed to play with swords either. Looking at it that way, Pelya decided not to judge Ebudae for it anymore. She nodded for her to go on.

“I have a perfect memory, not just with my mind, but with my hands and tongue, so I’m really good with memorizing everything for spells,” Ebudae said matter-of-factly. “I cast the spell exactly right and the old grandpa’s lungs stopped. He stared at me with bug-eyes while he died. It was mesmerizing.”

“Wow,” was all Pelya could say. A horrified fascination washed over her.

“When he left his body the light disappeared from his eyes, just like your daddy said. The eyes didn’t close either. They just stared at me even though they were empty.” Ebudae had a macabre grin on her face, clearly enjoying the tale. “I stared back until the horrid little girl came in and screamed.”

“What happened then?” The story was tremendously disturbing, but Pelya had to know everything by that point.

Ebudae sighed. “Adults came running. The little girl accused me of killing grandpa and her mother agreed. She even called me a freak. Can you believe that?” she asked incredulously.

“No!” Pelya exclaimed even though she was nodding internally.

“Grandmother took me home and never asked about it, even though I think she believes I did it too. They can’t prove anything though because it’s an untraceable spell. I do know that we’re never invited back there again.”

“That’s a bit drastic,” Pelya stated in defense of her friend. “Especially since they can’t prove that you killed their grandpa. They have to be able to prove it.”

“I know, right? Besides, he was better off dead, otherwise I wouldn’t have done it,” Ebudae stated logically.

“Very good point,” Pelya agreed. She didn’t know what else to say, so she sat there quietly.

Ebudae suddenly reached forward and gave her a big hug. “Thank you for listening to me. I haven’t told anyone.”

Pelya hugged back fiercely. “You’re welcome. It’s the best secret ever and I’ll never tell anyone.” She wouldn’t either. It was important that she be trustworthy. She also had no idea who she would tell or how she would even relay such an odd saga.

“I have nightgowns. One of them is big enough for you,” Ebudae said, getting up and going over to a chest of drawers. Even though she was a few months younger, Pelya was four inches taller. Ebudae pulled out a dark blue nightgown and brought it over. “You look good in blue, it goes with your eyes.”

Pelya changed and folded her clothes onto a chair. It felt strange to wear a silky nightgown instead of the cotton nightshirt and leggings of the guard. She didn’t know how she felt about it.

“Do you want to sleep here tonight?” Ebudae asked hopefully. Pelya quickly nodded. It would be much better than sleeping alone in one of the other cavernous rooms. The girls climbed in bed and held onto each other in order to be safe from the dangerous world outside the covers.

Chapter 14

Pelya woke with the sunrise, disoriented. It took her a minute to remember where she was and the events of the previous day. At one point during the night, she had woken from a nightmare of dead eyes surrounding her. She’d been so tired that she fell right back asleep though.

Ebudae was lying next to her, fast asleep. Pelya normally got up to do exercises and drills, but she wasn’t at the barracks, she was at Lady Pallon’s manor with no practice weapons. Ebudae shifted in her sleep and mumbled wordlessly. Pelya reached over and ran fingers through the girl’s messy brown hair for a minute to return the favor of the day before. Then she closed her eyes and went back to sleep.

They didn’t wake up until noon. As they were getting dressed, Ebudae said, “This is early for me. I usually stay up all night and get up in the afternoon. Grandmother likes it because she goes to bed and wakes up early. It means she doesn’t have to deal with me very often.”

“Do we get to eat?” Pelya asked hopefully.

“You like to eat, I’ve noticed. It’s probably why you’re so tall and strong. Maybe taking a break from all that drilling will be good for you,” Ebudae observed. Pelya stuck her tongue out eliciting the first giggle she had ever heard from the little wizardess.

“Come on. Tina will take care of us.” She took Pelya’s hand and led her downstairs.

Ebudae had chosen a cream-colored dress a few shades lighter than her brown hair. It was edged with black lace that matched black stockings and shoes. “Why do you hate pink so much when your eyes are pink?” Pelya asked.

“Oh, I love my eyes,” Ebudae said as they went down the stairs. “But I like them to stand out. Plus all little girls wear pink and I hate doing what everyone else does. Do you know what my favorite color is?”

“Black,” Pelya guessed.

“Yes, exactly. I love black. It’s the color of dark and spooky things and it looks really good on me. I like silver, white and purple too, but black is my favorite.”

“Mine’s blue, but I like black and brown too,” Pelya said.

“Blue is the color of your eyes. Black and brown are the colors of the City Guard, so that’s understandable.” Ebudae nodded, leading Pelya into the kitchen.

Tina was Ebudae’s personal assistant. She was a nice young lady with a very bad stutter and an eyepatch covering an empty socket. The eye had been lost in some terrible

childhood event no one would tell Pelya about. Lady Pallon hired her because it would make Ebudae's life more difficult. The stuttering was bad enough that the girl would have to wait for minutes whenever Tina delivered a message from her grandmother, which would make her late for whatever her grandmother needed her for. In addition, the eyepatch was a bit unnerving because Lady Pallon had ordered one with a painted eyeball on it and insisted the woman wear it. Tina was a poor woman who had no other avenues of work so did what she had to.

"Pelya and I would like some lunch in the dining room, Tina." The woman brushed back her dull blonde hair and nodded. Tina avoided speaking whenever possible, much to the relief of the girls. They walked into the long, empty dining room and sat down next to each other in seats nearest the kitchen. "Grandmother almost never uses this. She always eats in the conservatory."

"I've noticed that," Pelya said. "What do you want to do after we eat?"

"Are you going to do your drills like normal?" Ebudae asked. Her face looked ready for disappointment if the answer was yes.

"I'm only allowed to do them for an hour a day and I really don't feel like it right now. Can we do something else?"

Ebudae's face brightened. "Yes, definitely. There are all sorts of things we can do. Umm . . . I have some ideas, but is there anything that interests you?"

Pelya didn't answer right away, because Tina came in with bowls of thick stew with bread to sop it up. There was a plate of blackberry pie for each of them. Whatever Lady Pallon's faults might be, she always had the best food to serve, even to the children.

When Tina was gone, Pelya leaned over and whispered, "Daddy said there are secret places below the buildings in the gardens and that I should go exploring, but not too deep."

Ebudae nodded vigorously, grinning without saying a word. They both turned to the food and shoveled it into their mouths as fast as possible, not bothering to notice how delightful it all tasted. When done, they left their dishes for Tina to clean up and then headed upstairs for supplies.

Pelya followed her to one of the secret doors. Ebudae put her back against the door and spread out her arms. "We're friends now, right? If I let you in, you'll never tell anyone what's inside."

"I promise," Pelya vowed with her right palm over her heart. It was good enough. Ebudae opened the door and rapidly motioned her in.

Before closing and locking the door, she glanced back to make certain no one was watching. "Alright. I need to get some things." She stopped and looked at Pelya's belt. "I have another longknife you can use in case we get into trouble."

Pelya thought about it for a moment, chewing her bottom lip. She didn't want to kill anyone, but if they found danger, dying would be worse. Moreover, she really, really missed the weight of it at her side and was constantly putting her hand where the missing knife was.

At her nod, Ebudae went to a drawer and pulled out a steel knife that she handed over. It was a little longer and heavier than what Pelya was used to, but it was very well made with a steel wrapped hilt and curved etchings on the blade. Its quality was as excellent as the knife she had left back at the barracks.

“Here, take these too. I’ll get you a pouch.” Ebudae placed three small multi-sided balls into Pelya’s hands. Pelya gasped when she saw the magical runes etched into each side. “The blue one will act as an emergency light if my lanterns go out. The runes glow brightly in the dark, which is helpful. The dark green one will make smoke that can give you time to run away from something. The light green one will show you secret things. They only work once.” Ebudae put them in a pouch one by one as she explained what they did. “Don’t mix them up! There are keywords that activate them. Listen carefully and repeat after me. If you mess it up, you could die.”

Pelya nodded as everything was explained. She set the pouch on a table nearby while they practiced saying the keywords exactly right. She knew about rune balls from her studies in the guard, but wasn’t allowed to use them.

“Do you feel confident in your ability to use them?” Ebudae asked. “Because if you have even a little doubt, things are going to go badly.”

Pelya stood straight and looked her in the eyes. “I have complete confidence. I’ll use them wisely and correctly.” Ebudae reacted by giving her a big hug, which Pelya returned fiercely. In the space of a day, they had become best of friends and complete confidantes.

The large room they were in had magical items scattered carelessly on tables, stands, chairs and walls. There were a few tables that had vials, tubes, magical focuses and various items that Pelya couldn’t even begin to describe. In addition to that were bookshelves with over a hundred books, a luxury few could afford. They were kept more neatly than anything else, showing an added amount of respect. “I found those in the secret places. The ones in my normal library aren’t as interesting. I’m not allowed to go to bookstores to get more . . . or leave the house,” Ebudae said. “You can read them anytime you like. There’s a lot of stuff you won’t find in the Guard library, including a few stories with adults having sex.”

“What?!” Pelya exclaimed in disbelief. “There’re books about that stuff? I mean, I know adults do it and Daddy says lots of people get hurt with it, but he won’t tell me how. It makes him angry sometimes.”

The young wizardess pulled out a book from the bottom of a pile stacked neatly on a chair and flipped through it. In addition to words, some of which Pelya hadn’t learned, there were drawings of naked people on the pages. She blushed deeply and closed it in Ebudae’s hands while the other girl shrugged and placed it neatly back on the pile.

Everything about the room and the adventure they were on was different from the way Pelya had been raised. Ebudae’s dabbling in arcane arts, access to books that would make an adult blush, and tomes of magic were naughty and mysterious. Commander Coodmur had told her to experience life outside the Guard and this was definitely outside. Pelya debated whether to be shocked or excited by what she saw. After a moment, she decided the thrill of adventure, the unknown and the dangerous were all wonderful and she was going to have fun with it.

While Pelya studied the room, Ebudae changed into a long, thin purple dress with slits on the side of the legs for easy movement. She wore tight leggings and dark boots that were quiet when she stepped. Over all of that was a wizard’s cloak. Pelya had seen a couple and read about them, but they were rare in most places and never seen on a child. Dralin wasn’t most places though. Being a city with a higher population of

wizards than any three countries combined, magical items like wizard's cloaks were fairly common. Even then, children never had them.

Upon seeing Pelya staring at her, Ebudae said, "The cloak and the dress have runes sewn into them to protect me from magical and physical things, not everything, but a lot. The leggings keep spiders and rats from biting me too easily. I have a small pack here for exploring." She pointed at a waterproofed leather backpack. There's extra food, stuff for making fire, a couple of magical light wands, some first aid kits and a couple of vials with healing salve."

"Healing salve? That's expensive," Pelya said in awe.

"Grandmother expects me to get into trouble. It's the one thing I have to tell her about when I want more, so don't need it for anything." She winked and grinned.

"Alright." Pelya grinned back. The excitement was racing through her veins and she couldn't wait to go. She gladly took the pack when Ebudae pointed to it and looked at her hopefully. Then they went through an entry into the other secret room. There was a large rune circle on the floor in one corner that took up a quarter of the room and had candles all around it. Everything was drawn in some sort of silvery liquid. Other rune circles were drawn on the walls around the room, though they were in mundane colors. Three worktables had different items on them that Pelya couldn't identify. One had tubes, bottles and vials with colored liquids and looked to be some sort of potion-making table.

"Did you do all of this?" Pelya asked in a hoarse whisper, afraid to disturb anything with her voice.

"Yes," she answered while pushing a series of stones in the wall. A section of wall slid slowly down into the floor and Ebudae moved into the secret hallway beyond when it was done. "I'm never allowed to go anywhere, so I spend most of my time working in the lab. Every once in a while I go down to the tunnels below to find more stuff. I think this manor was built over some sort of wizard's academy. I don't think grandmother knows that though, so shh." She put a finger in front of her lips and winked again. Pelya grinned in excitement and quickly followed her into the secret passage just as the door began to rise again.

It was a stone hallway just big enough for a thin person to walk through comfortably if they weren't too tall. A magical lantern was sitting in a niche and Ebudae quickly lit it with a word and a gesture, showing off her magical ability. When she did, a breeze rustled her hair and robes. The bright yellow-green flame dutifully impressed Pelya. Ebudae motioned for her to follow.

After a brief walk, they came to a surprisingly wide spiral staircase that Ebudae wasted no time going down. Pelya's heart beat rapidly in her chest and she couldn't stop grinning. Hidden buildings under the city, a wizardess for a friend, magical places and danger all wrapped up in spooky passages illuminated only by a magical lantern casting its flickering light. Missing her drills no longer mattered. She was going on an adventure.

There were halls leading off the staircase as they passed the second floor, main floor, basement and a level below that Pelya hadn't known existed. Even after that, the staircase continued downward until it finally came to a large stone chamber. Ebudae spoke a word of power and flicked her wrist at a lantern sitting on a table in the corner.

The breeze ruffled her hair again. Another yellow-green flame appeared in it, helping to illuminate the room a little better.

“This is my staging area,” Ebudae explained. There were supplies on shelves and tables all around the chamber. At least twenty lanterns were in one corner, sacks and barrels were sealed, not giving a clue to what was contained inside, various artifacts were lain out on top of and underneath two of the tables. “That’s where I keep some of the things I find that I haven’t examined enough or that I’m not sure I’m going to keep,” she stated with a gesture at them.

“Wow!” Pelya’s voice was loud in the chamber, causing her to cover her mouth with both hands. Ebudae stared at her incredulously. “I’m sorry,” Pelya told her in a loud whisper. She continued in a more normal voice. “This is just amazing. I thought the secret entrances were in the buildings outside though. I didn’t know they were under the manor.”

“Some are in those buildings, but they’re not in very good condition, there’s more danger and less treasure that way.” Ebudae made gestures in front of runes on either side of the door. Light shimmered momentarily in the doorway. “Wards I placed to keep bad things out. Come here.” She pulled her knife out of its sheath and motioned her over.

Pelya moved to her suspiciously. When Ebudae took her left hand and pushed the sleeve up, Pelya pulled it back. Ebudae took it again and made a slow cut not far away from where she had cut the night before. Pelya set her jaw in irritation, but watched while the wizardess took dabs of blood and placed them in the center of each rune, saying a word and gesturing each time. The breeze would lightly ruffle her hair with each casting, but it didn’t seem to touch Pelya.

“There. Now you can go through even if the ward is activated.”

“Oh. You could have told me that *before* cutting me.” Pelya put her hands on her hips and glared playfully. She narrowed her eyes when Ebudae took her hand again. They widened when the wizardess wiped the rest of the blood and sucked it off a finger.

“You’re really creepy,” Pelya stated decisively.

“I like being creepy. It keeps normal people away. Are you normal people?” she challenged with raised eyebrow.

Pelya shook her head. “Nope. I’m not normal at all. Shall we go find some danger and magic?”

“Yes.” They took hands and walked through the entry. After Ebudae reactivated the wards, they continued. The hall was wide enough for them to walk side by side easily. It was dusty with a few threads of tapestries that hadn’t withstood the test of time. The air was musty and the only sound was that of their footsteps. Remnants of rusty torch brackets were along the walls. There were footprints and drag marks from Ebudae’s treasure collecting.

A few minutes later, they entered a large sloping chamber with a high ceiling the lantern barely illuminated. There were six marbled columns along the stepped aisle, but one of them had broken and fallen across the way, unable to handle centuries of neglect. Pelya suspected the floor was marble too. Balconies above had crumbled to the bottom level. Looking up, she could see that there was a balcony above them made of stone with columns supporting it. It didn’t look very sturdy to her though, especially since there were holes and cracks in various places.

“This used to be an auditorium. You can see the wide seating sections to either side even though there aren’t any seats there anymore. The front section would have had a wooden stage with a false bottom for props and people to disappear into.” Ebudae pointed ahead to a large open space. “If we really are in a wizard’s academy, this might have been used as a lecture hall for important speakers.” She walked down the steps, around the fallen column and sidestepped debris on her way down to where the stage would have been.

Pelya stared at everything in fascination, running her fingers along the column when passing it. A little bit of stone and dirt fell from the ceiling to their left, making a slight crumbling sound that caused them to glance in that direction. It would have been a beautiful place in its prime, but was now a sad vestige of its former self. She looked up at the ceiling and imagined the city above. They had traveled far enough that the manor wouldn’t be above them anymore. “Why doesn’t it collapse on us?”

Ebudae looked back. “There is a system of enormous columns holding the city up and insanely powerful runes connected to each other underneath Dralin that keeps everything from collapsing.” She waved her arms around the room and did a little spin. “This should have crashed down centuries ago and there are even older cities deeper in the ground that should be collapsed too.”

“Older? More cities?” Pelya had never heard of that and she knew a lot about Dralin from books and stories.

“Yeah. It’s not talked about a lot. I read about it in books and from asking grandmother. She didn’t know much though.”

“Do you think she knows we’re down here?” Pelya asked.

“Probably.” Ebudae went to the right after reaching a cross aisle that gradually curved around the area that would have been a stage. There were large openings on either side, but the one on the left looked like it had a lot of debris in it. “That way is a mess and not worth exploring. This way,” she pointed in the direction they were going, “is definitely worth exploring.”

Ebudae continued with the explanation as they entered another hallway much like the first. There was a barely perceptible breeze blowing through it. A rat scurried out of their way into a hole in the stone, but they paid no attention to it. “People have been living on this spot for as long as humanity has existed in the world. I read in one of the books that Dralin is one of the eight portals of magic in the world.”

“Portals?” Pelya asked.

“It’s in one of my older books. It might be in others, but I can’t read all of them,” she explained while moving around debris from a partially fallen section of wall. “There are eight portals of magic in the world. The City Center that no one ever talks about is one of those portals. That’s why Wraith Lake and Park are so bizarre and why Dralin Academy and the Estate of the Grand Assembly are all there.”

“Wow. I didn’t know that.”

“Most people don’t.” She pointed down a side passage. “There’re a couple of neat rooms that way, but we’re going to keep going this way.”

“Alright.” Pelya looked down that passage. It was thinner and murkier than the hallway they were in.

“So people have built cities on this location and then other people have conquered those cities and built over them.” Ebudae paused and held up the lantern to illuminate the

gloom ahead. Apparently, she didn't see anything dangerous because she resumed walking. "I don't quite understand how so many cities have been stacked on top of each other, but they have."

They passed a dark room to the right. Skittering sounds came from it along with the sound of dripping water. "What condition are the cities below in if this one is so bad?"

"Bad?" Ebudae asked incredulously. "This city is over a thousand years old. It's in fantastic condition." She waved her hand at the ceiling. "All of this should be rubble and dust by now. I don't know what the cities below are like. The only thing I've heard is that there are a lot of tunnels below. They're probably in really bad shape. I don't know if the air is breathable or if there is anything living, it would probably be more dangerous than everyone in the City Guard put together."

Pelya doubted that fact, being defensive of her beloved City Guard, but she didn't doubt the danger. "We're not going down further, are we?"

They came to an intersection of halls and turned down the one to the left. "Definitely not. Like I said, it's dangerous and there might not be any air." She turned into the first room on the right. "This is one of the labs where I've found a lot of neat things."

Pelya noticed that doors and furniture were two of the things that didn't fare so well. "You found a lot of books and other artifacts. How did they survive when the doors didn't?"

"Libraries and labs usually have preservation runes carved into the walls, ceilings and floor. It makes everything last longer," Ebudae explained, running fingers through her hair to get it out of her eyes while she opened a large chest along one wall.

"Is that what's on the walls in your secret rooms?"

"Some of them are preservation, but mostly they protect the rest of the house from being destroyed if I do something stupid." Ebudae pulled a sword out of the chest and brought it over. "I found this and thought of you. I haven't given it to you because . . . because I didn't think I could trust you with all of this."

The sword was in a sheath with a thin chain belt. It would be the size of a short sword for an adult, but made a perfectly good longsword for her. Best of all, it was thin. Pulling it out, she saw the blade was the width of two fingers at the crossbar. Its sharpened edges tapered gradually to the point. It wasn't very thick and there were absolutely no nicks in it. Pelya stepped back and hefted it. It was very light and the braided hilt fit nicely in her hand.

"It's magic, but I don't know how," Ebudae said, running her fingers along the flat of the blade. "I don't see runes in it anywhere, which means . . . I don't know what it means." She frowned at the metal that glistened in the dim lantern light. "It's in perfect condition though, and it's not cursed. I spent hours testing it."

"What metal is it?" Pelya asked. The blade didn't look like steel, silver or any other metal she had seen. It looked softer somehow.

"I don't know that either." She shrugged. "It's yours if you want it."

Pelya thought about it for a minute. "It's magical and made of mysterious metal. That would make it worth hundreds of gold pieces. I don't have that much."

Ebudae stomped her foot. "I *found* it on the floor next to some bones and rusted armor. It's not mine. It's treasure and I'm sharing it with you. There are lots of other things I've found that are even more valuable."

“I don’t know if I’ll be allowed to keep it,” Pelya replied sadly. It was the most beautiful sword she had ever seen and she really did want it. “When I bring it back to the barracks, I’ll have to check it in and tell them where I got it.”

“Well then I guess you’ll just have to leave it here for when we go adventuring, won’t you?” Ebudae asked with her hands on her hips and the challenging look back in her eyes.

It was the perfect compromise. “Yes. We’ll just have to keep it here for adventuring.” Pelya sheathed the sword and wrapped the wizardess up in a big hug that was instantly returned.

“Shall we go?” Ebudae asked, grabbing a second lantern and lighting it for Pelya to carry. Once again, a mysterious breeze only affected the wizardess.

After wrapping the swordbelt around her waist and moving the longknife to her right side, she answered, “Yes. Let’s.” They left the room and turned right back down the newest hallway.

Chapter 15

Pelya was sure they had gone further than she would probably be allowed, but that was fine with her. Ebudae had shown her amazing rooms: quarters for sleeping, a large dining room and kitchen, and what she believed to be classrooms.

The room they were in at that moment was a library. Ebudae said it was the room she spent the most time in, but there were many books she couldn’t read. Pelya was running her fingers along some of the ones on a bookshelf in the back corner. There had to be thousands of books and scrolls resting on ancient stone shelves reaching up to the high ceiling. She could speak and read in a few languages, but was only fluent in Altordanian, the language of the country Dralin was in, Common and a coastal language many people used. None of the writing was in any of the languages she knew.

On their walk to the library, they had fought a large spider in one of the hallways, but it hadn’t been much of a battle. Ebudae cast a small ice dagger that punctured it fatally. Other than that, there were mostly rats and insects. As they went further, the critters became more numerous. Ebudae told her that they were entering dangerous territory.

Pelya walked back to where Ebudae had her lantern sitting and a few books open on a stone table that was well preserved along with everything else in the library. The wizardess was studying pictures in one and had been doing so long enough for Pelya to become bored out of her mind. “Why are there more animals and insects the further we get?”

Ebudae yipped, startled out of her reading. “Don’t scare me like that!” she hissed loudly.

“Sorry.”

“It’s fine, just don’t scare me.” She looked around as if remembering where they were. “What did you ask?”

“When we came down here there were only a few rats and insects, but the further we go, the more there are. Why?”

Ebudae blinked a few times. “One of the massive columns holding up Dralin is near the theatre. You can’t see it, but it’s there.” She glanced at her book as though wanting

to continue reading, but closed it instead and leaned against the table with her arms folded. “There are runes that repel anyone who intends to tamper with them, animals, and monsters from what I’ve read. So the closer you get, the safer you are.”

“Who put them there?” Pelya asked, walking casually to the still-intact stone door, wanting to do more exploring.

“I don’t know. Probably the wizards or something, but I have no idea how.”

Ebudae came up behind her, holding her lantern again. “I’m sorry I spent so long reading. We can explore now if you want.”

Pelya turned to her, biting her lip in thought. She finally shrugged. “It’s alright. Your books are important.”

“Yes, but I’ve been here lots of times. Let’s go someplace I haven’t been.” She led the way out and turned to the left. Pelya followed and waited while the wizardess relocked the door. She had a large key ring found in one of the other rooms and had been thrilled when one of the keys was to the library. She believed most others belonged to locks on wooden doors that had long since disintegrated. The key ring had runes to preserve the condition of the keys. “I haven’t been much further than the library.” Ebudae smiled over her shoulder. “I really like books a lot and have been spending most of the last year in there.”

“I like books too, not as much as you, but I like them. It’s a shame most people don’t know how to read.”

“I know, right? I think that’s why I spend so much time trying to read *everything*. I’m scared something will happen to grandmother and I won’t be able to have books anymore.” There was real fear in her eyes.

“Your grandma’s too nasty to die, as my Uncle Herman says.” Pelya grinned as they walked down the long hallway. “He says mean people keep going until their faces turn into dusty prunes.”

Ebudae giggled. “You’re probably right.” They came to an intersection. Pointing left then right, she said, “Those lead to other areas of the academy. I really *am* certain that this is an ancient wizard’s academy. Ahead are big double doors that open onto a street. There’s a smaller door that I have the key to. I’ve only opened it once though.” She looked at Pelya. “It was too scary to go out there by myself.”

Pelya hugged her. “I think you’re brave for coming down here at all, *especially* by yourself.” She stepped back. “We’ll go down these other halls. I don’t mind.”

“You don’t want to go out there?” Ebudae asked in surprise. She seemed a little disappointed.

“Well . . . I do, but you said you were afraid . . .”

“I was afraid of going out there alone,” she replied crossly, her free hand on a hip. “I’m not alone anymore, am I?”

“I’m sorry. You’re right, I *do* want to go out there. Shall we?” Pelya asked hopefully.

Ebudae’s face brightened instantly. “Yes, let’s.” They continued briskly on toward the doors. A large spider scurried up one of the walls toward the high ceiling, but didn’t seem interested in bothering them. “I do have three bottles of anti-venom in the pack if we get bitten, but it’s another one I have to tell grandmother about, so don’t get bitten.”

“I won’t,” Pelya assured her fervently. Not only did she not want to tell Lady Pallon what they were doing, she really didn’t want to get bitten by *anything*, since it would most likely be painful.

The lock made a loud tumbling sound and the door squeaked when opened, which Pelya knew would probably alert the most dangerous thing available to their presence. She drew her new sword and stepped through the doorway while Ebudae held it open. The lantern didn’t cast its light very far, but the surroundings had dim illumination that enabled her to see shapes in the distance. She believed most to be other buildings, but wasn’t certain. They were at the top of stairs that went down fifty or so steps in a gradually widening arc. A cool breeze was blowing gently from their left, a nice contrast to the stuffy academy. She wondered where it came from.

“Is it clear?” Ebudae asked quietly, causing her to jump.

“I don’t know,” Pelya replied softly over her shoulder. “Nothing’s attacking me yet, which is good, but I can’t see very far. I need to let my eyes adjust.”

“I’m going to leave the door open for a minute so we can run back in,” the wizardess said nervously.

“Alright.” Pelya stepped to the side to let her come out and they studied their surroundings.

Unlike a normal street, there was no sky above. Instead, some sort of ceiling was about two hundred feet above their heads, but they couldn’t tell if was manmade stone or natural rock. Little dots of different colored lights that looked like stars were scattered along it. The lights also dotted the ground and the walls of the shapes that looked like buildings.

“I think those are glowing flowers.” Ebudae pointed at one growing through a crack about halfway down the steps. Pelya began walking slowly toward it, watching for danger the whole time. The wizardess followed her.

It was a flower with translucent leaves that had slow-moving, orange liquid running through their veins. “I’ve never seen or heard of anything like it,” Pelya said in awe. “What kind of plant is it?”

“I don’t know,” Ebudae replied, just as curious. “I don’t find plants all that interesting normally, so I skim over that stuff unless it relates to spell ingredients.” She blushed in the mixed yellow-green of the lanterns and orange light of the plant. “I’ll try to find out more. They’re pretty.”

“They are. I wonder if all those lights are plants.” Pelya stood and gestured at the myriad of glowing dots that weren’t thick enough to generate real light in the dark, cavernous space.

“I think they are. It’s beautiful. I just wish there were more.” Ebudae said wistfully. “Oh, let me close the door and we can go explore a little bit.” She dashed back up the steps and closed it. “Do you think I should lock it?”

Pelya moved halfway back up. “No. We don’t want to have to find the key if we’re in a hurry. I think that’s more likely than something sneaking in.”

Ebudae nodded and they slowly made their way down the broken and crumbling steps. The street they were on had been cobbled at one time, but most of it was loose and the underlying dirt was exposed in many places. Pelya wondered briefly how thick the dirt was if there were more cities underneath. She gulped at the mental image of everything caving in suddenly.

“What’s wrong? You’re breathing heavily and don’t look so good,” Ebudae asked worriedly.

Pelya closed her eyes and steadied her breathing as she had been taught to do in panic drills required by the Guard. “I just thought about what would happen if everything crumbled.” The wizardess smacked her hard on the arm. “Ow! What’d you do that for?”

“Because I hate those thoughts. This is scary enough without them. And keep your voice down,” she chastised in a loud whisper.

They looked around to make certain nothing heard them and were relieved when it was clear. Then they carefully crossed the wide street. A building directly across the way formed into what appeared to be a manor when they came closer. Crumbling stone around a dirt yard had most likely been a low wall at one time. They stepped over, not knowing where the gate might have been.

Pelya thought she saw a movement in the distance to the right. She froze and looked at the shapes of more buildings, but didn’t see anything.

“What do you see?” Ebudae whispered, grasping Pelya’s lantern arm with her free hand.

“I thought I saw a flash of silver, but it was probably just a plant. It feels like someone’s watching us though.”

“Do you think we should go back?” she asked worriedly.

“No, I really want to see more and it was probably just my imagination.” A small part of Pelya *did* want to go back, but she wasn’t about to say so.

They continued moving slowly to the manor. Finding the door had decayed, they looked at each other and went inside with Pelya leading the way, her sword held in front of her to confront any danger.

Swirling, liquid-silver eyes watched the little human girls go into the building. The children posed no threat to her, but at that moment, the creature hated humans and wanted them all dead. She was also famished and they would make a most delightful snack. A low rumble of hunger emitted from deep within her belly and rolled across the dark cavern. It had come involuntarily and she hoped it wouldn’t startle the girls.

For now, they were not important no matter how tasty they might be. Every effort she had made to get into the city had been thwarted and, even more than hunger, exhaustion was crippling her. The accursed underground city and tunnels contained too many dangers for her to simply rest wherever she liked. However, the larger building the girls had come out of looked promising.

One moment the creature was standing in a dark doorway, the next it moved in a blur to stand against the academy door the girls had come from. Her hearing was supernatural and every word the girls uttered had reached them, especially the part about leaving the door unlocked. Locks were not her specialty and she didn’t want to waste magic casting a spell to open it, or deal with the noise of bashing it down.

She closed the door behind her after slithering rapidly inside. It was quiet and safe. A spider slid down a silken thread, but scurried back upon sensing the intruder. Another step moved her in a blur to the intersection of halls. The need to finish her task was

overwhelming and she desperately wanted to lash out and destroy everything in her way, but such actions would be futile.

The hall to the left had the most potential, so she moved in a blur to the end of it. Stopping at the last intersection, she sensed a large room off a side passage. It would be a perfect place for her to rest awhile. Rats and insects in the area scurried for cover and a dangerous animal, called a hollow land squid, trembled in a corner, not having any way to escape. With any other creature, the squid would have stabbed it with poisonous tentacles and drained the prey's mind of energy, leaving them stupid and helpless. Instead, it died in violent fashion as the mysterious intruder sated its hunger.

Another blur and she was at the entrance to the large room. It had probably been a ballroom at one time, but she didn't realize that or even care. She could sleep there even though she would take up the entire room. Little effort was required to put wards up to alert her if anyone came. Then she transformed into her true self, curled up and went to sleep.

Perhaps the little girls would come explore the room so she could have a tasty bedtime dessert.

The manor was in terrible shape. Parts of the wall had fallen and there were holes in the ceiling where they could look up to the room above. The girls stepped carefully around debris, making their way to a staircase ahead of them. It looked a little bit like an ancient, rundown version of Lady Pallon's manor.

A low rumbling sound rolled through the air, seeming to come from everywhere outside. They froze. Hair on the back of their necks stood straight and their blood temperature lowered a few degrees. Nothing moved for a minute, including them. When the hairs finally relaxed a little bit, they both let out deep sighs of relief. "What was that?" Pelya asked in dread.

"I don't want to know. Should we run or hide?" They both stood staring straight ahead, fearful that if they looked for the source of the sound, they might find it.

"Let's pretend we didn't hear anything," Pelya suggested in a shaky voice.

"That sounds like a good idea. I don't think we're going to be able to go up those stairs, so we should try a couple of rooms. I think it'll be safer in here for now."

"Good plan," Pelya agreed. Their lanterns showed that the staircase had indeed collapsed on both sides after the first landing, making it impossible to go to the upper levels. They walked through a doorway to the right where the parlor would be in Lady Pallon's manor, only to find it empty. The shape of it was more like a dining room. Going further, they found the kitchen with empty ovens and cooking stoves that hadn't been used to prepare food for anyone in centuries.

The sight of everything made Pelya sad. On one hand, it was extraordinary that it was all so well preserved and she wondered what it would have been like when new and clean. The people must have been fascinating. On the other hand, nobody had lived there in forever and she mourned the loss of those people. She was curious as to why everyone had to die. It would make much more sense if they could just live forever.

They exited the kitchen and turned left into another hallway. More of the glowing plants grew in crevices and on the ceiling and they slowed down to look at the different

types, touching the leaves to feel the smooth texture. They were surprised to discover that the plants were chilly to the touch for no reason they could see.

A doorway to the left led to a big room. There was an empty fireplace on the right wall and another entrance ahead. A rotten odor emanated from the room. The usual debris was in a few piles on the floor especially near the walls. "This might have been some sort of a room for entertaining," Ebudae said. "They could have put a bard on a stage along the wall and had seats, or cleared the furniture for dancing." She spun around in a circle with arms in dance hold.

In the light of the spinning lantern, Pelya saw milky eyes rising from the debris. "Danger!" She ran forward while pulling her sword back for a strike and swinging it around at the creature in one smooth motion. Ebudae dropped to the ground and rolled out of the way.

The creature Pelya hit had rough skin, speckled brown and green in color. It howled for an instant, showing black teeth that glistened in the light. The howl stopped as the sword cut through the right side of its neck all the way through the left shoulder and thin, clawed forearm. Dark blood sprayed from the blade, splattering in a dimly glistening diagonal pattern against the walls and floor behind the creature.

Pelya was stunned by how little resistance the blade met. It was as though she were slicing through soft butter to put on her bread. Ebudae screamed behind her and Pelya quickly turned to see another one lurching toward the wizardess. Its body was five thin, mushy ovals squished together in a way that had made it look like a pile of trash when curled up on the ground. Two pairs of short knobby hind legs thrust it forward while four sets of the tiny arms with three claws at the end reached lamely for its prey.

Ebudae fell on her back while fearfully reaching into a pouch for something. Pelya rushed to her side and slashed upward into the creature just as it loomed over the wizardess. She expected the blade to lodge into the creature, especially since she was swinging one-handed in order to keep the lantern in her other hand. Instead, the sword cut it in half. More blood sprayed in an arc, this time up toward the ceiling. It was astonishing and Pelya noticed it with a part of her mind that was observing everything and filing away details.

She used as much leverage as possible in the swing and followed with her shoulder in an attempt to knock the monster to the side, away from her friend. While Pelya was large for eleven, her size wasn't enough to budge the mottled creature very much as it began to fall to its death.

Luckily, Ebudae quickly recovered her senses and rolled away toward Pelya. The creature's body tumbled over where she had just been with the top half splitting to the side.

Ebudae came to her feet, threw something and said a keyword. A rune ball flew threw the air and hit a third creature that was closing in on Pelya. Green flames burst, rapidly spreading over the monster's body. A putrid smell assaulted their noses and caused them to gag while the creature's scream crawled up their skin and gave them chills.

They dashed back into the hallway, glancing to see the creature thrashing in anguish. The green flames cast surreal shadows throughout the room and hallway. There were no other monsters the girls could see. They weren't about to look for anymore, and ran back down the hall toward the kitchen.

Once there, they headed back through the dining room and into the main hall. The girls rushed out of the front doorway before turning and looking back, fearing that something would follow them. Ebudae held up her lantern. "You've got some of their blood on you. Is it burning or anything?"

The question alarmed Pelya. She looked at her tunic, which had splatters on it. She felt moisture on her face and wiped some of the sticky blood off. There didn't seem to be any burning. "No . . ." she answered tentatively. "Do you think I'll be alright?"

"I think so." Ebudae wiped some blood off Pelya's cheek and rubbed it between her fingers. "It doesn't seem poisonous or anything. Most creatures really aren't, but there's always a few."

"What were they?" Pelya asked. "You have some blood on you too." She wiped a few drops off Ebudae's face.

"I have no idea. I haven't seen them before. They looked really bad though." She stuck her tongue out in disgust. "They smelled terrible too."

From their right came a snuffling sound and they turned to see a shadowy shape low to the ground thirty feet away or so. It was slinking toward them, its yellow eyes staring maliciously. "I want to run now," Ebudae said fearfully in Pelya's ear.

They dashed for the steps of the academy together. Pelya began to pull ahead, but paced herself to Ebudae's speed once realizing the wizardess wasn't keeping up. The creature made high-pitched squeals as it chased. Pelya felt it getting close quickly, so she swung the sword at it over her shoulder. The magical blade cut through the snout without resistance, just as it had the other monsters. The beast screeched in pain and tumbled to a stop.

Other squeals came from the right and left as the girls ran up the stairs. A pack of the creatures was hunting them after hearing the screams from the manor. Luckily, they slowed cautiously after seeing their cohort hurt. Pelya let Ebudae get to the door and slip inside first. She turned and held her sword out to keep them at bay while backing inside.

The wizardess quickly closed and locked the door as soon as Pelya was in. They rested against it while catching their breath. When one of the creatures scratched on the door, it startled them and they made a mad dash for the library. Pelya looked around for danger while Ebudae unlocked and opened the door.

Once inside, they set their lanterns on the table and sat down against one of the bookshelves. Pelya took the backpack off and set it to the side. "I need to clean the sword before I sheath . . ." She studied the blade, only to notice that it didn't have a drop of blood or anything else on it.

"There are all kinds of features magical blades have," Ebudae stated. "It looks like that one always stays clean and sharp."

"Sharp?" Pelya repeated incredulously. "I cut through those things and barely felt any resistance. I'm not *that* strong, you know." Pelya waved the sword in the air. "Even though I practice all the time, I'm only eleven. It takes a while for muscles to grow. Daddy would have cut through them with a wooden sword, but he's stronger than anybody." She sheathed the sword.

"He's not stronger than anybody. There are men at Carnival with bulging muscles that can lift all sorts of things," Ebudae disagreed.

“Daddy is stronger than anybody because he knows how to use his strength better than all those muscle-headed dummies.” Pelya glared at her friend, angry that she would disagree.

Ebudae looked ready to protest, but stopped at the look on Pelya’s face. Then she sighed and looked at her hands in her lap. “I wish I had a daddy like you.”

Pelya grabbed her in a big hug. They held onto each other, giving support for the danger they had just escaped and for childhoods that, to them, seemed terribly tragic.

They gathered their things to go back to the manor, looking forward to cleaning up and getting a hot meal. There was no danger in the hallway since the creatures couldn’t get through the locked entry. The rest of the journey back to the stairs and up to Ebudae’s rooms was uneventful.

One of the wonderful luxuries the manor had was a water pump in the bathroom. Ebudae had a rune stone that heated the water and they were able to wash off the blood and dirt from the day’s events. As Pelya hadn’t brought any other clothes, Ebudae loaned her a dark blue dress that was a little short, but not too frilly. The warrior hated it at first, but after a while found it relaxing.

They went down to the ancient academy two more times that week, but never into the city. Ebudae showed Pelya certain details about reading and writing in some of the old books. It opened new paths of knowledge to be explored and they spent quite a bit of time in the library. When Frath finally came to take Pelya back to the barracks, both girls hugged fiercely and vowed to see each other whenever possible.

Chapter 16

Uncle Bobbell wasn’t well liked in the Guard. He was quieter than most and tended towards sullenness. It didn’t stop him from being one of Pelya’s favorite people though. Bobbell was one of those individuals who was destined to be a private all his life and preferred it that way. He did the job well, but not enough that someone would notice him for a promotion. His personality was such that nobody really wanted to be around him if they could avoid it.

He was only five foot seven, a couple of inches taller than Pelya. His thin mustache and goatee were black like his oily hair and he had a grin that rose a little higher on the right side of his face below a cheek that jumped with an involuntary tic now and then.

Frath and Bobbell had both been raised in Dralin’s miserable orphanages and entered the Guard’s Program for Criminal Youths. They developed a strong friendship despite being completely different in just about every way. They were no longer in the same squad, but kept the friendship. Bobbell belonged to a squad that handled law enforcement among wizards. It was by far the most dangerous job in the City Guard because the wizards of Dralin tended not to obey many laws. The fact that wizards in Dralin tended to be especially powerful and crafty compounded that problem.

“What shall we do today, my little viper?” Bobbell asked Pelya in a voice that sounded like a tiny hammer tapping a sheet of metal. It was early morning, two days after Pelya had come back to the barracks from Lady Pallon’s estate. They sat on a bench outside a small café a distance east of the Guard District, eating fruity pastries to start out their morning.

“Why do you call me your little viper, Uncle Bobbell?” Pelya asked out of curiosity. He had done so ever since she could remember.

“Because you’re quick as a snake, just as deadly and nobody notices you until they’re right on top of you,” he answered with a grin that twisted the right side of his mouth upward more than usual. “You didn’t answer the question,” he pointed out. “What do you want to do?”

Pelya leaned in and whispered, “I was hoping you’d teach me more about picking advanced locks.”

“Hush. Let’s do something else. You already know almost as much as me.” He stuck his tongue out at her

She returned the gesture. “Fine. I want to go to Wizard’s Mall.” Pelya knew he would never take her there, but she wanted to go anyway. Wizard’s Mall District contained shops with just about every single type of magical item possible including the rarest artifacts in the world. As with everything in Dralin, it was dangerous. The streets were crowded and curvy and there were endless alleyways, making it easy to get lost. In Dralin, people who got lost generally stayed that way.

Amazingly, Bobbell didn’t say no right away. Instead, he stared into the distance, the tic in his cheek working double time. The sky was clear and the air was cool from overnight thunderstorms that had washed the streets clean. Birds sang in the branches of green trees that lined the street. The Blossom District was a large residential area with nice houses, quite a few parks and gardens, and a relatively low crime rate considering it was in Dralin. In any other city, the rate would be appalling.

“You have to stay by my side the entire time. If you go off on your own, I’ll bend you over my knee and paddle your butt no matter who your father is. Are we clear?” he asked seriously.

“Yes, Uncle Bobbell. I know to stay with you at all times,” Pelya said immediately and earnestly. There was no way she would disobey. She couldn’t believe he might actually take her.

“Unless I fall. Remember, the code of the Guard requires at least one person to report. If a unit is ambushed, one member must always report,” Bobbell recited. It was a Guard policy that someone must remain alive to report the death of comrades. They had to drill it into each and every member because most had a natural instinct to fight to the death.

“You’re not going to fall, Uncle Bobbell. We don’t have to go if it’s that dangerous,” Pelya replied quickly. “I didn’t really think you’d say yes.”

“Nah. It’ll be fine. You’ll enjoy the Wizard’s Mall a lot and I saw something there last week I wanted to buy you. Come, my little viper.” He stood and took her hand. “We’ll go through the Tower District and walk around some of the crazy streets along the way.”

“You don’t have to buy me anything, Uncle!” Pelya protested in dismay. “Everyone buys me things and I don’t need anything else. Plus I have my own money.” Guard members didn’t make a lot, especially privates. She probably had more money than he had ever earned.

He stopped and looked at her, shrugging after a moment. “Fine. You can buy it for yourself. Do you have any coins on you?”

“Yes. I made sure of that. They’re safely tucked away,” she assured him as they continued walking. It was a relief that he would let her buy something for herself instead of wasting his money.

The Wizard’s Mall was on the northwest side of the Tower District while the Guard and Blossom Districts were on the southeast side. The journey to get there would be somewhat dangerous even in the daylight.

Bobbell was one of the few people who held Pelya’s hand with their right hand. He was left handed and needed that one to be free should a fight occur. One thing that was constant was that everyone she was with held her hand. No one was ever willing to risk losing the most precious member of the Guard.

Pelya knew she was special, everyone told her so, but she didn’t know why. Other kids had parents, brothers, sisters, grandparents and normal aunts and uncles. They lived in nice houses or run-down houses, depending on their parent’s lot in life. They had normal lives and seemed quite happy with them for the most part.

Then there were the kids that were orphans, or worked under slave-like conditions. They seemed mostly miserable, but even they were ordinary in the sense that it was a common occurrence. Pelya, on the other hand, did not have a normal life. There was always someone looking after her. Literally thousands of Guard members checked in on her in the course of a week even if it was just to say hi. Not only that, but they smiled when they saw her.

On the rare occasion she did something wrong, Frath would punish Pelya by grounding her to her room, but worse than that was the fact that everyone seemed to know about it. They would be disappointed in her and then they would all lecture her, which hurt more than any punishment. A number of people in the Guard didn’t like her, but the majority kept them quiet and she didn’t see them often.

At times, her life seemed miserable and she wanted the normal life with parents and a house, but that didn’t happen very often. Having so many people to hold her hand and teach her what they knew was wonderful. Plus she liked being in the Guard now that she was certain no one was angry at her and they weren’t going to kick her out.

“Hold, Guardsman. I would speak with you a moment.” The clear, powerful voice brought Pelya out of her reverie. Bobbell stopped and put the right half of his body directly in front of her in a shielding motion.

“Hello, Sir Knight. What would you speak of?” Bobbell asked the person who had spoken. He gave a slight bow with his free arm out to the side.

Pelya looked up and saw a man in shining plate armor sitting atop a magnificent warhorse. The first thing she noticed was that his eyes were the same color of the sky above him. His face was strong and noble, but kind at the same time. Dark blonde hair fell to his shoulders and matched the neatly trimmed beard and mustache. A fine orange tunic had a golden sun embroidered on the chest and matched the cloak flowing down his back. She curtseyed as was proper.

“The child whose hand you hold, that would be the daughter of Frath Jornin, yes?” he asked in a voice golden as the embroidered sun.

Bobbell didn’t answer immediately, but had no reason to hide the fact. “It is, Sir Knight.”

“She is well?”

“Yes, My Lord,” Bobbell answered, not volunteering any other information.

“Her father is well?”

“Yes, My Lord.”

The knight’s gaze settled on Pelya. His eyes had a dignity about them and she found herself trusting the man instantly, though she couldn’t say why. He spoke directly to her. “I am pleased that you are well, Pelya Jornin. It is my hope that you will know peace in your life.”

“Thank you, Sir Knight.” She curtsied again, wondering how he knew her.

“There will come a time that I will need your assistance, child,” he told her mysteriously.

Pelya stared at him incredulously. She wanted to respond, but had no idea what to say. Bobbell obviously didn’t know either.

“It will not be for a while, so do not concern yourself. Reanna’s blessings upon you and your father. May her light guide your way through the darkness.” With those words, the knight turned up the street, followed by his squire and another man who were also on horses. They nodded at her and Bobbell as they passed.

Uncle Bobbell stared after them until they disappeared into the mildly crowded street. A few people passing by stared at the two of them curiously. Pelya finally asked, “Reanna is the Goddess of the Sun, right?”

He turned and faced her. “Huh? Oh, yes. Goddess of the Sun, yes. There’s a God of the Sun too that most people worship. I’ve never seen a follower of Reanna to be honest with you.” Bobbell looked around before focusing on her again. “That was the most unusual thing. How do you know him?”

Pelya shook her head. “I don’t know him. What do you think he meant when he said that he’s going to need my assistance?”

“I don’t know. Knights tend to get hit in the head a lot. Maybe the Sun Goddess baked it in that helmet a little too long,” he suggested with a grin.

“No. I believe him, but I don’t know why. Maybe daddy knows him. He asked if daddy was well,” Pelya suggested. The man intrigued her. Something about him was familiar, but she couldn’t say what. The knight also had an aura of good that stood out in the city of Dralin as a flame stands out in a pitch-black room.

They resumed walking. “You may be right. We’ll ask him when we get back this evening.”

A little while later, they were on the confusing streets of the Tower District. From there, it took a short while to reach the Wizard’s Mall and the trip was mostly uneventful.

“Here we are, the most amazing place in the world where you can find everything from the tooth of a carnivorous fairy to the scale of a mighty dragon,” Bobbell announced, gesturing grandly at the streets ahead.

They were in a large plaza surrounded by tall buildings with cone-shaped tile roofs. A bronze statue of a renowned wizard was in the center surrounded by an area of flowers. Six more flower gardens were around the edge of the plaza. Inviting benches were next to the gardens for people to sit and relax.

“This is the nice part of Wizard’s Mall,” Bobbell told her as they moved to a spot clear of bustling wizards, workers and assorted individuals out for a day’s shopping, work or leisure. “You’ll find high quality stores this close to the Tower District.” He pointed to well kept shops that were brightly painted and had placards announcing their wares. “A wand shop, potions, books, rune balls, artifacts and antiques, and a shop for

the finest spell components and focuses a person could ever want all at prices that make even the richest wizards choke.” He grinned at Pelya and got the laugh he was anticipating.

Then he became serious and leaned in. “Of course, you don’t want to see these places even if they would let a pair like us in. You want to go into the shadowy, twisty streets with shops that sell dark magics and mysterious wares don’t you, my little viper?” Pelya nodded hopefully, doing her best to contain her excitement. He gripped her hand firmly. “You hold on to me and do everything I tell you to. Understood?” he asked, his grim face close. When she nodded sincerely, he said, “Let’s go then.”

Pelya stared at everything she could as they walked, all the while holding Uncle Bobbell’s hand tightly. Wizards, male and female, roamed the streets. Some were brightly dressed with flashy robes that glistened in the sunlight. Others wore sinister robes and held their chins up in contempt of lesser people that dared to walk the same streets as them. Many were disheveled and had stains on their old cloth robes. Those had a tendency to mumble to themselves and run into things. In the upper windows of a few buildings, people stuck their heads out over laundry lines strung from building to building and gossiped about current events.

“Why do all wizards wear robes, Uncle Bobbell?”

“Hmm? Not all of them do, just most,” he answered absentmindedly. Bobbell had been busily looking around at people and buildings as though searching for something. “A robe is one single piece of clothing with a large surface to thread or embroider runes into. It makes for stronger magical storage and protection. If they were to separate it into tunics and leggings, it would cut the amount of power that could be imbued into it.”

“Do you have to have runes to store power in something?” Pelya asked, thinking of the magical sword Ebudae had given her.

Bobbell didn’t answer right away. Then he looked at her thoughtfully. “I honestly don’t know. I suppose so. Runes help to store, channel magic, and define what each specific effect is. I can’t say that I’ve ever seen a magical item without them. Why do you ask?”

“I was just curious,” Pelya said quickly. “I’m eleven. It’s my job to ask a never-ending string of questions,” she told him with an innocent grin.

He laughed at that. “I suppose it is, my little viper, I suppose it is.”

The streets were gradually becoming darker. Paint chipping from looming storefronts and worn placards showed the declining quality of buildings. Powerful looking wizards were becoming much less frequent, replaced by furtive figures that would slink from one shop to the next. The only thing that didn’t change was the absent-minded wizards who talked to themselves. It seemed they went everywhere. A crow perching on a second story eave of one of the shops caught her attention. Pelya was certain it was staring at her.

A hooded woman came toward them from a dark corner. “Here now, what a pretty little girl.”

“You’ll die quickly if you touch her, you old bat,” Bobbell threatened in the most sinister, hissing voice Pelya had ever heard from him. The woman hissed back wordlessly, scraping the air with a claw-like hand before slinking back into the corner.

They went past a few more stores before he stopped in a clear space. “This was a terrible idea. We should go back,” Bobbell told her with a sigh. “No member of the

Guard is supposed to be in this district alone, and I'm *definitely* not supposed to bring you here. This was a stupid decision." He rubbed his brow while keeping an eye out for danger.

Pelya wanted to protest, but realized immediately how much stress it was putting on him. She was also beginning to get a bad feeling about everything. "Yes, Uncle Bobbell. I'm sorry," she said contritely.

He looked at her and smiled gently. "You're such a good child and a wonderful person. I love you, my little viper," he told her, wrapping her up in a strong hug.

"I love you too, Uncle Bobbell. I'm sorry I suggested this. I don't want you to get into trouble."

"No. Don't you worry about that," he replied, taking her by the shoulders and looking her in the eyes. "You want adventure and excitement as every child should. Don't worry, I'll keep you safe." He looked around again. "The store I want to take you to is nearby. After that, I have one quick task to do. Then we'll go have a nice lunch in the park or something safe like that."

"I really, really don't want you to get into trouble, Uncle. We should go back now," Pelya told him worriedly. A crow cawed at them in agreement from a placard jutting out of a nearby shop. She couldn't tell if it was the same one that had stared at her before.

Bobbell didn't seem to notice it. "Nonsense. I'm known here. We'll be fine." He grinned and led her back into the street. The crow cawed in warning again. Pelya stared as they passed it. For an instant, she was certain its eyes flashed purple.

"Uncle Bobbell. Please let's go back. I have a really, really bad feeling," she pleaded, pulling on his hand.

"The shop is right there," he pointed at a grimy stone building with two steps in front of an iron-braced wooden door. Its placard had a peeling picture of a hand with green fire coming from the palm. He opened the door, which rang a bell to alert the shopkeeper that there was a customer.

Inside was a space packed with shelves that held a myriad of tightly packed items. Many appeared to be magical, but it was hard to tell. A skeleton of a large bird hung from the ceiling next to a couple dozen representations of the moons, which were a favorite decoration of wizards. Everything was dusty and the light coming in from dirty windows was dim, which most likely helped to hide some of the flaws in the items.

"Bobbell, you little weasel, have you come for that special item or another tumble in bed?" a husky-voiced woman asked from behind the counter.

"Tibella, none of that now, I have my niece with me," Bobbell said quickly. "I have the gold piece you're asking for the item." They walked through the narrow aisle to the counter.

"Your niece?" Tibella asked with raised eyebrows. She was short, but stout and busty with green eyes, dusky red hair and a pretty face. Pelya guessed her age to be in the late thirties, older than Bobbell. "I happen to know for a fact that you're an orphan." She narrowed her eyes at Pelya and put her hands on hips. "Bobbell, I know you like things a little kinky, but I never figured you were this depraved. I won't have anything to do with it," she spat out angrily.

Pelya stared at her in shock, not really understanding the meaning, but getting the feeling that it was bad. Bobbell instantly disputed the claim. "That is *not* what she is here for and don't ever suggest it! She's under the protection of the entire Guard and I'm

caring for her for the day. *Nothing* bad will happen to her as long as I'm alive," he said fiercely, jabbing a thumb into his chest.

Tibella looked back and forth between the two, finally relaxing when she realized he was sincere. "Sorry. There are a lot of people who would do that sort of thing." She brushed dust off the front of her robe. "You're not getting the picks for her, are you?"

"Yup. I didn't say I wasn't corrupting her," he replied with a grin.

The shopkeeper laughed loudly and unlocked a cabinet along the wall behind the counter. She pulled out a tied leather packet and brought it over, unraveling it onto the counter. Pelya gasped when she saw the set of lockpicks and tools. "Here it is," Tibella stated. "They have good magic in them. They won't break and they'll get warm in the hand as a warning if there's a magical ward on a lock. They'll stay steady even in the shakiest hands too."

"Perfect," Bobbell said, going through them to make sure they were all there.

"It's illegal to have them, of course. If a member of the Guard catches you with them, you'll be in trouble," Tibella said with a wink as she leaned on the counter. They both burst into laughter at the joke. Pelya stared at the picks, wanting them very much. She was really beginning to like dangerous things that could get her in trouble and picking locks was fun. "I could easily get five gold pieces as you know, but you did right by me and I'm letting them go for the gold piece I paid," Tibella told him. There was a look on her face as though she regretted the deal. "I have to get that much though."

Pelya instantly reached into the pouch hidden under her tunic and pulled out the largest coin. It was one of two shiny gold pieces she kept out of the bank in case she wanted to buy something especially nice. She laid the shiny coin on the counter and watched the shopkeeper snatch it faster than lightning. "Well, well. That's quite a pretty coin for someone so young," Tibella said with a leer. "I wonder how she earned that."

Bobbell's sword was at Tibella's throat faster than the coin had been snatched. "Don't ever insult my niece again. She's the best person in the world." Blood drained out of the shopkeeper's face and she trembled while nodding slowly. The sword was placed rapidly back in its sheath. "Do you mind if I use the back exit?" Bobbell asked. "I need to talk to someone." He wrapped up the lockpicks tightly and handed them to Pelya who tucked them securely away under her tunic where the pouch was. She had a secret place in her room where she would keep them.

Tibella nodded weakly and then looked at Pelya. "You don't want to take her into the alleys . . ."

"She's safe with me. Don't worry," Bobbell assured her. The shopkeeper looked back and forth at the two of them, but courage had left her, so she nodded again and led them into a back room even more cluttered than the shop. The door had ten locks keeping it secure. She undid them quickly and stuck her head out before waving them through.

Locks clacked shut behind them as they studied the tight alley. Bobbell carefully looked both ways for any sign of danger and then led her to the right, moving quickly and quietly.

Pelya followed, but didn't like it at all. "Uncle Bobbell, we should go back please," she urged in a low voice. "I'm sorry I asked to come. I won't ever do it again."

"This will only take a few minutes then we'll go back," he reassured her.

“I have a *really* bad feeling,” Pelya protested. The blood in her veins had gone cold with dread by that point, but he didn’t answer.

Buildings loomed over them menacingly, letting little light through even though the sun was directly overhead. Bobbell made her step carefully over a trickle of brackish green liquid coming from a drainpipe out of the back of one of the buildings. She recognized it as magical waste. If they touched it, it could lead to deformities.

After a number of twists and turns, they finally stopped in front of a black, ironbound door. Bobbell knocked on it in a pattern of nine raps. A metal plate slid back and a face looked through at them before the door opened and a rough looking man with a spiked club stepped aside to let them through.

Pelya was honestly terrified. Everything was wrong and she didn’t want to go in. She gripped Bobbell’s hand with all of her strength and stayed as close as possible while they walked down the hallway to the next door, pushed open for them by another dangerous-looking man. If she could have gone back and started the day over, she wouldn’t have *ever* suggested coming to Wizard’s Mall. Perhaps she would have just stayed in bed.

A man sat behind the desk at the far end of the lavishly decorated room. Silver sconces, vivid tapestries and lush carpets were entirely out of place from the exterior of the building they had just entered. Five men sat or leaned around the edges of the room. Every single one of them looked dangerous. A red-haired wizardess wearing green robes threaded with golden runes stood behind the man at the desk. The men in the hallway who had opened the doors came inside, closed the door to the room and stood in front of it to prevent escape. Every nerve in Pelya’s body was screaming at her and she wanted to cry in fear.

“Private Bobbell,” the man behind the desk began in oily tones. He had slick blonde hair and cruel green eyes. “Did you honestly think you could betray us and live, even if you *are* a member of the vaunted City Guard?”

Bobbell looked down at Pelya who was holding his hand in a death grip. “You were right, my little viper. Always trust your instincts.” He jerked forward with a grunt as a sword was run into his back and out through his chest by a man who had moved behind him.

Blood flowed from his mouth. “One member must always report.” Then he fell to the ground while Pelya screamed in horror as she lost the grip on his hand.

[Chapter 17](#)

“What a pretty little present Private Bobbell brought us.” The man behind the desk stood.

Something pushed Pelya to the side just as another man reached to grab her. The motion was enough for her to run to the door. Right before she got there, it flung open on its own knocking the two men in front of it to the ground.

Pelya ran her fastest down the hallway and out through the door to the alley, which was also pulled open inexplicably. She was going so fast that she ran into the wall on the other side of the alley, causing her to stumble. For the first time, she turned and looked back only to see a glowing green web coming straight at her. Pelya ducked and rolled to

the left, but it stuck all over an arm and leg. Some of it tore when she yanked, but it was strongly tethered to the wall and ground.

Then the shadows around it darkened and ripped the strands from her, scaring her even more. Above her, a crow cawed. She was sure it was the same one when she looked up to see it resting on a brick jutting from one of the buildings.

A man ran out of the door and into the wall, just as she had done, falling on his behind in the sticky substance. Pelya barely evaded his outstretched hand as she dashed away, her heart racing in fear. Looking over her shoulder, she saw the crow claw the man's head, drawing blood and screams of pain.

Convinced that the crow was an ally, she ran as fast as she could. Pelya was strong for her age and had done obstacle drills with the Guard. The alleyway she ran down was a gritty version of those and she was truly running for her life this time.

Voices called out behind her while footsteps began pounding the cobblestones and echoing off the wall. The alley split into two. The crow flew over into the left one and cawed to her. Pelya took that one, briefly noticing that the bird's eyes were most definitely purple.

The alley took a sharp turn and she pushed against a wall to keep her balance. When she saw green pollution in a puddle on the ground, she leapt over it, flying through the air and landing with a thud that knocked the air out of her. Pelya got to her feet and kept running, but her chest began to hurt from exertion and fear.

A dark corner ahead suddenly became inviting, so she rushed to it. One of the buildings in the alley was set deeper than those around it, creating a small space. There were garbage and debris along the edge, but she was able to back into the corner.

Pelya heard the men coming down the alley and realized they would see her. Alarm gripped her muscles, but just as she was about to bolt, she heard a whispering "shh" in her ear. Shadows slowly caressed her arms and legs, causing her to relax involuntarily.

Three men came running at full bore. They had a perfect line of vision to see her, but the shadows continued stroking her skin and Pelya could feel their cool touch even through her clothes. She breathed calmly, letting her chest relax as the men ran past. They didn't notice her at all.

A moment later, the shadows stopped caressing and pushed her back into the alley. The crow cawed from the left, so she immediately ran in that direction. Pelya didn't know what to think about shadows and a crow guiding her, but it was much better than what would happen if the thugs who killed Bobbell found her. The thought sapped the strength from her bones and she stumbled to a halt.

The image of the sword piercing her uncle flashed in her mind, as did the sight of blood flowing from his lips while he mouthed words she could no longer hear. Pelya burst into tears and fell to her knees. Panic and fear ganged up to squeeze her heart tightly and prevent her from doing anything. Her throat constricted, making her wheeze as she tried to breathe.

Pain shot through her scalp as her hair was pulled, causing Pelya to cry out. The alley came into focus again and flapping wings beat about her head. The crow yanked her hair again to get her to come fully back to reality.

Pelya got to her feet and half-heartedly ran some more. A minute later, she saw another dark corner that looked inviting, so she rushed toward it. Once she got there, her eyes were drawn to a wide ledge above that also looked inviting. She put up a foot to use

the wall for leverage, but as she did so, it was grabbed and supported. Shadows heaved her up and she quickly caught the ledge while more pulled her arms.

From the alley, she heard voices coming back the way the men had run. Pelya's back was pushed so she lay down on the ledge. It was slightly damp from the previous night's rain and more than a little dirty, but she stayed still. Footsteps pounded back down the alley and faded into the distance.

As she stood up on the ledge, Pelya felt something running down her scalp, over her left temple and cheek. Wiping it off, she saw it was blood from a scratch where one of the crow's talons had accidentally cut her. She looked up to the edge of the roof directly above and saw the crow. It cawed apologetically.

"It's alright," Pelya assured it. "Thank you for saving my life."

It cawed again before hopping higher on the roof. Pelya got the distinct impression it wanted her to follow. She stood beneath the ledge, which was just a little out of her reach. On a gut instinct, she lifted her left foot and was thrilled to feel it grabbed and pushed up. With a leap, she caught the edge and scrambled up.

Wooden shingles were at a steep angle, making her gulp at the thought of climbing over them. Gathering what courage she had left, Pelya followed the crow up to the peak of the building they were on. It was one of the shorter buildings around and she could see other rooftops surrounding it. The crow flew to another that was a little higher. The other side of the roof was at a much more gradual angle, so she quickly made her way along it.

The next edge was chest-high and she pulled herself up without assistance. Pelya paused to consider how odd it was that shadows were helping her and realized that they weren't even supposed to have substance. The crow cawed again as if warning her not to think about it too hard. Pelya traveled across that rooftop to another and another, each one a little higher.

Other crows began to show up as she traveled over the wooden, slate, and metal roofs. They acted as a winged escort. Pelya's arms and legs grew rubbery from the physical and mental exertion. The horror of what had happened lurked in the back of her mind, threatening to burst through again. Then all the crows but the original flew away. Pelya stopped and held onto the weathervane on the middle of the roof she was on.

It was then that she realized she had reached the highest point in the area. The roofs of Wizard's Mall were around her, looking like hills under the warm sun. Birds flew about in the distance and the murmur of voices from the streets below filled the air with a humming sound. Various aromas of incense and perfumes from the shops below mixed with garbage in the alleys to create a nauseating effect.

But the most extraordinary sight was the rise of the Tower District in the distance. She couldn't make out individual towers. Instead, they shimmered and moved slowly back and forth, weaving through each other in circular motion. Rainbow colors of green, blue, purple and red eddied around all of it, creating a foggy illusion that went high into the sky.

The crow cawed from the next roof. Pelya rubbed her eyes to clear them of the colors that hurt her head and then followed. Coming around to the other side of the next rooftop, she saw a window that would give the occupant a perfect view of the hypnotic sight. The crow was sitting on the top of the frame above it.

The window creaked open slowly, startling her. She stared at the crow. "I really hope you're my friend." It gave a short nod and cawed at her again. Pelya shrugged and carefully entered the opening. The crow stayed outside and flew away.

There was absolutely no light inside and it took a minute for her eyes to adjust after being in the bright daylight. Pelya reached in her tunic for another pouch. It still had the three rune balls Ebudae had given her. She pulled out the one that created light and said the activation word. A soft blue glow mixed with the sunlight coming from the window. The room was empty except for some old furniture and the webs of spiders that had decided to fill the vacancy.

Pelya walked to stairs going down on the opposite side of the small room, jumping when the window creaked closed and latched itself. Shadows were thick in that area and she figured they had taken care of it. "Thank you," she told them, wanting to be polite.

The stairs were steep and rickety, groaning with each step she took. The next level was also empty except for furniture. A few rats and cockroaches joined the spiders. Pelya stepped quickly to the next level of stairs underneath the one she had just come down. They were rickety as well, but not quite so bad. When it took five more flights to reach the bottom, she realized how high up she had traveled on the rooftops. It wasn't surprising that she was so exhausted and shaky.

Shadows cast by the blue light in her hand moved around a doorway to her left. She went through it into another room and across that to a door beyond. When she reached for the knob, the shadows pushed her hand aside.

Pelya pulled back and waited for a minute. She looked around the room at the one couch mostly eaten away by rats. Moths had nearly finished off a tapestry that once hung from the far wall, and the fireplace lay dormant. It reminded her of the ancient buildings underground.

The knob clicked and turned slowly. When the door opened a crack, Pelya pulled it enough to see out. She was on a street with a mixture of shops and houses. It was bright and people were walking back and forth about their business.

Then she saw a guard unit coming up the street, searching for something or someone. Pelya crushed the rune ball as Ebudae had shown her and threw the ashes on the ground while running toward the unit. Rune balls could become unstable if not made for multiple uses.

"Pelya!" one of the guards exclaimed, pointing at her. She knew the woman, who was always nice. Her name was Minda and she had black hair and blue eyes much like Pelya's. The unit ran to Pelya and surrounded her as she rushed into Minda's arms and began bawling.

"Pelya," the unit leader said, trying to get her attention. He was an average man with brown hair and a shaggy goatee. "Pelya . . . *Pelya!*" he yelled, finally getting the girl to turn. "Who were you supposed to be with today? Why are you alone?"

"And why in the world are you in Wizard's Mall?" another asked disapprovingly.

"Unc . . . Uncle Bobbell . . . is dead," Pelya stuttered, snot running down her nose. She couldn't seem to keep from losing control now that she was safe among family.

"Where? Tell me quickly," the unit leader commanded while Minda wiped Pelya's nose with a handkerchief she pulled from inside her tunic.

Pelya turned her head back and forth, looking for anything familiar much to Minda's exasperation because she was still trying to wipe the girl's face. Finally, Pelya looked at the unit leader. "I don't know," she wailed despairingly.

The man folded his arms and looked around. Then he blew a piercing whistle that hung on a chain around his neck. It would call any other units to his location. Most times, the squad sergeant and corporal would each be with units nearby.

He looked at Pelya, who was still sniffing and wiping at her red eyes. "I can see you've just been through a terrible ordeal, but we need to know about Private Bobbell and what happened to him, so I suggest you figure out how to keep it together long enough to explain everything you can remember."

"Y . . . yes, Sir," Pelya said. She gulped deep breaths of air and let Minda clean up her face. A moment later, three sharp tweets came from behind them. The unit leader responded with two tweets. It was a way of locating each other. Two more units came from that direction, making up all but one unit of the squad.

"What is it?" the squad sergeant asked while running up. Pelya recognized her as Sergeant Rashel. There was a wizard with her too. The wizard's brown robes were slit up the sides of the legs to enable him to run easily. He wore black leggings underneath.

"Pelya Jornin rushed up to us alone," the unit leader said, pointing at the girl. "She was with Private Bobbell, but said he died. I told her to get control of her emotions so she could report."

The sergeant looked surprised to see Pelya there. "So that's who the death was. What in the *world* was he doing in the Mall with Pelya?!"

"I don't know. Perhaps you should ask the girl," the unit leader said in irritation. Minda, the sergeant and most of the other guards there glared at him. Pelya realized he was one of the people who didn't like her.

Sergeant Rashel squatted down in front of Pelya. "Can you lead us to Bobbell, Pelya?" When the girl shook her head, Rashel's eyes widened. She reached a hand to Pelya's right temple and wiped the blood that was still slowly trickling down.

"It looks like just a scalp cut, Sergeant," Minda told her quickly. "I think she'll be alright, but she's shaking like a leaf."

Rashel nodded. "Pelya, I need you to tell me as much as possible so we can find his body. Make it as quick and concise as you can."

Pelya nodded and collected her thoughts. It was difficult, but she was determined to do everything she could. "I asked him to bring me here thinking he'd say no, but he said yes instead." She wanted to cry from guilt at the admission. It was all her fault.

"He shouldn't have done that," Rashel stated. "But no matter, continue."

"We came from the Tower District into a plaza with a statue of a wizard surrounded by flowers. There were a lot of really nice, expensive shops there."

"I know the place," Rashel said. Everyone else nodded as well. "Go on."

"We walked to a darker place and he took me into a shop. There was a hand on the placard with green flames coming from it. The paint was peeling." Pelya saw that they were all thoughtful. Apparently there was more than one shop like that. "The shopkeeper was a short woman named Tibella."

That did it. "Willam!" Rashel barked. "Carry Pelya. We move *now*!" A big, red-haired man with thick muscles picked up Pelya and settled her on his hip. Her weight didn't slow him down at all as they charged through the streets. The squad's fourth unit

had shown up with the corporal who was running ahead, tweeting his whistle to clear a path. There was another wizard with him. All squads had two competent wizards who specialized in battle magic.

People parted to let them through. It was the law to get out of the way of a Guard unit rushing through the streets. People made extra effort at the sight of an entire squad. Within a few minutes, they reached the shop.

Sergeant Rashel came to a skidding halt, as did the rest of the squad, a few huffing and puffing. "This is the place?" she asked.

Pelya nodded as Willam set her down. "Tibella let us through the back door to the alley. We turned right. I can trace our steps, but there are bad people . . ." It took all her willpower not to start crying again.

"It's our job to deal with bad people, Pelya" Rashel said with a malevolent grin that was mirrored by the rest of the squad. Pelya was suddenly glad they were on her side. One of the wizards cast a spell. Suddenly Pelya felt a burst of strength that also appeared to affect everyone in the squad. "Let's go," the sergeant said, opening the door and leading the way in.

Tibella stood behind the counter with eyes wide. When the sergeant demanded to be let out the alleyway door, she unlocked it immediately. Rashel led the way to the right and traveled far enough for the squad to join in the alley. It was too narrow for them to do much more than single file, a severe disadvantage for any fighting group. However, the Guard trained specifically for such situations. The boost of strength the wizard had cast would help them with that. Pelya felt her skin tingle and gasped. Minda, who was directly in front of her while Willam was directly behind, reassured her. "A spell to protect all of us against certain forms of magic was just cast. You felt a tingling, right?" Pelya nodded.

They came to an intersection and word came back asking which way. Pelya closed her eyes and remembered the steps they had taken. "Left, right, right, go a couple hundred feet and there's a black iron-bound door with a plate to look out of," she said. There were other twists and turns, but those were the intersections they had to take.

Word was relayed up the line and everyone moved again, following the directions Pelya had given. A minute later, she heard shouts. Rashel's voice rang above the rest. "Halt! Lay down your weapons in the name of the Dralin City Guard!"

Willam drew his sword and then put Pelya on his left hip. She held on tightly while her protector stepped aside to let others through. Minda stood next to them with her sword drawn so Pelya was in between the two of them. It would be difficult for anyone to harm her.

The sounds of clashing swords along with shouts of anger and pain echoed up the alley, but they didn't last long. After a moment, the train of Guard members passing by stopped. The last unit had gone in a different direction in the hopes of cutting off escape. Guard members were required to memorize every street and alley in the city. In training, they would start with the easy districts, but as they learned more, they would be sent to more difficult ones. The Tower District was by far the hardest to learn. Wizard's Mall was one of the worst after that. Even with that knowledge, there were secret ways to get away underneath the city in the sewers and above the city on the rooftops.

It didn't take long for the squad to move forward again. Minda and Willam went ahead of the last few in order to keep Pelya secure. They passed a guard lying on the

ground with a gash in his leg. He was gritting his teeth while his unit mate applied healing salve to it. They would take him to a healer once they got to one of the Guard's auxiliary barracks.

The unit leader that didn't like Pelya came back to them, pushing past other guards. "The sergeant wants to see Pelya right away." He led them to the black door. Three of the thugs were dead, their broken, bleeding bodies shoved against the wall across from the door in gruesome heaps that made her sick to her stomach. Two more were on the ground down the alley with a few guards standing over them. Pelya had never seen dead people before and didn't like it even though she wasn't the one who killed them.

Willam set her down so she could walk on her own, still between him and Minda. They went down the hallway into the room. Bobbell wasn't there, but his blood soaked the carpet. She wanted to cry again, but resisted with all her might. The unit leader opened a door on the side and headed down another hall. After turning down two more halls and going down a set of steps, they came to a room. Bobbell's body was lying on a table with his arms crossed. Two grim faced Guards stood watch over it.

"Pelya," Rashel said from the left. On the floor next to a table were the blonde-haired man, the man who killed Bobbell, the wizard, and another one of the thugs; all dead from numerous wounds. It was too much for Pelya and she threw up on the floor.

Minda quickly wrapped an arm around her waist and pulled her hair back. It took Pelya a minute to finish. Meanwhile, everyone else gave her plenty of room.

"Sergeant Rashel, report," a man said, entering the room. Everyone snapped to attention and thumped fists to their chests.

"Yes, Captain." The sergeant gave the report of everything the squad had discovered. Meanwhile, Pelya stood trembling and whimpering while tears and snot ran down her face. It was too much for her and she didn't care if she wasn't being brave or strong anymore. Minda continued wiping the girl's face as best she could and they moved to the corner so everyone else could work. Pelya saw that one of the other guards had also been killed in the battle, which made everything worse, especially since he had given her a hug and a copper the day before. She buried her head in Minda's stomach finally and shut her eyes to block everything out.

"Why is Pelya still here? Is there a reason you're traumatizing her with the sight of all these bodies, Sergeant?" the captain asked. Pelya was too miserable to figure out who it was.

"I wanted her to identify if these are the people who killed Private Bobbell."

"I see." Footsteps came over to her. "Pelya, I need you to focus just a minute then I'll let Private Minda take you back to your father," the captain said, squatting next to her. She looked through her teary eyes at Captain Criffon, a man Pelya hadn't seen but a few times. She nodded and whimpered some more. He took her by the arm and guided her to the bodies. "Did one of these people kill Private Bobbell?"

Pelya pointed at the man who had run the sword through her uncle. "H . . . he . . . did . . . sword." She pointed at the man's sword that was lying nearby.

"He killed Private Bobbell with that sword?" the captain asked for verification.

"Y . . . yes."

"And was he the leader of this group?"

"N . . . no." It was hard to say anything between gulps of air. "H . . . he . . . was l . . . leader," Pelya said, pointing at the blonde man.

“Did anyone say why Private Bobbell was killed?” the Captain asked.

Pelya really wanted to leave, but his grip on her arm was strong. Still pointing at the blonde man, she answered, “H . . . he said, ‘Did you th . . . think you could betray us and live’.”

“Did he say anything else?” the captain persisted.

Pelya shook her head. “N . . . no.”

“Do you remember anything else that would help us, Pelya?” the captain asked.

“N . . . no.” She just wanted to leave.

“Private Minda. See to Pelya. I’ll have a unit escort you,” Captain Criffon said as he rose. “Get the girl out of here before she becomes even more traumatized.”

“I’d like to go with them, sir” Willam said.

“That’s not necessary, Private,” the captain replied.

“I’m going with Pelya, sir. Reprimand me later if you must.” Willam picked Pelya up and held her tightly.

Captain Criffon sighed. “As you will, Private. There’ll be no reprimand.”

Willam and Minda took Pelya from the room and the building. They found a different way out that avoided the alley entirely. A unit quickly joined them and they headed toward the Guard District. It took a while because they went by the safest route possible, which meant avoiding the Tower District and a few other more dangerous areas.

A few minutes before they reached the Guard District, Frath came running up.

“Pelya! Where is she?”

“Daddy!” She twisted in Willam’s arms, reaching out for him. Willam passed her over effortlessly and Pelya clung to her daddy’s neck, wrapping her legs around his waist. The tears flowed all the way back to her room, Frath carrying her as effortlessly as Willam had.

She finally fell asleep in her father’s arms. He was there the two times she woke up screaming from nightmares. There were more questions the next day, but not many. Captain Criffon had solved the case rather quickly. He quietly told Pelya that Bobbell had been working undercover between two guilds that were smuggling illegal wizard artifacts. Through no fault of his own, he had been discovered. Everyone who had anything to do with his death was already dead in exchange.

Captain Criffon and others told her that he died with honor in the line of duty and was to receive a funeral with full tribute for his service. Then they reassured her that she had done nothing wrong and that her obedience to Bobbell throughout the events and her warnings not to continue showed maturity and wisdom. It didn’t help much, but it helped a little. She spent the rest of that day in her father’s arms, not saying anything at all while she tried to come to terms with the vision of her Uncle Bobbell dying before her eyes.

Chapter 18

Three days after the death of Bobbell, Pelya was out for the day with Lieutenant Kally Nevala, a strong woman with curly blonde hair that whipped around in the strong breeze. Her hazel eyes glittered in the sunlight and a scar ran along her chin from a battle that went badly the year before. The lieutenant was the daughter of a successful noble who had made certain Kally was well educated as a child and gave in when his daughter made the request to join the City Guard. A high education and wealthy parents would

allow a person to enter any military group as an officer and the Dralin City Guard was recognized as one of the most highly-trained and dangerous military groups in the world.

Pelya was dressed in unadorned brown pants and tan tunic with her longknife back at her side. She wasn't allowed to wear the colors of the Guard, black pants and brown tunic like Kally had on, so that no one would mistake her for a member.

It was only the second time she had been out, having gone the day before to Carnival for a short while with Bava and Herman. While there, she never smiled and only spoke when absolutely necessary. Bava and Herman spent the day worried about her, but eventually let her deal with things her own way.

It had been debated whether or not to let her go with just one guard at a time, but Bobbell had specifically broken the rules as to where Pelya could be taken. Frath made it clear that anyone else who did something stupid with his daughter would die by his hand regardless of their position. It was a threat everyone took seriously.

Lieutenant Nevala was an extremely capable warrior and Frath trusted her. They had decided to go to a safe park in the Noble District where Pelya could feed ducks around a peaceful lake and sit quietly if that was all she wanted to do. Kally had a book to read and money for lunch and treats. It sounded like a nice day to Pelya who just wanted to sit and stare awhile. The lake would be perfect.

"I need to make a stop on the way, but it shouldn't take long," Kally told her in a pleasant voice that could split the air when giving orders.

Pelya stopped in her tracks, causing the lieutenant to jerk in surprise as they were holding hands. "Uncle Bobbell said he just needed to make a stop and that it wouldn't take long," she said grimly. "That's when they killed him, Aunt Kally,"

The woman stared at Pelya for a minute, not saying anything. She brushed hair back over her ear. Lieutenant Nevala was a pretty woman even with the scar and the ability to gut criminals. Occasionally a man would stare at her when walking past. Kally gave no notice of it most of the time. She resumed walking and Pelya went along, not knowing if they were going to make the stop or just go to the park.

Pelya liked the Noble District. It was quieter than most. Even though there were guards at the doors of most estates and many of the nobles were a bit stuck up, it had a pleasant atmosphere. People were dignified and wore the most beautiful clothes. Everyone moved at a stately pace instead of the hurried velocity in other districts.

It was also where the Shining Shield Inn was. Frath brought her to it every once in a while to have a nice meal in the garden with Albert and Purla. Most of the staff remembered her mother and they were always happy to see Pelya. The memory of the place was painful to Frath, so they never stayed long.

A few blocks before reaching the park, Kally stopped in front of a large manor. She sat down on a low wall in front of manicured grounds and took Pelya by the arms. "This is where I need to stop. You can see that it's not a dangerous place. The man I need to speak to is a minor lord. He knows my father and they have business dealings." She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "It's a personal matter that I can't take care of while on duty. If I could talk to him now, it would help me out a lot." She squeezed Pelya's arms gently and then let go. "That said, if you feel uncomfortable with this or have a bad feeling, we'll skip it and go straight to the park."

Pelya thought about it for a moment. The fact that they didn't *have* to do it helped a lot. She looked at the estate and didn't get any bad feelings from it. There were no

crows to issue warnings either. In truth, she was numb from the events of the other day. Finally, Pelya nodded. "I don't have any bad feelings about it, so I think we should do it. Thank you for asking me though."

Kally wrapped her up in a hug and held her awhile. "Everything will get better a little bit each day," she reassured Pelya. "Give it time." She smiled and stood, holding her hand out for Pelya. Together they walked through the gate. The guard at the door announced their presence and a butler met them as they walked up the short steps.

"Lord Uylvich is expecting you," the man said in a monotone voice devoid of anything resembling emotion. He led them into a sitting room decorated with old furniture. Each piece might have been elegant at one time, but Pelya doubted it. None of it matched and all of it clashed with the tapestries and rugs. The lone window in the room had two small panes of broken glass covered with leather. Everything was mostly clean, but Pelya could tell that no one moved furniture or knickknacks to clean underneath or behind them. There was a dry dusty smell permeating the air and the only sound was a low whistling from wind blowing through a crack in one of the window's seams.

The lieutenant gestured for Pelya to sit in a chair near the door while she went to the cold fireplace and stared into it blankly. Pelya did as told and remained quiet while hoping they would get to leave quickly.

The slick man who ambled in had thin black hair and a pencil-thin mustache. He looked to be in his late thirties. "Well, well. It is good to see you, Kally. Are you here for pleasure or business?" he asked, not noticing Pelya at all. His voice rose and fell in glossy tones as he leered at the officer. Pelya was nauseated by the way the man looked her Aunt Kally up and down with a wink. "Every time I see you, you're even more beautiful.

"Hello Lord Uylvich. I'm here on business, specifically my father's contract. You know he needs it to stay in business." Pelya noticed that Kally was nervous. The lieutenant's hand squeezed the hilt of her sword for reassurance, her lips pursed tightly together, some of the blood had left her cheeks and her stance had gone from confident to insecure.

"Well, well . . . getting straight to the point, are we? Look how attractive you are." He moved forward and put a hand on the lieutenant's shoulder. "When you were a young lass you showed a hint of beauty to come, but as a woman that beauty has been realized. You know you can call me by my name." The lord began to run his hand down her arm until realizing she was wearing chainmail under the tunic. He moved to her neck and caressed it slowly instead. "You *do* know it, don't you?"

Kally breathed in nervously, but didn't pull away. "Enric." Her voice was shaky, something Pelya had never heard from her before.

"I like the way you say that. You have such a pretty voice," He told her. Lord Uylvich slid the hand behind her neck and began massaging slowly and firmly. Moving closely, he put his other hand on her waist. His face was just a few inches away from hers. Pelya wondered why her aunt didn't pull away or even kill the man. It was making her uncomfortable, but she just didn't know what to say or do.

His other hand slid down around to Kally's thigh and up underneath the long chain shirt to squeeze her bottom. "The contract is just business. Surely you understand that.

It's not finalized, but another offer was better." He paused thoughtfully for a moment.

Lieutenant Nevala was breathing slowly. She looked distinctly uncomfortable, but still made no move to push him away. "Lord . . . Enric . . . I don't . . ." She pleaded with her eyes for him not to continue.

He responded by moving his hands to her sword belt, unbuckling it and letting it fall to the ground around her feet before putting them back in their original positions. "You know I wanted to marry you, but you joined the guard instead. Marriage isn't an option now because of that, but it doesn't make me want you any less," he told her, his voice heavy with lust. Lord Uylvich pulled her to him with both hands, pressing against her with his body and his lips.

Once again, the lieutenant didn't resist. Pelya watched in wide-eyed shock as the man squeezed and rubbed her aunt's neck. It stunned her even more when Kally opened her mouth to let the man kiss her deeply. The two continued for a moment before Kally finally pushed away.

"Here now, I thought you truly wanted your father to have that contract . . ." Enric said, pulling her back with the hand on her neck. He seemed to be using it to control Kally as much as possible.

"I'm not alone," Kally told him, her hands against his chest. With a motion of her head, she indicated Pelya who had been staring in shock the entire time.

Lord Uylvich blinked in surprise at the girl who had been sitting so quietly. Even with the revelation, he continued to hold the lieutenant firmly. He frowned. "Go to the kitchen and help the cook, girl. Pretty Kally is going to spend some time making me very happy and will come to get you when we're done." Then he proceeded to ignore Pelya as he pushed his mouth against the lieutenant's again.

Pelya didn't move right away, worried that her Aunt Kally was in trouble. She knew adults kissed and even knew what sex was, but this wasn't how she had seen anyone act before. When the lord began kissing Kally's neck, Kally looked at Pelya and nodded for her to go. Pelya walked slowly toward the doorway until Lord Uylvich pulled Kally's tunic, chain shirt and under shirt up to the chest, then Pelya dashed out. Looking over her shoulder, the last thing she saw was Kally's bare back as the man lifted everything over the lieutenant's head and raised arms.

The sound of a man yelling at someone blasted through the kitchen doorway and Pelya decided to wait against the wall outside it before going in. She didn't like what her Aunt Kally was doing, but couldn't think of anything to help. She was beginning to hate spending the days with aunts and uncles, whereas it had seemed fun at first.

"More food ruined by rats! You incompetent fool, I should turn you over to the City Guard for bringing me this feces infested rice!" the man hollered angrily at some poor victim from the kitchen. "Take this bag and pick every insect and turd out of it before bringing it back to me."

Pelya decided not to eat the rice if they had to stay for lunch. She heard the sound of a person scurrying off and the cook muttering about rats. The aroma wafting from the

doorway wasn't too bad. Roasting meat mixed with spiced pie and made her mouth water, but Pelya wasn't certain she wanted anything from the kitchen.

Not knowing what else to do, she went inside and found the cook. He was a portly man with a shaven head and multiple piercings on his ears, eyebrows, lips and nose. Pelya didn't like piercings, mostly because members of the Guard weren't allowed to have them. They could be pulled out by dirty fighters or used in ways to hurt the person wearing them. The cook wore a food stained apron over a clean, short-sleeved shirt and tan cotton leggings. Tattoos covered his exposed arms and others were on his neck, extending beneath his shirt. Tattoos and piercings were common with many adults in the city.

"Pardon me," Pelya said politely, but firmly, while coming up behind the cook who was beginning to slice strips of meat to add to what was already cooking. The man turned quickly, a butcher knife held casually in his hand. To her credit, Pelya didn't flinch.

"Yeah, whaddya want? Actually, who are you and what are you doing in my kitchen?" His ruddy cheeks jiggled as he spoke.

"Lord Uylvich told me to come help you in the kitchen while he . . . has a meeting . . . with my aunt." She really didn't know any other way to describe it, nor did she want to try.

"Meeting, huh?" He looked her up and down, sizing her up. Pelya was extremely happy he didn't have the same gaze that the lord had used on Aunt Kally. "Say, do you know how to use that little sticker on your side?" he asked, pointing to her longknife.

"Yes Sir,"

"Good! I got a problem with rats in the basement. They're eating my food supplies and destroying things. You go take care of them and I'll give you a few coppers spending money," he told her as though it was the most brilliant plan ever.

Pelya narrowed her eyes and put a hand on her hip. "Really?"

"Tell you what, if you get ten, I'll give you a silver piece," The cook bargained enthusiastically.

"Really?"

". . . Yes, really. Why are you looking at me like that?" he asked, drawing back in surprise.

"You really want me to go kill rats in the basement?" Pelya raised an eyebrow. "It sounds like the first part of every bad adventure story ever told."

"Well this isn't an adventure story and you're just a little girl. I'm telling you to go kill some of those rats in the basement and I recommend you do so . . . unless you want me to go interrupt Lord Uylvich's meeting to tell him you're a disobedient little brat . . ." He left the threat hanging there.

That wasn't how she wanted to rescue Aunt Kally. Pelya had the distinct impression the lieutenant wouldn't appreciate the interruption. "Yes Sir," she agreed reluctantly.

"Good girl." He pointed to a door in the far wall. "The basement's through there. You'll find lanterns on a table and you can light one to see your way. I'll give you a copper for each rat carcass you bring me."

She nodded and went to the door. It wasn't too dark below, so she went down the steps quickly after closing it behind her. There were a lot of boxes, barrels, sacks and crates scattered around the stone floor and on large shelves. Pelya lit a lantern and lifted

it. There were already a few lanterns hanging from hooks on posts deep in the basement. They were all at low flame to conserve oil. A rat stared at her boldly from atop one of the crates.

“Hello, rat,” she greeted it. Instead of taking out her longknife to kill it, she made her way through the stacked crates to discover how large the basement was. Pelya didn’t mind rats. They were a natural part of the city and usually didn’t bother humans as long as humans didn’t bother them. It wasn’t a popular sentiment, but she wasn’t about to get their blood on her clothes. It wasn’t worth coppers she didn’t need.

The thought of blood made the image of it flowing from Bobbell’s mouth flash across her mind. Pelya whimpered at the memory. It had woken her up screaming every night. Frath was always there for her and had taken to sleeping in a sleeping bag on the floor next to her bed.

She shook off the negative thoughts. The strong odor of moldy cheese tickled her nose and Pelya decided not to eat anything with cheese either. The basement was bigger than it had seemed originally. There were other rooms that were kept cold by runes inscribed into the walls and doorways. The entire space was a little chilly, which felt nice after the warm days they had been having. It still wasn’t summer hot, which she was grateful for, but it was certainly getting close to that.

Another set of stairs led to a deeper level of basement. She looked back and listened for a minute to see if anyone else had come down. It was quiet with the exception of an occasional creak of the building or skittering of rats. One rat sat on a barrel, staring at her. She put a finger to her lips and whispered, “Shh.” It turned and went about its business in silent agreement not to tell.

No light came from the stairwell below. Pelya held her lantern up as she went down. It occurred to her that she wasn’t even remotely scared. A basement was tame compared to the city streets underneath Dralin or the alleys of the Wizard’s Mall.

Grief squeezed her heart again, but she shook it off and looked around the sub-basement. The air was cooler and mustier than above. She saw furniture, old paintings, rolled up rugs and tapestries, various tools, dishes and house wares like candlesticks and baskets. It was a minor adventure and she was enjoying herself for the first time since exploring the academy with Ebudae.

Pelya saw a stone door with a lock on it set into the right side wall. She studied the area around it for a minute as Uncle Bobbell had taught her. She hoped it was locked so she could use the tools kept under her tunic.

Patience was the word he had always told her when teaching how to pick locks. Pelya rolled a half barrel near the door and set the lantern down on it so she could study the door, checking the seams for unusual gaps or perhaps a hidden canister that might pop with gas if she opened it. She didn’t know exactly what it would look like because Bobbell hadn’t been able to arrange equipment that advanced. She was relying on his verbal descriptions.

After checking all of that, she looked back and listened to make certain no one else was coming down. Then she unrolled the picks onto the barrel and chose three that were the most useful. Pelya knelt in front of the lock. Bobbell had snuck her around a few times to different doors and had her practice, but this was the first time she had ever attempted it by herself.

The lock looked very similar to another one she had learned on. Pelya carefully inserted two of the picks in to see if they became warm. When they didn't, she knew there weren't any magical wards on it and pulled them back out. Pelya trusted Bobbell's judgment of their ability.

Before trying to pick the lock, she tested whether or not the door was even locked, a rule Bobbell had hammered into her head to make sure she would never look the fool. It was, so she eagerly inserted the first pick into the lock. Once it was set, she put in the second and third. With a little pressure, the lock clicked. It surprised her that she might get it so quickly, but when she tested the handle, it opened.

The room beyond was dark too. Pelya put the picks back and grabbed the lantern. She was disappointed to see more crates of household furnishings. Some of the items on shelves along the wall appeared to be tarnished silver, which would justify the locked door. Pelya wouldn't have stolen anything. She considered herself a member of the Guard sworn to uphold the law, but picking locks and sneaking around took skill and made her feel alive. They were also useful abilities to have when hunting down true thieves and criminals.

Pelya sat down on one of the crates in disappointment. She put the lockpicks back under her tunic and felt the pouch with her other two rune balls, remembering that one of them would find secret doors. Ebudae had told her that most of the manors in older districts like the Merchant and Noble Districts had secret passages. She picked out the light green ball and rolled it around in her hand. Before doing anything, Pelya grabbed the lantern and went back to the upper basement to see if anyone had come down to check on her.

That level was clear and a minute later, she was back in the room. She said the key word to activate the rune ball and it began to glow green. Pelya shined it around the room only to be extremely disappointed when it didn't reveal anything. Not willing to give up, she took it out into the rest of the sub-basement to see if she could find something.

When the light revealed a space behind a stone wall in the back corner, she smiled gleefully. It took a moment of moving the rune ball around the area to find the trigger, a stone she had to push near the low ceiling. She stood on a crate and pushed with all her might while still holding the rune ball. It worked, but created a slight grinding noise.

Pelya froze in hope that no one had heard. After a minute, she investigated the passage beyond, taking the lantern along for better light. It was much cleaner than she expected. There was little dust or cobwebs and the floor was swept, meaning that the passage was used. It worried her that she might get caught. People didn't tend to be understanding about strangers in their secret passages and the standard excuse of looking for a chamber pot defied credibility.

She was undecided for a moment, but decided to explore to the left first. About two hundred feet away, there was a set of stairs going upward. Pelya didn't want to go up, so she turned in the other direction. The secret door to the sub-basement was still open, so she found the passage-side trigger and closed it, hoping it would also let her back out. She kept the rune ball activated. It would continue to work awhile and there might be other passages.

After another three hundred feet, there were stairs going down. Pelya stayed to the left-hand side and hoped there were no traps along the way as she quickly moved down.

After sixty steps, they turned and went down the other direction. They did that three more times before coming to another hallway.

Pelya made her way carefully through the damp passage. Patchy moss covered the walls and ceiling, but the floor was clear. She followed it for two hundred feet before coming to another door. It was metal, but plain. She tried the latch, expecting it to be locked, but the door opened easily.

What she saw on the other side of that door caused her eyes to go wide in amazement.

Chapter 19

Instead of a dark and dusty room with treasure and hidden dangers, Pelya saw a room filled with magical lanterns, bookshelves along one wall, a stone floor with thick magical runes painted on it, workbenches with items of wizardry much like Ebudae had in her labs and more runes painted on the walls. In addition to that, there were a few small, magical creatures in cages scattered throughout the room. On the far end, surrounded by eight orange, glowing orbs of lights that were set on stands, was a large cage. But the thing that made Pelya gasp was the orange dragon lying in the middle of the cage, staring at her with liquid-silver eyes.

She had heard a few tales of dragons, but few people ever saw one. They were mysterious creatures that stayed away from human civilization. What she remembered hearing from Micky, a bard friend of her father's at Carnival, was that dragons were the most powerful creatures in the world. He told her that entire armies had fallen before them, but hadn't heard of dragons killing humans or vice versa anytime in the last millennium or more and didn't know why. Micky said little was known about them other than the facts that they were bigger than a large inn, very beautiful, could fly, and that it was an absolutely *horrible* idea to upset one.

As she carefully walked toward it after shutting the door behind her, Pelya observed that the dragon was beautiful, stunning even. Metallic orange scales covered the body from snout to tail, glimmering in the light of the orbs and lanterns. The wings were folded back and its head was resting on its front claws. Pelya got the distinct impression that it was sad, though she couldn't figure out how she knew that.

Micky had mentioned that dragons were bigger than most large inns, but this one was more the size of a large wagon. Pelya wondered if he exaggerated the facts or if it was just a small dragon. She wasn't sure if it was safe to get too close, but curiosity was stronger than anything. "Hello, beautiful dragon . . . you are a dragon, aren't you?"

Its head lifted a tiny bit and a pitiful, trembling wail emitted from its mouth before settling back on its forepaws. The small dragon looked weak to Pelya and she instantly felt sympathy for it. "You poor dear," Pelya said, moving toward the cage. She stopped at the edge of an intricately spoked, large circle of runes that surrounded the cage. She studied them for a moment without understanding what any of it did. "You're trapped in there aren't you?" she asked before instantly realizing it was a stupid question.

It gave her just the slightest miserable nod of its head. She was surprised that the creature understood her, but remembered Micky telling her that they were said to be much more intelligent than humans.

There was a large lock on the gate and Pelya got the idea of helping it escape. It was probably a stupid idea, but she didn't care. The creature was far too beautiful to be locked away. She noticed that the circle on the floor had spokes leading outside of it that attached to the stands the glowing orbs were above. Those spokes were the same color orange as the orbs and went directly underneath the dragon. "Are they draining your power?" Pelya guessed.

The head rose further that time and a louder wail came forth.

"Shh, shh," Pelya hushed anxiously. "I don't want anyone to find me here, otherwise I won't be able to rescue you." The dragon tilted its head in curiosity at the word rescue. Pelya glanced back nervously to make sure no one had entered the room before turning to the dragon again. "I don't know what I'm doing or if I'll succeed, but I'm going to try." She gestured to the circle of runes on the floor. "Is that some sort of magic that keeps anything from getting to you?"

It didn't respond right away. Its eyes swirled more rapidly. Then it nodded slowly. Pelya got the impression there was more to the answer. Guessing what the dragon was trying to communicate to her was difficult. Setting down the lantern, but still keeping the rune ball in her hand so it wouldn't deactivate, she pulled one of the picks out of her pouch and held it forward toward the circle. It didn't just become warm, it turned white hot and burned her fingers, causing her to drop it. "Ouch!" she yelled, ignoring her own advice to be quiet. The dragon raised one of the long ridges that ran over his eyes in a most humanlike expression. Pelya stuck the wounded finger in her mouth and glared at the creature.

Luckily, the pick only became hot when handled. She was able to retrieve it with the leather of the pouch and work it back into its opening. "I need to be able to pick the lock, but I have no idea how to get past anything magical," she told the dragon sadly. It slumped its head in dejection.

Pelya sighed and looked around the room. The other creatures appeared to have their energy being drained as well, which suddenly made her furious. She wanted to save all of them, but couldn't without some sort of magical knowledge. Pelya wondered briefly if Aunt Kally knew about the room, then she panicked in fear that someone might have come into the basement to find her. She calmed her breathing and decided she didn't care.

"Let me see if I can figure something out," she told the dragon. It didn't respond except to follow Pelya with its eyes while she explored. It was a very large room with multiple tables. Magical items of all sorts were on many of them along with tools and ingredients to make those items. Pelya couldn't help think that Ebudae would love the place.

Then, along the back wall, the rune ball exposed a very large secret door. It occurred to Pelya that it was large enough to fit a dragon. She looked for a mechanism, but couldn't find it. For five minutes, she scanned the wall without discovering its secret. Some sort of room or wide hall was behind it, but the light only exposed fifteen feet beyond.

Foiled in her attempts, Pelya rapidly began searching the rest of the walls and even the bookcases. No other door revealed itself. Then she looked around all the tables and shelves for a key, scroll or anything else to give her a clue about the dragon's cage or the entrance. It was to no avail. Well after an hour had passed, she sat down cross-legged

just outside the circle in front of the dragon. Pelya put her chin on her fists and felt tears beginning to flow.

She was tired of crying and wiped them off furiously. "I'm sorry, beautiful dragon. I just don't know how to get you out of here," Pelya apologized miserably. It didn't respond other than to continue staring at her dejectedly. Pelya began tossing the rune ball back and forth from hand to hand.

Aunt Kally was probably done with . . . 'the meeting,' as Pelya considered it in her mind. She didn't want to think about the other stuff. "I'm supposed to be in the basement killing rats," Pelya admitted to the dragon who didn't respond. "Someone's most likely searching for me now. I don't care if I get in trouble, but I just wish I could save you."

The dragon lifted its head up for the first time in a while. Pelya watched as it inhaled. Then it sneezed on her.

Pelya sat there in shock as it lowered its head again. Dragon snot covered her face and clothes, even oozing down her collar. "Eww," she told it while holding her arms out in disgust. "I can't believe you just sneezed on me after I tried to help you." It didn't respond at all. It didn't even *look* guilty.

She crushed the snot-covered rune ball to destroy it. Pelya was about to throw the dust on the ground, but realized it would give someone a clue that she had been there. With a huff, she picked up the lantern, turned and stomped back to the door she had come in, still holding the dust. At the same time, she did her best to wipe off the extra-sticky snot with an arm.

As she ripped the door open and entered the secret passage, it occurred to her that she was doing a terrible job of sneaking around in a place that was owned by someone with powerful enough magic to capture a dragon. Her senses came back to her. Pelya set the lantern down and closed the door before picking it back up.

Everything was quiet ahead, so she made her way back to the stairs and up, stopping at each landing to listen again. It was still clear when she reached the original hallway and she headed instantly to the secret door. At that point, Pelya realized she had crushed the rune ball that allowed her to see the trigger to open it.

Pelya went to the steps up and counted back to where she remembered the secret door being. She was very pleased with herself when she got it right on the second try. The door opened in front of her and she slipped through. Much to her relief, there was no one in the sub-basement that she could see or hear. A rat noticed her, but seemed willing to keep the secret.

The secret door closed when she pushed the trigger on that side. It still made the grinding noise, but didn't seem to alert anyone. Pelya moved to some crates a short distance away and threw the dust of the rune ball on the ground where it wouldn't be seen. She wiped off the remaining powder on her pants.

There was no one in the upper level of the basement either. Pelya walked to the bottom of the stairs and stood there for a few minutes. Faint sounds of the kitchen trickled down the steps, but there was no indication of trouble or alarm.

Pelya walked around and glanced in some of the open crates and barrels. One barrel had some water in it and she used it to clean the snot off as well as possible. She managed to find a box of moth-eaten shirts in another corner and used one to dry off after making sure nothing inhabited it.

Another box had some crackers in it so she grabbed a few, sat on another crate and began munching. She had been down there for a few hours and no one had come to fetch her. It upset her that Kally was taking so long, but Pelya decided to take the time to consider everything she had seen.

It was somewhat nice in the basement. The cool darkness felt good with the way she had been feeling lately. A rat came nearby to inspect her crackers and she held one out to it. "Here you are, friend. I don't mind sharing." It sniffed the air with initial distrust, but finally decided Pelya was one of them. It snatched the cracker and moved a short distance away to begin eating.

For the next hour or so, Pelya debated the fate of the dragon, the decision Kally had made, the death of Bobbell, the academy below Lady Pallon's manor, her friendship with Ebudae and various other thoughts that came and went.

The verdict by the weaponmaster that she learn about life outside of the guard had drastically changed Pelya's life in just a couple of short weeks. She shifted into a cross-legged position on the crate, crossed her arms on top of the bigger crate next to her and rested her chin. Pelya was already more mature, but also much more sad at the same time. She didn't need to experience suffering to know that life was hard. She believed everyone when they told her, but now she felt that pain on a very personal level.

Her heart ached for the people that suffered. Bobbell's disappointment in his eyes when he realized he was going to die hurt her almost as much as losing him. Kally's shock when Lord Uylvich demanded sex for favors made Pelya feel sick to her stomach. Ebudae's neglect at the hands of her grandmother weakened her faith in humanity, if humanity deserved such a thing.

Pelya felt sad for her father suddenly. He had spent the last eleven years raising a child after losing his wife. He still mourned Sheela. Pelya could see unbearable sorrow in his eyes whenever he spoke of her mother and how happy they were together.

Guilt rubbed Pelya's heart raw that she had caused her mother's death. Pelya didn't know how her father forgave her for that. Her daddy always smiled at her and comforted her when she was down, but she didn't understand why he didn't show how much he must hate her.

Pelya cried silent tears while the rats sat quietly, showing respect for their miserable friend. She fell asleep that way. In an odd measure of respect, the rats left her alone. Perhaps they realized that she had left them alone and were returning the gesture.

"Pelya?" Are you down here?" Kally's voice came to her ears along with the sound of boot steps coming down the stairs. Pelya's head jerked up and she wiped the sleep from her eyes as she stood. When her muscles protested, Pelya groaned.

"There you are." Kally came toward her with a smile. She was walking oddly and her hair was matted with sweat. At some point, she had tried to brush it, but it didn't turn out too well. "I see you fell asleep. I'm sorry it took so long," she said remorsefully. Pelya ran to her and hugged tightly. "Here now, what's this?"

"Are you alright, Aunt Kally?" Pelya asked, looking up. "I've been so worried about you. Did he hurt you?" she asked, sliding her hand to the hilt of her longknife, ready to kill her first person for Aunt Kally's honor.

"Here now. There'll be none of that," Kally said while gently taking Pelya's hand away from her weapon. "Lord Uylvich is a master with the sword and in any case, he treated me wonderfully."

“He did?” Pelya asked suspiciously, not believing her.

“Yes. Come now, let’s go to turn in whatever rats you killed to the cook and then go to the park.” She took Pelya’s hand and led her to the stairs.

“I didn’t kill any rats,” Pelya admitted in embarrassment.

Kally stopped. “You didn’t? You have plenty of skill for it I would think.”

“I kind of like rats and they didn’t bother me while I slept. Plus I didn’t want to get blood on my outfit.”

Kally laughed loudly and happily. “I like that. It was a very wise decision.” They went up the stairs and through the door at the top. The cook was berating another person, so Kally put a finger to her lips and they quietly left the kitchen.

A minute later, they were heading toward the park. Pelya studied her aunt out the side of her vision while they walked. “Aunt Kally?”

“Yes, Pelya?”

“You look really happy. Did he really treat you decently then?” Pelya asked.

“He did. I was nervous at first, but he understood me so well,” Kally said thoughtfully. “Enric did things I enjoyed . . .” She blushed as she realized what she was saying out loud. Kally looked down at Pelya sternly. “That’s none of your business, young lady.”

“Alright,” Pelya agreed. “But you’re going to break your face if you smile any bigger.”

She laughed. “You little brat! Come along. I’ll buy you a nice sticky sweet treat that will hopefully stick your mouth shut,” Kally told her playfully as they entered the park and made their way to a vendor selling said treats.

They stayed in the park for a few hours. Neither of them said much, being lost in their own thoughts. It was nice to sit awhile before walking around the large lake. They bought bread to feed the ducks and laughed when one tried to bite their feet.

After eating dinner, they headed back to the Guard District in silence, still lost in their own thoughts. Pelya decided to ask her father if she could go to visit Ebudae for the next week. Part of her reasoning was that she didn’t want to deal with any more aunts and uncles making side trips, but the biggest reason was that she wanted to ask Ebudae about dragons. Between the two of them, maybe they could sneak back into Lord Uylvich’s manor and rescue the forlorn creature.

She asked her father that night. When he asked why, Pelya told him that she missed her friend and thought it would help her get back to normal. She didn’t tell him that she also wanted to give him a break from her so that he wouldn’t have to think about how Pelya’s birth had killed her mother.

Chapter 20

The sun blasted down, signaling that summer was happy to arrive. Pelya was extremely grateful that she would get to spend the week in Lady Pallon’s cool manor. The walk was uneventful and the only conversation was when Frath asked four separate times if she was alright. “I’m fine, Daddy,” she reassured him each time.

Lady Pallon met them at the door and invited Frath to breakfast while Pelya went straight up to Ebudae’s room. Since they weren’t expected, she figured Ebudae would still be in bed. She ran up the stairs two at a time before slowing down and taking them

one at a time to see what it would be like. After four steps, she concluded that it was boring, so continued at her normal breakneck speed.

At the door to Ebudae's sleeping chambers, Pelya stopped and slowly went in. As suspected, the young wizardess was under the covers of the enormous bed that engulfed her pleasantly. Instead of waking her up, Pelya went to the drawer of nightgowns Ebudae had given her, put one on and slid into bed.

Ebudae woke up enough to recognize her presence and smiled happily. They held onto each other and both went back to sleep. Pelya was exhausted from lack of sleep since Bobbell's death. Ebudae's bed was comfortable, like sleeping on a cloud, and it was the first time she slept without a nightmare.

Fraith came up to say goodbye after eating breakfast. He stood there for a few minutes watching them sleep. With a rare smile, he whispered, "I'm so grateful for you, my beautiful daughter. You are the only wonderful thing I have." Then he turned and went to work.

"What do you know about dragons?" Pelya asked when they were in Ebudae's secret room later that night. She was sitting on the one bench in the room after having moved some magical items that were on it to the floor.

Ebudae was working on laying out ingredients for a new rune ball. She loved making them. Over her shoulder, she replied, "Dragons? Not much. They're the most powerful, magical creatures in the world, extremely dangerous and they fly. Why?"

"I met one," Pelya answered.

The wizardess froze and then slowly turned around. "What do you mean by 'you met one'?" she challenged.

"Promise not to tell," Pelya insisted worriedly even though she knew it wasn't necessary.

Ebudae took out her knife and made a small nick in her arm. "I promise not to tell." Then she licked the blood from the cut.

"Eww," Pelya stated. "That's a really bad habit." Ebudae shrugged and tapped her foot with hands on hips, waiting for the answer. Pelya grinned. "I think it was a baby dragon because it was only as big as a cart. It was in a cage with magical orbs draining its energy."

Ebudae came and sat down on Pelya's left and pulled up her right leg. "You really did see a dragon?" she asked incredulously.

"Yes." Pelya turned toward her and pulled up her left leg so their knees were touching. "Aunt Kally had to make a stop at Lord Uylvich's house in the Noble District. I think she had sex or something." They both made faces of disgust. "The cook told me to go down to the basement and kill rats. I don't have a problem with rats, so I explored instead, even going down to a sub-basement. Then I used that rune ball for finding secret passages."

"Neat! You found one?" Ebudae was clearly excited.

"Yeah! There was a hidden door that led to a well-used passage."

"Interesting. Go on."

“There were stairs going up on the left,” Pelya explained. “I didn’t want to go up, so I went to the right and found steps going down. It went down six flights of stairs and to another passage.”

“Aha! That’s how they got it into the city. They didn’t,” Ebudae exclaimed. At Pelya’s confused look, she grinned and explained the contradiction. “Dragons can’t get into Dralin. They can’t even be brought into the city by someone else. When you first told me you saw one, I wondered how. But you went down far enough that you passed the wards underneath the city. It must have been smuggled below somehow.”

“There was another secret passage in the room with the dragon. There wasn’t a trigger that I could see,” Pelya stated excitedly. “It was easily wide enough for a dragon though.”

“Maybe it has a magical trigger. Did you see any runes on it?”

“There were runes all over the walls and floor, a lot like here.” Pelya gestured at the markings in the lab. “Some of them were on the secret entrance too.”

“Then we just need to figure out which ones open it,” Ebudae said eagerly.

Pelya grinned. “Does that mean you’re going to help me rescue the dragon?”

Ebudae’s face fell. “I want to, but I don’t think we can.” She leaned forward. “I probably know more about magic than any other eleven-year-old girl, but if someone can capture a dragon, then they’re much more powerful than me,” she said sadly.

“Yeah,” Pelya admitted miserably. “I couldn’t figure it out. I was hoping you could tell me something though. The other problem is that you can’t leave the manor without your grandmother and I can’t leave the Guard District without an escort, so I don’t know how we would get back there. Even if we did, getting past everyone would be difficult, then there’s the chance we might get caught.” She exhaled in frustration.

“Then there’s the fact that the dragon might kill us. They *are* dangerous, you know,” Ebudae pointed out.

“It wouldn’t hurt us,” Pelya stated confidently. “It understood what I said and wanted to be rescued. It did sneeze on me though,” she said, still irritated by the fact. Even a bath the night before hadn’t completely gotten rid of the musky smell of the creature.

Ebudae laughed and Pelya joined her. “I think there were a couple of books about dragons in the academy library. Maybe we can figure out some things,” the wizardess suggested.

“Let’s go!” Pelya stood and rushed over to the table where their supplies were. Ebudae was right there and, within a few minutes, they were on their way down. Both girls were excited and Pelya filled her friend in on many of the details about the adventure in the basement and the death of Uncle Bobbell. Ebudae hugged her warrior friend fiercely when they reached the staging room and it helped Pelya to feel a little bit better.

When the wizardess lit a second lantern, Pelya asked, “Why does a breeze ruffle your hair every time you cast a spell, but I don’t feel anything?”

Ebudae answered as though reciting a lesson learned from a book. “When an individual casts a spell, they collect energy around them. It creates a magical gust only the caster can feel. When releasing the energy, it blows past the user from behind the spell. The more it looks like the caster is being hit by wind, the stronger the spell will be.”

“Oh, alright. I remember hearing some of my aunts and uncles talking about magic wind in battle,” Pelya stated.

Ebudae nodded. “It’s a good way to tell when magic is coming. If you see wind whipping the wizard’s hair, get out of their way as fast as possible.”

Everything was quiet except for the sound of their voices while they walked through the theatre and hallways. Ebudae was pulling out her ring of keys shortly before they reached the library when a shrieking roar blasted through the hallway.

Both girls froze as the shockwave hit them. Their bones turned to rubber, the hair on the back of their necks stood straight and their feet became planted to the ground. Pelya desperately wanted to get away from whatever had made that sound, but couldn’t control her body.

The sound died to a low rumble before fading away. Dust was crumbling from cracks between the stones in the ceiling, falling gently down upon them. Ebudae whimpered next to her. With all her might, Pelya forced her body to move and grabbed the wizardess’s arm to pull her toward the door, the nearest safe place they could get to.

Another supernatural roar ripped through the hall, weakening them further and causing them to drop their lanterns. It took all of Pelya’s strength to keep going. Ebudae was crying and Pelya realized tears were streaming down her own face as well when they reached the door. A flash appeared in the distance up the hall. She tried to get the keys from Ebudae, but was too weak to grab them.

Both girls screamed in terror when taloned hands grabbed their necks from behind and lifted them off their feet. Pelya’s remaining courage fled for its life, leaving her alone. She couldn’t breathe anymore and her body shivered uncontrollably.

Whatever was holding them snarled terribly before putting its face next to Pelya’s. It sniffed rapidly and flicked a long forked tongue all over her face. Ebudae’s keys dropped to the floor in a clatter, startling the creature. The wizardess drew in a strained breath. Pelya realized that spots were floating in her vision. She inhaled a rasping breath, concentrating on basic survival even though she knew they were about to die. In a corner of her mind, she realized the hallway was glowing orange.

The creature sniffed her again, a low rumbling sound coming from its throat. It was loud, vibrating through their bones and knocking more dust from everything. “Where is my child?” it asked in a hissing voice that slithered up and down the hallway.

Conversation was the last thing Pelya had expected. She wondered what the creature was talking about, but when she tried to speak, all that came out was a strangled sob. The creature turned them both to face it.

Pelya was shocked to see a muscular woman easily holding them up in the air. At least it was shaped like a woman, but there were distinct differences. Her hair was metallic orange, falling down her back. There seemed to be an orange tint to the skin, though it could have been the bubbles of orange lights floating along the ceiling. She wore silken black leggings and a short-sleeved orange shirt.

The most frightening part was rows of sharp teeth that didn’t seem to fit in its mouth. But what really stuck out to Pelya were the swirling silver eyes that looked like the trapped dragon she met the day before. “Where is my child? I smell him on you,” it hissed at her again.

She wanted to tell the creature, but all that came out was a strangled whining sound. It looked back and forth between the two girls and suddenly seemed to realize they were so terrified that they couldn't answer.

"Be calm," it ordered, setting them down on their feet. Pelya's knees buckled as did Ebudae's and the creature had to hold them up. Then unexpected relief washed through Pelya and strengthened her bones once more as her knees found their strength. She felt peace in her mind and her breath came back to the way it was supposed to be. Ebudae stood on her own too. "Can you speak now?" the creature asked in an almost normal voice. It still had a hissing quality, but nowhere near as severe.

The girls nodded, but didn't say anything. The peace Pelya was feeling didn't seem quite right and somewhere in the back of her mind, she was still completely terrified. Ebudae took her hand and held on for dear life. The creature, or woman, or whatever it was, crossed its arms and studied them for a moment before slowly unfolding the right arm to point a talon-tipped finger directly at Pelya's chest. "You have the smell of my child on you. Tell me where he is *now*." The words were a command that became more threatening with each word.

If she hadn't been under the false sense of calm, Pelya probably would have wet herself at that point. Instead, she answered as rapidly as possible in hope the creature would go away. "If your child is a dragon, then I think he's in a secret lab underneath the manor of Lord Uylvich. I tried to rescue him, but couldn't," she added, praying it would have mercy on them. At no point did Pelya think she and Ebudae could fight or escape the creature.

It began rumbling in anger. As the sound grew louder, more dust began to fall. The girls felt as though their bones were being shaken from the inside out. When a keening shriek began to run over the rumbling, they covered their ears the best they could. The creature's fists were balled at its sides and its throat was turned toward the ceiling.

When both the rumbling and the shriek ended, the girls were crying again. Even the magical sense of calm had been shredded by the sound. Then the most miraculous thing happened. A metallic tear slid down the creature's cheek from the rapidly swirling eyes. From the cheek, it fell to the ground and turned into a silver dragonfly. The insect flitted about the hallway before flying away.

"I . . . I'm sorry I . . . I couldn't s . . . save him," Pelya stuttered fearfully, feeling sympathy for the terrifying creature. "I . . . I really d . . . did try my best."

It looked at her. Then it looked at the door behind the girls. Thin, rust colored tendrils spread throughout the silver eyes for just a moment. "Let us go into the library." The tendrils disappeared. "I want you to tell me everything you saw. He is still alive, yes?"

"Yes," Pelya answered swiftly. "He was weak and sad though. I think they're draining his energy."

The information caused the creature scowl and rumble angrily again. Pelya really wished it would stop and judging by Ebudae's shaking hand, she did too. "Open the library," it told Ebudae who reached down with her free hand and picked the keys up. They turned back to the door and the wizardess's hands shook violently as she tried to find the right key. Pelya helped to steady her and they managed to get it open.

The creature picked up the lanterns and followed them in. The orange lights came down through the door and ran along the top of the ceiling, lighting the room further.

They were different from the orbs around the child dragon's cage. Those had been milky and swirling. These were translucent and looked like they had little bolts of lightning dancing around inside.

Pelya and Ebudae walked around to the other side of the table while the creature studied the room. "A . . . are you really a dragon?" Ebudae asked, her first words coming out trembling.

It focused on her. "Yes. I am a dragon." It looked back and forth between the two of them. Gesturing with its hand, the dragon caused the door to shut, making the girls jump. "In my natural form, I am too big for these forsaken tunnels underneath your accursed city." The dragon's voice was quieter, but still had an ominous hissing quality. "Human form is convenient for many things in these ruins. It does not fool the wards which keep dragons and others out of the city, else I would have destroyed the towers of those silly wizards over the last month in my search." It put its hands on the table. The girls gasped when its talons pierced holes into the stone top. "Now tell me everything you saw," it commanded Pelya.

She began describing the details of going into the basement and the secret passage. Then Pelya told what she remembered of the child dragon in its cage. After that, she described what she remembered of the room.

"I am pleased that you use words with truth in them, but there are many details missing." The creature drummed the clawed fingers into the holes it had created. Pelya wondered how it knew she was telling the truth. It stopped drumming and moved around the table in a blur. "I need to know those details." The dragon in human form enclosed Pelya's head with clawed hands and began speaking words of magic. Her words sounded like multiple ghosts of voices dancing gracefully through the room.

Ebudae made no move to help her friend because it could have killed Pelya. The warrior girl wouldn't have noticed either way. She felt her mind open and become colorful. There was no other way to describe it. Her memories were like rainbows she could slide on and she felt weightless.

"Now tell me *exactly* what you saw," the dragon commanded. Pelya stuck her hands into the pretty rainbows and began playing. She heard herself talking, but hadn't a clue what she was saying.

After an unknown amount of time, the rainbows went away. Pelya was disoriented as the dragon released her head. Ebudae caught her when she stumbled to her knees. Everything felt like it was tipping to the left and she couldn't get her balance. Then she threw up all over the floor.

[Chapter 21](#)

"Pelya . . . Pelya! Wake up!" Ebudae's voice came from somewhere far away. Pelya couldn't pull herself free from castoff rainbows that had lost their color. They were mush and stuck to the walls of her mind. "You need to wake up now, Pelya," Ebudae insisted. The sound pulled Pelya out of the grey rainbows, but she still felt sticky. A groan bounced around in her skull. She was angry at whoever was making the noise. "That's it. Come on. Wake up."

She opened her eyes and instantly regretted it as the dim orange light in the room spun around. Another groan sounded and she realized it was her own. As Ebudae put an

arm around Pelya's back and lifted her into a sitting position, everything tilted to the left again and she felt the nausea threaten to remove whatever might be left in her stomach.

"Drink this. It'll help." Ebudae lifted a bottle to her lips. Pelya turned her head and weakly fought off her friend.

"You can take it from your friend or I can hold your head still with a claw and force it down your throat until you choke on it, child," the dragon said irritably.

Pelya saw it standing nearby, still in human form with its arms folded. The dragon was spinning in the opposite direction of the room, making Pelya even sicker. When the bottle was put to her lips again, Pelya drank it all. She knew the dragon would make good on its threat.

The effect was amazing. Pelya could feel the thick, cool syrup slide down her throat. As soon as it hit her stomach, the nausea stopped and energy flooded her veins. The best part was the fact that the puddle of monochrome rainbows at the bottom of her mind washed away and she could think clearly again.

Ebudae helped her to stand before putting the bottle on the table. She held Pelya's arm and examined her with concern. "Are you alright?"

Pelya nodded slowly. "Everything feels funny, but I think I'll be alright. What was that stuff?"

"A special healing potion Hezzena had me give to you." Ebudae jerked her head toward the menacing visitor.

"Hezzena?"

"It's not my true name, but it will do for your simple human minds," the dragon interrupted testily. "For the last few hours your little friend and I have been going over everything you told us. It is time for you to listen to the plan."

"Plan?" Pelya questioned blankly.

"I worry that this one is not bright enough to perform her task," Hezzena told Ebudae.

"You stirred her mind like you were making butter in a churn!" Ebudae protested. "She's smarter than anyone I know and more decent too! You be nice to her!" The wizardess treaded forward and jammed a finger up into Hezzena's chest before remembering she was talking to a dragon. When another low rumbling growl shook the room, Ebudae stepped fearfully back to Pelya's side.

Pelya positioned herself so that she would be between her friend and the dragon. "The plan is to rescue your child, isn't it?" Pelya asked, hoping to deflect any violence.

The rumbling died down and Hezzena's expression softened. "You two protect each other in the face of death. I almost don't hate you as I hate every other human at this moment. Yes, child. You are going to save my son, Rizzith, as you may call him. I have devised a plan with the help of your crafty little friend there, but she'll kill herself with foolishness if you don't do your part."

Ebudae blushed and stared at her feet when Pelya looked at her questioningly. "What is she talking about?" Pelya asked.

Hezzena answered the question instead. "Human children aren't capable of handling magic. Your bodies are developing and magic can stunt that development, even deforming a child." Purple tendrils appeared in the dragon's eyes, much like the rust colored ones from earlier. "I can already see that small damages have been done to the

juicy parts inside her bones and both her livers. If she continues, she'll die when she reaches maturity."

The danger to her friend horrified Pelya. Ebudae had tears in her eyes as she desperately grabbed the young warrior's arm and pleaded, "Please don't make me stop. I love magic so much. I can't live without it, Pelya."

"And it will kill you if you continue," Hezzena stated irritably. "That is of no matter to me right now. You must rescue my child."

Pelya turned to the dragon, flaring in anger. "And what if we refuse?"

Both of their heads were instantly held in claws. The tips pierced skin where they touched. "*Then you will die!*" Hezzena hissed. She released them quickly and stood back, claws forming back into the taloned hands. Pelya's stomach twisted at the feel of blood trickling from the small piercings in her head. "If you do not accept this task, you will die. If you begin this task but do not finish, you will die. If you run away, you will die. I have means to see to it even if you're in the city where I can't reach you." Pelya and Ebudae clung to each other, both nodding fearfully while Hezzena rumbled, shaking loose more dust. Then the dragon's expression changed, softening. "However, if you give me your word that you will attempt to rescue my son in good faith, I will not implement those means."

The girls exchanged puzzled glances before looking at Hezzena in confusion. "If I could have, I would have saved Rizzith already," Pelya told her. "If you had just asked me, I would have done so again gladly. I'll still do it because I think it's the right thing to do."

Hezzena stared at her for a minute and then hung her head. "I am ashamed by my behavior, child. My treatment of you is unacceptable, yet you still act with great honor. Please forgive me."

The sudden change in behavior surprised the girls. Pelya stared for a moment then ran and gave Hezzena a hug. Ebudae stared at them both, but rushed and joined the hug too. The dragon looked at them in shock, but wrapped her arms tightly around their shoulders. "Thank you. Thank you for forgiving me and thank you for helping to rescue Rizzith."

"Of course. There's no way I would miss it!" Ebudae said enthusiastically as they separated. "I know we can do it now that you've told me everything you did."

Hezzena pointed a finger at Ebudae. "You are not to do anything I've forbidden you." The sharp tip circled warningly in the young wizardess's face. She moved it in front of Pelya. "I will tell you those things. If you don't prevent your friend from doing so, she will die from the casting." Pelya nodded while Ebudae crossed her arms stubbornly.

"I'll make certain of it," Pelya agreed, glaring at her friend who stuck her tongue out.

"Good," Hezzena said with a nod. "The first problem we have is where to meet once you've rescued my son." She began pacing in a very human way. "The wards you described on the secret hallway will prevent me from coming in that way. They were made specifically to keep me, or any dragon whose help I might enlist, from sensing my son or coming through. However, it is the only way to get my son out since he cannot be brought up through the city. Once you get past the door, I need you to meet me."

“That sounds like a good plan, but I don’t know how to get through the door,” Pelya replied thoughtfully.

“That’s the easy part,” Ebudae said. “The problem is figuring out how to get to the ancient city from that room. Then we need to figure out how to alert Hezzena and get her there before something eats us so she can rescue Rizzith from the cage, which is the hardest part, one that I’m not allowed to do.” The wizardess folded her arms and stubbornly glared at both of them.

“I don’t know where the passage will let out,” Hezzena explained. “I can protect you against everything, but only if I can find you in time.”

Pelya rubbed her stomach. It hurt from throwing up and the potion wasn’t really settling well. “I can show you the general area.”

They stared at her. “How can you do that?” Hezzena asked suspiciously.

“Part of the training in the Dralin City Guard is knowing where all the sewers are. I like studying the maps, so I know them really well. They’re great for practicing all the memorization I’m going to have to do as I advance. If we can find one, I should be able to get you close to Lord Uylvich’s estate.” She smiled enthusiastically. “I’ve been wanting to explore them anyway, but I’m not allowed in them.”

“Aren’t the sewers above the runes that protect the city?” Ebudae asked.

“I don’t know for sure,” Pelya said, holding her arms out to the side. “But there are a lot of levels and the lower ones should be below. I don’t have all of them memorized, but I really think I can get you close.”

“Then we go now.” Hezzena grabbed Pelya’s wrist and pulling her to the door.

“Wait!” Ebudae protested. “The sewers are dangerous and we’ll have to go through the ruined city to get to them, which is even more dangerous.” Hezzena just stared at the wizardess, her face expressionless. Ebudae thought about her words for a moment. “Oh . . . wait . . . you’re a dragon and probably more dangerous than anything else . . .”

Hezzena gave a single nod. “Alright. I’m ready,” Ebudae said cheerfully.

The dragon rolled her liquid eyes, a neat trick, and led them to the door, still dragging Pelya by the arm. They exited the library, giving Ebudae a moment to re-lock the door. The girls left their lanterns inside, deciding to rely on Hezzena’s light orbs.

After a few steps, Pelya turned toward the wall and threw up again. A single rainbow with feet on each end marched across her mind, crashed against the inside of her skull and turned into grey goop. “Pelya!” Ebudae grabbed her again when the warrior’s knees turned to mush.

“You humans are so weak.” Hezzena let go of the arm. “Especially when you’re young. We don’t have time for this. You have to save Rizzith!”

“She’s not doing it on purpose!” Ebudae yelled at the dragon. “It’s your fault!”

Luckily, the dragon didn’t rumble that time. It didn’t stop her from tapping a foot in annoyance though. Through the sparkly fog that was beginning to develop in her mind, Pelya got the impression the dragon was rapidly swishing its tail even though she was in human form.

Hezzena squatted, took Pelya’s head in her hands and looked deeply, making Pelya even dizzier than before. “I’m not a White, but I should be able to fix it a little bit.” The dragon reached into Pelya’s mind and tried to put things right.

Pelya wailed pitifully as the creature crashed around in her head like a mad bull. “Stop it!” Ebudae screamed, beating on the powerful creature. “Stop it! You’re hurting her!”

After a moment of making everything worse, Hezzena did stop. “I hate healing!” she exclaimed in a growl. Pelya sank to the ground against the wall. She could barely see anything but blurry outlines. Her mind felt wrong -- worse than the rainbows. Things were cracked and she couldn’t move her arms or legs. Ebudae knelt over her and took Pelya’s face in her hands. They were much smaller and more pleasant than the dragon’s had been. “Pelya! By the Gods, what have you done, you beast?!” the wizardess screamed over her shoulder at Hezzena.

Pelya tried to reassure her friend, but couldn’t speak anymore. She realized she was probably going to die. It was very disappointing.

“Don’t close your eyes, Pelya!” Ebudae used her thumbs to hold Pelya’s lids open. “Stay with me.” Turning back to Hezzena, she demanded, “She’s dying! Fix it!” Hezzena snarled at Ebudae and flashed her claws, but the little girl wasn’t daunted. “You did this! She tried to help you and you killed her!”

Pelya internally objected to that statement. She wasn’t dead yet and wanted to say so out loud, but nothing worked. It occurred to her that she *would* be dead in a moment, but that was beside the point. A shadow on Pelya’s left caressed her neck in comfort while one on her right ran its fingers through her hair. They let her know she would go somewhere safe when she died. It made her feel better about her fate.

“Move aside,” Hezzena ordered. “I’ll fix it.” When Ebudae glared at her suspiciously, she said, “You don’t have any other options, now *move!*”

Ebudae did so, but continued glaring. Hezzena took her place kneeling over Pelya. She pulled out a shining white tooth from some unknown place. Then she gripped Pelya’s jaw. “I’m doing this because I did make a mess of her head and she’s going to die soon if I don’t, but also because I need her to save my child. I’m angry and hungry and it’s causing me to make mistakes.”

Pelya was beginning to slip away, feeling as though she was falling into whatever hole the rainbows had slid through. A white-hot burst of pain in her chest abruptly brought her back to the hallway and she screamed in agony. Ebudae’s horrified scream mingled with it as she watched Hezzena drive the tooth into her friend’s heart.

Instead of killing Pelya, the tooth healed her mind entirely. The warrior child stood when Hezzena did. Everything felt perfect, or even better. Her mind was sharp and she could see every detail in the room better than before. Hearing, smell and taste were also heightened. In addition to that, she felt well rested, free of hunger and thirst, stronger than ever before, and completely healthy. “Wow!” she exclaimed. “What was that?” The tooth was gone and there was no injury.

“That was amazing!” Ebudae responded in awe. “I thought you were dead!”

Hezzena put taloned fingers under each of their chins. “That was a white dragon tooth. It dissolves into the blood and cures nearly anything. It is forbidden to tell anyone that under penalty of death.” She looked pointedly at Pelya. “It is also one of the rarest and most valuable items of magic in the world. I’m fairly certain one has never been used on a human, let alone a child.” Hezzena turned in disgust and began striding down the hallway, mumbling to herself. “It’s my own fault for being careless. Everything is my fault. I’ve done everything wrong and it’s *all* my own fault. I deserve to die.”

Ebudae and Pelya exchanged worried glances. Then they took each other's hands and hurried along.

After exiting the ancient academy, Ebudae re-locked the door. Hezzena stomped down the steps with the girls close behind. They followed her while she continued mumbling about how she deserved to die, about disobedient children, how humans were the worst plague ever to be cast upon the world of Ryallon, how she had lost her most valuable treasure, and about little human girls that tried to die just because she tickled their mind a bit.

After a few minutes of walking through the dark streets with only glowing plants and six orange orbs casting an eerie light to see by, the girls were getting nervous. They were much farther into the depths than would be safe for them without a dragon escort. Neither had a clue whether or not Hezzena was leading them in the right direction and neither was willing to disturb her angry mumbling.

A pack of yellow-eyed creatures like the ones that had chased the girls the week before appeared from a street to the left. The girls got closer to Hezzena who seemed oblivious to the presence of the monsters. Then one of the beasts let out a high-pitched squeal.

That drew the dragon's attention. She stopped and looked at the long, low-slung creatures. There were seven of the monsters. Pelya still had the magical sword Ebudae had given her and the wizardess could do spells, but they just weren't emotionally capable of fighting at that moment, so they held onto each other.

It wasn't necessary for them to fight. In a blur, Hezzena went from where she stood to just in front of the first monster. She backhanded it, hurtling it into the side of the nearest building a hundred feet away. Its body broke from the initial blow. It shattered upon hitting the wall.

Neither girl had ever seen a singular display of such strength. Then Hezzena shrieked in rage and began tearing apart the creatures. She picked the next one up by the snout and used it to beat the ever-loving snot out of the third. Hezzena grabbed the fourth by the tail and slammed it back and forth against the ground a few times. Everything was done so quickly that the others hadn't had time to react. The fifth finally decided to try to escape, but Hezzena cast something from her hands that was both fire and electricity combined. The creature exploded within an instant, splattering in an arc away from the dragon. Hezzena's hands turned into dragon-sized claws that scratched and shredded the sixth one to tatters. She lifted the last into the air and thrust it at violent speed to splatter into the dark ceiling far above. It landed with a thud a distance away shortly thereafter.

Hezzena's claws changed back into taloned hands and she stood there huffing in anger. Then she inhaled deeply. The roar that came forth was much vaster than the body it emitted from. It was a full dragon roar filled with rage and anguish. The underground world shook and Pelya wondered if the city above could avoid hearing it.

A few minutes later, the last of the rumbling ended and Hezzena came back to them with shoulders slumped. There wasn't a drop of blood or goo on her from the creatures she had killed, which impressed Pelya. "There's a sewer ahead," she told them, pointing weakly in the direction they were traveling. Her head was down and she walked at a much slower pace. Pelya came up and took Hezzena's hand. When the dragon looked at her in surprise, Pelya smiled encouragingly. Ebudae took the other hand and smiled as

well. It made all the difference in the world and Hezzena stood straighter, even giving them a toothy smile of her own.

The sewer was an enormous stone tunnel forty feet high, running through ruins. “This is one of the lower outlet tunnels that go all the way to flood plains in the south.” Pelya explained.

“If we followed it, we could get out of the city that way?” Hezzena asked suddenly.

“I don’t think this one goes out of the city, but it connects to others that do. Luckily, it hasn’t rained much recently or it would be full and we’d die before getting anywhere. Even with that, it’s dangerous and stinky,” Pelya told them. She pointed to a shaft going upward. “There are thousands of those leading up to higher levels. They have ladders in them. Once again it’s dangerous.”

“You learned all that in books?” Ebudae asked, impressed by the knowledge.

“Yes. Learning the sewers is the single hardest part of the Guard’s education after the Tower District, so I started early. Legally, only the Guard is allowed to enter the sewers, but criminals use the higher levels a lot.” She looked at the tunnel. “I have no idea how to get into them though.”

“That’s very interesting. Getting into the ruins below the city was extremely difficult. Getting out the way I came in isn’t an option. Let me look for a way to get into the tunnel,” Hezzena said. The rust-colored tendrils filled her eyes again while she looked to the left and right. Purple tendrils replaced them for a moment before going back to normal. “There are iron access doors on top that we can use. They’re protected by runes that will be easy for me to bypass.” She reached around their waists. “Hold onto me.” They did so and she leaped to the top of the tunnel.

The girls gasped as their stomachs dropped to their toes. The leap was incredibly graceful and the landing on top was smooth. She set them down and headed to a nearby circular access door. Pelya looked at the iron plate set six feet from the left side of the tunnel. It had to be eight feet in diameter. The exterior of the tunnel was thirty feet wide and stretched as far as the eye could see.

“Why are the doors round instead of square?” Pelya asked. The few trapdoors she had seen were square and made of wood.

“Because circles hold magic better than squares,” Ebudae answered first. “The round unbroken line is always more powerful than four lines with corners. These doors have wards on them, so it makes sense for them to be circular.”

“Both of you shush,” Hezzena told them. She gestured with her arms, moving them like snakes while making hissing sounds. The wards Pelya hadn’t seen before lit up and began moving. An instant later, the door opened upward. “Wait here.” Hezzena jumped into the hole, taking half the orange orbs with her while leaving the rest for them to see by.

It became very quiet without the dragon there. Ebudae wrapped her arms around Pelya who did the same. They stood there for a few minutes, terrified that something would come along while they waited. They let out little screams when Hezzena popped straight out of the hole and landed next to them.

“I don’t like the smell down there, but there’s a walkway and no obvious dangers. The water level isn’t too high either.” Hezzena wrapped her arms around their waists. They held on to her when she jumped back into the sewer. Pelya was proud of herself for

not making a noise while Ebudae squeaked at the sensation of dropping. Once again, the landing was soft.

All of the orbs came with them that time and spread out in both directions. Pelya pointed to their left. "The Noble District should be in that direction. I'll know for certain when I see the markings that should be on the walls.

Hezzena nodded and took their hands. They followed the wide walkway that was fifteen feet below the ceiling on the left side and did their best to ignore the stink that permeated the air. It was bad enough to make the girls' eyes water. Their dragon friend didn't seem affected in the least. To the right of them, sewer water flowed steadily on its way down to the southern plains. Dripping water that condensed on walls and ceilings combined with murky water trickling by.

The water level was just a few feet below the walkway. "When it rains a lot, the water level will be above our heads. If it's not raining much, the level goes down and becomes extra stinky sludge along the bottom," Pelya explained. "That's the marking," she said, pointing at a metal engraving set into the wall where the shaft came from above. It was a series of numbers and letters that specified where they were. "It says we're in the Market District on the eighth level of sewers, which is the bottom level."

"Is this the way to leave the city?" Hezzena asked.

"No. There'll be side tunnels that lead south. Right now, we're going east, which is the way we want," Pelya told her. They walked for quite a way, passing numerous shafts and side passages. There were walkways over side tunnels that intersected, but a couple were broken. Hezzena jumped them over those. It took them half an hour to reach the area where Lord Uylvich's manor would be. "The openings to the street will be on upper levels, but this is as close as this one will get, I think," Pelya informed them.

Hezzena motioned to another of the circular access doors in the top of the tunnel nearby. The wards on it glowed and it opened. She picked the girls up and leapt through the opening. Pelya was beginning to enjoy the sensation and wished she could jump like that.

The orange orbs followed through to illuminate the immediate area. They were in another section of the ruined city that looked different from the one they had come from. The ceiling was slightly lower and there were more of the glowing plants. Dripping sounds filled the air and the smell of mold irritated their nostrils.

"What are those plants?" Ebudae asked Hezzena, pointing at the glowing leaves of one growing on top of the tunnel.

"They grow in the dark places of the world," she explained absentmindedly while going to the right side to scan the area after having scanned the left. "If you go lower into the world, they grow everywhere and there are glowing animals and insects as well. There are also creatures as dangerous as anything above ground . . . except dragons of course." Hezzena turned to Pelya. "Where do you think we might find the secret passage?"

Pelya had been thinking about that very question. "I'm trying my best to remember. There were a lot of turns, but I think it'll be ahead another thousand feet or so and then to the right." Pelya looked at the dragon apologetically. "It's a lot different down here than it is up there, so I'm guessing a lot, but I'm doing the best I can."

Hezzena came over and patted Pelya's head. "I know, child. I'm very proud of you." She crossed her arms. "I'll be more proud when we find the passage and you

rescue my son.” Then she turned and began walking the thousand feet along the top of the tunnel. The girls quickly followed, not willing to be left behind in the dark.

Suddenly the dragon stopped, holding up a hand with its sharp tips. “Hold still,” she commanded quietly. The girls did as she said. They didn’t make a sound while their new friend searched the plant dotted darkness to the right. “There’s something there,” she said in low tones.

The girls stared into the darkness, but couldn’t see anything. Hezzena picked them up again and leapt to the ground in that direction before setting them down gently. “Follow me, but not too closely in case I have to fight.” Once again, they did as she told them.

More crumbling buildings lined the long-forgotten street. Pelya had a desire to explore them, but not so much that she was willing to leave Hezzena’s protection.

Two magically lit blue lanterns hung from a large set of double doors set into the side of a building on the right. Hezzena stopped short and sniffed the air. What might have looked perfectly normal in a dragon looked very odd with her being in human form. She crouched low over the ground and let out another of her rumbling growls. “I can’t smell him. He must have been carried in something that hides his presence.” Hezzena distractedly clawed the ground in front of her, digging furrows into the broken cobbles. Her voice had become the hissing sound that echoed off the walls. It caused Pelya and Ebudae to cling to each other again.

“Is this the exit?” she asked Pelya.

“I think so,” Pelya told her nervously. “Everything about it seems right, the height of it, the location, and the look of the runes.”

“Yes, I think so too.” Hezzena straightened and turned to them. “We’ll go back to the library and finish the details. Then I will come back here and wait for you to bypass the runes to let me in so I may rescue my son.” Without waiting for a response, she picked them up and carried them back to the academy.

[Chapter 22](#)

“We need to get some rest before we try to do this,” Ebudae protested. Hezzena had gone over every detail with both girls for three hours in the library and was insisting they leave immediately to begin the rescue.

“No!” Hezzena slammed her fist on the table, cracking the stone that had survived a millennium of ruin. A chunk of the corner fell off and the girls hugged each other desperately. Hezzena ran fingers through wavy, metallic-orange hair to regain her calm. “My son is dying. They will drain his life and use his body for ingredients. Every moment counts.” She began pacing back and forth. “You must save him *immediately* no matter how tired you may be. You have the plan and you’ll succeed. The necklaces I loaned you will help with stealth.”

Pelya touched the silver linked necklace with a circular pendant that had three onyx stones set in it. The girls could each use theirs to go invisible for a short while. They were powerful enough to hide sound and smell too. Hezzena made it clear that the necklaces were only on loan, being a very important part of her treasure and she had already used the most valuable piece she owned to save Pelya’s life.

“We know what to do,” Pelya said. She was a little tired, but not bad since the healing tooth had fully restored all of her energy along with health. “We’ll meet you at the doorway as quickly as possible.” Ebudae sighed, but agreed reluctantly.

“Go then!” Hezzena moved behind them in a blur, put the lanterns in their hands and pushed them toward the door. “Go on. Save my son. Don’t let him die!” The girls stumbled out of the library. Not wanting to be pushed anymore, they ran up the hallway.

Pelya looked back to see Hezzena in the glow of the orbs, staring at them with her swirling eyes. They turned the corner and headed back along the halls, through the theater and up the stairs until they reached Ebudae’s secret room and flopped to the ground in exhaustion.

Their breathing settled few minutes later. Ebudae lay on her back and asked, “What do you want to do?”

Pelya turned to her side. “What do you mean?”

“Are we really going to save the dragon?” Ebudae also turned to her side. “If we’re caught, they’ll kill us even if we are children.”

“That makes it that much more fun and exciting,” Pelya answered with a grin. She quickly became somber. “You don’t have to go.”

Ebudae jumped to her feet and pointed a finger angrily at the young warrior who scrambled to her own feet. “Don’t you ever say anything like that to me again. We do this and every other adventure together even if we die!” She folded her arms and lifted her chin. “Besides, you know you can’t do it without me.”

She was right and Pelya knew it. The wizardess was surprised when Pelya wrapped her in a fierce embrace. They hugged for a few minutes before breaking. “Shall we go?” Pelya asked.

“I really think we need sleep, but Rizzith could die, so I say we go,” Ebudae answered. She began moving back and forth between tables, shelves and drawers to gather magical items. “Grab that pouch on the wall by my workbench,” she told Pelya pointing at the bench where she did most of her experiments. “It has rune balls that cancel out wards. There’s only four and I don’t know if they’re strong enough, but they’ll make it easier if they work.”

Pelya grabbed it and a few other things Ebudae directed her to. They gathered the items in two backpacks, the heaviest of which Pelya took. Most of it had been planned in the library, but the wizardess grabbed a few extra things she thought would be useful. Pelya kept the magical sword at her waist instead of leaving it. They both wore black cloaks that would help disguise their age, though not their size.

Instead of leaving through the front door, they went back into the secret passages with lanterns held in front of them, turning the other direction toward the manor proper. Steps down took them underneath the main hall. A hundred feet later, it turned toward the backyard. “This goes to the rear wall. There’s a secret door to the alley there.”

They exchanged worried glances. Alleys were never good news for children even in a moderately safe neighborhood. It didn’t slow them from continuing and they were soon at steps that went up into the wall. There was a small chamber where Ebudae pushed a button that opened a peephole. It was big enough to see through, but not big enough to figure out if anyone was in the alley. The girls stood quietly for a moment to listen. When they didn’t hear anything, Ebudae pulled another trigger that caused part of the wall to come into the chamber and slide to the left. Thankfully, it did so quietly. Pelya

went out first with sword in hand, all the while desperately hoping she wouldn't have to use it.

There was no one around, much to their relief. Ebudae quickly closed the secret entrance while Pelya put away her sword. Then they turned and headed to the Noble District. The sun was up and people were moving about by that time. The girls held hands to keep from being separated. Neither had ever been in the city without an adult before. It was both frightening and exhilarating.

Crowded streets actually made it easier to go unnoticed. Nobody tried to grab them, nobody asked what they were doing and nobody noticed the two little girls going to rescue a dragon. By the time they reached the estate of Lord Uylvich they were smiling at their boldness.

They walked beside the high side wall around to the back, but there were workers talking next to the rear entrance. The girls went to the front and walked casually past the front gate. The guard saw them and frowned so they continued walking. Both side walls were tall with few footholds, too many witnesses and spikes on top, so they wouldn't be an option.

The girls nodded at each other and walked back to the front corner. They paused for a moment, waiting until they were certain nobody was looking at them. Then they activated the invisibility pendants at the same time.

Finding each other's hands, they went to the low front wall and climbed over. The girls were able to sneak through the grounds to the side kitchen entrance, moving carefully even though their sounds were hidden as well. There was a guard sitting next to the side gate, but he was sleepy and didn't notice the invisible girls even when the kitchen door opened and closed.

Two younger men washed dishes and cleaned silverware while a woman worked on pastries. The cook was calmly doing prep work for lunch, a much different disposition than he had on Pelya's previous visit. The girls snuck quietly toward the door. Pelya opened it and gave Ebudae a little shove to go through. "Why is the basement door open?" one of the dishwashers asked.

Pelya dashed through and closed it behind her. As she did so, she heard the cook's muffled voice. "It's those stupid rats! That worthless girl didn't kill a single one the other day and now they're bold as can be."

She thought for sure someone would follow them down, but the girls made it to the bottom of the steps without the door opening. Pelya took one of the lanterns and led Ebudae to the back. She didn't light it right away. Instead, they hid behind some crates, waiting to see what would happen. After a few minutes, everything remained silent. Ebudae magically lit the lantern with words Pelya couldn't hear and then took the warrior's invisible hand.

The two girls went down the stairs to the sub-basement. Had anyone been watching, they would have seen a single lantern floating through the air and surely would have run away thinking a ghost was coming. Pelya quickly pulled her to the secret passage. Ebudae had two more of the rune balls, but they didn't want to use them right away in case they were needed later. Fortunately, the young warrior had a memory that was becoming finely honed and was able to find the opening mechanism.

The door opened and they went through, closing it behind them. They listened for a moment before rushing down the passage to the stairs. A minute later, they were at the

door to the lab with no incidents. Like before, it was unlocked. Pelya thought Lord Uylvich foolish for being overconfident just because a secret passage hid the lab.

Unlike before, there was a man in the room. He was a tall, fit man wearing green robes that had runes embroidered in rich gold thread. Unlike the cook, he didn't blame the mysteriously opened door on rats. "Who's there? I see your lantern, now show yourself or die," he growled with hands in front of him as though ready to catch the invisible intruder.

Ebudae let go of Pelya's hand to cast a spell. The warrior girl saw air warp in a bolt toward the wizard. Before hitting him, it dissipated. The gold thread on the wizard's robe flared briefly, indicating it had protected him against the spell.

Pelya rapidly pushed Ebudae to the side as the wizard began to circle his hands in front of his chest while speaking words of magic. She saw a mysterious wind blow his hair back. It didn't affect anything else and she realized he was gathering energy for a spell. That energy gathered in an icy cloud in front of the wizard.

When he cast it forward, the magical wind that only affected him switched direction and slammed into his back. Meanwhile, shards of ice flew from the cloud to pierce the door, wall and ground where the girls had been standing. They ran around behind him while he watched the shards melt. Pelya realized that she had drawn her sword at some point, so she leapt forward and stabbed him in the back of the thigh with it.

The golden runes on the robe flared as the sword slid deep into the leg causing the wizard to scream. It was the first time Pelya had ever drawn blood on anyone and it scared her. To make matters worse, it had been a weak thrust with bad aim. Had the blade not been magical, it wouldn't have done real damage. She immediately pulled the sword out, causing hot blood to spurt from the open wound all over her. As the wizard clutched the wound and fell to his knees in agony, Pelya realized the runes in that area had burned away in failed protection. Had she stabbed with a lesser weapon, the result would have been much different.

The blood did not become invisible when it sprayed the girls. They realized they would be easy to target from that point on and both deactivated the necklaces at the same time. Ebudae had a rune ball in her hand and said the activation word. With amazing aim, she hit the wizard on the side of the face. It exploded in a cloud of dark blue dust that the wizard instantly inhaled while attempting to gasp for breath. The dust went into his mouth and disappeared. He collapsed.

"Did you kill him?" Pelya asked in alarm. The sword was shaking in her trembling hand.

"No. It was a sleeping mist stored in the rune ball. He should be unconscious for an hour or so," she answered excitedly. It was clear Ebudae was enjoying their adventure. "Although, he'll be dead in less time with that wound," she stated, pointing at the blood-soaked cut.

"We should bandage it," Pelya said in alarm.

"No! We have to save Rizzith," Ebudae said, pointing at the dragon that was looking at them in curiosity from the cage.

Pelya glanced at it and then back at the wizard. Tears welled in her eyes. "I've never killed anyone, Ebudae. I don't really want to." The wizardess stared at her in surprise. Pelya made a fast decision, put her pack on the ground and retrieved the healing kit. She grabbed a bandage and wrapped the leg with it as tightly as possible. It was

instantly soaked in blood. She hadn't cut the artery, but it was still a deep and serious wound.

"You bandaged it, now let's rescue Rizzith," Ebudae said in exasperation while pulling on Pelya's shoulder. The young warrior reluctantly went with her, still staring at the injured wizard.

They stood in front of the circle around the cage. "I can do this," Ebudae insisted quietly. Rizzith had managed to lift his head, but it swayed tiredly.

"No! It would kill you." Pelya forgot about the man and focused on her friend. Hezzena had talked aloud in the wizardess's presence about how to deactivate the circle of runes around the cage so they could release him. Then she had talked about how to reverse the energy in the globes to bring Rizzith back to health.

Ebudae understood everything that was said and told Hezzena that she would deactivate the runes. The dragon woman had instantly forbidden it. Children should never perform magic. Only after puberty should it be considered and it was best to wait until adulthood. A child's body was developing and the energies could stunt that growth or even deform a person. Ebudae was in severe danger just with the magic she had already performed in her short life.

Even with that knowledge, the wizardess stood there with her fingers twitching. Ebudae had told Pelya in the past that the power was like a drug she wanted more of each day. "Let's take care of the secret door," Pelya encouraged, pulling her friend in that direction. Ebudae reluctantly followed, still staring at the dragon cage and orbs.

They set down their packs and Ebudae grabbed a set of eight medallions Hezzena had given them. She set the medallions on the floor in an outward arc from the edges of the secret door. Pelya carefully pulled out a special rune ball Hezzena had also given them. It was larger than any she had seen before, filling up her hand. She readied it along with her courage while the wizardess activated the medallions.

The normal way to open a secret door protected by magical triggers was to know the activation words and gestures for it. However, the runes had been made specifically to work against Hezzena. Even after listening to Pelya's description of everything, understanding eluded the dragon. So she chose the solution the girls were implementing.

Upon activation, hundreds of orange lacework lines emitted from the medallions and connected to each other. They shimmered upward to the ceiling in an arc around the entrance, creating a barrier of magical force. Ebudae had to continue chanting a series of magical words in order to keep it activated. Her voice had an otherworldly quality to it and a strong magical breeze ruffled her hair and robe.

Pelya threw the rune ball hard through the glowing lines. Hezzena told them that things could pass from their side of the force field, but nothing could get through from the other side. The medallions had to be placed exactly right and the words spoken correctly though. It was an enormous risk to leave it to a child wizard, but she would do anything to save her son.

As the rune ball passed through the lines and just before it hit the wall, Pelya yelled the activation word loudly. The timing was another thing that had to be just right. It was foolish to leave that to a child as well, but the dragon was desperate and had no other options.

White light flashed as the rune ball detonated and the building shook with an enormous blast. Hezzena had told them what would happen, but it was still a shock. The

lacework barrier protected the girls from the worst of the flash and sound as well as the entire explosion. It also channeled all of the force into the secret door. Not only was it blown open, but half the wall on either side and stones from the ceiling collapsed in the rubble. The force shook the ground and knocked the girls on their backs. The orange barrier disappeared once Ebudae's concentration was broken and she couldn't continue chanting.

Everything had worked exactly as planned except the part where the two girls were dazed. They crawled to their hands and knees and tried to regain their senses. Pelya glanced at Rizzith in his cage. The orbs and circular runes around it were still intact, too powerful to be disturbed by the secondary force of the explosion.

Then she saw the wizard move and heard his groan through the mild ringing in her ears. The barrier had absorbed most of the sound and flash, but not all of it. Coupled with crashing stone, it had hurt their ears and created spots in front of their eyes.

Ebudae was scrambling to get the medallions and put them away. She cried out in pain when stone from the ceiling fell and hit her in the shoulder. Pelya rushed over to her. "Can you move it?" she asked. Ebudae's robe was dirty, but not torn. She moved her shoulder and groaned in pain, but it wasn't broken. Pelya helped her to stand. "The wizard is waking up. We need to hurry."

They snatched up the rest of the medallions as quickly as possible before scrambling over the rubble. Stone dust clogged their noses and they looked up to make sure nothing else would fall on them from the gashed ceiling. Pelya looked back as they entered the passage. The wizard was gingerly moving, but hadn't gotten up yet. Ebudae pulled on her hand.

There were large double doors a few hundred feet up the passage with magical lanterns exactly like the ones outside the doors from the ruins where Hezzena would be waiting for them. When they reached them, Pelya noticed Ebudae panting heavily. She grabbed the wizardess's face and saw dark circles under her eyes. "Ebudae, what happened?" Pelya asked in alarm.

"Very tired. It was *so* hard keeping the medallions activated." Exhaustion dripped from her voice.

"You just relax. I'll open the doors," Pelya told her. When the wizardess nodded, Pelya grabbed the picks under her tunic. She pulled one out and held it in front of her. When it glowed hot, Pelya wanted to cry.

"Use this." Ebudae handed her one of the small rune balls that would deactivate wards. Once it was in Pelya's palm, the wizardess told her the keyword and advised her to throw it from a distance. They took a few steps back and glanced down the hallway to make certain no one was coming yet.

Pelya threw it and yelled the activation word. The ball flashed along with eight previously invisible runes drawn in a circle on the doors. Three of the runes disappeared with crackling sounds, but the others remained, flickering dimly. The warrior felt another rune ball placed in her hand. "Activate it the same way," Ebudae told her. Pelya did the exact same thing and the remaining runes vanished with more crackling. She rushed forward to the door and discovered it to be locked.

With a deep calming breath, Pelya pulled out her lockpicks again. Her hands were shaking, but she wasn't going to let that stop her. Uncle Bobbell had told her to always

push ahead no matter how tired or frightened she might be. It helped that the picks were magically enhanced to be steady.

It took a minute and switching the lockpicks twice to figure out the right combination. Ebudae leaned against the wall tiredly while Pelya worked. When the lock clicked open, they exchanged happy smiles. The smiles faded when they heard voices behind them. "They went down the passage!" one yelled. Pelya hurriedly put the picks away while Ebudae pulled one of the doors open.

Instead of being in the ancient ruins, they were in a room filled with crates and tables. It looked like a storage area and secondary workspace. Across from them was another set of doors. Ebudae pointed excitedly while Pelya pulled the current door shut. "Those are the doors to the ruins. They look *exactly* the same."

They ran toward them, but Ebudae held out a hand just before they reached the doors. She handed another of the small rune balls to Pelya who took it and threw while yelling the activation word. More wards flashed and crackled and she immediately threw the last rune ball that Ebudae handed her to finish them off.

Once again the doors were locked. Pelya pulled out the picks that had opened the last one. The lock looked the same and she prayed they would work. The tumblers inside clicked just as the doors behind opened. "There they are! Kill them!" Pelya looked back and saw the limping wizard and two others coming into the room. One was a female wizard preparing to cast a spell while the third had a wicked looking sword in his hand.

The girls frantically opened the doors, each pulling one back. Relief flooded their hearts when they saw Hezzena in the entrance. She was crouched with taloned hands in front of her, teeth bared and furiously swirling eyes staring straight ahead at the attackers.

What happened next was so fast that Pelya barely had time to digest it all. In one blurred leap, Hezzena reached the enemy and thrust both hands into the chest of the woman casting the spell, killing her instantly. The energy of the thwarted spell turned into wisps of green fire that burned the woman's skin. Hezzena pulled out flesh and flung it in the faces of the men. Pelya heard herself scream in horror. She knew about death, but was really beginning to hate the concept. It was messy, violent and painful to those who experienced it. What she didn't notice was Ebudae watching everything with her head tilted in fascination.

The warrior hit Hezzena in the shoulder with the sword, causing runes in her vest to flare. It clanged off the dragon woman's magical shirt and hard skin without making a cut. A rumbling growl emitted from Hezzena, shaking the room as she turned to face him. The warrior dropped his weapon and took a step back, fear conquering his eyes. Hezzena grabbed his throat with her left hand and his head with the right. She squeezed and the warrior's head was crushed like an overripe melon. Then she ripped the head from his body and threw it against the nearest wall where it splattered violently. Pelya emptied the scarce remaining contents of her stomach onto the floor.

The wizard tried to limp away but Hezzena's talons raked down his back. When he fell, she stood on his legs and slashed furiously into his body over and over, digging into it like a dog burying a bone. Pelya finally turned and covered her eyes, sobbing in dread.

Hezzena was back suddenly. She took their shoulders one by one with bloodied hands and pulled them close. Putting her face next to theirs, the dragon woman

whispered, “Shh. I’m not supposed to kill humans, but you’re never going to tell anyone, are you?” Her voice was sinister and her eyes spun with insanity.

They both shook their heads vigorously. Pelya felt urine running down her leg as she wet herself. She couldn’t handle any more and wanted to go home to hide in bed for the rest of her life. Hezzena let them go and turned back toward the room. “Where is he?” she demanded.

Ebudae rushed forward to the other set of doors and led Hezzena past the bodies into the corridor. Pelya considered not following, but after looking into the dark ruins behind, decided that sticking with them was the best choice. Plus, she didn’t want to leave Ebudae alone. It was extremely uncomfortable to walk with her pants wet, but she ignored it the best she could. Between that, walking through sewers, having thrown up and sweating so much from the exertion, she smelled terrible.

Pelya caught up with them as Hezzena positioned herself in front of the cage and began casting. Ebudae was scrutinizing every detail while Rizzith cried out piteously to his mother. Pelya waited by the rubble of the formerly secret door and watched.

The incantations were vastly more powerful than anything Ebudae had done. Hezzena gestured fluidly like a dancing reptile while the wind of magic gusted back and forth around only her. Layers of magical words slithered throughout the room, echoing off the walls. The circular runes glowed brightly as energy from the orbs switched direction, flowing back into the young dragon who perked up instantly.

In just a few minutes, the orbs were dark. They all shattered at the same time and fell to the ground in shards. The stands they floated above crumbled as well. Then the rune underneath the cage began circling. Hezzena’s gestures became exaggerated turning motions as she spun the rune faster and faster while wind gusted around her. Then it burst in slow motion with a tinkling sound before disappearing into thousands of tiny sparks that snapped into nothingness.

Hezzena jumped forward, grabbed two bars and ripped them apart. The scream of protesting iron filled the room, causing the girls to cover their ears. Then Rizzith had his foreclaws on his mother’s shoulders while licking her face with forked tongue. It looked extremely odd considering Hezzena was still in human form. “You must transform into a human, my beautiful son. I am too large to fit in my natural form,” she told him.

Rizzith concentrated for a moment then took the form of a six-year-old boy. The transformation was instantaneous and surprising. However, his teeth were overly large, causing his mouth to stretch grotesquely. “Smaller teeth, dear,” Hezzena told him. He made the adjustment and his appearance was almost normal. He still had the same dragon-like features as his mother, but at least it didn’t frighten the girls.

Pelya was tired and she could tell that Ebudae was more so. Hezzena picked up her son and the packs the girls had left in that room. “Show me the way through the sewers to the southern plains,” she ordered, handing them the packs.

“But we’re tired,” Ebudae whined. “I just want to go to sleep.”

“That’s what happens when you play with magic, you silly little fool. Besides, you can’t go back that way. I hear people coming from beyond the door. We must escape and I’m not finished with the two of you,” Hezzena told them sternly. “Now move your tailless behinds.” She pointed past the rubble toward the passage to the ruins.

The girls stared at her in shock, but chose to obey.

Chapter 23

When they entered the ruins, Hezzena led them away a short distance and set down Rizzith. Then she turned and began casting another spell. Magical wind whipped her hair back as she molded orange energy in front of her. Pelya thought she was going to cast it forward, but instead, Hezzena inhaled deeply and breathed into it. It acted like a spark for the dragon's breath and orange flames ripped forth against the entrance. The fire created a raging inferno over the stone and doors, melting them into liquid. The girls covered their faces from the blazing heat. There was no way anyone would be able to follow them.

When Hezzena was done, she led them back to the tunnel, their way lit by the supernatural orange fire behind them. First, she picked up Rizzith and tossed him casually to the top, alarming the girls. He landed easily on his feet and waited for the rest of them with a big grin on his face. Then Hezzena picked up the girls and jumped. She carried them to the hole and jumped back down into the sewer. After setting them down, she held out her arms for Rizzith who jumped into them happily. Hezzena used magic to close the access door and re-activate the runes on it. At Ebudae's questioning look, she explained. "That will make it much harder for anyone to track us should they be inclined to do so."

They walked back down the tunnel a ways until coming to different tunnel that turned south. "Is this the tunnel that leads to the plains?" she asked Pelya.

"No. It's past where we go back to the academy. It will be twice as wide as this one. You'll know it when you see it," Pelya told her.

"Then you lead." Hezzena gestured for her to go.

"Wait, aren't you going to take us back to the academy?" Ebudae asked in alarm.

"No. You are guiding us to the plains. I will not take a chance of being stuck under this forsaken city," she hissed at them.

Ebudae began to cry. Exhaustion, excitement and fear had taken their toll on both girls. Pelya wrapped an arm around the wizardess's shoulder and led her forward. Secretly she was afraid that Hezzena might kill or eat them once free.

Pelya noticed when they passed the exit to the academy, but didn't disturb her glassy-eyed friend with the information. A short while later, they reached the larger tunnel leading out of the city. She pointed. "This is it. It travels for twenty miles or so before exiting. The further you get the wider and deeper it becomes in order to handle all the sewage. There's supposed to be a gate at the end to keep larger creatures from getting in, but I'm certain you can get through it."

"I'm not so confident," Hezzena disagreed. "Lead on."

Pelya stared at the dragon woman. "Ebudae is tired. We can't go on." Tears were welling in her eyes again. She was weary of crying even though it was acceptable for little girls to do so in such terrible situations.

Hezzena gestured and spoke more magical incantations. Suddenly Pelya felt a burst of energy and Ebudae perked up. "There, that will last for a few hours. I was able to grab a snack before you opened the door. The creatures in the dark aren't very tasty, but it will tide me over. We all feel wonderful now. Let's go."

"You're going to get free and then eat us or kill us," Pelya accused, planting her feet stubbornly.

A low rumble emitted from the dragon woman. "I am not going to eat or kill you. It's forbidden to kill humans and I was only able to get away with it back there in order to save my child. Moreover, I would not kill someone who did me such a favor as the two of you have done. I am good by nature."

She could have fooled Pelya. "Then how are we going to get home?" Pelya asked. "We can't come back through these sewers and to the academy. It's too dangerous." She folded her arms. "Going into the city above ground is even more dangerous for us!" Ebudae was hiding behind Pelya's shoulder, not willing to enter the disagreement.

"You will be fine!" Hezzena snapped. "I will see to it, you impudent little girl. If all human children are as disobedient and obstinate as you, then humans should eat their young. Now march!" she commanded, pointing a finger at the tunnel. Pelya considered herself to be fairly brave, but standing up to Hezzena was too much at that point. She turned around and marched while holding Ebudae's hand.

The smell grew steadily worse as they traveled. Even with the boosting spell, the girls quickly lost energy and began trudging. Hezzena finally grew frustrated. She put Rizzith on her back and had him wrap his arms around her shoulders. Then she put the girls on her waist and had them hold on tight. When everyone was settled, Hezzena ran.

They held on tighter as the surroundings whipped by. The speed with which the dragon moved was faster than fifty horses combined. To Pelya, it felt like they were flying and she grinned in pleasure. She saw that Ebudae's eyes were wide and there was a grin just as large on her face. The wizardess saw her looking and they smiled in excitement.

Hezzena was amazingly sure-footed even at blurred speeds. It shocked the girls when she went to running along the wall in order to pass obstacles such as broken walkways or large pieces of debris that had the sewer water clogged up over the path. Something about her abilities made it so they felt like gravity was always pulling them toward Hezzena's feet even when she was sideways. After an hour, they had traveled the entire twenty miles to the gated end. When she finally set them all down, Hezzena was breathing heavily. The dragon woman took a few steps forward to the gate.

"I don't think it has any wards on it. The books didn't say anything about it," Pelya told her. "I know the outlets are a few hundred feet wide and hundreds of feet deep. They become rivers that drain into marshlands and the water eventually flows to the ocean beyond. She moved ahead of the dragon woman and pointed beyond the thick iron bars where the murky river glistened with oily residue. It spread out and became a wide, slowly moving morass of acrid gunk. The only reason they could handle the smell was because they had become somewhat used to it after being in the sewers for so long. It was still overwhelming and they all wanted to get out.

Pelya turned and saw the purple tendrils in Hezzena's eyes. The dragon woman frowned. "There are no wards on this, although runes have been inscribed into the metal bars to keep them strong. This door is locked." She motioned toward an iron woven door in the larger gate. It allowed workers to access the walkway that continued for a ways along the river of sewage outside.

"I can get that," Pelya said, pulling out her picks. She was excited to be able to use them again so soon. After examining the lock carefully, she chose the picks she thought best. When they didn't work right away, she was disappointed. The others seemed content to wait patiently in spite of the smell that was becoming as tiresome as it was

putrid. Pelya had to try four different combinations of tools before it finally opened with a satisfying click.

“Well done, child. It took you a while, but you kept your patience. Persistence is a valuable quality to have and one most humans lack.” Hezzena squeezed her shoulder and smiled toothily. They walked out of the sewer and Pelya re-locked the door from the other side. Any good member of the Guard would do so, but more important, her father would.

“Let us find some place away from this wretched morass.” Hezzena led them along the stone walkway and it didn’t take long to reach stairs leading up to a ridge two hundred feet above the river. When they reached the last step, they could see the city in the distance to the north.

A lightly used dirt road came from the city and continued southward. There were no buildings for a long way in any direction, which made sense considering the stench. Trees dotted the grassy lands here and there. “We’ll go to that grove of trees,” Hezzena told them, pointing at a small wooded area far enough away to get them some fresh air.

The afternoon sun was high in the sky, beating down with heat that caused the overworked girls to wilt even worse than before. Hezzena didn’t pick them up, so they trudged more and more slowly until reaching a tree at the edge and collapsing in its shade after barely managing to take off their packs. Hezzena stood a few feet away and stared at them, Rizzith at her side. Pelya ignored the dragon woman while trying to catch her breath. By that point, she just wanted to lie down and sleep. It wasn’t even important if they made it home first.

One moment, Hezzena was in the form of a human woman, the next she was in her true form, as was Rizzith. The girls stared slack-jawed at the enormous dragon looming over them. Comparing her size to Lady Pallon’s manor would be a disservice. Hezzena’s eyes alone were as round as the girls were tall, still made of the swirling liquid-silver.

The dragon was beautiful with brilliant orange scales layered over massive muscles along the length of her body. There were five thin spikes along her spine and two on the tail. Her teeth were sharp in perfect rows throughout her long snout. Hezzena stretched her leathery wings far to each side in a manner that reminded Pelya of how she stretched as tall as she could every morning. The long tail curled around to the left, wrapping around Rizzith in a maternally protective gesture.

She looked at the two girls sitting under the tree with their mouths open. “Take your tunic off and lay on your stomach, Pelya child. Take your dress off and do the same, Ebudae child,” she told them. Instead of obeying, the girls held onto each other and stared wide-eyed. Hezzena snorted. “Do not be foolish. There is no impropriety. Now do as you’re told.”

Neither had any intention of doing so. The disobedience upset the dragon. Pelya watched as Hezzena lifted a claw and made intricate designs. Words of power hissed through the air and the girls found themselves frozen. With a few more gestures, Ebudae’s dress flew off, leaving her in just leggings. The pendant of invisibility also came off and Hezzena took possession of it. Then the wizardess was rolled onto her stomach. Pelya wanted to help, but couldn’t move.

What happened next terrified Pelya. She watched as the dragon pinned Ebudae with the left claw and touched her spine just below the neck with a talon of the right claw.

The talon glowed orange. Ebudae began to whimper and cry as the dragon's talon slid down the length of the spine, making a cut that glowed the same orange. It was just the beginning.

Hezzena made intricate designs along the base of Ebudae's back from hip to hip and then moved upward and along each rib to the sides, making more intricate designs. Pelya realized it was some sort of tattoo and the designs looked like feathered runes of some sort. By the time Hezzena was done, Ebudae's back looked like it had wings from base to neck. The girl lay there crying, but unable to move even after the claw lifted.

Then the silver eyes turned their attention on Pelya, who didn't wait for the claw's touch to start crying. She felt her tunic pulled off magically and her body rolled onto the stomach. Her pendant was taken too. Pelya whimpered just like Ebudae when she felt one claw pin her down and the other begin cutting into her back. It didn't touch the bones in the spine, but she could feel heat coming from it.

Through the burning pain, Pelya became aware that hers was different from Ebudae's. Only her left side was being tattooed. Then Hezzena turned her over and continued the tattoo along the ribs to Pelya's breastbone. More intricate designs were carved into the skin while Pelya stared at the leaves of the tree above her through eyes blurry with tears.

The talon finally stopped moving. Pelya struggled to breathe. Her entire body burned, but the hottest fire was where the tattoo was. It hurt more than any physical pain she had ever imagined. The talon touched them each in the middle of the forehead. "Stand up and put your tunic back on, Pelya child. Stand up and put your dress back on, Ebudae child."

Pelya did as commanded. Somehow, the dragon was controlling her. Ebudae was back in her dress and came to stand next to Pelya who had her tunic and belt in place.

Hezzena lowered her head and looked deep into their minds. "Grab your packs, walk back to the manor where Ebudae child lives and then go to sleep. No one will disturb you or notice you."

The girls immediately turned and grabbed their packs, knowing that the instructions were complete. They walked past Hezzena toward the dirt road by the sewer river. Neither of them looked back or up when the dragon put Rizzith on her neck and leapt into the sky, although they could feel the massive gust of wind from her wings as she flew away.

When Pelya and Ebudae reached the road, they turned north. For hours, they walked the miles back to Dralin. Their exhausted bodies protested and the heat from the tattoos caused them to sweat terribly, but it made no difference. It was well past midnight, when Dralin was most dangerous, before they reached the Tannery District. It smelled worse than the sewers, but the girls paid no attention to that. They spent nearly a full hour walking through it because it was one of the largest districts in Dralin.

Pelya was able to realize that no one was paying attention to two young girls walking alone through the streets. At some point, they should have been kidnapped, yelled at or at least noticed. Something the dragon had done was protecting them. She also noticed that the pain from the tattoo was still fierce, but it didn't slow either of them down.

They finally reached the Merchant District just before sunrise. The shadows moved alongside Pelya, concerned for her safety. She wanted to reassure them that she was alright, but couldn't speak.

They entered the secret entrance from the alley and went down the stairs in the wall to the passage. A few minutes later, they were back in Ebudae's lab. Instead of collapsing, they dropped the packs and continued until they were in Ebudae's bedroom. Both girls changed into nightgowns. As they got under the covers and clung to each other for dear life, Pelya wished they could take a bath and eat. The thought faded as they closed their eyes and fell into a deep sleep.

They woke after sunset that night. Both their stomachs growled from neglect. Before the noisy bellies could be satisfied, the girls grabbed each other tightly and drowned themselves in tears. Everything they had been through finally caught up to them. It seemed like the obvious thing to do.

When the tears died down, they got their aching bodies out of bed. Pelya's tattoo still felt like it was on fire. She looked underneath the nightgown and saw the lines glowing a dim orange. Ebudae put an arm on Pelya's shoulder and opened her mouth to say something. When no words came out, she frowned.

"What's wrong?" Pelya asked. Ebudae opened her mouth again, but the words refused to come forth. Pelya opened her mouth to ask if it was about the tattoo, but suddenly she was silenced. They both tried to talk, but when it came to the tattoos, neither of them could say a single word about it. Eventually, Pelya asked, "Shall we get some food?" As long as it was about anything else, the words came forth.

Ebudae nodded miserably. "Yes. I'll have Tina run us a bath after she gets our food." It looked like she was going to say more, but nothing came out. The wizardess hit her thigh in frustration. Pelya took her hand and gave her an understanding look and then they headed downstairs.

No one said anything about them having been gone. In fact, they didn't seem to have noticed. After eating, they took the bath and scrubbed the grime and stench off furiously. They stared at each other's tattoos, but when they reached out to touch them, they always lost interest and did something else instead. Realization sunk in that they would never be able to discuss them. Every time Pelya wondered about what they did, she quickly lost interest. It was upsetting her to the point of tears, but she couldn't help it.

They went back to bed after the bath and fell asleep immediately between fresh clean sheets Tina had put on. The next night, they woke up, ate, bathed and fell back asleep. The glowing lines had almost disappeared by that point although the girls could still feel them in their skin and bones. For the rest of the week they rested in bed or in the gardens. Neither of them had any desire to go on another adventure.

The tattoos were invisible when Frath came to pick up Pelya. Lady Pallon and Frath had to peel the girls apart because they were holding onto each other fiercely. Both girls cried miserably when the tall man put his daughter over a shoulder and carried her off.

Things eventually settled back to routine. Pelya was allowed to go back to training, but on a limited basis. She could still study and read as much as possible and even began to work on learning extra languages as well as memorizing every detail of the sewers.

Ebudae continued learning magic. Even though she was still too young, it was no longer having harmful effects on her body. She was able to handle more powerful spells than ever before. The young wizardess also continued to study, delving into the books and learning more and more ancient writings.

Every chance possible, the two of them got together. Ebudae started teaching Pelya some basics of magic while Pelya taught the wizardess self defense and basic exercises that would help keep her fit in order to better handle magical energies flowing through her body. They didn't go into the secret passages for the next few months before eventually working up the courage. Within a couple of years, they had explored the entire academy as well as some of the tunnels under the buildings in the backyard. They didn't venture out into the ancient city though. The thought of running into anything else that rumbled in the darkness was too much for them.

They remembered the dragon tattoos every once in a while, but only briefly and never told anyone about them. They couldn't have done so if they tried.

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Books 2 and 3 of the Dralin Trilogy, "Ebudae" and "Pelya", are available where you found this.

[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 staring 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. He has been married to his wonderful wife for sixteen years and they have three obnoxious . . . wonderful children who always behave . . . when they're asleep.

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 Willden Trilogy is his first endeavor into the field of writing. Other series and standalone works will be forthcoming. In addition, John has written a number of short stories that can be found at most eBook sites. He writes in the evenings and weekends whenever possible. Regrettably, the family mentioned in a previous paragraph desires food and shelter, requiring the author to possess a full time job until his writing makes him rich.

You can follow his blog where he discusses writing, emo bunnies, family and various other topics of insanity.

<http://www.ryallon.blogspot.com/>

Follow him on twitter if you like insane ramblings and random comments.

<http://twitter.com/kookoo88>

Find him on Facebook where he discusses current projects and writing in general: <http://www.facebook.com/John.H.Carroll.Author>

His Goodreads Page:

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Stories for Demented Children:

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Dralin

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Pelya

Stand-alone Novella

Rain Glade

Coming soon:

The Crazyed Trilogy (Set in time after the Willden Trilogy)

The Morhain Trilogy (Set in time after the Willden Trilogy)