

ADAM K. WATTS

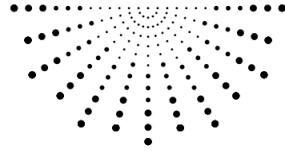


HEIR^{TO} MAGIC

TALES OF THE MISPLACED ~ BOOK 1

HEIR TO MAGIC

TALES OF THE MISPLACED - BOOK 1



ADAM K. WATTS

Copyright (C) 2021 Adam K. Watts

Layout design and Copyright (C) 2022 by Next Chapter

Published 2022 by Next Chapter

Edited by Chelsey Heller

Cover art by CoverMint

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without the author's permission.

CONTENTS

[Map of Daoine](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

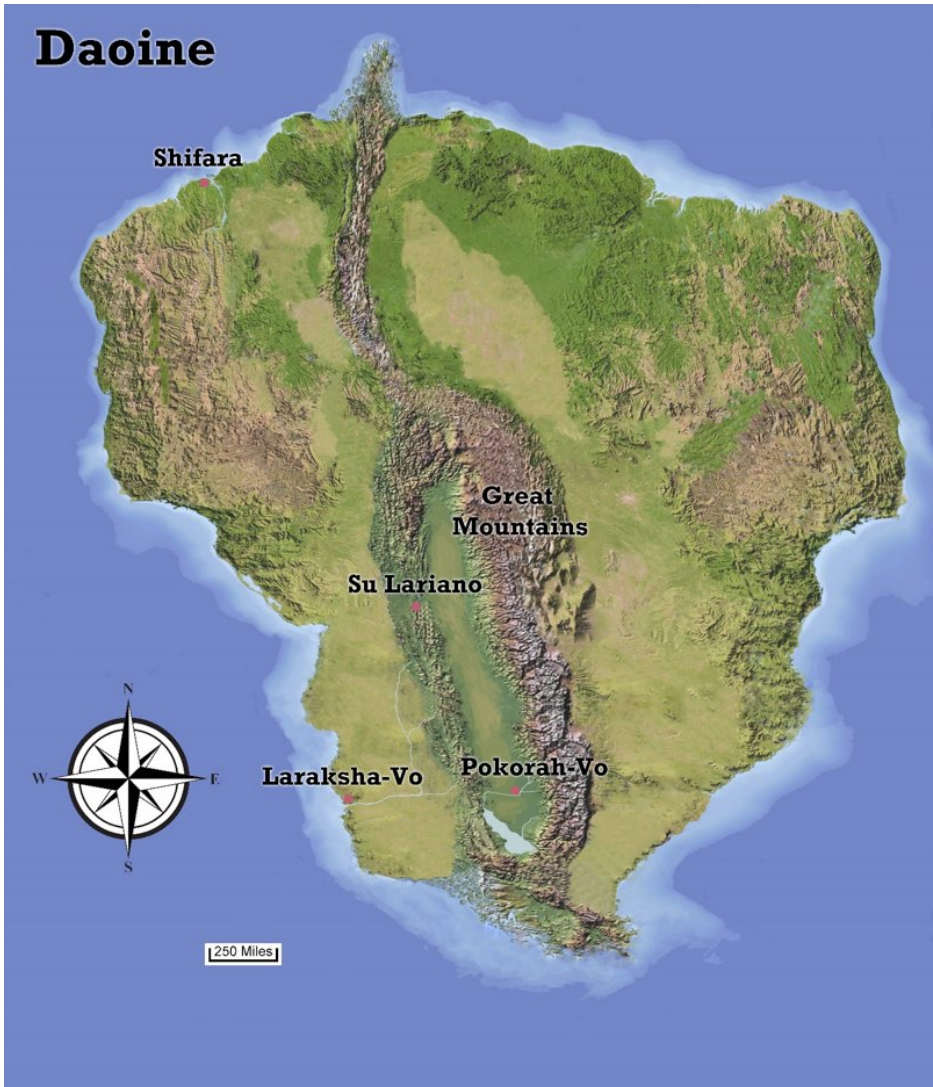
[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

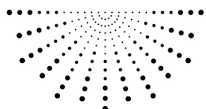
[Acknowledgments](#)
[Next in the Series](#)
[About the Author](#)



Map of Daoine

This book is dedicated to all the universe creators who have sparked my imagination for decades. To name a few, Anderson, Anthony, Asimov, Bester, Blish, Bova, Bradbury, Brooks, Brust, Budrys, Burroughs, Card, Christopher, Cooper, Dick, Dickson, Feist, Foster, Friedman, Haggard, Harrison, Heinlein, Heniford, Herbert, Hubbard, Huxley, Laumer, LeGuin, Lustabader, MacAvoy, McCaffery, Moorcock, Niven, Orwell, Pohl, Pournelle, Powers, Saberhagen, Simak, Springer, Stirling, Tepper, Tolkien, Williamson, Zelazny, Zimmer-Bradley, and so many more. If I could bring all of you together, among us we still could not find enough words to express my gratitude and appreciation.

CHAPTER ONE



I remember thinking that my life was perfect. Well, as perfect as it could be, anyway. My parents were very loving and supportive. Foster parents, I should say. Jill and Tony. They're great. My real parents were dead, so that part wasn't so perfect. My big sister was super-awesome. She's a foster, like me. Not to say she didn't have her issues—what foster kid doesn't? But Nora was pretty great, too. That's what I mean by as perfect as it could be.

Some people think I'm an optimist. Believe me, I'm not. I'm really just practical, and to me, it makes more sense to focus on what I have than on what I don't have. You can't build anything with what you don't have. If there's one thing I've learned in my sixteen years, it's that life doesn't give you anything but opportunities, and it's on us whether we can see them and how we use them. If we miss them or make bad choices? Well, life can be a real bitch.

I didn't know why I was feeling so introspective. Jill had just brought me something that she'd been holding onto for a while. It was just a wooden box. More like a small chest, I guess. About two feet long, a foot wide, and maybe a foot tall. It was my mother's. I

didn't know Jill had it, but she said I was old enough now that I should be the one to take care of it. It was my inheritance.

I remembered my parents, but it had been such a long time. What was inside the box? What would I find out? Would it change anything? I could imagine all kinds of things about them. I couldn't ask the box any questions. It wouldn't hug me or smile at me. I did remember those things about my parents. No, the box could only tell me something of the people who had been my parents. Maybe.

Whatever it held, it would have to be enough. There wasn't anything else. And once I knew what was inside, there wouldn't be any more answers.

"Aren't you going to look inside, Mira?"

I looked up at Nora as she leaned against the door frame, then back to the box in my lap.

"Nosy!" I teased her, looking back up.

We didn't look much like sisters. Oh, we were about the same height, not terribly tall, and we both wore our hair past our shoulders. Other than that, we were very different. She had crazy, curly red hair, which she hated, and freckles on her pale skin. My looks and light brown skin clearly showed my Latina heritage. She'd just turned eighteen, so she was two years older than me and ready to graduate from high school. I'd already started teasing her about graduation; how could anyone hope to look nice in those horrible robes? I planned to take plenty of pictures to save as blackmail material for the future.

She shrugged and looked away. "Maybe. But if you want to look at it alone, Mira, I understand."

"No," I shook my head. "I'm just...I don't know. I really don't know anything about my real mom." I glanced at her quickly. "That sounded horrible! Jill has been a real mom to me."

Nora nodded. "It's okay, I know what you mean."

I turned back to the chest in my lap. It wasn't very heavy, but it was a bit bulky to open on my lap, so I put it on the bed next to me. The top was slightly rounded, but not too much. It was made out of a dark wood, and the corners had been reinforced with metal. The whole thing wasn't terribly decorative, but it was definitely sturdy. There was a clasp with a lock holding it shut.

"It looks like it takes a key," I said.

"Let me take a look," Nora said, approaching. She smiled at me. "You have a bobby-pin?"

I laughed as I retrieved one from my dresser. "Here you go. But I don't think it's as easy as they show in the movies."

Nora tried for several minutes to open the latch before she gave up.

"Sorry," she shrugged. "I guess it *is* harder than in the movies."

"That's frustrating," I frowned. "How am I supposed to open it?" I gave the latch an irritated shove, and it popped open. "Woohoo!"

"How did you do that?" Nora gave me a bewildered look.

"It was probably just stuck, and between the two of us, we worked it loose," I shrugged. "Let's see what's inside!"

I lifted the lid. The contents weren't really organized. There were some clothing items; they looked like scarves or something. There were letters, photos, some rolled-up papers tied with ribbons, and a big jumble of odds and ends. It was going to take a bit to sort through it all.

"I bet when you read the letters, you'll find out about your mom," Nora said.

Something blue and shiny caught my eye at the bottom of the chest. I pulled it out. "Wow! Look at this!"

It was a silver necklace with a stone pendant. The stone was more oval than teardrop-shaped, but it was wider at the bottom and tapered toward the top. It was about an inch and a half long and a half-inch wide. It seemed to catch the light and the colors changed. It was attached to the chain by silver wire that was woven into an intricate, net-like pattern that held it snugly in place.

"I think that's black opal," Nora sounded impressed.

"It's not just black. It's got all these other colors, blue and red and green."

"Black opal just means it has a dark base instead of something lighter. But look at the colors in the light. Definitely opal. Maybe a black fire opal. Score!" She grinned at me.

I laughed and hung it around my neck.

"It looks beautiful," she said.

I picked up a stack of photos from the chest.

"What's all this?" Nora was running her fingers along some carvings on the underside of the lid. "Why all the decoration on the inside? The outside looks pretty plain."

"I don't know," I answered. "But it looks like these carvings are all over the inside."

"Girls!" Jill's voice sounded from down the hall. "Dinner's ready!"

"Coming!" Nora called back.

"Come on!" I said to her. "I want to show Jill the pendant!"

As I stood, the cuff of my shirt caught on the chest and pulled it off the bed to the floor, spilling the contents.

"Oh, no!" Nora knelt by the chest. "Did it break?"

The boards at the bottom of the chest looked like they had come loose.

"No," she said. "It's a false bottom! There's something else in here."

We pulled out the loose boards. Underneath them were two recessed apertures holding a few knob-like objects. Two of the smaller ones, maybe an inch and a half in diameter at the most, were wrapped in cloth. Another was round and flat, and more like two and a half inches in diameter. I grabbed that last one and tried to pick it up, but it was evidently a lot heavier than it looked and it barely moved when I tried to lift it.

That was kind of weird, but I switched to one of the smaller ones. It came easily, but it wasn't just a knob. As I pulled, there was more below that kept coming from out of the hole; somehow it was embedded downward through the bottom of the box. It ended up being more than a foot and a half long, and the whole thing was wrapped in a cloth. That didn't make any sense. There were only a couple of inches of box under the surface of the hidden area.

I unwrapped the cloth to see what was inside. It was a knife in a hard sheath with metal caps.

"Awesome!" Nora exclaimed.

"But how could it come out of the box like that?" I asked her. "There's not that much box under there."

"Maybe this is like one of those boxes magicians use for tricks?" she suggested. "You know, like when they pull a coat rack out of a small bag, but there's really a secret compartment you can't see."

I wasn't going to argue with her, but I was right there and there was no way it was something like that. I could see the size of the whole box. I pulled out the other small knob and it turned out to be a knife, just like the first one.

"I bet Jill didn't know these were in here!" Nora said.

"Probably not," I told her. This whole thing was just too weird. I didn't want to think about it right now. "Let's check this out some more after dinner. Right now, I'm starving!"

"Me too!"

We wasted no time piling spaghetti and meat sauce onto our plates. Jill was a really good cook.

"This cheesy garlic-bread is the best," I said as I dabbed it in the sauce.

Nora nodded her agreement with a full mouth.

"Mom," I said between bites. "Was there a key to that box?"

"Oh! I'm sorry!" Jill got up from the table. "I'll get it for you."

"I think it can wait until after you're done eating," I laughed.

"Better to do it now before I forget again."

After a moment, Jill returned with a key. "Here you go!" She handed it to me before sitting back down. It was a simple key that looked the right size for the small lock, and had a blue ribbon tied in a short loop.

"Thanks!"

After dinner, we went to my room and gave the daggers a closer inspection. They looked like duplicates of one another, except for the color on part of the handle. The blades were about ten inches long. The covers for the blades—I think they're called sheaths—were covered with some kind of fancy metalwork. The swirling designs continued into the handle, but they were inlaid to make the grip totally smooth. The black or white part of the handle design seemed to wrap around the grip. And then there was the round, flattish knob on the end. The blades themselves were polished and seemed to reflect the light in the room brightly.

"These look really sharp," Nora commented. "I bet I could shave my legs with one of these!"

"As if anyone would notice," I teased her. "What little body hair you have is practically invisible."

She grinned at me. "Don't be jealous!"

We decided to take the knives to an antique store the next day after school to see what we could find out about them. Were they heirlooms? Would they tell me something about my mother or my family? Online, we found an antique store that might be helpful, and we decided to go right from school the next day.

Nora's scooter was an old Vespa she'd found on Craigslist. We used that to get to and from school. I'd have to figure something else out for next year after she'd graduated.

I hid the knives in my backpack. I didn't know what my teachers would say if they found out I had them with me in school.

As we left the house that morning, I saw something move in the corner of my eye and turned to look. No one was there. I started to look away when I noticed that there was some kind of shadow hanging in the air about twenty yards from the front gate. Nora accelerated at that point, and when I tried to look back over my shoulder, I couldn't see anything.

The whole day seemed strange, and I kept feeling like I was being watched. Plus, I kept seeing odd lights, and sometimes when I felt like I was being watched, I could see some kind of shadow. Or, almost see a shadow. I was glad when the school day was over.

We went straight to the antique store right after our last class. The guy in the store couldn't tell us anything about the knives.

"But you know what?" he said. "I may know someone. She has a strange little place that is part antique store, part herbalist shop, and I don't know what else. She's a bit odd, but something about this filigree reminds me of things I've seen in her shop. Maybe she can help you."

The game was afoot and we went right over to the place he'd told us about. Nora pulled her scooter up near the door. A little bell rang as we went inside.

"Good afternoon girls, I'm Katya," a woman looked up from behind the counter, where she'd been reading something. "What brings you to HAC?"

"Hack?"

With a smirk and a flip of her auburn hair, Katya angled her green eyes pointedly at the sign that read, *Herbs, Antiques, and Curiosities*. The first letter of each word was larger than the rest and in a fancier font.

"Oh," I laughed. "I get it. Well, I got some things that belonged to my mother and I'm hoping they can tell me about her. She died years ago. Someone said you might know what these are?" I pulled the daggers out of my backpack and put them on the counter.

Katya peeled the cloth from one and paused. "A knife?"

"Two knives," I unwrapped the other one. "They look like they go together. They're the same, except the handles, where that one is silver on this part, but on the other one, it's black. Everything else is the same. They're really sharp, too." I pulled one of the blades out from its sheath. "And shiny. It's like they almost glow."

Katya looked at both daggers intently without touching them.

"Sheath it," she said, her face tight as she watched me slide it back in the sheath. "Where did you say you got these?"

"They were my mother's. I just got a box that had some of her things in it. It had a false bottom and these knives were in there. I thought they might be important, like they could mean something about my family?"

"What's your name, girl?"

"Mira. Mirabella Cervantes. Why? Do you recognize these?"

"No, not precisely. But..." she seemed to be considering her response. "This box you received, did it have any odd markings or carvings inside?"

“Yes. How did you know? They were all over the inside of the box. Even the false bottom had them.”

Katya nodded. “The box must have been warded to hide the contents.” Her eyes fell on the pendant hanging from my neck. “That was in the box as well?”

I nodded. She wrapped both knives back up in their cloth and pushed them into my hands.

“Listen to me very closely, Mirabella Cervantes. You need to take these daggers and put them back in that box exactly how they were. And you need to do this quickly. They are not safe for you. Come back another time and I can tell you more, but not now. Go.”

“But—”

“Quickly!” She ushered us out the door as I clumsily shoved the knives in my backpack. “Come back tomorrow.” She closed the door behind us.

“Okay, that was weird,” Nora commented.

“Yeah, too weird for me. I don’t think I’m going back there. Maybe we can find something out about these on the Internet.”

Two hours of following search results that night from page to page and discussion to discussion didn’t get us anywhere. It seemed that a lot of people really liked knives and swords, and had a lot to say about them. I wouldn’t say I have a photographic memory, but once I’ve read or heard something, I pretty much remember it. That night, I learned more about knives than I ever wanted to know. It was sort of interesting, but not helpful.

I put the knives on top of the dresser. I’d had enough of researching for the night.

Tomorrow would be Friday, and then only one more week before the end of the school year. Graduation for the seniors would be on

Wednesday, and Nora would get her diploma. Maybe we could do more research over the weekend.

I met up with Nora after my last morning class the next day and headed to the lunchroom to get a dose of whatever they'd be serving up.

"Hey! Here comes the Wicked Witch! Nice wart!"

It was Darek. He was such a jerk! Nora was very self-conscious about the mole she had on the tip of her nose. I could see her face flushing from rage as laughter sounded from other students. He probably wouldn't give her such a hard time if she didn't get upset so easily.

"Just ignore them!" I told her. "They're just jealous because they're stupid and you're not."

Nora stormed to the lunch counter and we got our food, then she headed straight for a table in the center of the room. One thing Nora would never do was slink away or back down from anyone.

"Hey guys!" I looked up to see Shelby. She was a friend, but we weren't very close. Shelby didn't seem like she was very close with anybody. She sat down with us. "What's up?"

"Hi Shelby. One more week of school," I told her. "Then we're free for the summer!"

We'd just started eating when something struck the side of Nora's head and fell to the ground. *A paper airplane?* Darek again. We just ignored him and kept eating.

After a couple of minutes, Shelby's face showed surprise and she grabbed my arm. Nora quickly looked toward Darek and his friends. I turned to look, and another paper airplane was coming straight for my face! Before I could react, Nora flung her hand out as if to block it, but it was out of reach.

I saw another weird light. It seemed to come from her hand and the airplane looped up and back and headed for Darek.

Darek was looking at Nora instead of the airplane and it hit him square in the eye. He screamed and raised his hands to cover his face. His friends gathered around him, and then one of the brighter members of the group suggested they take him to the nurse's office.

"That was strange," I said as they escorted him from the lunchroom.

"Serves him right."

"What just happened?" Shelby asked.

I didn't know what to make of the light I saw coming out of Nora's hand, and Nora hadn't mentioned it. Had anyone else seen it? Had Shelby? What about the shadows I kept almost seeing?

Was I being haunted or something?

Nora and I went to the girls' room, and Nora waited by the sink. I was just about to flush when I saw a bright flare of light from the front of the bathroom. Then I heard Nora storming out the door.

I flushed quickly and put my hands under some water at the sink before running after her. "Hey! Wait for me!"

She paused long enough for me to walk with her. She was being impatient, but I knew it wasn't about me. I glanced at her. She didn't look the same.

"Something's different."

Nora just shrugged, and we went to our separate classes for the afternoon. After my last class, I went to where Nora had parked her scooter, but she wasn't there yet. I started to feel that itch on the back of my neck again, like someone was watching me.

About ten minutes later, I saw Nora coming. She wasn't in any better of a mood than she'd been after lunch.

"Vice Principal Riordan wanted to talk to me," she explained.

"Nora—"

"Let's just go." She started up the scooter and I got on behind her.

Once we got home, I held open the gate so she could push the scooter through the side yard and into the garage.

That's when I noticed what was different. Her mole was gone.

"Nora?"

"What?"

"What happened to your mole?"

"What are you talking about?"

"It's not there."

"You're not funny."

"No...look in the mirror. You didn't notice?"

Nora bent and examined her reflection in the side mirror of the Vespa suspiciously.

"It's gone!" She was suddenly grinning.

"Yes, but how? What happened to it?"

"Um..." Nora shrugged. "It fell off?" At my look, she went on. "Well, it was there after lunch. Hey! Mrs. Riordan said I looked different! It must have been before that."

"Wait a minute, I noticed it, too, when we came out of the bathroom."

"You did? I remember looking at it in the mirror. I was so mad about it. And at Darek."

"There's no trace of it now. It's like it was never there."

"I just wanted it to go away."

"And you're just noticing now?" I teased her. "Maybe you should work on those keen powers of observation."

"Girls!" Jill's voice sounded from inside the house. "Is that you out there?"

"Coming, Jill!" Nora called back. "Should we tell Jill and Tony?"

"You mean Mom and Dad?" I ignored her eye roll. "I wouldn't mention it if they don't. But this isn't normal. We should figure out what happened."

"You don't have to always over-analyze things, little sis."

"I am not over-analyzing. I'm just being practical."

"Yeah, yeah."

We stepped into the house and hit a wall of something wonderful.

"Something smells good," Nora took a deep breath.

"See," I teased her. "You *do* have keen powers of observation."

"What are you making?" she asked Jill.

"Just a pot roast."

"Smells yummy!" I told her. "I can't wait to taste it!"

"Yeah," Nora studied her critically. "What's the special occasion? The last time you made that was my first dinner here."

"What?" Jill tried to look offended. "Can't a woman make a pot roast without a special occasion?"

"Maybe a normal woman," I laughed. "But you, Mom? It's suspicious."

"Oh, hush! I just thought it sounded good. Now go do your homework."

"Mom," I scolded her. "There's only one week left of school. We don't have any homework."

"Oh, really? Well, if you hang out in the kitchen, I'll find some work for you to do!"

"No, no. We wouldn't want to get in your way." Nora grabbed me by the shoulder and we cleared out.

We ended up in my room. We usually did. When Nora went to her room, it usually meant she wasn't feeling sociable.

"So." I looked at her. "Wanna watch a movie?"

Nora just grinned. "Sure. What do you want to watch?"

"We haven't watched *Gilda* in a while?"

"Who can get tired of Rita Hayworth, right?"

"Exactly!"

It was nice. Watching these old movies was one of our favorite things to do. We'd seen this one several times.

"I'm glad they finally stopped being stupid with each other," I told her when the movie was over.

"Well, they have to do something stupid so they'll have a story."

"Rita was so awesome," I said, ignoring her cynicism. "She could sing and dance and act. Of course, most of them did in those days, but she was so glamorous, too. I can't believe she started as a flamenco dancer as a kid." Rita Hayworth was definitely one of my favorites, but I also liked how stylishly they dressed in the old movies.

"Glenn Ford was pretty good, too," Nora pointed out. "Maybe we can watch the original *Big Heat* this weekend."

"Girls! Time for dinner!"

Nora and I looked at each other with a chorus of, "Pot roast!" We raced down the hall in anticipation.

It was a full family dinner with Jill and Tony and Nora and me. I really felt like I had the best family. And the pot roast was so good!

"This is dreamy," Nora told Jill.

I laughed, "It's dinner, not your date!"

"Beef is beef," she shrugged with a smile.

"Girls, please!" Tony rolled his eyes.

"Well, thank you," Jill beamed. "I'm glad you like it!"

"Seriously though." Nora looked at her, "What's the occasion?"

"Well, there is something to celebrate." Jill exchanged glances with Tony before turning to me. "The legal stuff is finally over. After six years of fighting, we can finally go through with the adoption. We've already signed the papers."

"Really?" I was shocked. I had wanted this for so long. I was out of my seat before I knew it and was hugging Jill and Tony. They were going to be my parents for real!

Finally, I went back to my chair. I glanced at Nora on the way and felt a lump in my throat. Nora had only been with us for about a year. She had just turned eighteen and wouldn't need to be adopted. But I knew she really wanted to belong somewhere.

"I'm sure they'd adopt you, too, if you want."

"Sweetie," Nora looked at me. "Tonight isn't about me; it's about you. I'm really happy for you. You deserve a good life and all the wonderful things the world can give you. Congratulations."

"Thank you! You're the best sister ever!" I put my arms around her and gave her a big hug. I had such a great family!

"Does this mean I'll have to change my last name?"

"That's up to you, Mirella." Tony liked to call me Mirella. "And if you want, you can even go Spanish style and just add Ramirez to the end."

"Mirabela Cervantes Ramirez. I like it!"

"Nora?" Jill asked her as we finished up. "Can you help with the dishes while Mira takes her shower?"

"Sure."

I turned on the water in the shower to let it get hot and grabbed a towel. I stripped down and waited until I could see the steam start to rise, looking forward to the luxurious feel of the hot water over my skin.

"I don't know!" I suddenly heard Nora's voice shout from the kitchen, then I heard a loud banging sound from the front of the house. I wrapped the towel around myself and hurried down the hall to see what was going on.

Jill and Tony were standing by the front door and I didn't see Nora anywhere.

"What happened?" I asked. I could see that something was wrong with the door.

"It's okay," Jill told me. "Go ahead and take your shower."

"Where's Nora?"

"She went for a walk," Tony answered. "She just needs to think about some things."

"But—"

"Shower," Jill repeated. "We can talk later, once you're clean and have some clothes on."

I looked down at the towel and decided my questions could wait for a few minutes since nothing seemed to be happening at the moment.

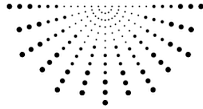
I cut my shower time a bit short. I was distracted by whatever was going on, and I wasn't able to let go and just enjoy the heat. I dried myself off and threw on a clean pair of sweats. I started down the hall and Jill sent me right back.

"Uh-uh. Dry your hair."

It was easier not to argue. Besides, I did want to dry my hair.

Finally, with everything in order, I went to see what was happening.

CHAPTER TWO



Tony and Jill were standing by the front door, where Tony was making a list on a notepad.

"That should do it," he said. "I'll be back in a flash."

The door was split down the middle. The hinges were loose, and the door jamb was broken.

"Did Nora do that?" I asked.

"Yeah," Tony answered. "But she was just running through. I don't think she did it on purpose."

"Why was she running?"

Tony looked at Jill. "I'll be back shortly."

"I think she was feeling pressured," Jill supplied. "And she panicked."

At my confusion, Jill went on.

"I told her that if she wanted, we would adopt her, too."

"That's wonderful!" I could barely keep in my excitement. "But why would that make her feel pressured?"

"She's had a hard time, honey," Jill told me. "You've been with us for years, but Nora has been through several different foster homes. You know she has a hard time trusting people. I think she was just scared. Let's give her some space."

"Okay," I nodded.

"And you can help me finish the dishes!"

By the time the dishes were done, Nora still wasn't back.

"I think I should go look for her."

Jill looked at me. After a moment, she nodded. "Okay, go ahead. She might be ready for some company by now. It is getting late and she shouldn't be out much longer."

I grinned and gave her a hug. "We'll be back in a jiffy!"

"Jiffy?" She laughed. "Where do you get all these old words?"

"They're fun!" I told her.

Tony was already back with supplies, and was replacing the door and jam. "It's getting a bit chilly out," he said. "You might want to wear a coat."

"I'll be okay," I said as I went past him.

Nora had probably gone to the small woods nearby. That was one of her favorite places. I'd most likely find her at that big tree near the center.

It took me nearly a half hour to get there. It was starting to get dark as I arrived, and I couldn't see very well.

"Nora?" I saw movement at the base of the big tree, right where I expected her to be. "There you are." I walked toward her. "You've been gone for a couple of hours. Jill was worried."

"I fell asleep."

"What happened?" I didn't know if she'd be ready to talk about it, but I'd give her the chance, just in case.

"I just...needed some air,"

"It's getting cold. Are you ready to go back?"

"Yeah, give me a minute." She looked at me. "Is Jill mad?"

"I don't think so, but you broke the front door. Tony went to the hardware store to get stuff to fix it. He was working on it when I

left.”

“The door?”

“It was practically ripped from the hinges. How did you do that?”

“No, I...I didn’t touch it. It just opened. I thought maybe Tony had left it open. I just needed to get some space, you know?”

“I heard you shout something in the kitchen, and then I heard the front door slam open. Tony says he was in the front room when you ran by.”

“I don’t know. Let’s go back. Time to face the music.”

As Nora started brushing the dirt from her clothes, I saw a strange glow on her hands.

“What...what’s that light coming from your hands?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Your hands, when you were brushing the dirt off. They were glowing or something.”

Nora held up her hands for me to look at. “No glowing.”

“No, it was just for a moment,” I told her. “This wasn’t the first time, either.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, I didn’t say anything because I wasn’t sure. Remember when that paper airplane flew back and hit Darek? I saw some kind of weird light coming from your hand. And then in the restroom at school. I was in the stall, when there was some kind of bright flash from the front, and right after that, I noticed your mole was gone.”

“That’s crazy!”

“That’s not all.” I didn’t know how to explain it to her. “I also felt something at the same time, like, on my skin? I don’t know how to describe it. But when I heard the front door slam open, I felt it again.” I didn’t want to tell her about the almost-shadows or the other things yet.

"You think I did something? And it made my hands glow and gave you the creeps?"

"It didn't give me the creeps. It's not a bad feeling or a good feeling, it's just sort of a sense of something."

"Whatever. How come I haven't noticed my hands glowing?"

"I don't know." I didn't know what could have caused it. "Try to do something."

"What do you mean? Is this some kind of Luke Skywalker shit? You think I used the Force to get rid of my mole?"

"I don't know. Maybe. Something like that." I shrugged.

"Is this some kind of practical joke? It's not funny."

"No, I promise."

Nora held her hands up and looked at them. "Nothing."

I was thinking about when I had seen it before. "So, with Darek, it was probably just a reaction. But what about in the restroom? What was happening?"

"I was just really angry about Darek and wishing I didn't have the mole on my nose."

"Somehow, your wish came true. But there has to be a way to do something without making you mad first."

"Maybe because I was just very focused on it?"

"Okay, what can you focus on here?" I asked her.

"Do you think I could make that grow?" She pointed at a small sprout nearby.

"Try it."

She crouched down to get closer and looked at it intently.

"Nothing's happening," she said after awhile.

"Focus harder. Make it grow."

Nora focused again, and I saw a glow appear around her hands.

"Something's happening! Your hands are glowing!"

She glanced up at me and I was afraid she would break her concentration.

"Don't stop!" I put my hand on her shoulder.

After a couple of minutes, she finally stopped. "It's not working."

"Maybe that's not so easy to do, but your hands were definitely glowing."

She was silent for a moment. "I didn't see my hands glowing. Not at first. But when you touched my shoulder, I could see it. I also saw something else glow. Not really glow, but something."

"What?"

"Your pendant." Before I could say anything, she went on. "You know, none of this crazy stuff started to happen until after you opened that box."

She had a point, but we didn't have the box with us. My hand went to my pendant and I looked at it.

"Let's try something. You put this on, and try again. Let's see what happens."

Nora knelt by the little plant and tried again, this time with the pendant around her neck. As far as I could tell, nothing was happening.

"Whoa!" She stood up. "I saw it!"

"I didn't see anything on your hands, but I did notice something with the pendant."

"Here, take this back. That was freaky."

"Let's try something easier." I put the pendant back around my neck, then I started to get that feeling of being watched again, but it was much stronger this time.

"Actually, how about we go home and try later? I want to go home."

"Okay." She shrugged. "I'm tired and I'm getting hungry again. Let's go back and see how much trouble I'm in."

We started walking back. Slowly, the feeling of being watched faded.

"I'm sure it'll be alright," I told her. "What do you think we should try next? Maybe something with you would be easier, like the mole."

"Maybe I could make my boobs bigger!" Nora joked.

"You think that will be easy?"

"Probably not. Maybe my hair? Maybe I could straighten my hair and I won't have to always look like I have a bird's nest for a hat."

"Hey girls," Tony said as we approached the house. "We were about to send out a search party. It's getting late."

"We're back! No rescue needed!" I grinned at him.

"Bummer. I was hoping for an adventure. Careful of the wet paint."

Nora looked at him. "I'm sorry about the door, Tony. I didn't mean to do that."

"Don't sweat it, Norrie. Stuff happens."

"Hey! Just because I screwed up doesn't mean I'm going to let you call me Norrie!"

"That reminds me of something I say to Jill."

"What's that?"

"Yes, dear."

Nora rolled her eyes at him as we walked inside, being careful of the wet paint. We went to the kitchen and we were helping ourselves to the leftover pot roast.

"Busted!" Jill came up behind us.

"You know I can never get enough of this stuff!" I told her.

"Yeah, I wasn't really worried about it going to waste."

"Jill, I'm sorry I ran off like that." Nora sounded embarrassed. "I just felt so...claustrophobic or something."

"Honey, it's alright. You just think about what I said and whatever you decide is okay. It's an open offer."

"Really? Even after..."

"It would take a lot more than that to change anything, believe me."

Jill was really wonderful, but I didn't want things to get too intense for Nora again.

"Enough already!" I joked. "Let's eat!"

Jill went back into the other room while we took our pilfered leftovers to the table. I didn't know what was going on with Nora and these strange things happening. It was cool, but I didn't understand it.

"Do you really want to try straightening your hair?" I asked.

"Maybe. This is pretty strange. Doesn't it scare you?"

"Not so far. Why? Are you thinking of trying something scary?"

Nora's face clouded up. "No, but what is this? Do you think I'm..."

"What?"

"Darek was just calling me a witch. Do you think maybe he was right?"

Oh, no. I was not going to let her buy into whatever Darek was selling. "Darek was just being a jerk, like always. If he was right about something, it would be a first."

"I bet that woman at the shop knows a lot more than she said."

"The one who freaked out about the knives? What was her name? Katya something?"

Nora was back to eating her pot roast and just nodded.

"Maybe we can watch another movie tonight?" I suggested. "Maybe... *You Were Never Lovelier?*"

"Another Rita Hayworth?"

"Yep, but this time with Fred Astaire."

We washed up the dishes in silence, anticipating what was going to come next.

"You think you can do this without making your hair fall out?" I asked as we stood together in the bathroom.

"That's not funny."

"Sorry." But I wasn't. I thought it was pretty funny. Maybe not if it actually fell out, though.

Nora stared intently at her reflection. After a short time, her hair started to glow.

"Something is happening! I see a glow!"

I could tell it was taking a lot of effort for her, even though she was just standing there. Amazingly, her hair started to straighten. It went from the top slowly down to the ends. Finally, she stopped, gasping.

"You did it!" I gave her a big hug. "That was amazing!"

"I want to try something else."

"What?"

"Just watch. I hope this works."

I could see she was focusing again by the glow. Slowly, her red hair began to darken. It got darker and darker until it was jet-black, but she didn't stop. Different colored highlights began to cascade down from the top of her head—blue, green, purple, and pink. As the colors reached the tips, she let go of her focus, gasping for breath and laughing at the same time.

Suddenly, I felt something else happening, like a tingling or something crawling on my skin. Nora gaped and looked over my shoulder. I turned to see a shadow, but this time, it was shimmering

in the air and growing larger. I could see other shadows moving through it, like I was looking through a dirty window.

“What’s—”

“Ah, there you are,” a voice sounded.

A man stepped out of the shimmering air and it disappeared behind him.

How was this possible? How could a man just appear in our house? In our bathroom? Who was he? What did he want?

His unpleasant chuckle freed us from our frozen shock. His hand shot forward, but he missed us as we dodged and ran down the hall. Nora closed and locked the door.

“Running?” We heard his voice from the hall. “No more of that.”

Nora grabbed the daggers from the dresser and gave me one. Was I supposed to use it on the man?

“How droll,” the man said when he found the door locked. He started pounding or kicking it from the other side.

“What’s going on?” That was Tony.

The door splintered open and the man stepped in. He was wearing some kind of robed garment and a cloth wrapped over his nose and mouth.

“Yes, you’re the one.” He was looking straight at me.

He grabbed my arm and I tried to pull away as he made some gestures with his other hand. Another shimmering formed in the air and he tried to drag me into it.

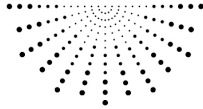
I saw Nora moving from the corner of my eye.

“No!” She leaped on him, stabbing with the knife. The knife struck something and there was a shower of sparks. I managed to pull away from him just as we all fell into the shimmering air.

Suddenly, I was on the ground and there were no walls around me. It had been night, but above me now was blue sky.

I was alone.

CHAPTER THREE



*W*here was Nora? Where was the man who had grabbed me?

What's happening?

I looked around, but I didn't see either one of them.

"Nora?" I yelled out. "Nora, where are you?"

The sounds of insects around me went quiet for a moment, and then resumed. I could hear birds, but no Nora.

What's happening?

Where was my house? How is it daytime? I could feel myself starting to panic, my breath coming faster and faster.

Stop! Breathe. Slowly. In. Hold. Out. Just breathe.

My heart started to settle down.

Push forward. What's the next thing to do? Take stock of the situation. I checked my pocket, but I'd left my cell phone on the dresser by my bed.

I stood up and looked around. I was in a small clearing on the side of a hill. There was forest in all directions. Puffs of white hung randomly in the sky. They were pretty, but that wasn't going to be of any help.

I still had the knife that Nora had put in my hands. I saw that the other knife and its scabbard were by my feet, so I picked them up.

Where was I? In the distance, I could see an ocean or a big lake. There was nothing like that near where I lived. What just happened to me? How was I here? Where did that man come from? I had too many questions and no answers.

Okay. What was the practical thing to do?

I needed answers, and I wasn't going to find them on my own. I also would need food, shelter, and water.

I needed help. People. But there was no one around, so I was going to have to find them. Hopefully, they wouldn't be too far away. There would probably be people someplace on the shore of that lake or ocean, whatever it was. Besides, downhill sounded easier than uphill. That water looked like it was pretty far. I wished for my cell phone. But there probably wouldn't have been any signal here, anyway, wherever "here" was.

I took one more look around, but I didn't see anything special about the clearing to identify it. Maybe I should wait in case someone came for me. I shook my head at that thought. Probably the only one who could come for me would be whoever that man was who'd grabbed me, and I didn't want to wait around to see if he showed up.

I walked across the small clearing and started downhill.

It was warm. Much warmer than the early summer I had left behind. The sun was above me, but I couldn't tell if it was going up or going down. The trees seemed mainly like oak, with some pine. I passed the occasional glade and could see wildflowers in bloom. I could also see birds flitting around me in the trees.

I looked closer at one and stopped short. That wasn't a bird. I didn't know exactly what it was, but it appeared to be more like a

little person than a bird. But it was gone before I could get a better look at it.

The way wasn't very steep, so it was a mostly easy hike. After a couple of hours, I was wishing I had some water or something to eat. I should have been watching for that kind of thing. Another forty minutes or so passed. I'd always been pretty good at keeping track of time even without a watch.

I became aware of a sound. I walked towards it and was relieved to find a small brook trickling through a rocky fold where two hills came together. I'd be afraid to try any berries or other vegetation I didn't recognize, but I needed water or I'd dehydrate. I crouched on the rocks and leaned down to touch my lips to the water and took a long drink. I hadn't realized how thirsty I'd become. I wet my hands and ran my fingers through my hair. I reached into my pocket and, sure enough, there was my favorite scrunchie. I used that to pull my hair into a ponytail.

That felt much better. Unfortunately, I didn't have a way to carry water with me. I drank twice more before continuing on my way.

Several minutes later, I heard a loud rustling in the bushes ahead to the right. Thinking it might be a large animal, I angled my walk toward the left. This all looked like normal forest and I'd done a lot of hiking in the past, especially in the last year with Nora, but I had no idea what animals would be around.

After about twenty minutes, it happened again, and once more, I angled to the left, away from the sound. Maybe an animal was stalking me. I wished Nora was here. She was the strong one. I never had to be afraid when she was around. At least I had my daggers to protect myself, not that they would help me against a pack of wolves or anything. After those birds that weren't really birds, I didn't know what to expect from this place.

Shortly, I found myself in a small clearing with brambles to the front and sides. I turned around to retrace my steps and go around the dead end I had walked into.

I stopped. A half-dozen creatures blocked my path. They looked almost like regular people, but they were only about four and a half feet tall at the most, maybe up to my shoulder, and very stocky. Their heads seemed large for their size, and they had heavy jaws and wide mouths. Their shoes were falling apart, but the hands at the end of their over-long arms held spears that appeared very sharp.

What were these things? What did they want?

"This one's easy," one chuckled. He nodded to the one next to him. "You make fire for cooking. We catch."

He glanced at the daggers I was holding in my hands. "That not help you."

With that, several of them stepped towards me, gripping their spears in both hands as if ready to use them. I looked around, but there was nowhere to run.

"Ragar, you know better than to hunt in my woods." A voice, female, rang out from the trees. I looked around, but couldn't see who was talking.

"Not our fault," the leader answered, looking around. "This one come from up the mountain."

"Are you up the mountain now?"

I still couldn't see who was talking, or even where the voice was coming from.

"You Dark Blade, eh? You think you can trick Ragar?" He scowled. "Use bait for trap!"

"You should leave," the voice said without emotion.

"We leave," he nodded. A sly look came over his face. "We take our prey and leave."

Prey?

"No."

The word came with such strength and finality that Ragar and his men—or whatever they were—froze. And then, he became angry.

"If you are so tough, why hide? Dark Blade not so tough. Astrina Ulané Poloso weak! All *Ralahi Jhané* weak!"

"You are about to make a very big mistake."

"No mistake! We not leaving. We stay and eat. You leave, or we eat you!"

"You had your chance."

She appeared out of the shadows behind them. She wore snug leather clothing in dark greens and browns, making it difficult to see her in the forest. "Time for a lesson." She drew a long knife from her belt.

Ragar roared and his men charged her. She moved so fast, I couldn't follow her with my eyes. She seemed to be suddenly everywhere at once. Before I knew what was happening, there were five bodies on the ground, and she stood in front of Ragar with her knife at his throat.

"I'm not going to kill you, Ragar," she said. "Do you know why?"

He shook his head slowly, his eyes never leaving her knife.

"Because if I kill you, no one can go back and remind your people why you don't hunt here. And because I want you to deliver another message—send back Reelu Ulané Pulakaloso and her son Karis Ulané Panalira." She stepped back. "Now go!"

Ragar took off without a sound or a backwards glance and disappeared into the forest. She turned to look at me and cocked her head to the side.

"You are human." It sounded more like an observation than a question. She looked me up and down. "And one that is new to our world."

The comment confused me and I nodded, speechless. I studied the creature that had come to my rescue. She wasn't very big; she was slender and couldn't have been more than four and a half feet tall, either. Her raven-black hair was pulled back in a ponytail, revealing pointed ears. Slanted eyes shone lavender from a heart-shaped face, looking at me intently. Her skin color was similar to mine, though not quite the same as my own light to dusky tone.

"What are you?" I blurted without thinking. I was immediately embarrassed—would she think I was rude? "Um, are you Asian?"

"I'm not from your world. I'm what humans would call a sprite."

"But your features? They look like you might be some kind of Asian."

"You're not very bright, are you? Let's try this again. I'm not from your world. I don't know what an Asian is, but I'm not human. I'm a sprite."

"I'm sorry!" I was frustrated. "I don't know where I am or what's going on! I'm just trying to make sense of things. What's a sprite?"

"How can you speak the common tongue and not know what a sprite is?"

"What do you mean?" She was just confusing me more. "I'm speaking English, just like you."

She walked around me, examining not just me, but also my clothes and my shoes. She looked at the knives I carried, still in their scabbards, then she pointed to my pendant.

"That," she said as if it explained everything.

"What do you mean?" I held up the pendant and examined it.

"That is a very powerful amulet," she said. "It uses the opal to make one of the strongest diplomacy spells I have ever seen. But it is very subtle. I wouldn't have known it was there if I hadn't been looking for it."

"Spells?"

She sighed. "This is going to be a long conversation if you keep asking me to repeat myself."

Something caught my eye in the forest behind her. I instantly grabbed her and pulled her to the side. A spear passed through where she had been standing and stuck into the ground. She looked at it and gave her head a small shake.

"Wait here," she told me, and she blurred away from me. A minute later I heard a scream that was cut short. Not long after that, she came back into the clearing.

"How can you move so fast?" I asked her.

"Magic," she smiled.

"That's amazing. Can you teach me?"

She looked at me seriously.

"I owe you a blood debt," she said. "You saved my life. Is this your wish? I pay my debt by teaching you to use magic? To move quickly?"

"Oh, yes! And to fight! You took out all of those...what are they?"

"*Urgaban*. You would call them goblins."

"Goblins, right." I looked at the bodies. "You took out all of those goblins. You were incredible!"

"Very well," she said. "I accept this geas you have laid upon me. I am bound to you until I have done this."

"But..." This sounded much more formal than I had thought. "You saved my life, too. It sounded like they were going to eat me."

She shook her head. "No. They were trespassing. I was enforcing my law. They cannot hunt here, no matter the prey. You saved my life for no reason other than you could." She paused for a moment. "I am Neelu'u, of the Su Lariano clan."

"I'm Mira. I don't really have a clan," I told her. "That goblin guy, Ragar, he called you something else?"

"Lucky guess," she shrugged. "The goblins know of me as Dark Blade."

"He said something else, too...something about..." I tried to remember, "Astrid something?"

"Astrina Ulané Poloso. She is our queen."

"Oh, okay. Um, could you help me get home?" While I would love to learn magic, getting home would be more important.

"To your world?" She shook her head. "Portal magic is something else entirely. I do not know it. But there is a lot I can teach you. Where did you get that?" She indicated my necklace.

"It was my mother's. My parents died years ago and I just got a box that had some of her things in it. It had this necklace, and these knives." I held them up. "And some other stuff. Photos. Letters."

"Those look like they could be powerful as well," she said, looking at the knives.

I tucked one under my arm and held the other up, pulling the knife from the scabbard. The blade shone brightly in the sun.

Neelu'u grabbed my hands and shoved the knife back in the sheath.

"Do not pull it from the scabbard again! Not until you learn to hide it. You will draw too much attention. That is no simple knife. I wonder who your mother was to have such powerful talismans." She gave me a hard look. "You have much to learn before you can travel safely in this world."

"Are there a lot more of these goblins around?"

"Goblins will be the least of your worries if you do not learn to shield magic. Now, let us leave this place. The wolves will feed well tonight—" she gestured to the bodies around us "—but I don't think you want to be here for it."

Thinking she was probably right, I nodded my agreement and followed her as she began walking into the forest. After a few minutes, I thought of Jill and Tony and Nora, and how they must be wondering where I was.

"Neelu'u, you said you don't know...portal magic? How long before we can find someone who can help me get home?"

"Mira," she began, then paused. "This is your full name? Don't humans usually have longer names?"

"Mirabella Cervantes. Ramirez." I remembered Tony saying I could add that last one to the end. "But most people call me Mira. My dad, he likes to call me Mirella. Nora tried calling me Bella once, but after the whole *Twilight* thing..." The look on her face told me I was rambling. "Just call me Mira. That's easiest."

"Mira." She nodded. "I do not want you to misunderstand the situation. It is possible you may never be able to return to your world."

"What?" I pulled up short, blinking back tears. "But...no! I can't stay here! I have to go home! You can't keep me here!"

She put her hand on my shoulder. "If I could send you home this minute, I would. Travel between realms is not what it once was. Time was, one could move from the Daoine realm to many other realms without much difficulty. The easiest realm to access your world has always been the Dannu realm. Many of our peoples traveled from Daoine to other realms and made their homes there. But travel to and from Dannu has been blocked for centuries. To

travel to your world from Daoine would be extremely difficult—if you can even find someone who knew how to do it and was powerful enough to manage it.”

“I’ve been gone for hours. Jill and Tony must be going crazy.”

“From what I’ve heard, time in Daoine doesn’t move at the same rate as on your world. Only minutes will have passed for them in the time you have been here. That is the effect of the travel block.”

“Daoine?” I asked her. “That’s where we are?”

“Yes.”

“And your people...sprites? They’re in charge here?”

She shook her head. “No, the *Ashae* rule here. They have also been known as Sidhe in some parts of your world.”

“Would one of these *Ashae* know how to get me home?”

“I do not know who would be able to help you. But I will do everything possible to find someone.”

I nodded, trying not to think of it. We resumed walking as we talked.

“What was the other place you were talking about?” I asked. “Dannu? Why is it blocked off?”

“The Ande-Dannu, the people of that realm, have erected their own magical barriers to prevent entry.”

“You said they went to my world a lot?”

“They went there easily, but more than that, I can’t say. Dannu was once home to what those on your world called the Tuatha de Danann. They and the Ande-Dannu lived in the realm of Dannu. But one day, the Tuatha de Danann were attacked by a race from another realm—the Fomorians. They fought a bloody war against this race, and both sides were devastated. Eventually, the Tuatha de Danann sought to go to another realm to recover, and the *Ashae* helped them in this. The Fomorians—what was left of them—

pursued the Tuatha de Danann. Who knows what happened after that? That is when the Ande-Dannu put up the barriers. Probably to protect themselves from being similarly attacked."

"I guess humans aren't the only ones that have wars."

She gave a short, mirthless chuckle. "No, not by far. Tell me your tale, Mirabella Cervantes Ramirez."

"Mira," I corrected her.

"Mira."

As we walked, I told her about how I'd been fostered with Jill and Tony, and how they were finally going to be able to adopt me. I told her about Nora, about how broody she could be, but also how she always watched over me and tried to make sure I was happy. Then I told her everything that had happened to us since I'd gotten that chest of my mother's things.

Once I finished, she said, "It is possible that when your sister attacked the mage, it destabilized his portal spell. That could explain how you came to Daoine."

"But what happened to him? Or to Nora?"

"There is no way to know." Neelu'u shrugged. "They could be in your world, or they could have fallen through the splintered portal and landed somewhere else."

We came to a small hut in the forest. I could hear the burbling of a stream nearby.

"I sometimes use this for sleeping when I am away from my village," Neelu'u explained. I think we should stay here for a bit until I can teach you some basics, then I will take you to the village."

The hut was at the edge of a small clearing. There was a firepit that had been evidently set up for cooking, and a large pot was handy.

"I'll make a pallet for you in the hut for sleeping," Neelu'u told me. "The season is not cold, so you should be comfortable. Are you hungry?"

At the mention of food, my stomach began to grumble. "Yes!"

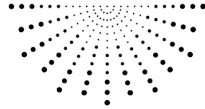
"I will make something."

"I don't know which I am more," I told her, "hungry or tired. It was nighttime when I left home. I think I'm feeling something like jet lag."

Neelu'u retrieved some enclosed baskets from inside the hut. "Here," she said. "Some nuts and berries I gathered earlier. Have some of that to tide you over and I'll make a pallet for you. Once you've rested, we can talk more over a proper meal."

The nuts seemed similar to pine nuts. I couldn't identify the berries, except to say they were tart and sweet. In the hut a few minutes later, the pallet was soft and heavenly.

CHAPTER FOUR



“*M*agic is all around you. It’s in everything. Your amulet lets you see when people are manipulating it, like this.” Neelu’u held out her hand, and a small ball of light formed above her palm.

I nodded. “I see it.”

“Good. Now try to see it when it isn’t being manipulated.”

“What do you mean? Where?”

“Anywhere. Everywhere. Look around you. Focus.”

I looked at the ground, the bushes, the trees, my hands. Nothing.

“We’ve been doing this for hours,” I was exasperated. “It’s not working!”

“Alright,” she said. “Let’s try something else.”

We sat on stools, facing each other, a few feet apart. She formed another ball of magic over her palm and looked at me expectantly.

“Yes, I see it,” I told her.

“Good. And do you feel it?”

I concentrated on my perceptions, not sure of what I was doing.

“Yes,” I answered. “I think I feel it more, the bigger it is.”

She nodded. "Focus on it, your sight of it and your feel of it. Your connection to it through your senses."

The more I focused, the more clearly I could feel the magic. It was almost like a tingling sensation, but not quite.

"Do you feel your connection to it?"

I nodded.

"Good. Keep that connection, keep that focus." She paused. "Now, without losing the connection, close your eyes."

When I closed my eyes, my connection to the magic started to falter and I concentrated harder. There! I could still feel it. It was there in front of me. And then, even with my eyes closed, I began to see it; a light in the darkness behind my closed lids.

"I see it!"

"Good, keep your connection."

After a moment, a second light appeared.

"You made another one! I can see that one, too!"

Then the light began to shift, slowly. It was getting dimmer, but it was still there. Then it started to change shape, moving up Neelu'u's arms to her shoulders, slowly spreading until I could see the magic glowing from Neelu'u's entire body.

"Your whole body is glowing now!"

The light began to change again, dimming even further.

"Can you still see it? Feel it?" Neelu'u asked.

"Yes, it's still there."

"Very good. Now, I want you to hold onto that focus and that connection, and slowly open your eyes."

I opened my eyes to look at her. She was still sitting in front of me, her hands relaxed in her lap. She had a faint glow around her that I could just barely see.

"Are you projecting magic from your whole body?"

"No." She smiled. "I'm not using any magic at all."

"But..." I looked at her more closely, and at the light. It didn't look like it was being projected. It just *was*. But it wasn't just her; it was everywhere. The trees. The rocks. The hut. Me. Even the air had a quality of magic. "It's all around!"

"Yes!" She grinned at me. "You're doing it! Now, use your connection and try to feel it more."

I nodded as I reached out with my senses. There was something, not quite a pulsing; an undertow, but I couldn't identify a direction for it, or whether it was pushing or pulling.

"I feel something," I said. "Almost like it could pick me up."

"That is the *Ralahin*. The spirit of all things, and the interrelationship and connection we have with it all. That is magic."

"It's wonderful!"

"In time, you will learn to see it without your amulet. For now," she paused, "try to keep the awareness at all times. The more you can maintain the connection, the more natural it will become. Watch what happens when I do this."

Suddenly, Neelu'u was enveloped by the magic and slid through it to the other side of the clearing in an instant.

"How did you do that?"

"The *Ralahin*. It has an ebb and flow, and it's all connected with everything all at once. You can move with it, ride it. That's how sprites can move so quickly."

"That's what you're going to teach me?"

She nodded. "It will take time. Few can naturally see the *Ralahin*; different races and disciplines see and interact with magic in different ways. Without your amulet, this first step might have been impossible."

"Should I try doing what you did now? Moving with the *Ralahin*?"

"No!" Neelu'u was adamant. "Absolutely do not try to do that. We will start with simple things, like your hands and arms. You must master moving and stopping before trying to move your whole body. You wouldn't want to end up smashing into a tree because you couldn't stop yourself."

I hadn't considered that. "Okay, so what's next?"

"Next, " she scowled, "we need to get you some better clothes. Those won't last you long."

I looked down at the sweats I had put on before going to find Nora. The bright pink was already getting dingy.

"If I get really good at magic, will I be able to keep my clothes clean?"

Neelu'u laughed. "That's easier said than done."

"Why? Couldn't I just separate the dirt from the clothes?"

"Of course! But doing it without also separating the threads from each other takes skill."

"You know, whenever they write stories about people getting stuck in a fairy world, they don't talk about things like clothes or toothbrushes or deodorant."

"Using that word will mark you as a stranger."

"Deodorant?"

"Fairy. Or fae, or anything like that. It is considered ignorant at best, insulting at worst. Those are human labels used by humans for races they didn't understand. There are no such things as fairies or fae."

"But you said that humans would call you a sprite. Isn't that a human word, too?"

"Yes, but at least it acknowledges that we are our own species and are separate from other species. There are many species, which

are collectively referred to as the *Ralahi Jhané*—for the way we connect with magic, with the *Ralahin*. This is what you are learning.”

“But what do sprites call themselves?”

“We are *Ulané Jhinura*.”

I replayed the word in my head. “Well, sprite is easier to say.”

Neelu’u laughed. It had a musical sound. “Be happy I don’t ask you to use my full name.”

“Do I want to ask?”

“Neelu’ Ulané Pulakasado.”

“Right. How about just Neelu?”

“That works, too,” she laughed. “We *Ulané Jhinura* rarely use our full names when dealing with others. We find the expediency reduces confusion for them.”

“Unless you want them confused?”

She just shrugged at that.

“What about the goblins?” I thought about the creatures that had wanted to eat me. “What do they call themselves?”

“They are *Urgaban*,” her face clouded as she answered my question. “Come, we’ll go to my village and see what we can do about getting you some clothes. And maybe brushes for your hair and teeth.”

“What’s your village called?”

“Su Lariano,” she answered. “*Ulané Jhinura* villages are named for the clan.”

It was a hike of several hours to the sprite village. I hadn’t mastered the correct name for the sprites yet. I hoped they were as relaxed about that as Neelu had indicated. And it was certainly easier to drop that third syllable from her name.

Supposedly, my amulet was making all this easier for me. It was a good thing I had it. Of course, if I didn’t, would I even be here?

And why had that man shown up, and what did he want with me? If Nora hadn't been there, I could have been kidnapped or worse. But why?

Jill and Tony must be going crazy by now. I said as much to Neelu.

"Remember, time moves differently here than in your world," she said. "I don't know the exact difference, but many days here would only be hours there. A century or more here would be a year there. They may not even know you are gone yet. It's only been minutes for them."

"Great! Then maybe I can get back before they start to worry!"

"Ah, no." Her face got very serious. "I didn't mean to imply that. It is unlikely you will be able to return soon enough for that. I don't want you to have false hope."

"But it's possible, right?"

"In an infinite universe, all things are possible," she told me. "But in all likelihood, your life as you knew it on your home world is over."

For the first time, this really hit me hard. I could feel my eyes welling up and my insides felt like broken glass. My sister. My parents. Gone. I would probably live my whole life here and they'd never know what happened to me.

I thought back to our last night together. Everyone, sitting around the table. Jill's news.

"Jill made pot roast," I said. "To celebrate that they were finally able to adopt me. Nora was so happy for me; she's never had a family." I could feel tears on my cheeks. "She told me once that I was the only family she'd ever need. But she was starting to connect with Jill and Tony, too. She's only been with us for about a year. I don't know what will happen now. Especially now that Nora is doing magic."

I ran out of words and we continued in silence. Every so often, Neelu would make a whistling or chirping sound. It sounded like a bird call of some sort.

"It is a signal," she explained at my questioning look. "If other of our Foresters are nearby, they will know we are here."

I tried to copy the sound, but it didn't come out right. But from Neelu's expression, it was at least entertaining.

An hour later, we passed a meadow. Through the trees, I could see it was full of different types of flowers of all colors.

"Wow!" I paused in my step. "That's amazing!"

"That's a pixie garden," Neelu told me. "Pixies and sylphs live off flowers and they cultivate gardens. You can tell the difference between a pixie garden and sylph garden because the sylph gardens are much more wild."

"I think I know what a pixie is." I was picturing Tinkerbell. "But what is a sylph?"

"A sylph is the same size as a pixie. But instead of, well, what you would call humanoid, they look like flowers and their wings look more like petals."

"Can I see one?"

"Look from here," Neelu told me. "Use your connection to the *Ralahin*. Try to See."

I'd forgotten at some point to keep up the *Ralahin* vision thing. I closed my eyes for a moment to concentrate and get that connection back. I opened my eyes and the meadow had transformed. I still saw all the flowers and the colors, but now they all shone with light, and I could see small things moving among the blooms. As I focused on them, they became clearer and distinct. I guessed they were about three inches tall, and they had wings. Some of the wings looked more like dragonfly wings, and some more like butterfly

wings. Their little bodies appeared to be like human bodies—and evidently had no need of clothing. I could feel my face getting a little warm.

“Cool,” I said, hiding my embarrassment. “So those are pixies.”

Neelu nodded and we continued our trek.

“Keep in mind for the future,” she warned me, “that it’s not a good idea to wander into a pixie or sylph garden. You can call to them from the edge, but if you take a step into their gardens and damage anything...let’s just say they are very protective and very deadly.”

That surprised me. “Deadly? But they are so small!”

“One at a time, yes. But a swarm? A thousand pixies can turn you into a pile of meat and bones in a few minutes. I understand it is a very painful experience.”

“I bet!”

“Even the wolves and other animals of the forest know to be wary of any gardens.”

“I noticed some of them carrying around their young,” I told her. “The small ones didn’t seem to have wings.”

“The wings are an aspect of their magic and how they connect with the *Ralahin*,” she explained. “As they become proficient with their connection to the *Ralahin*, wings manifest, and they are able to float and hover to do the work they do with the flowers.”

“Can you do that?”

She shook her head. “No. That is not how I connect with the *Ralahin*. *Ulané Jhinura* don’t fly.”

“*Ulané Jhinura*.” I was getting better at remembering what the sprites called themselves. “And what about the pixies and sylphs? Those are human words, too, right?”

"Yes." Neelu smiled. "Pixies are actually called *Pilane Jhin*. And the sylphs are *Sula Jhinara*."

"Okay, that's going to take me a bit."

Neelu nodded. "For the most part, no one minds the human words, except for fae fairy. But if you use their real names, they will respect you more for taking the time to learn it."

After we had hiked another hour, I was wishing we had a car or even a horse. The scenery was pretty and all, but I was impatient to get to where we were going.

"I bet you could get to your village a lot faster without me slowing you down."

"True." Neelu didn't seem bothered by this. "But in time, you will learn to travel quickly with the *Ralahin*."

"Maybe I could learn now?"

"Perhaps," Neelu laughed. "You should learn patience first."

I tried not to scowl at that.

"Seriously," I ignored her comment, "maybe I could learn a bit as we go? If it works, maybe we can get there faster."

"It is possible you could learn enough that, with my help, you could travel safely."

"What do you call it? When you move fast like that?"

"We move with the *Ralahin*."

"Yes." I nodded. "But what do you call it?" I was remembering how she zoomed around all of those goblins—those *Urgaban*, I corrected myself.

She shrugged. "Only as I have described it."

"That doesn't make any sense," I told her. "There should be a name for how you flit from one place to another." I paused. "That's it—flit!"

Neelu laughed again. "If you need to put a label to it, I suppose that will do."

"Yes." I had decided. "How do I do it?"

"Alright," she turned to face me. "Hold out your arm."

I did as she instructed.

"Now, feel the *Ralahin* around you and around your arm."

I nodded.

"Do you feel the ebb and flow? The push and pull?"

"Yes."

"Good, feel that around your arm. Around your hand. Feel the pull above your hand."

"Yes," I told her. "I feel it."

"Now, surrender your hand to that pull."

"This will teach me how to move really fast?"

"You do not move," she explained. "The *Ralahin* is moving, and it takes you with it. Surrender your hand to the pull of the *Ralahin* above it."

I let my arm go, but it just fell to my side.

"No," she told me. "Don't surrender to gravity, surrender to the specific pull of the *Ralahin* above your hand. Try again."

I held my arm out and focused on the *Ralahin*.

"Do you feel the pull?"

"Yes."

"Can you feel how you are resisting the pull? Feel how you are keeping your hand from going with it."

"Yes!" It was something that had been below my awareness. I didn't even know I was doing it.

"Then stop resisting. Surrender the hand."

I focused on my resistance and what I was doing to hold my hand in place from being tossed around by the *Ralahin* all around it.

I looked at the specific resistance to the pull above my arm. And I let it go.

Suddenly, my hand shot up, pulling my arm with it. If it hadn't been attached to my body, it would have just kept going.

"I did it!" That was cool. "I just need to do that with my whole body, right?"

"Slow down," she was shaking her head. "You made a good start, but you're a long way from that."

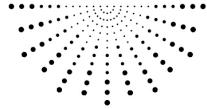
"Okay, then what's next?"

"Next, we will move with the *Ralahin* together and I will keep you from getting into trouble."

"We're going to flit?"

"Yes. We're going to flit."

CHAPTER FIVE



Neelu stood beside me and looped my arm around hers, holding it in place with her other hand.

"Feel the *Ralahin* all around you," she said. "Around me."

"I feel it."

"Now, just give in a little to the pull in front of us."

I felt the *Ralahin* almost move me, then I felt Neelu go—and I was going with her! It was so fast! At first, the trees were a blur as we went past them. As I got more used to it, I could see everything clearly with the *Ralahin*. The trees and bushes and rocks. A deer looked up as we passed, but we were gone before it could even see us.

As we went, the *Ralahin* began to take on more detail for me. I wouldn't describe it as layers, really, but there was definitely more than just one dimension to it. I saw how it wound through everything, connecting everything. How it was everywhere and going everywhere at the same time. I could feel how Neelu was letting one flow pull us along as the strand extended out further and further ahead of us.

We went through valleys and over hills, between trees and around meadows filled with pixie gardens. Then we stopped. It was

sudden, but there was no momentum at all. We simply stopped.

"We are close now," Neelu told me. "We should walk the rest of the way."

"That was incredible! I didn't know you could go so far at one time!"

"Most can't," she admitted. "I have put more time and study into this. I am able to go faster and further than any other *Ulané Jhinura* I know."

"I could feel what you were doing." I thought for a moment. "I think I could do it, too. With a little practice."

"Did you notice what I did to stop?"

"No."

"Until you know how that part is done, you aren't ready. It's too dangerous."

Oh, yeah. Stopping. I could see how that might be important.

We walked for a few minutes and stepped through a break in the trees. I saw the buildings of the *Ulané Jhinura* village, tucked up against the base of a steep cliff face. Neelu put a hand on my arm to stop me.

"It would be better if you did not mention I am teaching you to use the *Ralahin*."

"Is that against the rules or something?" I asked her.

She looked uncomfortable. "Nothing so specific, but our way of connecting with the *Ralahin* is very intimate for us. It is not something we share with outsiders."

"We would be in trouble if anyone found out?"

"Let's only say, we would be under much greater scrutiny. That's not always pleasant."

I made a zipping motion with my hand across my lips. I laughed at Neelu's quizzical expression. "I won't say anything," I explained.

“My lips are sealed.”

We approached the first building, and I got a better look at it. Instead of being cut into planks or logs, it was as if fallen branches and trees had somehow been melded together and formed into the structure of a building. It reminded me of driftwood sculptures I had seen. As my eyes traveled up the wall, I could see that many different types of trees had been used. One piece flowed into another with no gaps or seams. In some areas, the bark was still on, giving it a rough and shaggy look. In other areas, the wood was bare and smooth, exposing the colors of the grain. The roof seemed to be covered with branches that were heavy with leaves, but these were also melded together. Probably to make it waterproof. This was very different from the rough hut Neelu had used in the forest.

A shaggy section of wall swung out, and one of the *Ulané Jhinura* stepped through. She turned left and walked towards another building without noticing us. I looked back at the first building with this new information and saw that the rough patches probably represented doors and windows.

“These are amazing! Is that a house? A cabin? What do you call these? How are they...I mean, how do you—”

“This is another way that we use the *Ralahin*,” Neelu explained. “The wood is reformed to our need, while still honoring its true nature.”

“Will you be teaching me how to do that, too?” I looked at her.

She shook her head. “No. That is outside of our agreement, and much more difficult to do.”

She led me further into town to a building that stood with its shaggy door open. We went in, and I could see it was some kind of shop. There were shelves with different materials and a stock of various household items. There was a counter near the back and an

Ulané Jhinura woman looked up from what she was doing. I had wondered if Neelu was short, but she and the woman behind the counter were about the same height. I felt a little awkward towering over them both at five-foot two.

"Neelu'u," the woman smiled, then her copper eyes turned to me and her face clouded with uncertainty. "What have you brought me today?"

"Hello, Felora." Neelu approached her. "This is my friend Mira. She has recently arrived and has no wardrobe but what you see on her back."

"I see," Felora replied, looking over my pink sweats. Her eyes rose to mine. "And what sort of clothing do you need?"

The question surprised me, and I looked back and forth between the two of them. "I don't know," I flustered. "I guess something like what Neelu has?"

Neelu wore tight-fitting leather clothes of dark green and brown. This was in contrast to the work-dress that Felora wore. The dress was light and pretty, but probably not suited to hiking—or flitting—through the forest. Still...

"I think a dress might be nice, too. Is that too much trouble?"

Neelu was nodding. "A dress might not be a bad idea, but Forester gear would be more practical for now."

"Come this way." Felora led us into another room, all traces of uncertainty gone. "You are larger than most of my customers. Take those garments off so I can get a good measure of you."

I stripped down to my underwear and she looked me over closely, walking around me to see from every angle.

"Yes," she said. "I can do this. Will you be needing footwear as well?"

I looked over her shoulder at Neelu, who nodded.

"Yes, please," I answered.

"I'll speak to Gylan. These undergarments look very efficient," she said, tugging at my sports-bra and the waistband of my panties. "You will be needing more of these, too, I imagine."

Embarrassed, I just nodded.

She picked up my sneakers and examined them, then did the same with my sweats. As she lifted them, the knives fell from the pile. Finally, she nodded and I put my clothes back on.

"How soon do you need it?"

Neelu answered for me, "As soon as you can, Felora. She's been wearing the same thing for days now."

"Here," she grabbed a couple of items from the shelf and handed them to me. "You can use these wraps for now. They will be a little shorter on you, but they will work."

She also grabbed a wide leather belt from a shelf and handed it to me.

"You can tuck your knives into this to carry them easier. Come back the day after tomorrow for the rest. Until then," she added with a glint of humor in her eye, "maybe some swimming would be in order."

Neelu went to the shelves and found a cloth pouch, into which she put a hairbrush, what looked like some sort of toothbrush, and a few other items. She handed me the bag and I added the wraps and the belt, along with my knives.

"Put everything on my account," she told Felora.

"Do I stink?" I asked Neelu, once we were back outside.

"Not too badly." She smiled.

"That's...reassuring."

"Neelu'u." The voice brought my attention to someone I hadn't realized was standing there.

"Veeluthun'ú," Neelu answered him. "Looking for Tesia? I didn't see her, but I'm sure she's around."

He seemed to blush, but met her gaze.

"No, I heard you were back. And Mother would like to see you."

"Well, be sure to send my regrets. I was just back for a moment and I'm off again."

His violet eyes shifted to the shop we had just left. "Felora is making something for you?"

"For my friend, yes."

His eyes narrowed as he looked me over.

"Now, brother, I have to go." She took my arm and started us back in the direction of the forest.

"Very well," Veeluthun'ú called after us. "I will be sure to collect your items from Felora for you so you can pick them up when you come to see Mother on your return."

Neelu didn't seem to want to talk as she led me briskly back into the forest. Once we were back under the canopy of leaves, she seemed to relax a little.

"I had wanted to show you a little more of the village," she said as we walked. "But I thought we'd have more time."

"That was your brother? What did he want?"

"It's not what he wants, it's what my mother wants."

"Which is?"

She sighed. "She wants me to be a good little princess and stay out of the forest and attend to more official matters."

"Princess?" I was surprised. "Then your mother..."

"My mother is Astrina Ulané Poloso, queen of the *Ulané Jhinura*."

"Of your clan?"

"The Su Lariano clan is the ruling clan for all *Ulané Jhinura*. And now, my brother will make sure we have to see her when we go

back to pick up your new clothes.”

That stopped me in my tracks. “I have to meet a queen?”

Neelu hadn’t stopped, so I hurried my step to come back to her side.

“Maybe I could wait at the hut and you could go back without me?”

She shook her head. “She’ll have heard about you by then. She’d just send me to get you so she could meet you for herself.”

“I have to meet her in two days?”

“No.” She smirked at me. “That’s when the clothes will be ready and my brother will collect them. But Felora gave you a couple of wraps. We can hold off a little longer before going back to pick up the rest.”

“I take it you don’t want to talk to your mother?”

Neelu continued walking without answering me.

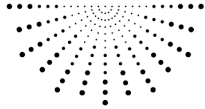
“Okay,” I walked along with her. “What will we do in the meantime?”

“Train.”

“Are we going to flit again?” I asked hopefully.

“No. You will also be learning to fight, and that means you need to be in shape. Let’s go!”

CHAPTER SIX



She suddenly took off running, and I had to do the same or be left behind. Fortunately, I had been semi-athletic in school, though I was no long-distance runner. I really hadn't done much outside of PE class except dancing. The running felt good for about the first minute or so, then it quickly did not feel so good. She slowed the pace a little after that initial burst of speed, but after about fifteen minutes, I was starting to feel it. Neelu was showing no strain. Not wanting to seem wimpy, I pushed myself to keep going. What made it even harder was the bag I was carrying over my shoulder from Felora's shop.

After another five minutes, my side was aching and my breath was ragged. Neelu brought us to a stop, then she turned to me.

"Try to strike me."

I looked at her like she was crazy. "Too tired," I gasped, dropping the bag. "Don't know how."

"I don't care how tired you are or what you know. Neither will your enemies. Strike!" She pushed my shoulder.

Still gasping, I tried to throw some sort of punch at her.

"I didn't say flail your arms in the air," she goaded. "I said strike! You're more than a head taller than I am. Strike me! Knock me

down!"

I tried again, a little better. And then a second one. Neither of them landed.

"Faster! If I'm standing, don't stop!"

I started swinging and kept going. She blocked my blows with open hands, moving my fists to the sides or up or down, never letting me make contact with her. Finally, exhausted, I collapsed to my knees.

"I can't," I gasped.

"If you can't fight, then run! Come!"

She took off again, and I grabbed the bag and struggled to my feet. I was beyond thinking at this point. I just kept forcing my body to move. Focusing on the sound of my breath. Sweat stung my eyes; I tried to wipe it from my eyes and forehead as I ran, but it was useless and I gave up. Finally, she slowed to a walk.

"Can we stop for a rest now?" I asked her.

"We're not finished." She shook her head, not stopping. "Open yourself to the *Ralahin*."

"I'm too tired to focus."

"When you need it most, you will be tired. You will be hungry. You will be in pain. You must always be able to connect to the *Ralahin*, no matter the situation or circumstance. Learn while it is easy."

"*This* is easy?" I was starting to think Neelu was a few cards short of a full deck.

She nodded. "Hard is when you are wounded and surrounded by your enemies. That is no time to learn."

I could see her point. I was thinking it might be better to start out a little easier, but was in no position to argue.

My breath was still heavy from the run, but walking it out seemed to help. I tried to shift my perceptions to bring the *Ralahin* into focus. Twice, I started to see faint traces, but lost it.

"I can't hold it," I told her.

"Don't worry," she smiled. "You will get there. Your connection to the *Ralahin* will become as instinctive as breathing. You've already made good progress."

"I know I said I wanted to learn this stuff, but does it have to be so intense?"

"Mira." She stopped and looked at me. "You are new to this realm. You have no people. No tribe. No clan. No one but yourself. If you cannot protect yourself, you will be prey to any you come across. There are other humans here, but you are not of them and will not likely find much protection among them."

"You make it sound like it's really dangerous here. I mean, there was that one thing with the goblins, but other than that, it seems pretty peaceful."

"Of course it seems peaceful! I have been guiding you!" She seemed angry now. "I cannot be with you every moment. You must be ready to face trouble alone. It can come without warning and be over in moments."

Her face clouded and her lavender eyes lost focus, but then she shook it off.

"You must be ready," she said again. Her face softened. "But we will not get there all at once."

She was right that I was new to this world, and I had to take her word for it that it was dangerous. I followed her, and she led me to a large natural pool. It was beautiful. Water trickled over some rocks to the pool below, and then continued on its way to the far end. The

pool was large enough to create a break in the tree cover, and the sun shone through from above.

“For now,” she said, “it’s time for a bath and to wash clothes.”

The previous day, she had shown me some leaves that worked well as natural toilet paper. They grew on a common shrub and grew to about five or six inches across. The surface was soft and porous, but the leaves were strong and did not easily break. She retrieved several of these now.

“These *senit* leaves have many uses,” she explained.

At Neelu’s direction, I stripped down and went into the water, carrying my clothes with me. The water felt wonderful after all the running under the hot sun. The shade of the trees had helped, but I was still hot and sweaty.

Rubbing the leaves on the wet clothes caused a little bit of foam to form. I’d been afraid I’d permanently stained my sweats over the last couple days, but the dirt quickly came out. I washed my clothes and my underwear with the *senit* leaves and laid them out on the rocks to dry in the sun.

“You can also use the leaves for washing your body.” Neelu had stripped down and joined me in the water. I noticed that, other than her height and pointed ears, she was anatomically indistinguishable from a typical adult human. She dove under the surface a few times before finally standing up with something in her hand like she’d found a prize. “And this,” she said, “is for your hair.”

She held something in her hand that looked almost like a large crawdad that wasn’t very happy. At her instruction, I dunked my head, and then held out my hand. I was afraid of what she would do next, and hoped she didn’t expect me to put that thing on my head. Instead, she seemed to sort of tickle it on its underside. The creature suddenly released a black, oily substance that poured into

my hand from somewhere at the base of its tail. Once I had a good amount, she took some for herself and released the creature, which swam quickly away.

"Ink from the *finloy* is wonderful for your hair!" She was already rubbing the substance into hers.

Once we'd finished washing ourselves, I checked my clothes. My panties were dry, but my sweats, socks, and bra were still too wet to wear. Using one of the rags Neelu had added to the bag from Felora's, I dried myself off.

"Is it always so hot here?" I asked her.

"This time of year, it is," she answered. "But come back in a few months and that water will be too chilly for comfort."

Neelu showed me how to tie one of the wraps so that a strap passed between my legs, making them more like shorts than a skirt, making the whole thing look more like a strapless romper. She also introduced me to another plant.

"This is *avrek*," she told me. "It soothes the skin, but also reduces perspiration and hides your scent. Rub it over your body."

I sniffed the needles of the bush before following her instruction. "It smells a lot like rosemary. It's used in cooking."

"Good afternoon," a voice sounded through the trees. "May we approach?"

Neelu suddenly blurred. I saw that the sheaths on the harness she had not yet put back on were now empty of the blades they had just contained.

"Please forgive the interruption," the voice sounded again. "We did not wish to alarm you."

"Come forward." Neelu spoke from her invisible location in the trees.

The speaker came forward alone, but several others followed behind. They were goblins.

"You dare to hunt in our forest?" Neelu demanded.

The speaker blinked, as if wondering what to make of the question.

"We do not," he answered. "I am Grangor of the *Urgaban*. I come as a delegate from Laraksha-Vo, seeking an audience with Astrina Ulané Poloso of the *Ulané Jhinura*. She who leads the council of *Ralahi Jhané*."

Grangor didn't look like the other goblins I had seen. He didn't sound like them, either. Ragar's group hadn't even worn shoes, and their clothing hadn't been much more than rags. This group looked much cleaner and civilized.

"To see the queen, you must first survive the Dark Blade. What is your business?"

I noticed the goblins all froze when she said Dark Blade. Some of them moved their hands to their weapons, looking around nervously, but Grangor motioned them to stop.

"Do you have word of Reelu Ulané Pulakaloso or Karis Ulané Panalira?" Neelu asked.

A look of confusion passed over his face.

"Respectfully," he said, "my business is with your queen and not with you. If your queen wishes to share it with you, that will be her decision."

"*Putri firgolo*," I heard Neelu mutter under her breath. "Very well. Retreat fifty paces and wait. I will escort you. But be warned—try anything, and none of you will live to tell the tale."

Grangor gave a small bow. "We will await your pleasure." He stepped back through the trees and his people went with him.

"If you're waiting for my pleasure," Neelu grumbled, "you'll be waiting a long time." She stepped out of the trees. "I should have heard them coming. I was careless."

I retrieved my clothes, which were now mostly dry, and packed them into the bag with everything else. Neelu showed me how to tuck the knives into my belt.

"If anything happens," she said, "draw the blade. It will distract them and I can strike. Hold onto your connection to the *Ralahin*. Do not let it go."

She straightened her shoulders, her face like stone, then she gave a single nod. "Let's go."

I followed as she strode to where Grangor waited with his party. They were on horses. More like ponies, I guess, which made them a better fit for the height of the *Urgaban*.

"We don't have spare horses," Grangor said. "But if you are afoot, we could double-up."

Neelu shook her head.

"That way," she pointed before Grangor could object. "I will direct from behind."

At his questioning look, she went on.

"I will not walk with *Urgaban* at my back."

"As you wish," he replied stiffly. "And may I know the name of our courteous guide?"

"If my queen wishes to share it with you, that will be her decision."

Grangor stepped to one of his party and they spoke in low tones.

"What of the Dark Blade?" the soldier asked, peering around.

"Are we to worry about tales for children of ghosts and monsters?" Grangor demanded.

The soldier looked embarrassed and gave Grangor some kind of a salute and went to organize the other *Urgaban*.

We hiked through the forest and back towards the village. Neelu was silent, except for calling out directions for the group to veer left or right. Grangor walked next to us, equally silent. Finally, I spoke to him.

"You don't look like other gob—I mean, *Urgaban* I have seen. And you speak much better, too."

"Really?" he glanced at me. "I wouldn't expect you would see any *Urgaban* in this area. Were you traveling far when you saw them?"

I shook my head. "No, it was in these woods just the other day."

"That's odd," he said. "We *Urgaban* have a very closed society and we do not typically travel outside of our territory. Do you know what this one was doing here?"

"It was six of them. They...um..." I glanced at Neelu. She wasn't looking at us, but I could tell she was listening. "They were hunting food."

This seemed to surprise him even more. "Hunting?"

"Yes. But fortunately, I was saved."

Grangor pulled up short, shock evident on his face.

"You say they were hunting you? You must be mistaken."

"The mistake was on their part," Neelu spoke.

He looked back and forth between us. The surprise on his face turned to anger.

"These are criminals! Outcasts! They are in violation of our law!"

"They came to our forest in violation of our law," Neelu replied simply.

"I can send a unit to capture them," Grangor told her. "They will be held accountable."

"There is no need. *Urgaban* do not enter our forest with impunity. The price has been paid. We waste time." She started walking again.

"On behalf of our people," he said to me as we went, "I apologize for your treatment by these criminals."

"This was no isolated incident," Neelu spat. "Your apology is like water spilled in the sand."

We continued in silence for some time before Grangor spoke again. "I begin to understand your obvious enmity for my people."

Neelu's jaw clenched, but she made no reply.

We hiked for hours before Neelu called out for a halt in the early dusk.

"I will inform the queen of your arrival," she told them. "You will wait here for instructions. Rest your mounts."

Grangor nodded his acceptance and Neelu led me on to the village. Once we reached the edge of the trees, Neelu sounded a whistle. Within half a minute, there were three other sprites standing with us. They carried bows and had blades at their belts. They looked intently at Neelu.

"*Urgaban*," she said. "A party of twenty-six. One, Grangor, claims they are a delegation to the queen. You," she pointed to one, "assemble the Foresters and surround them, but stay hidden. You two," she went on as the first sprite disappeared, "will act as runners for communication. You, go with the Foresters," she pointed to another one. "You are with me," she said to the third.

I was surprised that they all followed her orders without question, but then I remembered that she was the daughter of the queen.

Neelu led us through the town and we took a left toward the cliff wall, which was about a hundred yards from the edge of the village. As we turned the corner, two huge doors became visible. They were

open, and the way seemed to go straight into the mountain. The doors or gates—whatever they were called—were huge slabs of rock. It looked like they were very precisely balanced so they could be easily opened or closed. It also looked like there was a locking mechanism that would allow the people inside to seal them shut. The mountain itself just looked craggy, and there was no indication, from what I could see, that it was anything except a natural mountain.

There were a couple of sprites—I had to stop calling them that. There were a couple of *Ulané Jhinura* standing by the doors.

“We need to speak to the queen immediately,” Neelu said.

One nodded and stuck her head inside. She brought some sort of flute or whistle to her lips, and I heard the rapid succession of several trilled notes.

Neelu hadn’t slowed and she led us straight through the doors. We seemed to be in a wide tunnel with rough walls. The floor was smooth, so I didn’t have to worry about tripping. I also noticed that the walls and ceiling were lined with holes. At first, I thought they might be natural, but the spacing was too regular and there were far too many of them. I guessed they were part of some defensive plan.

After about a quarter mile, the walls fell away and we were in a large cavern, the ceiling far above us. I could see stairs and walkways carved into the rock of the walls, and what looked like doors and windows to rooms.

Neelu pressed forward, and we came to a broad stone bridge that passed over a wide crevasse that spanned the width of the cavern. We continued over the bridge and entered another tunnel with a high ceiling. This one wasn’t as long as the first before we came to another set of double doors. These weren’t quite as big as the pair on the outer entrance, but they were elaborately decorated.

The next room appeared to be a throne room. I'd never seen a throne room in person before, but it was big and cavernous, with a big, fancy chair at the other end that seemed to be a throne. The walls were all adorned with brightly colored tapestries. Several people—well, I'm not sure if that's the right term for several *Ulané Jhinura*—but there were several of them just arriving at the throne, evidently from a door at the back of the room, which was on a raised section of the floor.

Neelu continued without slowing. As we neared, one of them spoke.

"Neelu'u, it is good to see you. What is happening?" The speaker was female and there was a silver circlet on her head.

Veeluthun'u arrived and joined the group.

"Mother." Neelu came to a stop. "We have *Urgaban* at our door. They claim to be a delegation."

"A delegation for what purpose?"

"He would not say. He said it was business for the queen."

"And when you told him you were my daughter? Still, he wouldn't say?"

Neelu was silent at this and the queen raised an eyebrow.

"I thought it would be better if he didn't know who I was," Neelu finally told her.

"Very well," the queen said. "I suppose we should find out what these *Urgaban* want."

"We cannot trust them," Neelu told her.

"Perhaps not, but we can listen with some measure of courtesy and civility. Though I would prefer they are not here overlong. Have them sent here at once."

Neelu turned and gave a nod to the *Ulané Jhinura* who had accompanied us. She nodded in return, and went immediately back

the way we came.

"While we wait," the queen continued, "you can introduce me to your companion. I assume this is who you brought to Felora's shop this afternoon?" She glanced at Veeluthun'u, who nodded.

"Mother," Neelu said formally, "I would like to introduce you to Mirabella Cervantes Ramirez. Recently arrived from Earth. Mira, I present Her Majesty, Astrina Ulané Poloso, Queen of the Su Lariano and of the *Ulané Jhinura*."

I didn't know what to say. I didn't know if I should bow or curtsy, but I didn't really know how to do either one properly. I ended up doing some kind of a bob that was in between.

"Um...pleased to meet you," I said. "Your Majesty," I quickly added with another bob.

The queen looked questioningly at Neelu. She had lavender eyes, like Neelu's.

"An enchantment," Neelu told her. "The pendant."

The queen's eyes went to the opal that hung from my neck.

"That is a story I should like to hear later. What can you tell me of these *Urgaban*?" she asked Neelu.

"They appear different from what we have seen before," Neelu told her. "It has been only days since the last incursion. That is how I met Mira; they were after her. When we told this one of it—Grangor, who leads them—he claimed those *Urgaban* were outcasts and criminals."

"And your impression?"

Neelu shrugged. "They are *Urgaban*. That says enough."

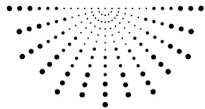
The queen nodded, then she turned to me. "I will have quarters prepared for you. You can wait and rest there while we meet with these *Urgaban*."

"Mother," Neelu spoke up. "Perhaps she should stay."

The queen looked at her, surprised.

“The enchantment on her pendant is a very powerful diplomacy spell,” Neelu explained. “Perhaps if she stayed, it would be difficult for this *Urgaban* to deceive us. That is—” she turned to me “—if Mira would consent to be present on our behalf.”

CHAPTER SEVEN



“*M*e?” I was shocked. “But what do you want me to do?”

“If this enchantment is as powerful as Neelu’u suspects,” the queen told me, “simply agreeing to be present on our behalf would give us an edge. But it must be your choice to ally yourself with us.”

I couldn’t say no. I felt I already owed Neelu a debt, and this didn’t seem to be very difficult.

“Okay,” I said.

The queen turned to face me directly. “Mirabella Cervantes Ramirez, do you accept the appointment as diplomat and advisor for the *Ulané Jhinura*?”

“Yes.”

“Very well.” The queen nodded. “The bond is formed. Hopefully, this will cause the spell to act in our favor.”

We could hear footsteps coming from the corridor. The queen moved to her throne and took a seat. Veeluthun’u and the two advisors or attendants who had arrived with the queen stood to one side. I stood with Neelu on the other.

A score of armed *Ulané Jhinura* preceded the *Urgaban* into the room and lined the walls, bows at the ready. We could hear

marching steps sounding from the corridor, but no one was coming through. Finally, we could see one *Urgaban* in front of two columns of twelve each. They were marching in place, only stepping forward every fourth step. The leader gave a signal and they all switched to double-time, inching forward on each step. They had all changed to dress uniforms of grey and blue, with shiny brass buttons down the side and at the cuffs of their sleeves. Once they reached the center of the room, the leader gave another signal, and the two columns became four columns as he moved to the side.

The *Urgaban* all held what looked like sticks in their hands. I guessed they were spears, held diagonally. Compared to the height of the *Urgaban*, they were pretty long, maybe half as long as they were tall. The four columns then did some sort of reverse step from facing the sides to facing center, and they were spaced out evenly.

Then they started flipping the spears around and going through different complex motions, all in unison. One end of the spear seemed bulkier than the other, and as I looked closer, I could see there was some kind of bag or enclosure that was tied securely over the end, probably a point or blade. Suddenly, all of them froze in place with the spears extending behind them and one long arm extended to the front. The leader signaled again, and they executed some kind of cascading choreography that ended with all of them rising up and then sinking to their knees, heads bowed, their spears lying flat on the ground in front of them.

Grangor stepped forward from the back of the room and walked up the center of the formation. He approached the steps at the base of the throne and went to one knee, his head bowed.

“Your Majesty, Astrina Ulané Poloso, I am Grangor, delegate of the Daoine *Urgaban* of Laraksha-Vo. I respectfully request audience

and that I be accepted as ambassador of my people to the *Ulané Jhinura*."

"You may rise, Grangor," the queen instructed. "You certainly know how to make an entrance."

"Forgive the theatrics, Majesty." Grangor smiled. "We get so few opportunities to be seen by other peoples, I couldn't refuse their request."

"And I suspect," she added, "such a display of competence can go a long way towards setting the tone of a discussion."

Grangor tilted his head in a nod of acknowledgement.

The queen indicated Neelu. "This is my daughter and heir apparent, Neelu Ulané Pulakasado." At that, Grangor's eyes widened in surprise. "And this is my son, Veeluthun Ulané Gabolé."

Grangor bowed his head to each in turn.

"This is the first official visit the *Urgaban* have given the *Ulané Jhinura*," the queen continued. "Though we have had many unofficial visits."

"I have only just learned of this," Grangor's face clouded. "Perhaps, had we established an official relationship sooner, much of this could have been prevented."

"Am I to understand you are conditioning the end of these incidents upon our agreeing to establish an official relationship?"

"Absolutely not," Grangor answered firmly. "Now that we are aware of what these criminal outcasts are doing, we will root them out and end it."

"Criminal outcasts," the queen mused. "It is a convenient explanation."

"It may seem so," he answered. "But it is no less true."

"You must forgive my skepticism, Grangor. The *Urgaban* have long since earned their reputation as slavers and cannibals."

"This is something we hope to correct, Majesty."

"That will be quite a task."

"Yes," he acknowledged. "We have been isolationists for too long. The *Urgaban* have a long history on this world. Our people first came to this realm millennia ago. On our world, there were no other intelligent creatures, only dumb beasts of many forms and sizes, and they were used for food and as beasts of burden. To our knowledge, we were the only sentient species in existence. When we arrived here, assumptions were made. Eventually, we learned the truth. Once we realized there were so many sentient races here, once we realized the mistakes we had made, we withdrew to ourselves in Laraksha-Vo. Still, this world provided resources that were desperately needed, so we established a settlement."

"How did that work out for you?" Neelu muttered under her breath.

Grangor evidently heard her. "It worked well for quite some time. But as you know, the *Ashae* closed all access to and from this realm. And so, we have been stranded for nearly a thousand years here. We have petitioned the *Ashae*, but they have refused us."

"No surprise there," the queen commented. "The *Ashae* are not known for caring about the needs of other races."

"Exactly," he said. "This is why I have come to you. We have heard of the great *Ralahi Jhané* council. In that spirit, we are seeking to form a council of all races, not only the *Ralahi Jhané*. It is our hope that united, we may finally gain voice that will be heard by the *Ashae*."

"Ambitious," the queen remarked. "One might even say audacious."

"Perhaps."

"And if the *Ashae* still refuse to listen? What then?"

"The *Ashae* rely on other races for their labor, food from their farms. If we are united," Grangor explained, "we can make them listen."

"You believe the *Ashae* would allow farmers to walk away from their fields?" the queen pressed him. "You believe laborers could feed their families if they refused to work? That the *Ashae* would not take action to force them back to their farms and their labor?"

"We believe that all in this world deserve an equal voice, that no race should be above another. We believe this is a dream worth fighting for."

"And if the races join together for this fight and you become free to return to your home world, what then? Will you abandon us to fight without you?"

"I do not know whether the gathered races would decide to open travel and trade with other realms. If the way was open," he conceded, "certainly some would return to our home world. But for most of us, Laraksha-Vo is our home. Generations have been born and died there. We are not seeking an escape; we are seeking to have a voice."

"Then this is not to be a temporary coalition, but a more permanent alliance?"

"It is."

"What races would be represented?"

"Of course, we would hope for all of the *Ralahi Jhané* to be represented," Grangor replied. "As well as humans, *Ga-No-Mé Ri*, *Impané*, *Ogaré*, and *Loiala Fé*. Even dragons, if they wish it."

"Good luck with the dragons. And how many have agreed to join?"

"Majesty, you are the first we have approached. It was felt that your reputation would lend credence to our cause. And that with

your experience with the Council, you could provide valuable insight and direction.”

“Even with my backing,” the queen told him, “given the reputation of the *Urgaban*, I think few races would accept your people’s leadership for such an alliance.”

“It is not our intention that the *Urgaban* lead the alliance,” he answered.

“Then who do you propose would lead it? Someone must be in charge to drive it forward.”

“We would propose...that is to say...we had hoped that you would take such a role.”

The queen stared at him for what seemed like forever, blinking. Then she started laughing.

“Oh, audacious indeed,” she said when she could catch her breath.

“Fortune favors the bold,” he said. “Though I did not intend to bring that up so soon.”

“I have that effect on people,” the queen said, but I suspected it might have something to do with my pendant. “Tell me, what precisely would be the goal of this alliance?”

“Equal voice for all. Equal representation. Only forty percent or less of the population are *Ashae*, yet they make all of the decisions. Those decisions favor themselves over all others. Equal chance to excel in business and in trade. Equal wages. No race should have any more or any less rights than another.”

“And this is to be universal?” Veeluthun’u asked. “Among all races?”

“Of course.”

“Then an *Ulané Jhinura* could go to your city and set up shop?” Veeluthun’u pressed him. “We should allow an *Urgaban* to come

here and do the same?"

Grangor looked at him in surprise, then nodded. "That is the logical progression. Eventually, I think this would become common. But it would not be done overnight."

"If ever," Neelu muttered. I could see her brother's violet eyes tighten in annoyance.

"It is a noble goal," the queen said to her.

"That's why I'm suspicious! Who ever heard of a noble *Urgaban*?"

"I am aware this will be no easy task," Grangor said. "How can I convince you of our sincerity?"

Neelu was suddenly a blur and she stopped in front of Grangor with the edge of a knife against his throat.

"Give me back my sister!" she screamed into his face.

"Neelu'u!" the queen's voice cut in. "Stop!"

Every *Urgaban* in the room had risen to their feet and held their weapons at the ready.

"Stand down!" Grangor called to them, not moving.

Neelu glared at him, then turned and stormed from the room through the door at the back.

Grangor looked at the queen. "If I might inquire... "

I could see the queen thinking about whether to answer him.

"When Neelu'u was young," Veeluthun'u spoke, "she and our older sister were out in the forest with our sister's husband and child. There, they encountered a group of *Urgaban*. Neelu'u and her young cousin, Karis, were captured. Our sister, Reelu, managed to free her, but was herself captured in the process and her husband Kalisan was slain. Neelu'u returned to us as quickly as she could and we sent our Foresters, but the *Urgaban* were long gone—Reelu and Karis, gone with them. There were no bodies, and even after all

these years, Neelu refuses to believe that our sister and her cousin may be dead."

"How long has it been?"

"Ten years."

"Even if they were taken as slaves, that is a long time to survive," Grangor replied. "From what I have heard, these outcasts are not kind."

I looked toward the door Neelu had gone through, but there was no sign of her. Her attitude with the *Urgaban* made more sense now.

"As long as these...outcasts...continue to plague us," Veeluthun'u continued, "peace between our races may not be possible."

"Perhaps a joint effort to eradicate them would go a long way toward forming a bond between our peoples," Grangor suggested.

"If this were undertaken in earnest, it would be a very good step," the queen said.

"I mean no token action," Grangor replied. "These criminals are a constant stain to the reputation of the *Urgaban*. It serves us both to remove them from the equation."

"Very well," the queen told him. "We have much to consider. Let us reconvene tomorrow and discuss this further." She turned to one of the attendants. "Please see to it that Grangor and his people are given suitable quarters and provided food and refreshment." To the another attendant, she said, "Find Neelu'u and have her join me in my private chambers."

"Thank you for your courtesy, Majesty." Grangor bowed. "I look forward to speaking with you again tomorrow."

As he was led away, the queen turned to me and Veeluthun'u. "You two, come with me."

She led us through the door at the back and down a corridor. After few turns, we entered a smaller room. The floor was covered

in thick, colorful area rugs that reminded me of Persian carpets. The stone walls were also covered with tapestries. The room was very cozy and the furniture looked comfortable.

"Please sit," she told us.

I was happy to be able to sit. I was finding it awkward to be so much taller than everyone else. I wasn't that much over five feet tall, so I was used to looking up at people, especially adults.

"Is Neelu okay?" I asked. "Um...Your Majesty, I mean. I'm sorry if I say things wrong; I've never met a queen before and I'm new to this. I didn't even know Neelu was a princess until today." I realized I was babbling, so I stopped.

The queen smiled at me. "You are doing fine. And it would probably be easier for you to use the more informal address for us. I am Astrina'u, but you may drop the honorific. Call me Astrina."

"And you may call me Veeluthun," Neelu's brother said, smiling for the first time since I had met him.

"Thank you." I was very relieved. "Both of you. Call me Mira."

Astrina turned to Veeluthun. "I think we should send a delegation to the *Urgaban*, along with someone to help lead this joint venture to eliminate the *Urgaban* criminals."

"I would be honored to undertake this," Veeluthun began, but Astrina was shaking her head.

"I know, and you would do well," she told him. "But your sister would insist on taking part in the fight and I cannot be without both of you."

"Diplomacy is not her strong suit," he warned. "Especially where *Urgaban* are concerned."

She sighed. "Be that as it may, she must be the one to go. Perhaps if Mira goes with her, under her care and responsibility, it will help to temper her emotions."

They both looked at me.

"Oh!" I didn't know what to say. "Sure! I mean, yes. Besides, Neelu is my only friend here. But she sure has it in for the *Urgaban*."

Veeluthun nodded. "Ever since that day, she has trained harder than any other *Ulané Jhinura*. She has become our greatest warrior. She can travel faster and further than any *Ulané Jhinura* in history. Her skill is rivalled only by her hatred for the *Urgaban*. She hunts any she finds in our forest, and she is ruthless. She has taken an oath on the subject."

"They call her the Dark Blade," I said.

Astrina nodded at that. "I have heard of this."

"I think all the *Urgaban* have heard of her," I said. "But from what Grangor was saying to one of his men, he doesn't believe the Dark Blade is real. He doesn't know Neelu is the Dark Blade. But the *Urgaban* that tried to catch me, they guessed it."

"Which brings us to you," Astrina said to me. "Neelu'u—Neelu—said you were only recently arrived to our world, and that you come bearing a powerful amulet. It seems you have a story to tell of your own."

"I actually have more questions than answers," I told her. "But really, it all started with a box."

I went through the whole thing with her about what had happened since I'd gotten the box. As I was getting to the confrontation with Ragar and his men, Neelu came into the room and leaned against the door.

"When they refused to leave," I went on, "Neelu was suddenly everywhere and they were all dead, except the leader. She told him to go back and tell others not to come to your forest. But then, he didn't really leave. He tried to kill Neelu with a spear."

"It was a cowardly attack," Neelu chimed in. "Had Mira not seen and pulled me out of the path of the spear, it would have worked."

"Then we owe Mira a great debt," Astrina said, looking at me.

"I have...I have undertaken a geas," Neelu told her.

Veeluthun shook his head. "Why must everything be a geas with you?"

"And what is the geas?" Astrina asked, one eyebrow arched.

"In repayment of my life," Neelu said, head bowed, "I am to teach her to fight."

"Is that all?"

"To fight, and..." Neelu hesitated. "...And to travel with the *Ralahin*."

They were silent for a moment before Veeluthun spoke.

"And naturally, you formalized this."

"Of course," Neelu answered.

"Then it must be honored," Astrina sighed. I could tell she was not happy at all, but I didn't know her well enough to know how much trouble Neelu was in. She turned to me. "I'm sure Neelu told you that how we connect with the *Ralahin* is very personal and sacred to us. There are many who would not be pleased to learn it is being shared with a human. It is good that you agreed to the appointment as diplomat and advisor; that will make it easier for them to accept it."

Astrina turned back to Neelu. "Grangor has proposed a joint operation to eliminate what he is calling criminals and outcasts."

Neelu laughed. "He is clearly in for a surprise. With such a naive statement, I am more inclined to believe him. This isn't just some gang of thugs; these outcasts have banded together over many centuries. They have their own settlement. Did you tell him?"

Astrina shook her head. "He has only just learned of the problem. I thought it better to give him time to come to understand the scope."

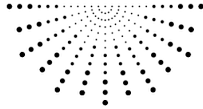
"Besides," Veeluthun grinned, "if they pledge themselves to this before understanding the size of the problem, that is on them. We don't want to scare them off with too much information."

They were talking above my head, but I thought I was getting the gist of things.

"Neelu'u," Astrina said, "I will be sending you to lead our portion of this, and to act as delegate to the *Urgaban*."

"*Putri firgolo!* You want me to be our representative to those *zergishti scum*?" Neelu sounded incredulous.

CHAPTER EIGHT



“*L*anguage,” Astrina admonished her. “You would prefer I give this assignment to someone else?”

“Yes!”

“Who would you trust to see through any subterfuge? Whose word would you take that they are sincere? Is there someone you believe to be more fitted to this task than you?”

That gave Neelu pause. “No,” she scowled. “You’re right.”

For a moment, I was trying to figure out if Astrina had been “right” because she was the queen or because she was Neelu’s mother. A chuckle slipped out and everyone looked at me. Astrina smiled at my explanation. Neelu continued to scowl.

“I have not agreed to anything with Grangor,” Astrina told Neelu. “We are to continue our discussions with him tomorrow. You will need to participate in all stages of planning.”

Neelu nodded at this.

“I also think,” Astrina went on, “that these meetings will be much more fruitful if they are not conducted over knife-point.”

Neelu looked embarrassed. “Yes. Sorry about that.”

“If what Grangor says about these outcasts is true, then we will need to redefine our understanding of the *Urgaban*.” Astrina touched

Neelu's arm. "I share your abhorrence, daughter, but we must be open to the possibility that it is only one group of *Urgaban* that deserve it. And that there are good and bad in every species."

I could see Neelu struggling to accept this. Finally, she nodded. "I will try."

"Are you going to make that another geas?" Veeluthun asked with a wry smile.

Neelu straightened and began to speak, "I accept—"

"No," Astrina stopped her, giving Veeluthun a look. "No oath. No geas. Just saying you will try is enough. I trust you. As to your most recent geas—" she glanced at me "—I think we can assist you. We can send Mira to morning classes with the children to learn the *Ralahin*. You will be busy with your other duties now. However, that means you will be without the aid of her diplomacy spell in your meetings with Grangor."

"That will be fine," Neelu nodded. "I am skeptical, but I am beginning to believe what Grangor has said. His comments reveal too much ignorance to be an effective deception."

"Good." Astrina stood. "Take Mira to join the class at the end of the breakfast hour, then join us in the central conference room. You will also need to arrange quarters for her. Sleep well, you two. You will both be very busy tomorrow."

Astrina left, and we went in search of someone to assign me a room. We located her near the kitchens.

"Arané-li," Neelu got the woman's attention. "This is Mira. She will be staying with us for a bit. She's a new member of my mother's advisory staff, so we'd like her rooms to be fairly close to us. As close to mine as convenient. Is there anything like that available?"

"Of course!" she answered. "Come with me!"

"Arané-li is our chamberlain," Neelu told me as we went. "As you can imagine, she's the one that really runs this place."

"Someone has to keep you *Ulané* in line," Arané-li said over her shoulder with a wink.

She led us up a few flights of stairs and down a corridor. There were tapestries and wall hangings everywhere I looked. By the second turn, I was hopelessly lost. We entered another corridor with two very staunch-looking guards standing to either side.

"I don't suppose you have a map of this place?" I asked. "I don't know how I will get from one place to another."

Neelu laughed, but Arané-li spoke up, "You needn't worry about that. You can always summon someone to guide you, or if you become lost, you can ask any household staff and they will help you. You will learn your way soon enough."

"That sounds good," I was relieved.

"We have an active spell throughout the palace," Arané-li said. "Wherever you are, you can simply say 'assistance please' and remain there. Someone will be along shortly. If you change your mind, I ask that you just say 'assistance dismissed.' That way, we won't have staff running around looking for you if you don't need it."

"How do they know where I am?"

"The spell notifies staff of the location in which it was invoked."

"Wow! That's a pretty smart spell!"

"Thank you." She smiled. "We do try to find ways to be as efficient as we can."

"Don't let her downplay it," Neelu told me. "She came up with the concept, and then plagued our mages until they put it in place and made it work perfectly. It took them months to get it right to her satisfaction."

"Just because something has never been done before is no reason we can't do it now," Arané-li said, a bit of steel creeping into her voice. I had no doubt that if she wanted something done, she would get it to happen.

"And whatever you do," Neelu said, "don't get on her bad side or you might find your hot water going chilly after the first minute of your showers for a month."

"Neelu'u," Arané-li chided, "don't exaggerate. You make things sound much worse than they were. As I recall, that was only for a week."

"It sure felt like it went on for longer than a week."

"Shall we try again and see?"

"No!" Neelu shook her head. "I'm sure I misremembered. It must have only been a week."

"Isn't it funny how some lessons stay with us?" Arané-li asked wryly.

We arrived in front of a door on our right and stopped. Arané-li turned to me.

"These will be your rooms while you are in residence," she said. "They will be permanently assigned to you, whether you are here or not, until the queen says otherwise. Anything you leave here will still be here upon your return, whether it is days or years later. Bedding and towels have already been freshened. Do you remember what to say if you need anything?"

"Yes, thank you, I do."

"Is there anything else you need for now?"

"Well." I glanced at Neelu. "We haven't had any dinner yet. Could I maybe get something to eat?"

"I'm hungry as well," Neelu chimed in. "Could you please have something sent to us in Mira's rooms?"

"Of course." Arané-li nodded. "Go on in and you'll have something shortly." She turned to me again. "Do you have any particular dietary restrictions or preferences?"

"Um..." I shrugged. "I don't like pickles?"

She laughed. "Very well."

Before we went into the room, Neelu pointed. "My room is two doors down this way and across the hall on the left."

We stepped into the room. It was dark for a moment, and then the room lit up to reveal a sitting room with couches, a table, and chairs. I saw more bright carpets and tapestries. I looked around, but couldn't identify a light source.

"Where's the light coming from?" I asked.

"From the ceiling," she answered.

I looked up. The ceiling in the room wasn't as high as it had been in the corridors, but it was still fairly high. I could tell that light was coming from above me, but I couldn't see exactly where it was coming from.

"It's another enchantment," she explained. "It's based on movement. Hold your hand like this."

She held her right hand in front of her body, with her palm flat and vertical. I copied her position.

"Good," she said. "Now lower your hand about six inches."

I tried it and the room was plunged in darkness.

"Now do it again," she told me.

I did and it was light once more.

"That's incredible!"

"You don't have lighting on your world?"

"We do," I told her. "But we have to flip a switch on a wall or a lamp."

"But what if it is dark and you are not near a switch?"

I laughed. "You kind of have to fumble around for it."

"Not very advanced," she said, shaking her head.

"Well, some people have lights that you can clap your hands to turn them on or off."

"Hmph. That must be wonderful if you are trying not to wake someone. Use one hand as I have shown you to turn lights on or off in the room you are in. Both hands together will control all the lights in your suite."

"That's brilliant!"

"This is a common enchantment throughout the Daoine realm. I suppose I should introduce you to some other aspects of civilization." She went to a round white stone embedded in the wall. It was about six inches in diameter and had a vertical line through the center. "This allows you to control the temperature of the room. Low to high. Simply place your palm on the stone and twist left to make it cooler and twist right to make it warmer. Each room has its own stone and can be controlled independently."

I nodded.

"You have this on your world?"

"Similar," I said. "We have electric heaters and air-conditioners to keep things cool."

"Electric?"

"It's a non-magical form of power."

"Interesting."

She was clearly being polite and had no interest in it at all. She led me across the thickly carpeted floor to another door and opened it. Inside, I could see a chair with a hole in the seat, like a toilet.

"This is where you can relieve yourself," she said. "When you are finished, make two circles in the air with your index finger like so—"

she showed me “—and all traces will be removed from you and from the pot.”

“No leaves?”

“No,” she laughed. “That was just for camping in the forest. This is also common in this realm.”

She led me to another door. On the other side was a tiled room with a tub that could probably fit three people and what looked like some kind of shower. There was also a wooden slatted bench along one wall. I could see that both the tub and the shower had embedded stones similar to the one that controlled room temperature. They each had a blue stone as well as a four-inch version of the white stone in the front room. Every room so far had been rich with colors, from the carpeting to the fabric on the furniture. This room was no different; the tiles were glazed with bright blues, yellows, and reds.

“Let me guess,” I said. “The blue stone turns the water on and off, and the other stone controls the temperature.”

She nodded with a smile. “You got it. And this room has an additional control.” She pointed to a dark grey stone embedded in the wall near the door. “This one controls the amount of moisture in the air.”

“Moisture?”

“Yes. Some find it therapeutic,” she explained. “They make the room very hot and also control whether the air is dry or has steam.”

“I have my own wet and dry sauna in my room?” This was going to be awesome.

“Your main bedroom is through there.” She pointed to another door. “You’ve shown me you already know how to use one of those, but I think you’ll find this one much more comfortable.”

“Main bedroom?”

“Yes,” she nodded, pointing to a door on the other side of the room. “There’s another one through there if you need it.”

Just then, there was a knock at the door.

“Enter,” Neelu called out.

Four *Ulané Jhinura* came in. The first carried place settings, the second and third had covered platters of what seemed to be the source of the rich and savory odors now filling the room, and the fourth carried some beverages. They set everything up on the table, and in a moment, Neelu and I were digging in.

“Thank you!” I called to them as they went back out the door.

I had gathered from prior conversations that the *Ulané Jhinura* were primarily vegetarians. It wasn’t that they didn’t eat meat, but they kept the forest in balance and were careful about maintaining the ecosystem. If everyone ate meat every day, that would throw things out of balance. I had thought we had a wide variety of mushrooms on Earth, but it didn’t come close to what they had on Daoine. I had already discovered several mushrooms whose texture was like eating meat. Mushrooms in Daoine were like potatoes in Peru; there were thousands of varieties.

The palace chef—just getting my head around having a suite of rooms in a royal palace was going to take some getting used to—was clearly a genius. There was a peppery mushroom steak and a mushroom and vegetable soup. There was also another kind of mushroom that reminded me of fish and was covered with a heavenly cream sauce that had a soft citrusy taste with some kind of slivered nut sprinkled on top.

“I could definitely get used to this,” I said.

“You didn’t pay me such compliments. Are you saying my cooking isn’t this good?”

"Well," I laughed. "From what little of your cooking I've tried..." I pretended to think for a moment. "Not even close!" I smacked my silverware down on the table in mock emphasis.

She chuckled at that. "I do miss the food when I'm out in the forest."

"Seems to me there's a lot here to miss when you're out in the forest."

She nodded, her face losing its levity.

"I heard about your sister and your cousin," I told her.

Neelu seemed to be holding her breath, and I went on.

"I can't begin to imagine what you went through, or what you still go through. I don't even want to think about how I would feel if something like that happened to Nora. But I can see how it pushes you. I just want you to know I'll do anything I can to help."

She let her breath out and nodded, not meeting my eyes.

I reached for my knife and fumbled it. I hadn't noticed that my play-acting a moment earlier had spun it so the blade was toward me instead of the handle, and I ended up pricking my finger.

"Ouch!" I brought it to my mouth, sucking on it.

Neelu looked at me, alarmed.

Just then, the front door burst open and six guards charged in, weapons drawn.

"It's alright," Neelu told them. "Just an accident with the cutlery."

One of the guards nodded, but he checked all the rooms thoroughly before he and his men left.

"An injury or a single drop of blood in this wing is enough to set off an alarm," Neelu explained. "And you see how quickly they respond."

I nodded, impressed. I changed the subject. "I guess I'll be in magic classes tomorrow. What will you be doing? Cooking lessons?"

"Hah! You wish!" She smiled. "I'll be in meetings with my mother and with Grangor and others." She looked at me. "The classes will really help you. They will give you a solid grounding. Learn as much as you can as quickly as you can. We probably only have a few weeks at most before we will be leaving. I'll also set you up with martial training for the afternoons."

"Martial training?"

"Basic fighting skills," she explained.

I nodded. "I heard you're the fastest in history, and the best fighter."

"Veron is our weapons master and he is unparalleled. My advantage is that I can use the *Ralahin* speed with it. I can teach you that. Everything else about fighting, you can learn better from him."

"And the flitting? How are you so much faster than everyone else?"

"I have honed it. I have delved deeper than any other. I apply the same concepts, but I do them more fully. My connection to the *Ralahin* is not exactly that of my people, but something new. They can't see it is different and assume I am simply better at doing what the *Ulané Jhinura* have done for millennia."

"And that's what you're teaching me?"

"Yes. This was my pledge to you. But these classes will provide the foundation." She stood. "But that is for tomorrow. Sleep well tonight and I will collect you in the morning. We have a general dining hall where most of us eat. We'll have breakfast there, and then I'll take you to your classes. I'll either collect you for lunch myself or send someone."

"That sounds good," I agreed. "But before I hit the bed, I'm going to make use of that bathtub. And maybe even the sauna."

What do we do about these?" I indicated the dishes.

"Don't worry. Someone will have these cleared by morning and you won't even hear them."

She turned away, and then stopped. "Mira, it's very important that you don't try to move with the *Ralahin* on your own. The way other *Ulané Jhinura* do this, they anchor in all directions before moving. Magic is everywhere and in everything, but you can sort of project a path and be carried along by it. When I project the path, I surrender to it. This is why I am faster; I surrender to one direction and do not anchor. But such a surrender is very risky. Those who have tried this in the past, they lost themselves to the flow, to the *Ralahin*. Either way, traveling with the *Ralahin* is not something used for long distances; it's too dangerous. If you get lost in the flow, you never come back. You can lose your projected path, and your body breaks down and spreads into the *Ralahin* in all directions. It is dangerous and not to be taken lightly. This is not something you would attempt if your mind is clouded or you can't focus.

"That's...okay. I won't try it."

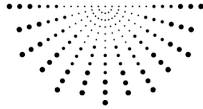
After she had gone, the hot bath felt so luxurious, I felt like I had died and gone to heaven. I was too tired to think, and I didn't want to even try. I distracted myself instead by playing over, in my mind, one of the old classic movies I would watch with Nora. We'd watched *Vertigo* several times. Kim Novak and Jimmy Stewart were such a good duo. Nora would have loved this tub.

After a nice long soak, I tried the moisture settings and made the room very hot and the air dry. I was surprised at how quickly the temperature changed. I enjoyed the heat on my skin for about ten minutes, and then normalized the temperature before using the shower to clean off my sweat. I didn't know what to do with my dirty clothes, so I left them on the floor for now. Wrapped in a comfy

robe that was a little shorter on me than it would have been on an *Ulané Jhinura*, I headed for the bed, noticing the table had already been cleared. The thick carpeting felt like a dream under my feet.

I didn't have any PJs, so I dropped the robe and slid under the covers in my skin. I scarcely noticed much about the bed, as I was asleep as soon as my head hit that soft, wonderful pillow.

CHAPTER NINE



*I*t seemed like only seconds had passed when I heard knocking on the outer door. A moment later, there was more knocking on the bedroom door.

"Hey sleepyhead." Neelu peeked her head in. "Time for breakfast."

"Already?" I sat up. I did feel rested. I looked around, but then remembered we were underground. There would be no sunlight peeking in around the edges of some curtain. "How do you keep track of time underground?" I asked as I started to get out of bed.

That was when I realized I hadn't put any clothes on after my bath. I had taken off the robe before lying down.

"Oh!" I stopped halfway out of bed, holding the sheets over my body. I felt myself turning red.

Neelu laughed. "I'd heard humans were embarrassed about nudity, but after our bath in the pond, I thought you would be more civilized about it."

"Civilized?" I was incredulous. "What does being civilized have to do with it?"

"Civilized people don't have strange superstitions about hiding the skin they were born in from the eyes of others." She shook her

head. "You are in luck, though. Felora heard we had come back to the palace and sent part of your order." She tossed me a package. "Here are some fresh undergarments and one set of Forester clothes."

"Thank you!" I was happy to have something other than my sweats or the wraps. I looked at her, where she was still standing by the door to the bedroom. "I'll put them on and be right out."

She laughed again and went to the front room, shaking her head.

Felora had pretty much copied the white underwear and sports bra I'd had on, and they fit perfectly. The leather pants and top looked pretty close to what Neelu wore, but while hers were black and dark green, mine were black and dark red. They fit like a glove; they were very supple and didn't restrict my movement at all. I supposed that the Forester outfits were designed so they wouldn't have loose or trailing material that could catch on twigs and branches. None of the hooks were exposed, so they wouldn't snag on anything. There were also some sturdier pieces that seemed to tie in place over the forearms and shins, as well as a heavy vest, but I didn't think I would need them inside the palace.

I retrieved my sneakers from where I'd left them before getting into the bath the previous night. I also made use of the hairbrush and toothbrush Neelu had gotten for me at Felora's.

"Okay," I said to Neelu. "I'm ready to go."

She looked me over. "Good fit." Then she smiled. "Now you look like a giant sprite."

"No," I teased her. "Because I don't look Asian at all."

She rolled her eyes. "I told you I don't know what that is."

"My eyes are the wrong shape and my nose is too big." I grinned.

"I had noticed the...oddities," she nodded. "But I didn't want to say anything."

"Oddities?" I lost my grin. "What do you mean, oddities?"

She shrugged, suppressing a smile. "Ready for breakfast, big nose?"

"Fine."

We opened the door to step out, surprising a man who was about to knock.

"Gylan," Neelu smiled. "Good morning!"

"Good morning," he nodded. Glancing back and forth between the two of us with teal eyes, he went on. "I'm going to be working on those boots today, and Felora described the foreign shoes. If it's no trouble, I wanted to take a look at them?"

Neelu looked at me.

"Of course," I said, stepping back. "Come in. I'm Mira."

"Good morning, Mira. Felora described your shoes to me. She did well in her description, don't get me wrong, but she's not a cobbler and I just wanted to see what you're used to."

"These?" I indicated my sneakers.

He looked down. "Yes, please."

I pulled one of them off and handed it to him.

"I think these are called cross-trainers," I told him. "Running shoes are usually lighter material and a bit wider on the footprint here. Court shoes are even narrower here, and a lot of people use high-tops, sort of like boot versions, to give better ankle support. And of course, they all have this arch support."

Gylan's eyes got big. "You sure know your shoes! Are you a shoemaker?"

"No," I laughed. "Sorry to ramble, I saw a video on sports shoes one time online and—" I stopped when I saw his confused expression. "There was an educational presentation on shoes that I saw one time, that's all."

"Well, you remembered it well," he smiled. He looked back at the shoe, turning and twisting it and examining the inside. "Not bad," he said. "It's not built to last, but I can use some of these ideas."

He handed the shoe back to me. "Thank you for humoring me," he said. "I'll have your boots ready in no time!"

After Gylan departed, we retraced our steps from the night before and ended up in a large room near the kitchens. The room had tables with benches, and at one end, food had been set out buffet-style. I followed Neelu's example and loaded up a plate. There was a tasty-looking omelet with cheese, mushrooms, onions, and spicy yellow peppers. There were even pancakes and syrup. And wonder of wonders...

"You have coffee here?"

"Of course," she scowled at me. "Why wouldn't we?"

After eating, we deposited our dishes in the dish-room and she led me to my morning class. When we got there, I saw one motherly-looking woman herding about thirty young children into place to start; they only came up to her waist. As they started to notice me, they all went quiet, looking at me with very big eyes. We approached the woman.

"Laruna," Neelu said. "This is Mira. She is a new member of the court as a diplomatic advisor. Mira, this is Laruna. She is our preeminent instructor to orient our young in the ways of the *Ralahin*."

"Nice to meet you," I told her.

"Likewise." She smiled up at me. "Is Neelu'u giving you a tour of the palace?"

"Um..." I looked at Neelu. "Not exactly."

"I would like you to take Mira as a member of your class," Neelu explained.

Laruna raised her eyebrows in surprise.

"I know this is unusual," Neelu went on. "And she is much older than your other students. I hope it won't be a disruption for you."

I could see that Laruna had some objections, or at least some doubts, but she just smiled and gave a nod of acceptance.

"Unusual situations give us challenges we would otherwise miss," she said. "I'm sure we can manage."

"Thank you," Neelu nodded. "Then I will leave her in your capable hands."

With that, Neelu turned and left me with Laruna and the children.

Laruna was looking at me speculatively. "Do you have any knowledge of the *Ralahin*?"

"Not much," I admitted. "Just the little that Neelu has told me. And I can see it. With this." I held up the amulet.

She looked at it closely.

"That will help," she told me. "But it can also be a crutch. You will need to be able to see and connect with the *Ralahin* with or without it. As we do our drills, I would like you to have it in your hand so you can alternate practicing with it and setting it down to practice without."

She turned away from me and spoke louder, "Alright everyone, let's be seated."

The children sat in small chairs at tables that formed a large circle in the room. The chairs all faced toward the center of the circle, with a table and chair for Laruna at one end.

"This is Mira," Laruna told them. "She is our newest student."

The children immediately started talking amongst themselves.

"Quiet, please!" The students all settled down. "Mira, if you could please take a seat—oh! We'll need a larger chair for you."

"I can sit on the floor for now," I told her. The tables were sized for the children, but they would still be a little tall for me if I was on the floor.

"Thank you." She smiled. "I'll have a larger chair brought in a few minutes, and you can join me at my table. Though for group activities, you will be working with the other students."

"That will be fine," I told her. "I'll try not to be any trouble."

She laughed. "I scarcely think you will succeed in that, but I do appreciate the effort."

By noon, my head felt like a lead balloon. At least, I guessed it was noon, because Laruna was dismissing the class and parents had come to collect the kids. I'd done all the drills, by myself and with the children. We'd rotated, so by the end of the class, I'd had every one of them giggling at the giant who didn't know about the *Ralahin*.

"How did you do?" Laruna asked me. "It seemed like you were able to follow along."

"With the amulet, I could. But I still can't really see the *Ralahin* without it. Just flashes."

"That's actually very good," she told me. "Especially for a human."

Something about what she'd said irked me.

"Don't be discouraged," she said, misreading my expression. "I'm sure you'll have it in no time."

Just then, Arané-li came in.

"Neelu'u is running over with her meeting," she told me. "She asked me to collect you and she will join you for lunch as soon as she can."

"Thank you," I smiled. I nodded a goodbye to Laruna and followed Arané-li to the dining hall.

"How did your class go?" she asked as we walked.

"I think it went okay," I said. "This is all new to me, so I guess I don't know what to expect."

"If you are just starting, you should not expect to be able to even see the *Ralahin* for a few weeks."

"I can see it when I am touching my pendant because of the spell. But without it, I only see occasional glimpses."

"I'm sure the pendant helps, but seeing even glimpses of the *Ralahin* so soon without it is quite a feat."

"Really?" I felt much better. "You're not just saying that?"

"I would not deceive you, Mira," she assured me. "Setting false expectations serves no one."

In the dining hall, I was halfway through what looked and pretty much tasted like a cheeseburger, but was really some kind of mushroom patty when Neelu came in. She sat down heavily, looking tired.

"Aren't you going to get any food?" I asked her.

"Not right now," she said. "I'm just glad to get a break. How did your class go?"

I shrugged. "I'm told I did well. Especially for a human."

She looked at me. "Could you elaborate?"

"I was able to do everything with the amulet, but without it, I was only able to see the *Ralahin* sometimes in flashes."

"You were able to see it without the amulet on your first day of trying?"

"Yes, but only sometimes, and not for long."

She looked annoyed. "That's very fast. It does happen a lot, but most commonly, it takes days or weeks to get that far. Being human has nothing to do with it."

"The hardest part is that when I wasn't touching the amulet, I couldn't understand what anyone was saying."

"Right! I hadn't thought of that." She thought for a moment. "You're going to need a class on that, too. You'll have martial training in the afternoons, so I can probably arrange a tutor for the evenings."

I looked at her. "That sounds like quite an intense schedule you're setting up for me."

"I wouldn't want you to be bored," she grinned.

After I finished eating, Neelu led me down another set of corridors and we ended up in a large room. I could see *Ulané Jhinura* sparring in pairs or moving through choreographed motions, either alone or in groups. She led me to a wide-shouldered man with a dark beard and long chestnut hair pulled back into a ponytail. He saw us coming and flashed his teal eyes at Neelu with a grin.

"You've been away too long," he said to her. "I was beginning to think you were afraid of a rematch."

"Hardly," she smirked. "Veron, this is—"

"Mira, yes?" He nodded at me.

"Yes," I was surprised. "How did you know?"

"Word travels fast," he chuckled. "Let's see," he scratched his chin, pretending to think. "Magic in the morning. I suppose you are here for *bo-ka-bo* training, yes?"

I looked to Neelu, not sure what he was talking about.

"Yes," she answered. "Too bad you can't anticipate my strikes as easily as other things."

"I can anticipate your strikes just fine," he said. "But I'm happy to put it to the test."

"I wish I had the time," she sighed. "Veron, I don't know how much time we have before we have to leave. Probably only weeks,

at most. I'd like her to be as ready to defend herself as possible in that time."

"I see." He looked me over. "That's quite a challenge for anyone. Do you have any experience in any form of martial art?"

"No." I shook my head, watching the others going through their motions. "But I did spend a few years studying dance, and I've always been fairly athletic. Maybe that will help?"

"Yes, that will definitely help." He turned to Neelu. "Unless you're planning on that rematch, we're good here."

Neelu arched an eyebrow at him. "If I had more time, I would teach you more respect."

"Another day then," he grinned. "I look forward to the lesson."

"Despite his loose tongue," Neelu said to me, "he's actually quite good at his job. You're in good hands. I'll see you for dinner."

With that, she turned and left.

"This way," Veron said. He spoke as I walked with him. "Diplomatic advisor, I hear?"

I nodded.

"Very prestigious, especially for one so young. You are young for a human, yes?"

"I'm sixteen," I told him.

He nodded in response, but it didn't look like that cleared up his question. I realized I didn't know how quickly the *Ulané Jhinura* developed, either.

We reached a table against the wall that had a stack of rolled, light-grey cloth. He grabbed one of the rolls and tossed it to me.

"Unless you want your regular clothes sweaty and stinky, you'll want to change into a *rinti*. It will be a little short on you, but it will do just fine." He pointed to a nearby door. "You can change in there, and there are shelves where you can store your things. When you've

changed, I want you to go and join that group down there.” He pointed to a group of younger *Ulané Jhinura* at the end of the room. “Just try to follow along with their motions. I’ll find you once you’ve warmed up.”

He turned on his heel and went back to observing the others. The other room had some benches and rows of shelves with cubbies. The rolled cloth turned out to be pants and a top. The pants had no outside seam, but had ties at the waist and ankles—shins for me—so it would wrap and cover the legs. The top also wrapped around my torso and tied snugly into place; the sleeves were a little short as well. There was also a belt I tied around my waist.

I put my Forester gear in an empty cubby and changed into the practice clothes—what he had called a *rinti*. I noticed there were also showers off to one side, and I could see piles of folded towels. I had a feeling I was going to need that when I was done. I still had my hair scrunchie, so I pulled my hair into a ponytail.

I went to the back of the group Veron had pointed out. They stood on some sort of mat. I mirrored their stance, which had my feet offset and shoulder-length apart. Their knees were only slightly bent, and both feet pointed forward. Their hands were extended forward with open palms, held facing forward about chest height or slightly lower. They practiced moving forward and backward, turning, and single and double palm strikes. As they did the motion, they called out each part in unison.

“Step, step, strike, shift, step, strike, rotate left, block, strike, strike, rotate right, block, rotate right, block, strike, strike.”

Then they would start over facing a new direction. It was sort of like line dancing.

One woman was walking through the group, correcting here and there. I guessed she was an instructor because her *rinti* was a bright blue instead of light grey. Veron's had been black.

She came to me and corrected my wrist on my palm strike so the heel of my palm extended a bit more than the rest of my hand. Seeing my pendant, she reached out and held it up.

"It's not a good idea to practice with this on," she told me. "The chain will likely break."

"If I take it off, I won't be able to understand you. It has a spell. I don't speak your language."

"Best to start learning." With that, she pulled the pendant over my head. She held it up with emphasis, looking at me, then she strode to the wall and hung it from a hook that was part of a weapons case.

She motioned me to join back in with the group. They were still chanting the motions as they went, but without the enchantment from the pendant, it sounded totally different.

"Chun, chun, rijh, ajhtir, chun, rijh, enga, dzom, rijh, rijh, engo, dzom, engo, dzom, rijh, rijh."

At least there were a half-dozen words I would know by the time this was over. I probably practiced these same motions for an hour before I noticed Veron speaking with the instructor in low tones. I wondered what they were talking about, but my next rotation put them out of my view.

After a moment, I felt a gentle hand on my shoulder.

"*Bor,*" it was Veron. "*Bor,*" he said again, making a separating motion with his palms facing down.

"*Bor?*" I asked. "You mean stop?"

He just smiled at me and pointed to where my pendant hung from the wall.

I retrieved it. As soon as my hand was in contact with it, the chanting of the students became understandable to me.

I looked at Veron. "I take it that was the word for stop?"

"It was," he said, still smiling. "You are doing well in beginner level one." He motioned me to follow him. "Normally, we would leave you there for at least a week, but we need you on an accelerated program."

He took me to a bag that was hanging from a rope. It reminded me of punching bags I had seen in movies.

"Your level one motions are good," he said, "but they lack conviction. Take your stance facing the bag."

I faced the bag and went into the stance I had spent the last hour practicing. He put his hands on my shoulders and moved me closer to put me in position.

"Strike the bag," he told me.

I was tired, but not as tired as when Neelu was running me through the forest. I struck out with my palm at the bag.

"Face me," he said.

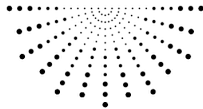
I turned and he struck me in the center of my chest. The impact was slight and the blow didn't hurt.

"Do you think you can stop an enemy if you hit them like that?" he asked.

"Um, probably not." I was confused.

"Then don't hit like that."

CHAPTER TEN



Veron turned to the bag. "Hit like you mean it." He struck the bag with a powerful blow. "Ideally, you would only need to strike your enemy once. But real life is rarely ideal, so you must be able to keep striking until your enemy is down and stays down. Connect your blows as if it is your only chance to save yourself. Or the only chance you have to save someone you care about."

I took my stance again and imagined the bag was the goblin Ragar coming at me. Using the palm strike we'd been working on, I hit the bag as hard as I could, nearly throwing myself off balance.

"Shift your position, good. Rotate your shoulders with the strike. Exhale on each strike."

I tried a few more hits.

"Good, push with your foot to get more into the hit. Use your whole body, but don't overextend yourself; keep your balance. Switch off. Right, left, right, right, left, right, left, left. Even if you must pause, keep the pattern going and repeat."

He watched me go through it several times, and nodded.

"Better. Keep going until I come back for you. Keep your strikes hard."

It was exhausting, but I kept going. How long had I been doing it? My arms got heavier and heavier, and my strikes were getting further and further apart as I struggled to make my body obey. *Right!* Neelu had told me this was a dangerous place. *Left!* I needed to be able to protect myself. *Right!* Even back home—*right!*—I don't know who that man had been that came through the portal—*left!*—but he could come back. I needed to be ready. *Right!*

"Enough." Veron had returned.

I staggered back from the bag, exhausted. It felt like I'd been hitting the bag for hours and my arms were leaden, but it had probably only been half an hour.

"You push yourself well," he told me. "That will serve you well in your accelerated program. Catch your breath and we will move on."

I got some water from a nearby receptacle. I didn't think I'd ever had to work this hard. It was just yesterday that Neelu had run me through the forest, and now this.

Veron motioned me over to an empty area.

"Now we are going to talk about blocking. When you were doing your forms earlier, it looked like you were thinking of the blocks as only a hard block, force against force. Blocks are done this way, but if your opponent is much bigger or stronger, or has a lot of momentum behind the blow, you can still be injured."

I thought about how I had been making my blocking motions earlier.

"What's a better way to block?" I asked.

"Let's not necessarily say better," he smiled. "Let's say it can be more strategic to use a sweeping or redirecting block. It sends your opponent's strikes—and their weight and momentum—in another direction. Same as before, exhale on each block."

I remembered how Neelu had done that with me the previous day. I'd been throwing punches at her and she'd just kept sending my fists in different directions with her open hands, but she had never used a hard block.

"Okay." I nodded. "I get the idea."

He walked me through some motions, incorporating stepping in different directions and rotating my position. Most of the techniques tended to use the attacker's momentum to send them past me. Once I was getting decent at going through those motions, he had me add follow-up strikes, which would be directed to the neck, throat, or upward under the chin. It was sort of like stepping through choreography. When it seemed like I had that idea working well, he took me to an odd-looking construct.

It looked like one of those things they used for practice in kung fu movies that always made me think of a cross between a tree and a coat rack. But the central piece of this one had a few rotating sections, each with a couple of arms.

"You will practice your blocks and strikes with this. Now, if you use a sweeping block like this," he showed me, "the other arm will follow and you'll have to use a hard block. Try it."

I stepped up to the machine and he sent one of the arms at me. I mirrored what he had demonstrated. We stepped through it several times as he manipulated the machine to simulate attacks, slowly getting faster.

"Okay," he grinned. "Let's speed it up."

Suddenly, the attacks were coming at me faster, and I was blocking and striking at different levels. Mostly, I was blocking, but at his constant goading, I did manage to get in some strikes here and there. Throughout, he made comments, coaching me on my stance and movement, correcting my rotation and balance.

Finally, thankfully, he stopped. I thought I'd been in pretty good shape, but it didn't feel like it.

"Very good," he told me. "You're a fast learner. Have you thought about what type of weapon you would prefer?"

"Um, not really." I thought about it. "I do have a couple of knives, so I should probably learn how to use them."

"A knife is good for close combat, but " he nodded, "we should probably also work on something for further away. I'm thinking that something that won't stand out as an aggressive weapon would be a good idea for a diplomat, like a staff. But we won't start on that today."

"Are we done for the day?"

"No," he laughed. "We have much more to do. Time for some sparring."

"There's no way I feel ready for that." The thought terrified me.

"Relax," he told me. "It's just practicing against a real person so you get accustomed to how real people move. I'm not pairing you with another student; I will work with you."

"Okay," I felt a little better. "You promise you won't hurt me?"

He blinked at me before answering. "No. But I promise not to hurt you much."

So much for reassurance.

He started coming at me slowly, and I stepped through blocks and strikes. Gradually, he sped up until we were at maybe eighty percent full-speed. We did this for about an hour at different speeds. He showed me variations on strikes and blocks, and we drilled them over and over.

Then he worked me on blocking kicks. After that, we went back to the bag and I learned about elbow strikes. Forward strikes. Upward strikes. Back strikes. Once I had the basic ideas down, he

left me to work the bag for another half hour or so. After that, we cycled back through the tree and sparring, adding in the new strikes, then we spent an hour working on throws.

"Alright," he finally said. "That's enough for today. Run around the room three times and hit the showers."

As I started the first circuit, I marveled at the fact that I was seeing running laps as a relief. As I came around to start the third lap, I heard Veron calling out to me.

"Why so slow? Surely you can run faster than that?"

With an inward groan, I pushed myself to go faster. My peripheral vision had disappeared and I could only see the space in front of me; just enough to keep from running into anything. I finished the last lap and stopped, gasping, with my hands on my knees.

"Good job!" he told me. "Walk it off a bit and cool down before you hit the showers. Stretch out any tight spots."

I nodded and did what he said, too tired to reply.

The hot water of the shower felt awesome, but I didn't stay overlong. I wasn't the only one taking a shower, and I still wasn't comfortable around all these people I didn't know.

Changed and somewhat refreshed, I deposited my dirty *rinti* and towel in the obvious receptacles and stepped out of the locker room—well, there weren't any lockers, but that's what the room seemed like to me.

Neelu was there talking with Veron. Her lavender eyes followed me as I approached.

"Veron tells me you worked hard today," she said. "That's two days of hard working. How do you feel?"

"Dead," I told her. "At least I didn't have so much running today."

"Do you think I should have her do more running?" Veron mused.

"Oh, definitely," Neelu said with an overly serious expression. "Much more running."

I looked back and forth between them, trying to decide if they were joking.

"You guys are evil," I said. They both went into fits of laughter at that. "I'm serious."

After their laughter died down, which took entirely too long in my opinion, Veron put a hand on my shoulder.

"Don't worry, Mira, we're only teasing you. You did very well today. With a bit more training, we'll at least be certain you won't fall to the first *Ga-Né-Mo* you run across."

"*Ga-Né-Mo*?"

"*Ga-Né-Mo Ri*. You may be more familiar with the term 'gnome' or 'brownie,'" Neelu offered. "They are about this tall," she held her hand at her waist level, about two feet above the floor. "Don't let that fool you, though—they can be vicious fighters. Are you ready for some dinner?"

I nodded, realizing I was very hungry.

"Bring your knives with you tomorrow," Veron told me. "I want to see what you will be using so I can train you for it."

"Pointy end goes in the other guy, right?" I seemed to recall the line from somewhere.

He laughed. "I told you she was a fast learner."

Hungry as I was, I wasn't able to eat a whole lot. After a few bites, I was feeling full.

"I had a break this afternoon," Neelu told me, "and I got you a tutor to help with learning the language."

Just then, Laruna walked by with a dinner plate. She nodded. "Good evening, Neelu'u." She paused. "Mira."

"Hello Laruna," Neelu smiled. "We appreciate your flexibility this morning. And I understand Mira is coming along well."

"Yes." Laruna smiled. "And quite remarkable for a human."

There it was again, and I couldn't help myself.

"I'm sure my progress is only because you are such an incredible teacher. For an *Ulané Jhinura*."

Laruna stood there for a moment, blinking. "Well," she said finally, "I'll leave you two to your meal."

"The tutor I found for you, Tesia," Neelu went on, ignoring the interplay, "is also an accomplished mage. She is actually our Spell Master; she worked with Arané-Li to develop a lot of the spells in the royal wing. She may be able to help you with the *Ralahin* as well."

"You think I need extra help with the *Ralahin*? I thought I was doing well?"

"You are," she nodded. "But maybe we should take an accelerated approach, like we're doing with *ka-bo-ka*. And she may have a better attitude than others."

"Is that kind of thing common?" I asked her. "Like with Laruna?"

"To be honest, I've never noticed it before. But it's pretty rare that anyone but an *Ulané Jhinura* is here." She thought about it. "It's probably not uncommon."

That was frustrating.

"Back on Earth," I told her, "we had discrimination against different races."

"Different races?" I could see her confusion. "But aren't you all human?"

"Not according to some," I frowned. "I'm Latina," I explained to her. "My eyes are brown; my skin is browner than the majority. My name is Spanish, and the language of my people is Spanish."

"But...you're human."

"I know. It doesn't make sense, but it happens. I guess I was hoping that wouldn't exist here. But I suppose that's why Grangor and the *Urgabon* are trying to put an alliance together."

Neelu's eyebrows went up in surprise at that.

"Anyway." I changed the subject. "What did you say her name was? Tesia? It seems like I've heard that name before."

"Felora and Gylan are her parents," she nodded. "And Veeluthun'u seems to find her intriguing."

"Oh, really?" I looked at her. "So, if she'll be around..."

"Then we'll probably see more of my brother, yes," she laughed. "But Tesia will be coming to your rooms and I don't think he'll be wandering around there." She looked up. "Speaking of, here's Tesia."

A pretty *Ulané Jhinura* with long auburn hair was coming towards our table. She had a warm smile, and she beamed it at us from below copper eyes.

"Hi Neelu'u! And you must be Mira."

"Hey Tesia. I was just telling Mira about you tutoring her."

"Oh, good." She sat down. "I didn't know for sure if you wanted to start today."

"We're on a time crunch," Neelu told her. "We want to move her along as soon as possible."

"I heard you had a busy day." Tesia looked at me. "Aren't you tired?"

"Oh, yeah," I nodded. "But she's right. Besides, I need to keep busy. If I have time to think, I think about how I'm stuck here and I don't know anything about this place and I may never see my friends and family again and they might even be in danger."

Tesia's copper eyes widened.

"I'm sorry," I sighed. "I didn't mean to dump all that on you. Mostly, I don't think about it. Busy is good."

"We'll try to keep you busy," Tesia said. "But dump when you need to dump. Don't worry about it."

"Thanks."

"We were also thinking you could help her with the *Ralahin*," Neelu said. "The intro class will probably be too slow, and since you're so skilled in that area..."

"Sure," Tesia nodded. "Why don't we try a little of both tonight, and we can get an idea of where we are?"

"That sounds good." Neelu smiled at me. "You probably don't know your way back to your rooms yet, but Tesia can get you there."

"You're not coming?" I was surprised.

"No," she was shaking her head. "More meetings. More planning. I thought it would be bad to hang around the palace back before these *Urgaban* showed up. This is so much worse."

"Oh!" Tesia said, handing me a bag she'd brought with her. "Here are the rest of the clothes you ordered. And your boots, too! Father was working on them all day."

We left our plates in the dishroom and Neelu went her own way as I followed Tesia back to my rooms.

"You went for *bo-ka-bo* training this afternoon?" she asked as we walked.

"Yeah, it was pretty intense."

"What did you think of Veron?"

"He seemed pretty intense, too."

"I suppose so," she nodded. In lower tones, she added, "But he seems very sturdy, too, don't you think?"

Something about the way she said *sturdy* told me she might not be aware of or just wasn't returning Veeluthun's interest. She had eyes for the weapons master.

"I didn't notice." I blushed. "But he is very strong."

Back in my rooms, we sat at the table.

"Try the boots," she said. "My father will ask about them when he sees me."

I pulled the boots out of the bag. They were a dark red color, matching the red in my Forester gear. I took off my sneakers and slipped one on. It slid up over my calf and my foot slipped into place. It was nice and snug, but not too tight. They were so sleek compared to my sneakers. I put the other one on. Holding my feet up, I moved them in circles from my ankles, then I stood up.

"These are amazing!" I told her. "I've never had anything conform to my feet so perfectly. They are snug enough to give great ankle support, and—" I could see from her amused expression that I was rambling. "Please tell your father I love them," I finished.

I set aside the bag of clothes and sat back at the table with her.

"From what Neelu'u told me," she began, "you are able to speak and understand because of an amulet that was your mother's."

I nodded.

"May I see it?" She held out her hand.

I took it off and placed it in her palm. She looked it over, and then closed her copper eyes with both hands around the pendant. After a minute or so, she opened her eyes. She placed it back in my hand before speaking again.

"This is a very complex enchantment," she said. "The translation is just one aspect."

"It also helps me see the *Ralahin*," I told her.

"First, let's focus on the diplomacy spell. The translation spell." She pulled a round, grey stone from a pocket in her dress and set it on the table. "This is also imbued with a diplomacy spell, but it is just a basic one. But there is one thing that is common to all translation type spells—they also help you to learn a language."

"So far, it just makes everything sound like my own language."

"Yes," she nodded. "With no direction or focus, it would do that naturally. However, with focus, you could alternate your speech between your language and our language. You could hear our words in our language and know what it means in your language. Used in this way, whatever is said during that time will be in your memory and you will be able to consciously choose which language to use."

"Really? That will make it so much easier to learn!"

"But first, you must learn how to direct the spell."

"Oh. Right."

She laughed. "Don't get discouraged. Really, this amulet is going to make everything so much easier for you. Here." She closed my hand around the pendant and took the other stone in her own hand. "Close your eyes and focus on the stone. Feel the *Ralahin* within it; feel your connection."

I nodded.

"Now, think of something in your native language. Think of how it sounds. And then say it out loud in your language. I have my amulet, so I'll be able to understand what you say."

I tried to do what she said, and think of some particular in English and how the sounds worked.

Finally, I came up with something and tried it. "She sells sea shells down by the sea shore."

"Brilliant!" She laughed. "Try something else!"

I was aware she was not speaking English, but I knew what she was saying and I was able to tell the difference between English and what they spoke in Daoine. I tried to think of something else to say.

"I'd really like some pot roast right now." As I said it, I thought of dinner that last night with Nora and Jill and Tony and I felt

something crack inside. Something wet was on my face. I felt Tesia's hand on top of mine and I opened my eyes.

"When you are focused on the spell, as you are with your amulet and I am with mine, you not only understand what the words mean, but you also understand what they mean to the person speaking them. And you can get images associated with that. I saw your family through your eyes. That dinner. That is a lovely memory."

I tried to answer her, but I was afraid that if I made a sound, I would lose it all. She seemed to understand.

"Take a moment," she said. "I'll get you some water."

There was a side table with a pitcher of water and some glasses. She came back with the glasses a moment later, putting mine in front of me.

"So," she said. "Since you are now able to use the amulet correctly for translations, that will resolve the issue of you learning to speak our language. But let me show you something else. I want you to put the amulet on the table, and don't touch it. Focus on your connection to it, just as before."

I did as she instructed. With the pendant on the table and my hands in my lap, I concentrated on it and on my connection with it.

"Can you understand what I am saying now?" Tesia asked me.

"Yes!" I looked at her. "How?"

"Once you have established the connection, you don't have to be in direct contact with it," she explained with a smile. "Just nearby, as long as you can maintain your connection, so that is very well done. What did you work on this morning in your class on the *Ralahin*?"

"Mainly the connection." I was getting myself back under control. "Seeing it and feeling it. We also worked with lighting candles."

"How did you do?"

"With the pendant, I could do all of it. Without the pendant, I could only see the *Ralahin* in short flashes."

"Nice! I do think we can move you along quicker using these evening sessions."

By the time Neelu joined us, I was able to use the *Ralahin* to slide a glass across the table. And sometimes, without spilling it.

"That's great progress!" Neelu cheered.

"And tomorrow," Tesia added, "we'll start getting you familiar with shielding your magic so everyone doesn't feel a shock whenever you use it."

"I think I'll do better with Tesia than with the morning classes."

"Yes! I agree," Neelu said. "So, you can do morning practice with Veron as well as the afternoons. You'll make a lot more progress this way."

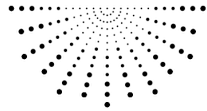
"You're kidding, right?" I asked her.

"No," she answered. "Why?"

In English, I said, "I think I hate you."

Tesia burst out laughing and Neelu just looked at me, uncomprehending.

CHAPTER ELEVEN



Neelu hadn't been kidding, because after breakfast, she took me to the practice yard. I'd heard they called it a yard, even though it was underground and more like a room or cavern. But I wasn't going to complain about technicalities.

I was more prepared today, and brought the bag with spare underwear so I'd have something clean for afterwards. I also brought my knives, as Veron had asked.

He saw me come in and motioned me over to where he stood by a table at one end of the room.

"I didn't expect to see you until this afternoon."

"Yes, well, we're going a different route for my magic training and Neelu didn't think I should keep my mornings open."

"That sounds like her," he laughed. "Always so practical."

"And here I thought I was always the practical one."

"Let me see what you've got here," he said. "These look more like a dagger or poignard than simple knives."

He drew both blades and they shone brightly. He gave them a few flourishes to get a feel for them, and then looked closer at the blades and the edges. He closed his teal eyes for a moment, concentrating on something.

"These are very high quality," he said, opening his eyes. "And they are quite powerful."

At my expression, he went on. "I can feel their names, though not their origin; the *Grève* and the *Glissé*, or the strike and the glide. Light and shadow. These two blades are linked. They will always be close together. If they are moved apart, there will be tension, and eventually, they will be pulled together with great force."

"Like if they were connected with elastic?" He looked at me quizzically. I shook my head. "Never mind. You were saying?"

"This." He held up the one with the white inlays on the hilt. "This is the *Grève*. Named for the direct strike. This is what your enemy will see coming. And this," he held up the one with the black inlays, "is the *Glissé*. It is named for the feint that becomes an attack, sliding along your opponent's blade. This, if done well, is what your enemy will not see coming. These blades can also defend against a magical attack; they can cut the spell or even send it back to your attacker. Very good. For now, go ahead and get changed, and join the beginner level one group until I come for you."

The morning and the afternoon were both essentially a repeat of what I'd done the day before. I kept expecting it to get easier, but if anything, it was getting harder. Veron worked with me, coaching me, making my motions tighter and more controlled. Despite my exhaustion at the end of every day, I could feel I was getting stronger and more sure of myself. Still, every success seemed to lead to a new challenge or a higher level of expectation.

I was also able to hang my pendant nearby and maintain my connection to it so I could still understand everything people were saying.

By the third day, he had me start out with beginner level two for warming up, and I had to learn a new pattern. This one included

elbow and knee strikes. I was also starting to notice some of the other students sending dirty looks my way. I just ignored them and kept practicing.

The fourth morning, I was working the bag when I felt a hand grab me roughly by the shoulder.

"Time for someone else to take a turn," someone said.

I reacted to the hand without thinking; I spun into it with an elbow strike to the solar plexus, followed by a throw.

An *Ulané Jhinura* looked up at me, surprised and angry and trying to get his wind back.

I was shocked.

"I'm sorry!" I said. "Are you okay?" I recognized him as one of the other students in level two.

This only seemed to make him angrier.

"You caught me by surprise!" He said, standing. "That was no fair! Humans always have to cheat to win!"

That caught me flat-footed and I didn't know how to respond.

"Ah, Elvar." Veron was approaching. "There you are. I was thinking it was time for some sparring and you have anticipated me. Very good. This way, you two, let's get you suited up."

Veron led us to another matted area and I could see Elvar's copper eyes glaring at me as we went. Veron outfitted us in protective gear. There was padding for the head, as well as protection for the neck and throat area. He also provided light gloves to protect our hands.

"None of this will totally eliminate the chance of pain," Veron explained. "But it will help prevent any serious damage. It is assumed that we can rely on those sparring to avoid intentionally breaking elbows and such, yes?" He looked at us.

I just nodded. I did not feel ready for this at all. I could see some other students gathering around to watch.

Once we were suited up, Veron led us to the center of the mat.

"Alright," he told us. "You aren't here to kill each other—this is sparring. If your opponent goes down, step back and let them get back up. If there is blood, we stop the match. Otherwise, don't pull your punches; we don't train halfway. Start!"

Elvar immediately charged me and knocked me down with a powerful shove before I was ready. He pranced around a little as I heard some chuckling and jeering from the other students. I got back to my feet. I was afraid of getting hurt, but I made sure I was ready for him.

He rushed me again, hoping the same tactic would work, but I sidestepped with a redirecting block. With a pivot, I slammed my elbow into the back of his head as he went by. It was just a glancing blow and he went to his knees. When he got back up, his expression was ugly. He came forward again, more cautiously this time.

He tried some palm strikes, which I was able to block easily. I nervously threw a couple his way, but those didn't land either.

"Weren't you listening?" Veron called out. "I said, we don't train halfway. Fight like your life depends on it!"

I looked at Elvar and imagined he was Ragar and that he wanted to hurt Nora or Jill or Tony.

Something exploded inside me. *Not going to happen!*

I went on the offensive, striking with palms and elbow and knees, brushing aside his blows, turning his blocks and pounding into him with everything I had. My senses were on fire.

Not going to happen!

He panicked and was back-stepping, but I kept on him.

Not going to happen!

I finally delivered a palm-strike upward under his chin that snapped his head back, landing him on his back and out cold, despite the padding. That was when I realized I had been screaming with every blow, calling out the names of the moves as I did them. My heart was pounding and my breath was coming in ragged gasps. The encircled watchers were holding their collective breath, as shocked as I was by what had just happened.

"Alright, everyone," Veron called out. "Back to your practicing."

The group broke up, talking amongst themselves. Several were glancing at me with curiosity. A couple of trainers in blue *rinti* were checking on Elvar.

"Out in the world, that is how you must fight," Veron told me. "It is life or death, and if you hold back, you will be dead—or worse."

"This is crazy." I was starting to shake. "I don't want to hurt anybody. I've never been in a fight in my whole life. Now look at me! I'm a bully!"

"Mira," Veron said as he helped me out of the sparring gear. "We do not learn these things because we wish to hurt people. We learn them because we wish to protect people."

"You'll have to protect them from people like me! First, I threw that guy for no reason, and then I knocked him out."

He was shaking his head. "You were too focused on your practice to see, but Elvar had been staring daggers at you all morning. Think back. What exactly happened?"

"He just put his hand on my shoulder and I attacked him!"

"No." Veron shook his head again. "I was watching. He grabbed you violently by the shoulder and turned you around. You simply reacted to his attack, and you did so very well. You are no bully, Mira."

"Is he even going to be okay?"

"He'll be fine. And hopefully, wiser. Now, back to the bag. We've still about an hour to go before lunch break."

I turned to go.

"One thing," Veron called after me. "After this, you may start getting challenges for sparring matches. Students at beginning level two and above are allowed to challenge anyone within one level of their own. You are at beginning level two now."

I'd been able to get myself around to where I needed to go, so at lunch break I headed for the dining hall. When I stepped into the room, I saw Neelu and Veron talking and laughing at a table.

"I wish I could have seen it!" Neelu was laughing, and then she saw me and elbowed Veron. "There you are," she said. "Go ahead and get your food."

When I returned to the table, Veron had gone.

"Did I interrupt something?" I asked.

Neelu's eyebrows went up, then she shook her head. "Oh, no. He was just filling me in on your adventures today. I understand you're becoming quite formidable."

"I don't know about any of that." I still didn't know what to think about what had happened. "How are your meetings going?"

"Grangor still doesn't realize what we're up against with this outcast settlement. He thinks we're overreacting, and he keeps trying to scale back the preparations. But he's committed the *Urgaban* to helping us. They can't back out now and hope to get anywhere with their alliance."

"But how can you beat the outcasts if he's underestimating them?"

"We're going to have to take him and scout them out, then he can see the size of the problem with his own eyes."

"Sounds like he's probably going to freak out when he sees it."

She laughed at that.

"When will you take him to scout it?"

"I don't know," she pursed her lips. "It may wait until we go to his city. We might take a side trip. But if we wait that long, he's going to keep arguing against our plans. We may have to go sooner. We'll see."

We didn't hang out in the dining hall. Neelu had her mind on other things and I was too hyped up from the morning to sit still for very long.

It was still the middle of lunch break when I wandered back to the practice yard. There were a few other people there, but no one by the bags. I walked over, loosening up before starting in on it.

"I didn't know they let gnomes in here," I heard the mocking tone of one of the voices.

"I'm not a gnome," another voice answered.

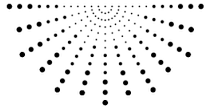
"What are you, then? Just a brown-noser brownie?"

"Is that why they let you in?" Another voice joined in. "Are you a brown-noser?"

I glanced over and saw one of them pushing a smaller student with shoulder-length black hair. There were a half-dozen or so grouped around him, and he was a half-head shorter than they were. I recognized some of the faces from the group that had been cheering on Elvar earlier.

"Leave him be," another voice sounded from the side of the room.

CHAPTER TWELVE



“Mind your own business, Mouse!” the first one, evidently the leader, snapped. “This gnome doesn’t concern you.”

“I’m not a gnome!” the small student said again.

The one they called Mouse stepped toward the group. He was the largest *Ulané Jhinura* I had seen. He wasn’t as tall as me, but he was at least six inches taller than the others and had long brown hair. He was also bulkier in build than what I’d become accustomed to seeing around the practice yard.

“You guys must really be afraid of him,” Mouse was saying. “Too afraid to come at him one at a time.”

“Go back to your hole, Mouse!”

He was shaking his head slowly. “I don’t think so.”

“You think you’re pretty tough, huh?”

The group had shifted so they surrounded both of them. I didn’t like how it was shaping up, so I started walking over.

Mouse shrugged. “Tough enough.”

As I neared, some of them started to notice me.

“What do you want?” the leader demanded.

"Seemed like you guys were having a party over here," I answered. "I didn't want to be left out."

It was still six to three, but the change was making them uncomfortable. Especially after what had just happened with Elvar.

"It's a private party," the leader said, his eyes narrowing.

"I won't tell anyone."

He nudged the guy next to him with his elbow. "Maybe some other time." They started walking away.

"See you next time, brown-noser!" one of them called back.

After they were gone, the smaller one turned to us, furious.

"I didn't ask for any help!" He seemed angry for some reason. Now that I could see him better, I noticed a scar on his left cheekbone that angled up under his long black hair.

"They were going to give you a beating," Mouse said.

"So? It would have been over. Now that they're mad, it's going to be worse!"

"We can protect you." Mouse glanced at me for confirmation, with eyes the color of deep chocolate.

"Yeah? Are you going to follow me around everywhere? Are you going to hold my hand and walk me home? Next time, stay out of it!" He stormed off.

Mouse watched him for a moment, then just turned and went back to where he'd been working on his forms. I was dumbfounded by the whole thing. Shaking my head, I went back to the bag and started practicing my strikes.

Each session started the same way, an hour with the group working on forms, and then to the bag. As people started filing in, I went to the level two mat to take my place.

"Mira!" I heard Veron call. "Beginner level three!"

I walked over to where he pointed, where another group was getting ready. I noticed that the smaller boy from earlier was in the group. Glancing around, I found the one they'd called Mouse in beginning level one. He saw me looking at him and gave me a slight nod.

"Rispan!" a trainer in blue called to the small boy. "Beginner level four today."

He nodded and went to the next mat. I saw that Mouse had been moved to beginner level two, and a few other adjustments were being made.

After I'd finished my hour with the group, I headed back toward the bag when one of the trainers called to me.

"Mira, you have a sparring match challenge."

I let her lead me to an available space for sparring and she helped me to get into the protective gear. I didn't see my challenger until I was ready and turned around, where he was waiting on the mat. It was the smaller boy, Rispan, from earlier.

"Why did you challenge me?" I was confused.

"It's the rules." He looked at me with violet eyes. "I can challenge anyone within one level."

He took his stance and started toward me. His smaller size actually made it awkward for me. I had longer arms, but I lost some of that length if I tried a body strike since he was so much shorter.

We circled a bit, feeling each other out. Since I couldn't reach him as easily with my hands, I tried a knee strike. He neatly stepped to the side and delivered a powerful blow to the nerve on the inside of my thigh. I almost fell, and only just managed to add some distance with a palm strike to his forehead.

My leg was numb and I couldn't put any weight on it. I crouched a little lower on my good leg, waiting defensively since I couldn't

advance well until my leg recovered from that strike.

He rushed forward, using my crouched stance to his advantage. He made some light strikes sideways, left and right, against my hands, and then somehow used my stance to climb and deliver an elbow strike to the top of my head.

That time, I did go down and he stepped back.

"Do you give up?" he asked.

Give up?

"No!" I struggled to rise. Feeling was coming back to my leg and I was able to stand on both feet.

He nodded resolutely and stepped toward me again.

I couldn't judge him by his size. He was very fast and I'd felt his blows. I didn't want to feel them again.

Okay, I stepped forward. Fool me once...

I tried a couple palm strikes, which he blocked easily. I faked a knee strike and he tried the same move as earlier, but I was ready for it and delivered an elbow to the side of his head. He staggered and tried to back away, and I managed to land two palm strikes to his face and head before he'd gotten out of range. I could see blood coming from split lips.

"Mira, Rispan, enough!" the trainer called. "It's a draw."

The boy was grinning at me through bloody lips and teeth as the trainer was taking a look at him. Was this kid crazy? I didn't understand him.

I had just started on the bag when Veron came for me.

"I think it's time we taught you a little about your weapons," he said.

He handed me two wooden practice knives that were about the same length as my own.

"First, I just want you to get comfortable holding these with the blades down, along your forearms." He showed me. "Good, now work on your elbow strikes on the bag while you hold them. Keep the blade tucked like that."

After I'd worked the bag for about a half hour, he brought me to what I had started calling the swinging tree, because of the arms or branches that kept swinging at me.

"Now we're going to work combinations," he said. "I want you to do hard blocks and follow with a strike across with the same hand. As you come across, I want you to extend the blade and slash, like this." He showed me. "Best is to aim for the throat or the eyes. Or even to cut the other arm."

We worked with the swinging tree and he had me try different combinations of these same moves. Altogether, we worked on them for about an hour.

"Alright," he said. "That's good for now." He scratched his chin. "How are you putting them in your belt?"

I remembered what Neelu had showed me, and I tucked them in on either side, with the hilts forward, toward center.

"Good." He nodded. "And how would you draw them?"

I wasn't as certain with that part. I reached across to opposite sides with both hands and drew the two practice knives.

"No good," he shook his head. "Now you are holding them point forward and you would have to shift them to get them into position. You can do that, but you lose precious time. Put them back in your belt."

I did as he instructed.

"Now instead of reaching across, set your hands on the hilts on the same side, just naturally. Good. Now you can pull either knife more easily, and it isn't so obvious."

I tried it and I could get the knives out much easier without having to reach across my body to do it.

"Another option," he went on. "You are right-handed, yes?"

I nodded.

"A little misdirection never hurts. Here." He shifted the knives. "Put both knives on your right side, hilts forward. Now people will assume you are left-handed. You can help them think that by reaching across with your left hand and drawing the knife, point forward." He was moving my hands through the motions to show me. "Now, with this point out, they'll be looking at your left hand and won't notice you draw the other knife with your right."

I stepped through the motion a few times, and got the feel of it.

"Before you start feeling too sure of yourself, this is not going to help you against anyone who is experienced with a knife," he said with a smile.

"It's not?"

He shook his head. "You can try to surprise them, but if that doesn't work, be ready to run."

"Shouldn't I be able to block another knife with my blade?"

He shook his head again. "This is not like fighting with a sword. Don't try to block the blade; block the hand or arm with the blocks you have already learned. One of the best ways to keep someone from sticking you with a blade is to have something you can thwack them with while staying out of their reach. That brings us to your next weapon."

He put the practice knives away and pulled out a couple of long sticks from a rack, handing one to me. The stick was probably five feet tall.

"Alright," he said. "The first thing is just to get used to how a staff moves, and to start strengthening your hands and wrists. I

want you to do a two-handed spin like this.”

He slowly started his staff spinning in front of him, changing hands with each revolution. I mimicked his motion, and we started to speed it up.

“Good,” he said. “Stop it like this. Now, try spinning in the other direction.”

I practiced that for a while, and then he had me try a one-handed criss-cross spin. I’d done a little baton work way back in grade school, so it wasn’t totally new to me. Once he was satisfied with my right hand, he had me practice with my left, then he had me changing hands back and forth.

“None of this is used for fighting,” he said. “But it builds your skill, strength, and familiarity.”

“I thought you said I’d be thwacking.”

“Soon enough,” he smiled. “Keep cycling through all of those and I’ll be back. Keep your hands away from your body.”

The staff was about an inch or a little more in diameter. It was pretty light, but it was much heavier than the batons I was familiar with. After a while, my arms started to get tired, and the muscles in my hands and forearms were feeling the workout.

Next, Veron had me hold the staff off-center, with the shorter part down and making sure that it was shorter than my arm was extended from my body. We worked on a crisscross spin where the staff stayed in one hand and the other assisted the motion. We continued working on more spinning drills from this hold, switching from downward spins to upward spins, and then turning them into strikes.

“You don’t want to leave your staff out there on a strike where your enemy can grab it. Swing all the way through. Even on a jab.” He went through the move. “Get it back or be prepared to lose it. A

lot of your staffwork will be done from one end with two hands. It's arguably the best weapon, even against a sword."

Once the afternoon session was finished, I headed for the shower. Neelu had mentioned she wouldn't be able to join me today—Tesia, either, for that matter—so I took my time, enjoying the feel of the hot water. By the time I finished, the practice yard was empty. I crossed the floor and took the exit.

I normally followed the crowd that headed for the dining hall, but everyone had already gone ahead. I realized I'd missed a turn and had to backtrack. As I drew near to the branching, five students stepped out and blocked my way. I recognized some of them from the incident with Rispan earlier.

I heard a sound behind me and glanced over my shoulder. Four more had apparently circled around me. Elvar was one of them, and the smile on his face wasn't friendly.

The group in front approached. One of them, the leader from earlier, spoke.

"You think you're something, human? You think you're special?"

"I'm not special," I told him. "I'm just trying to learn like everyone else."

"Sure," he sneered. "You get special attention. Early advancement. Picking on my friend Elvar here with your dirty human tricks. We don't like that. Do we, Elvar?"

The group behind me had gotten closer. Suddenly, Elvar grabbed my elbows from behind with one of the other boys.

"Not so tough now, huh?" Elvar said into my ear.

"Time for dinner." It was Mouse. "Let's go eat." He pushed his way through the crowd and pulled one of the boys off my arm, but Elvar refused to let go.

"Sticking your nose in again, Mouse?" the leader spoke again. "You're going to regret it this time. There's no way you can take all of us."

"I didn't know you were such a coward, Aflen." Another voice rang out from down the hall, behind Elvar's group. "I mean, I knew you were stupid and you smelled bad, but I never thought you were a coward."

"Who says I'm a coward!" he demanded.

"Probably anyone that knows you very well." It was the small boy, Rispan. "You're too afraid to try to take me on your own, so you figure you have to get a whole gang to practice on someone else first."

"You're dead meat now, Rispan!" Aflen snarled.

"Sure." Rispan shrugged. "Because you're too much of a coward to face me alone. As long as you have enough people to hide behind, you don't have to be afraid."

"I don't need help to take you!"

"So you say." Rispan looked pointedly at the gang. "Show me. Show me you're not a coward or a liar. Call them off."

"Fine! Everybody back. I'll put this brownie in his place."

Elvar finally loosened his grip on me and I pulled away from him. I tried to step forward, but Mouse put his hand on my shoulder. Shaking his head, he pulled me to the side, out of the way.

Rispan and Aflen squared off in the wide corridor. There was a flurry of strikes and blocks, and I could see that Rispan's split lips were bleeding again.

"Ha!" Aflen jeered. "First blood!"

Rispan spat. "*She* did that to me earlier. You don't get credit."

That seemed to infuriate Aflen and he redoubled his effort. Rispan managed to block most of the strikes, but some still got

through. I could tell his head was ringing. The boys had no protective padding, like in a sparring match, so every blow had full impact.

Rispan ducked a blow that made Aflen overextend himself, and he threw him heavily to the hard floor. I could tell the impact had been painful when Aflen stood up.

"You're going to pay for that one, brownie."

"You've shown you're not a coward," Rispan said. "You can walk away now."

"I'm not going to walk away until I squash you like a bug!"

Aflen charged him again, but I could see that his movement was a little stiff from the fall. Rispan feinted high, and when Aflen tried a hard block, Rispan delivered a powerful kick to the groin. Aflen bent forward, his mouth open in a silent scream. Rispan had crouched after the kick and now launched himself off the ground with a knee to Aflen's chin.

Aflen went down and didn't move. Something was wrong with his jaw; it was either broken or dislocated.

Nobody moved, looking down at Aflen. Finally, Mouse spoke.

"Best take him to a healer," he said. "Tell them he fell down some stairs."

Several of Aflen's gang just took off, but a few came forward to get him to his feet. We just stood and watched until they were around the corner.

It dawned on me that if Mouse and Rispan hadn't shown up, I would be the one needing the healer.

"Thank you," I said. "Both of you. How did you know I needed help?"

"I saw them hanging around while you were in the shower," Mouse explained. "They followed you when you left."

I looked at Rispan, who shrugged. "I saw those four running to circle around and it looked suspicious, so I followed them. Good thing I did; I had some unfinished business with Aflen."

"I think you broke his jaw!" I told him. "I'm glad you didn't do that to me in our match!"

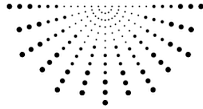
"Nah," he said, shaking his head. "You wouldn't have let me. You're better than he is, even if he is beginner level five."

"I'm starting to feel pretty hungry," I said. "You guys want to get some dinner?"

"I'm always hungry," Mouse nodded.

Rispan grinned. "Let's get him to the dining hall before he decides to eat us!"

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



*I*t was nice to have someone who was more my own age to talk with for a change. Neelu and Tesia were both wonderful, but they were grown-ups and I always felt like I had to act more grown-up around them. I was already feeling that a bond had formed between the three of us after standing together against Aflen and his gang.

"So why are they training you so hard?" Rispan asked me.

"Neelu thinks I might only be here for a few weeks before we have to leave," I explained. "She wants me as ready as possible to defend myself."

"Who?"

"Neelu."

"You mean Neelu Ulané Pulakasado?" He looked at me, his violet eyes big.

"Yes, that Neelu."

"You're joking."

"I saw her." Mouse shook his head, then looked at me. "She brought you on your first day."

"You know she's a legend, right?" Rispan asked.

"Um...she is?"

"She's the only one who's ever beaten Veron in a match!" He was clearly getting warmed up to what seemed to be a favorite subject. "She's wicked fast! Nobody ever has been as fast as she is. And she's killed more *Urgaban* than anyone. There used to be a lot of *Urgaban* in the woods, raiding and whatnot. She put an end to that, and all by herself! Well, she slowed it down, anyway. They still come, but not so much anymore."

I nodded. "That's how I met her. I was in the forest and there was a group hunting me."

"Wow! Did she kill them? Did you see it?"

"Well, it was really fast. I couldn't see what was happening. They just dropped dead."

"See!"

"Anyway." I wasn't that comfortable talking about killing. "I'm not the only one who trains a lot. It seems like most of the students are there all day."

Mouse nodded. "For group classes and sparring. But not many get personal attention."

"Especially not from Veron," Rispan added.

"We have to earn the right to train," Mouse explained. "And to advance, and for any personal training."

"You must have really made an impression on Neelu Ulané Pulakasado."

"She saved me," I shrugged. "Then I saved her."

"You saved her?" Rispan looked shocked.

"That would do it," Mouse nodded.

"How do you earn the right to train?" I asked.

"They make the rounds down in the deeper levels, around the mines and mushroom farms, and look for anyone who shows promise," Rispan explained. "In the higher levels—the wealthier

levels—they pay for private instructors to teach their kids. We don't see them very often."

"Is that where your parents work? In the mines or mushroom farms?"

Rispan shook his head. "Not me. No parents. I'm from the kids' home."

"Like an orphanage?"

"I don't know that word," he said. "It's the place where kids live who don't have parents."

"What happened to your parents?" I asked him.

He shrugged. "Someone found me in the forest to the north of the city. I don't remember anything about it."

"Is that when you got the scar?"

His hand went to his cheek, then he put it back to his lap. "Seems like."

"What about you?" I asked Mouse. "Are you from the kids' home, too?"

"Not me," he said. "I worked the farms."

"How was that?"

He nodded. "I liked it."

"Then why are you training?"

He shrugged. He didn't seem to want to elaborate, so I left it alone. Rispan didn't pick up on the clues, though.

"Yeah, I don't get it. If you like farming, why do this at all? Seems like you would have started years ago if you wanted to do this."

Mouse was silent for a moment before answering, his chocolate eyes turning inward. "Was a good life. Just me and my mum. Transport cart tipped over, then it was just me. Didn't much care for the farming after that."

I could tell Rispan was sorry for asking.

"My parents died years ago," I told them. "On Earth, I had foster parents. They were great, but I'll probably never see them again. One way or another, we're all in the same boat. Orphans. When we don't have a family, we have to make our own."

I worried I was getting ahead of myself with what I was saying. I had just met these two, and there was so much I didn't know about them. But it felt right. And I could tell by the looks on their faces that they wanted this—needed it. We were all a little desperate for that kind of connection and it was right here, if we had the courage to make it.

"One problem," Mouse said.

We looked at him. Had I misread his reaction?

"Never been on a boat."

We laughed at that, and any leftover tension faded away.

"So, what's your actual name?" I asked him. "I only heard them calling you Mouse. That's not a real name, is it?"

"My mum called me Mouse, and it kind of stuck. But my real name is Felgor."

"Nice to meet you, Felgor," I smiled. "I'm Mira."

"It's okay to call me Mouse. Most people do. Pretty much everyone."

"And you're Rispan, right?"

Rispan made a serious face, and making his voice sound deep, he said, "Call me Moose!"

We all laughed at that.

"What do you do after dinner?" Rispan asked. "I never see you in the practice yard after the afternoon sessions."

"Oh, I've been working with Tesia on learning the *Ralahin*," I told him. "She's busy tonight though, so I have the evening off for once."

"What are you going to do?" Rispan asked.

"I don't know. I thought maybe I'd just practice some more."

"Bo-ring!" Rispan shook his head. "Have you even seen anything else around the city besides the practice yard and dining hall?"

"Umm." I thought for a moment. "The throne room?"

They both laughed, thinking I was joking.

"No, really," I insisted. "And I met the queen."

Rispan looked at Mouse. "We're traveling in high circles now! Fame and fortune is sure to be in our future!"

Mouse smiled. "You should see more of the city. I could show you the farms."

"And Market Square!" Rispan added. "That's where everything happens."

"You guys wanna see the rooms they gave me to stay in?"

"Where is it?" Rispan asked, only mildly interested.

"It's a few doors down from Neelu's."

"You're in the royal wing?" His eyes were big. "No way!"

"So, you do want to see it?"

He nodded excitedly. I looked at Mouse, who nodded as well.

"Come on!" We deposited our dishes and headed out. I wasn't sure if I was supposed to have people over, but no one told me I couldn't. There was even a spare bedroom, so guests had to be allowed, right?

When we got to the hall with guards posted by the entrance, they just gave me a nod and didn't say anything. Mouse and Rispan hesitated for a moment, then hurried past. Once we were inside the room with the door closed behind us, Rispan let out a whoop.

"I can't believe we're in the royal wing! In a suite, no less!" He walked around the front room, looking at everything, then plopped himself on one end of the large couch that sat against one wall.

"This is way too big for one person; we're moving in!" Rispan declared.

"I don't even know if I'm supposed to have visitors," I laughed.

Rispan sat up. "We aren't going to get arrested, are we?"

"As long as you're nice," I teased, "I won't call the guards."

"You're funny." He gave me a mock-sowl.

Mouse still stood in place, dumbfounded. "This is bigger than our house was. Just this room."

"I guess I'm pretty lucky," I nodded.

Rispan opened his mouth to make some remark and there was a knock on the door. We all froze.

The knock sounded again. "Mira? Are you in? This is Laruna."

I pressed my finger to my lips so they would be quiet.

"Go in there," I whispered, pointing at the spare bedroom. Once the door closed behind them, I walked to the front door. The knock came again just as I reached it.

"Mira? Are—"

I opened the door. "Hello, Laruna."

"There you are," she smiled. It gave her motherly face a look of innocence. "I hadn't seen you in a few days and I wanted to check on you. Do you mind if I come in?"

She didn't exactly wait for a response before she stepped past me into the main room, looking around.

"Here," she indicated the table and chairs. "Let's sit and have a chat. Maybe some tea?"

"Um, okay."

The side table did have a teapot and cups, as well as a canister of tea.

"It looks like you haven't used these yet," she smiled at me. "We can break them in."

She poured water from the pitcher into the teapot, put in some leaves from the canister, and then brought the pot and two cups to the table and sat down.

"How are your studies going? I understand Tesia is tutoring you."

"Yes." I nodded, wanting to be polite, but not sure why she was here. "We thought it might be better than disrupting your class."

"And your progress?"

"Really good, I think. I mean, she only has one student to worry about. That's probably a lot easier than trying to teach a whole class."

"Yes." she nodded. "Quite. Have you learned how to heat water for tea yet?"

"No." I admitted. "I never even thought of it. We can do that?"

"Oh, yes," she nodded. "Watch closely."

She reached out her hand, making small circles with her fingers. My amulet allowed me to see the magic flowing, circling around the pot. In a few moments, I could see steam starting to rise.

"Can you see what I'm doing?" she asked me.

"I think so."

"Watch closer."

She continued to move her fingers in a circle and the swirling magic grew, forming a larger spiral around the pot.

"You see it?" She asked again.

"Yes." I watched, fascinated by how she could manipulate the magic.

She never stopped her fingers, and the swirling magic moved down the legs of the table to the floor, and then around my feet. I could feel a tingling as the magic moved up my legs and body.

Suddenly, she made a pulling motion and I felt something gripping me, pulling my legs against each other and holding me in

place. I tried to speak, but my jaws were locked shut and it just came out as a mumble.

"Don't try to speak, dear."

She did more circular motions with her hand while picking up a teacup with the other. I could see the threads of magic that surrounded me, and she somehow affixed the ends to the cup.

She disengaged her hand and released the magic. The threads stayed in place, holding me firm.

"There," she said, her smile no longer so sweet. "I hope that was educational. Not that it will help you."

She opened the front door and two *Ulané Jhinura* stepped in. She closed the door behind them.

"She's ready for you," Laruna told them. "Tell me again the plan so I can make sure there will be no mistake."

One of them rolled his eyes before he spoke.

"We take her to the *Urgaban* city and kill her there. We drop clues along the way so they can find her body, and we leave evidence that the *Urgaban* took her."

"Very good." She reached into a pocket of her dress and pulled something out. It looked like a brass button. Like one from an *Urgaban* uniform.

"Plus, a little clue on this end," she said, tossing the button to the floor.

"You said you could get us out of the palace city," the man spoke again.

"I'll get you to the forest where we discussed," Laruna told them. "Beyond that, it's up to you."

"We can manage," he said.

She handed him the teacup. "When you are ready to break the magical binding, just break this cup."

"Why a teacup?"

She shrugged. "It was nearby."

Just then, I heard a thump from the bedroom and all three of them turned toward the door. Laruna looked at me suspiciously and motioned to the two men. They quietly approached the door with daggers drawn. With a nod to each other, they launched themselves through the door. I couldn't see what was happening.

A moment later, they came out with Rispan and Mouse at knife-point. I tried to speak, but my words came out garbled through my locked jaws.

"What do you want us to do with these?" one of the men asked Laruna.

"You'll have to take them with you," she told them. "Not a single drop of blood in this wing."

Right! The alarm!

I looked at Rispan and Mouse, hoping they understood. Just one drop of blood and the guards would come. But they had no way of knowing that.

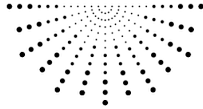
What else would set it off?

"Once you're in the forest," she went on, "you can kill them there. I don't care about them. But don't kill her too soon. Follow the plan."

Laruna closed her eyes for a moment to concentrate, then she lifted her hands to either side and spoke some words that were too low for me to hear. A shimmering formed in the air. The man who hadn't spoken grabbed me and threw me over his shoulder. I struggled to move, to resist in some way, but my body refused to respond.

As he started walking, I couldn't see anything but his backside. His fourth step was on dirt, and we were no longer in my rooms.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



The spot must have been prearranged. The evening air was slightly cool, as summer was losing its hold on things. Two moons shone in the night sky. One looked like it was about the same size as the moon back home, the other was smaller or further away. Or maybe both.

I was put down against a tree and could see that they had supplies waiting. They tied Rispan's and Mouse's hands. "What do you want to do with these two?" The voice was different, so he must have been the one who'd been carrying me. He pulled a knife from his waist.

"No, hang on, Farlen," the other stopped him. "No sense in wasting them. We can make a little extra and it's not far out of the way. Couple hours east before we head south. We'll sell 'em."

Farlen grunted and put his knife away.

"We didn't bring enough horses," he said.

"No matter," the first one said as he picked up a rope. "They're fit enough. They can run along behind."

"Hey!" Farlen said. "None of that."

Whatever they were doing was out of my field of vision. I saw the first one bring out three ponies. He hefted sturdy saddles onto

them that were made bulkier by blanket-rolls and large saddle-bags. Each saddle had a horn, and I could see him loop the end of a rope around each one.

Then Farlen was in front of me and I was being picked up again. I caught a glimpse of Rispan and Mouse, gagged, hands tied and standing at the other end of the rope that was tied to the saddle. Then I was facedown, thrown over one of the horses.

"Tie her in place," the first one said. "We don't want her to fall off and break her neck too soon."

Farlen didn't answer, but I could feel him securing me in place. After a moment, the first one made a clicking sound and we were moving.

They knew I couldn't move, so they hadn't bothered to look at me very closely. I still had my daggers tucked into my belt. The saddle I was thrown over was built for sitting, not for lying down; having the daggers in my belt only made it worse and I couldn't even shift my position. I was definitely going to be showing some bruises from all this. My jaw was locked shut, though, so I couldn't say anything.

The ride was anything but smooth. After about two hours into the ordeal, Farlen spoke.

"Gilglys, shouldn't we be there by now?"

"We're close," he answered. "Should be just the other side of that rise, from last I heard."

"They're always moving around. 'Fraid of that Dark Blade."

"They'll be there tonight, I tell you," Gilglys sounded irritated. "Stop worrying like an old woman!"

I was trying to figure out some way to get free, but I couldn't move. There weren't any ropes to cut or work loose. I couldn't move any of my joints, anyway. Maybe they would free me when they

stopped for the night. They had to break the spell so I could eat, right?

Another twenty minutes took us up a hill and down the other side.

"Who's there?" a voice called out.

"See, I told you they'd be here," Gilglys said under his breath, then he answered loudly, "Relax. We've come for business."

Shortly after that, we stopped.

"We've got something for sale," Gilglys said. "A couple of fine slaves. Take a look."

I couldn't see what was happening. I could hear the other person walking, but I couldn't tell how many there were.

"Stand still!" I heard Gilglys raise his voice. "They're young. Plenty of years ahead of them."

Was he trying to sell my friends?

"Alright," I heard the other voice. "I'll take them."

I heard something that sounded like coins exchanging hands.

"Hey now," Gilglys complained. "You can do better than that."

"This one's small. Less value," came the answer. "And what's this? A female?"

I heard steps approaching, and someone grabbed my hair and pulled my head up to look at my face. It was an *Urgaban*. He reminded me more of Ragar than Grangor and his men.

"Throw this one in and I'll double it," he said as he let my head drop.

"Sorry," Gilglys answered him. "That one's not for sale. She's already spoken for."

"Hmm. Maybe I can give you triple."

"Tempting, but I can't do it."

"Alright, just the two. You have your payment. Our business is done."

"Actually." Gilglys stopped him. "Maybe you have something for me. I need a map."

"A map?" It was Farlen. "You said you knew the way. That's why we took the job."

"Take it easy," Gilglys snapped at him. "I have a good idea where it is, but a map would help."

"What kind of map do you need?" the *Urgaban* asked.

"To get to Laraksha-Vo."

The *Urgaban* chuckled. "That's going to cost you."

"How much?"

"Half. Half of what I just gave you."

"For a map? I'll find it on my own."

"No, you won't," the *Urgaban* told him. "Without a map, the patrols will find you before you can even see the city. You'll be dead before you see the patrols."

"*Zergishti maloto!*" Farlen cursed. "I knew I shouldn't have listened to you."

"Fine!" Gilglys agreed. "Half the coin for the map, but not just to Laraksha-Vo—the whole area. And you point out anything we need to know so we won't get spotted."

"Done. Coin first."

I heard the money being passed.

"Alright," the *Urgaban* said. "Come. Pay attention."

I heard them stepping away. They didn't go very far, as I could still hear their conversation.

"This is where we are—"

"Wait," Gilglys interrupted. "You're drawing the map on the wall?"

"Where else? You want me to carve it onto your stomach?"

"I thought you had a map."

"Of course—in my head. I draw it here and you have it in your head."

"That wasn't the deal! I want a map! On paper or hide or whatever."

"You get your whatever. Map on rock wall. Do what you want with it."

"*Putri firgolo!*" he cursed. "Fine, just draw the *zergish* thing."

"As I said, we are here. Out to the west is the coast. Here, closer in, is your Su Lariano, just to the west of us. As we come south, these hills become steeper and the range goes on toward the south. You must stick to the west of the range to get to Laraksha-Vo. If you get stuck on the east side, you'll have to go through our city of Pokorah-Vo. There are trails here and here. There is a pass through the mountains here. On the east side, when you get to a river, follow it east and it will lead you to Pokorah-Vo.

"To get to Laraksha-Vo, follow this trail south on the west side, maybe four weeks, depending on your speed. You will cross two small streams. There is a *Loiala Fé* village at the second one, then you will come to a river. The river flows southwest to the sea, right past Laraksha-Vo, which is here. Stay on the south side of the river and you will avoid the patrols if you are stealthy. I don't know how close you need to get. There is an old tower, just ruins, a day along the river. If you need something from the Pokorah-Vo, wait near the ruins. Some will come eventually. It is a meeting place for smugglers and such. Someone may be able to get you into Laraksha-Vo, if that is what you need."

"That's it?"

"That's it," the *Urgaban* answered. "Study it. Take your time, but go soon. We go to Pokorah-Vo."

"*Putri firgolo*. Farlen, you study this thing, too."

"What? I don't know maps!"

"Time to learn."

"*Zergishti maloto, putri firgolo!* This is the last time I take a job with you!"

I could hear a lot of activity, people moving around, but I couldn't see what was going on. All I could do was wait and wonder what was happening to Rispan and Mouse.

After some time, I heard approaching steps again.

"Let's head south for a bit and set up camp," Gilglys was saying.

"Why can't we camp here for the night?"

"Not a good idea. Let's go."

I bumped along over the saddle of the pony for at least another hour before they drew up. I spent the whole time going over and over the details of what the *Urgaban* had told them about the area and the trails.

"This is as good a spot as any."

I'd never felt so trapped and helpless. There was nothing I could do. It was like I was paralyzed.

"Don't leave her on the horse or it'll be too tired tomorrow," Gilglys said.

Hands grabbed me and pulled me from the pony. Farlen sat me against a tree, and he wasn't particularly gentle about it. He stripped the saddle from the horse and put it by the others that had already been removed. When he was done, he looked at me.

"We gonna feed her?" he asked.

"What for? She'll be dead soon enough. Don't waste the food."

"Could be a week."

"Dribble some water in her mouth. Maybe we'll feed her in a few days when she's weaker. I don't want to break the spell before that."

"Meanwhile, she'll be shitting and pissing herself."

"She can hold it until tomorrow at least," Gilglys relented.

So much for them letting me free to eat tonight. I could move my eyes, and I looked around. There had to be something I could do, but what? And what was happening with Rispan and Mouse?

"Heh," Gilglys was looking at me. "Going crazy, huh? Can't move. Can't talk. Look Farlen, it's your dream come true—a female that can't talk."

I tried to say something, but it just came out muffled between my clenched jaws. All I could do was glare at him.

"Oh, she can sure hear us, though! Can't you?" He stepped over to one of the saddlebags and reached in.

"I know what you want," he said with a grin. He pulled out a small bundle and unwrapped the cloth to reveal the teacup. "You were hoping we might break this on the trip so you could get away?" He laughed, then faked a fumble. "Oh! Almost dropped it!" He tossed it in the air a couple of times, laughing.

"Here, I'll set it on this rock so you can watch it," he said, putting it down. He walked over, looking at me.

"Not bad-looking for a human," he said. "Maybe a bit young, though."

He reached out a hand and gave my breast a clinical squeeze. "Not bad. Couple of years, you'd fill-out nice. Too bad."

He grabbed my face with one hand and pinched my cheeks so my lips opened. With the other hand, he held up a waterskin, which he unstopped with his teeth. He poured water into my mouth, not caring that most of it spilled down my chin and throat, then he walked away.

They spent the next hour setting up camp and making idle conversation while they cooked and ate. Finally, they went to their

bedrolls and lay down. I was still going crazy, trying to figure out what I could do. He'd left that teacup on the rock to taunt me, knowing I couldn't reach it.

Wait! Maybe I could reach it! If I could move a glass of water with the *Ralahin*, I should be able to move an empty teacup!

I had long since let my connection to the *Ralahin* go, and I reached out to reestablish it now. Slowly, the dim glow that showed the *Ralahin* in everything began to be visible to me. I could still see the threads of it that bound me, and I could see where the ends of those threads were anchored to the teacup.

I glanced at the two men, but they seemed to be asleep. I looked back at the teacup and focused on it. I could do this. I had to be ready to move as soon as the spell was broken.

I reached out with the *Ralahin* to the cup and pulled. It started to move. *Yes!* Then, with a lurch, it moved toward me and fell from the rock. I watched the cup as it fell and struck the ground—and bounced.

No! The ground was too soft to break the cup.

"Nice trick," Farlen's voice called out. "Too bad it didn't work."

"What?" Gilglys opened his eyes. "What's going on?"

"She can use magic," Farlen told him. "She tried to break the cup."

Gilglys was up in an instant and rushed to the rock, not seeing the cup. He looked around and located where it had fallen. He relaxed with a sigh of relief.

"This complicates things," he said, looking at me. "We can't kill her yet. But it looks like we're going to have to keep her drugged."

If they drugged me, there would be no way I'd be able to do anything, even if they broke the binding spell. There had to be something. I looked around in desperation, focusing my *Ralahin*

vision on anything and everything. I could See the flows and connections, and I could feel them. I felt my connection to my amulet and the intricate weave that comprised the spell that let me understand the language. I felt my connection to the daggers, still tucked into my belt, and I felt the complex weave of magic in them as well.

Could I use them? Veron had said they could cut a spell, but I guessed it must be their magic that cut the spell, not the actual blades. I remembered how focusing on the amulet improved my ability to learn the language. Gilglys was searching his saddlebags for something, but I ignored him and focused on the daggers and the power they held, feeling the connections and turns.

There! I found it! The magical edge that could cut a spell. I took hold of it with my mind and pushed it against the threads that held me. The threads resisted, and then they parted.

I gasped as my body was suddenly my own again. Farlen saw it.

"She's free!" he yelled. He drew his knife and came at me, trying to grab me.

My right hand was on the hilt of the *Glissé* at my waist. As Farlen bent to grab me, I stuck across, just like Veron had drilled me, with the dagger naturally pointed down along my forearm, extending out mid-swing. The blade cut across his throat and he fell back, a look of surprise on his face. His hands went to his throat, as though he were trying to hold the edges of the wound together, to hold in the blood that was gushing out. But it was no use, and he fell to his knees.

"*Zergané!*" Gilglys snarled at me. "You'll pay for that!"

He came towards me with his knife in his hand.

I got to my feet as quickly as I could. I drew my other blade with my left hand, point forward towards Gilglys. The knife in my right hand was tucked against my forearm.

Gilglys looked at my left-hand blade and back at my face, hatred burning in his dark eyes.

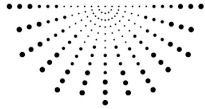
"You're going to die now, *Zergané!*"

I couldn't let him get in my head. I focused on what I knew, on what Veron had been teaching me. Gilglys held his blade point towards me, his other hand was empty. His stance was a little off, so I didn't think he was well trained.

Gilglys slashed his blade through the air a couple of times, trying to get me to react. Then he charged forward, trying to knock my left hand to the side and grab me. I stepped outside and did a redirect block, sending him past me. I spun as he went by and my blade bit deeply into the side of his neck. His momentum carried him forward and he fell face-first into the ground. He pushed himself over onto his back. He looked up at the stars.

"*Zerg!*" Then his breathing stopped.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



I stood there, shocked. I had just killed two people!
I glanced around, but there was no one else. There were no people. No police. No friends. Just me. And Farlen. And Gilglys.

I saw the blood on my hands. It was horrifying! I had to get that off! I looked around for something to clean my hands, but didn't see anything. Of course not! What was I expecting, a sink? Running water out here in the middle of nowhere?

I looked for a rag or towel or something, but there was nothing. The blades, too. I needed to clean them. If I put them in the scabbard with all this blood, it would still be there the next time I pulled them out. Every time I pulled them out, and then I could never get rid of all this blood.

Calm down. I was freaking out and I needed to stop.

It happened. They were dead, and I did it. I killed them. But this was not Earth. I wasn't going to go to prison. And they had attacked me—they had kidnapped me, and they were going to kill me. It was self-defense.

Calm down.

Be practical.

Think.

Rispan. Mouse. They were somewhere back there, sold as slaves. All because they were my friends. I looked back to what I thought was the way we had come. It was pitch black. There was nothing I could do until morning when I could see, then I could find our tracks and follow them back.

No, there was something I could do. I could plan. I could get ready. I needed to—first, I needed to get this blood off my hands and my knives.

I walked over to stand above Gilglys. His eyes were open and staring. I looked away from his face and, bending down, wiped my hands and blades off on his shirt.

Next, I took stock of what supplies there were in the camp. I saw the cook-pot with the remains of some stew they had made for dinner. I sat down by the fire and helped myself, looking around for what else was there. I would need all the resources I could get if I was going to help Rispan and Mouse. Maybe I could trade for them.

Three ponies and saddles for them, if I could get the saddles back on. Whatever was in the saddlebags—I'd have to search those. Three bedrolls; one still tied behind a saddle and the other two spread out where Gilglys and Farlen had been using them. Two bodies.

I didn't know if I should do anything about the bodies, but I needed to search them. I knew Gilglys had some money and maybe Farlen did, too. I couldn't afford to be squeamish. Anything they had that might be of use or of value, I would need to bring it with me. I'd get Rispan and Mouse free even if we had to trade everything and walk back to Su Lariano naked.

After I finished eating, I went through the saddlebags. There was nothing of value in them, just some odds and ends of clothing.

There was a nice, grey cloak in one; it was certainly better quality than anything either of them were wearing. Trying to avoid the blood, I searched both Gilglys and Farlen. They both had leather pouches with coins inside. I also took their knives and packed them into the saddlebags. Their belts looked sturdy and similar to mine. Not knowing if they had value, I went ahead and took those. I examined their boots, but neither were in good shape. It was a wonder they could put them on and take them off without having them fall apart.

One of Gilglys' boots looked a little different and when I checked, it turned out he had a small knife in a sheath tucked inside. I transferred that to my own boot along my calf. On closer inspection, his belt buckle also had a hidden blade. I swapped it out for my own belt, which I put in the saddlebag with the other things. A girl has to be ready to take care of herself in this world. In any world, I guess.

I checked all three bedrolls. Only the unused one was free enough of stench that I would consider using it. I rolled up the other two and laid out the third one. I would need some rest to be ready for tomorrow.

The first hint of light that preceded the sunrise brought me from my slumber, such as it was. I was up and moving right away, trying to break the chill that had seeped into my body while I slept.

I picked up a small saddle and walked to one of the ponies. He eyed me suspiciously—I think it was a he, I wasn't interested in checking. The saddle was a little heavy, but not bad. I managed to get it on his back and pulled the straps out from underneath so they hung down the sides, then I reached underneath to bring the ends around and buckle them together. I didn't see anything obvious while I was down there, so maybe it was a she. It wasn't my area of expertise.

I didn't know how tight the straps should be, but I figured they would need to be snug or the saddle wouldn't stay in place.

Satisfied, I stepped back. The straps looked right. Now I should tie the bedroll to the back—wait, now there was a gap between the straps and the pony's ribs. I went back and started to tighten them and it looked snug again, so I stepped back. But then, it looked loose.

"Alright," I said to the pony. "Very funny, knock it off!"

The pony just glanced at me like he had the patience of Job. I went back and nudged him in the ribs. When there was no reaction, I smacked him a little harder and he relaxed so I could tighten the straps. I saddled the other two ponies and made sure they weren't messing with me like the first one did. Finally, I tied all the bedrolls into place behind the saddles, the same way mine had been when I'd found it the previous night.

I looked around and could see where we had come into the clearing the night before, and the path we had come down. Good. That's where I needed to go.

Now for the tricky part. I got hold of the saddle and put my foot in the stirrup, pulling myself up. My sides were sore from my ride yesterday, but at least now I'd be on the saddle the way it was supposed to be ridden.

Success! I was on the pony! She—now I was thinking it was probably a she—looked over her shoulder at me, and then turned away like she was bored. She clearly wasn't very impressed with me. That was fine, as long as she took me where I needed to go. That's when I realized I'd left her reins tied to the bushes where Gilglys had tied them. I fumbled my way back off the pony and retrieved the reins, then I climbed back on. Now I was ready. I'd seen this on TV plenty of times, and in movies. I could do this.

Then I saw the other ponies.

Damn! This wasn't going to work.

I got back off the pony and pulled out some rope I had seen in the supplies. I attached one end to the reins on the other ponies and hung it from the horn on my saddle. I started to get on again, and stopped. Was there anything else I should do first?

I had all the gear packed up and on the ponies. I had all the ponies together. I knew the direction I needed to go.

I led my pony over so she was facing back down the trail we would travel. Once I was sure everything was in place, I climbed back up. The rope to the other ponies was across my leg, and seeing how that might get uncomfortable, I took it in my hand instead. I gave the reins a little shake, and my pony flipped an ear at me.

I tried again, making little clicking sounds and nudging with my feet. Finally, the pony started forward like she was just humoring me. Immediately, I had to grab the horn to keep from falling off. She wasn't going fast, but I had no idea what I was doing and the rocking motion threatened to throw me to the ground. The rope to the other ponies went taut for a moment and I was almost pulled off the back, then my pony stopped and I had to get her moving all over again.

This time, I was ready, and the other ponies started following behind.

After a few minutes, I started to get a feel for riding and felt more secure. We were going so slowly, though. With some other random shaking and nudging and wiggling on my part, I got my pony to move a little faster. It would have to do. Fortunately, the trail was pretty obvious and my pony went along without me having to steer.

As we followed the path back through the forest, I was trying to think of what I would do once I found the *Urgaban* and my friends. What would Neelu do? Neelu would probably just flit around and kill all the *Urgaban*. That didn't help me; I couldn't flit, and I didn't really want to kill anyone else if I didn't have to.

After about an hour or so, I came to a clearing that looked like it had been a camp for a large group. It was tucked up against the side of a hill and there was a sort-of shallow cave that had evidently been used for shelter, but there was no one here. Nearby was a shallow pool of water from a spring or something. Was this the right place? I hadn't been able to see much the night before. I glanced around for some clue, and then I remembered the map.

I got down from the pony, tying the reins to a nearby sapling, and walked over to the overhang. Yes! There it was, drawn on the rock face. It seemed like the *Urgaban* had used charcoal or the end of a burnt stick to draw it. The *Urgaban* had said they were going to the other place—Pokorah-Vo, he'd called it. Looking at the drawing, I could see the path they would have taken would head a east first for a short while before going south.

I also saw an X that probably meant Su Lariano. I wished I could go there and get Neelu or someone to help, but it would take too long.

Even though I had gone over the *Urgaban's* instructions in my head, I was never going to be able to memorize the map. I looked around desperately for something I could copy it onto, but there was nothing. Then I remembered the grey cloak in the saddlebags.

I fished out the cloak and grabbed a piece of charcoal from the dead firepit. I carefully copied the map by drawing it on the inside of the cloak, going over the marks repeatedly to make sure they would stay. I put the cloak on so it would be easier to look at the map.

Once I was ready, I looked around the east side of the clearing and found tracks of horses, along with boot tracks and ruts from what must have been several carts or wagons. This had to be it.

First, I took the ponies to the pond so they could get a drink. Once they seemed satisfied, I did as I had done before and brought the ponies around to face where I wanted them to go before climbing up.

I didn't know how much of a head start the *Urgaban* had on me or how fast they were going. I was going to have to try to get the ponies to go faster. So far, it seemed like me and my pony had come to an agreement that we wouldn't mess with each other, and she'd keep going.

I got her going again and was careful to be ready to get the other ponies to come along behind us. Once we were moving down the trail, I shook the reins to see if I could get my pony to speed up, but she didn't respond.

"Help me out here," I said to her. "I don't know how to do this."

She just flipped her ear and ignored me. I leaned forward to talk more into her ear, but before I could say anything, she lurched into a faster pace. The sudden change threw me backward and I had to grab onto the saddle horn to keep from falling off. Just as suddenly, she stopped.

I sat there for a moment, trying to figure out what was going on. I got her going again, and then after a few steps, I leaned back in the saddle. She stopped. Okay, now we were getting somewhere. I started her again, and then slowly I leaned forward and she sped up again!

"Woo hoo!" I crowed. I was getting this!

I leaned forward again and gave the reins a little shake. She sped up again and changed how she was stepping. Now I was bouncing

in the saddle and I was afraid I was going to fall off. I grabbed the horn again and tried to figure out the motion, and tried to keep from bouncing. I finally managed to get my hips moving in sync with the pony. Once I was reasonably comfortable doing that, I got her to speed up a little more.

I didn't know how long the ponies could keep to the faster pace, so every twenty minutes or half an hour, I would slow to a walk, so we'd spend only half the time at the faster speed. I'd always been good at estimating time, but doing it while riding for the first time was an added challenge.

By the end of the second hour, the pain in my legs from riding was excruciating. During the walking periods, I actually got all the way off the pony and led them by the reins to give my legs a break. I wanted to stop with every step, but my pain didn't matter. Not if it would keep me from getting to Rispan and Mouse.

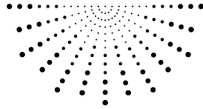
After the third hour, I was barely managing to get on and off the pony. I switched to one of the other ponies in case the one I had been riding was getting tired from carrying me. I had no idea if it would help or not, but I didn't know how many more times I would be able to get back on the horse. This time, I would have to stay on top for the walking breaks, no matter how much my legs hurt and cramped.

I was just glad that the trail was clear and easy to follow. I was well into the fourth hour when I had to switch to walking again. I just couldn't sit on the pony any longer. I had just started walking forward when a voice sounded out.

"That's far enough! What do you want?"

I recognized the voice from the night before. He was the one that made the deal with Gilglys. He stepped out of the forest onto the trail ahead.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



I was speechless for a moment, but quickly pulled myself together and opened my vision to the *Ralahin*. What would Neelu do? She would probably just flit around and kill everyone.

No, she would talk first.

"I should be asking you that question," I tried to be cool and casual, like Neelu had been with Ragar. "This is not your forest."

"My—" he looked uncertain. "What do you mean?"

"These woods are under the protection of the Su Lariano clan. And of the Dark Blade."

"Wait." He studied me. "I recognize you. Last I saw you, you were over the back of a pony! Where's Gilglys?"

"Gilglys and Farlen are dead," I told him in my best Neelu impression. "They were slow to learn. Are you slow to learn?" I rested my right hand on the hilt of my dagger.

"Who do you think you are? The Dark Blade herself?"

I just cocked my head and looked at him.

His worried expression turned stern. "Even if you are, which I don't think you are, my men have you surrounded."

If I'd been holding onto my connection to the *Ralahin*, I would have known they were there before I'd walked into their trap.

"You think I don't know they are there?"

His eyes narrowed. I was going to have to try something, and from Neelu's warning, I was afraid of what might happen. If I got it wrong, there'd be no help for Rispan and Mouse.

I focused on the space next to the *Urgaban*, just behind him. I felt the connection to that space from where I stood and focused on the pull. Focusing on that space as the end-point, I surrendered myself to the *Ralahin*.

Suddenly, there was a blur and I was next to him. I had drawn my dagger and now held it to his throat.

"Do you think your men are going to be able to help you?" I asked.

"Alright." He licked his lips. "You've made your point. What do you want?"

"You're lucky," I told him, stepping back and lowering the dagger. "I'm not really interested in you or your men. Not today."

He cocked an eyebrow at me. "What are you interested in?"

"The two slaves you bought from Gilglys last night. I want them."

He scratched his chin, then shook his head. "Can't do it. If you mean to take them, you'll have to fight us for them. Even if you were the Dark Blade—and I still don't believe you are—you'd have to kill us all to take them by force. That's just the way of business. If we let you take our goods, word would get out. We'd never be safe again."

I was focusing on my amulet and the intricate spellwork cast into it. It was supposed to be some sort of diplomacy spell. Maybe it would help me now. But what had he said? Business? Of course! That was why I'd made sure to collect anything of value from Farlen and Gilglys.

"What if we made a deal?" I asked him. "Business."

A crafty look came over him that he quickly hid.

"Yes," he said. "That's possible. What do you have to trade?"

I'd taken all the coins that Gilglys and Farlen had and put them in one pouch. I handed him the coin-bag and he weighed it in his hand.

"Not enough," he said.

"Most of that is what you paid Gilglys," I protested. "You already have the rest that you swindled out of him on that map deal."

He stood up tall and glared at me. "That was a fair deal! I'm an honest crook! That's not enough for both."

"Alright." The night before, I had planned out what I was going to offer, but I pretended I wasn't sure. "Maybe a horse? One of the ponies?"

His eyes went to the ponies that still stood on the trail. He started to speak, but I interrupted him.

"Before we get too far along with this," I plucked the bag back out of his hand. "I want to see them. I want to make sure they're still in good condition."

He made a motion and we waited. Meanwhile, he was eyeing my ponies. After a couple of minutes, Rispan and Mouse were brought forward, hands still tied and gags in their mouths. Both of them looked at me with wide eyes, not knowing what was going on.

"Why are they gagged?" I asked him.

He shrugged. "They talk too much, especially the little one. And then we heard you coming up behind and I didn't want them to give away our surprise."

"So do we have a deal? The coins and a pony for both of them?"

"One pony?" He shook his head. "Not enough. Ponies aren't as useful as slaves. Even all three ponies aren't worth as much as two slaves."

"I heard you last night. You said the smaller one wasn't worth as much."

He scowled. "Fine. Three ponies for both slaves."

"Agreed," I said. "We have a deal."

He motioned to his men, and they gave Rispan and Mouse a nudge toward me. Some of the others started to collect the ponies. Then I had a thought.

"Wait," I said. "What are your men doing?"

"Taking the ponies." He looked confused. "That was our deal. The coin and all three ponies for the two slaves."

"The deal you agreed to," I smiled, "was three ponies for two slaves. You said nothing about coin, and you said nothing about the saddles and gear."

He gaped at me, then looked chagrined.

"That was the deal, right?" I asked.

"Aye," he nodded. "That was the deal. But what are you going to do with the saddles without the ponies to carry them?"

"That's my problem," I answered. "Unless..." I pretended to be thinking.

He just looked at me, waiting, not fooled by my act.

"Maybe if you have some backpacks and some food, we could work something out," I suggested.

He stared at me for a moment, then chuckled. "Alright, alright. Three packs, three days of food, for all the coin and everything on the ponies."

Three days of food should be plenty, but that deal would leave me with nothing to trade with. I needed to make sure I had everything I would need.

I went to the saddlebags and retrieved Farlen's and Gilglys' knives, and tossed one each to Rispan and Mouse. I slung the

waterskin over my shoulder, and then I removed the blanket rolls. I removed the cookpot and, putting the utensils inside it, set it aside. Finally, I reached into the saddlebags and pulled out the teacup that had held the strings of my magical binding that I had carefully repacked.

I looked things over very carefully before turning back to the *Urgaban*.

"Okay," I said. "Everything on the ponies and all the coin for three packs, three days of food, and a five-foot walking staff."

"Done and done, I say, before you think of something else!" He grinned at me, holding out his hand, which I shook. "And if you ever decide to be a merchant, look up old Gralbast. We'd make a good team!"

"No offense, Gralbast, but even if I did decide to be a merchant, I could never partner with a slaver."

He spat. "That for slavers," he said. "Now I'll tell you my secret, girl. I hate slavers. I'd have let those two go once we'd reached a safe distance. I only sold them to you because it was clear you were trying to help them. Besides—" he glanced around at some of his men and spoke in a lower tone "—I do have to keep up appearances. Can't look like I'm going soft." He winked at me. "Plus, I could use the ponies."

"Oh!" I was shocked. "And I thought I did so well with the bargaining. You were tricking me the whole time!"

He just laughed. "Oh, you did well all right. Make no mistake. What's your name, girl?"

"Mira," I told him. "Mirabella Cervantes Ramirez."

"Well met," he said with a nod.

"You're not what I expected from an outcast *Urgaban*."

"We're not all the same," he said, growing serious. "And many of us were born to outcasts generations past. Don't judge too fast."

"I won't," I told him. "And I promise if I ever decide to be a merchant, I'll look for you."

"Done and done!" he grinned again.

Both Rispan and Mouse were strangely quiet as we split the food between the three packs, loaded in the blanket rolls, and started back down the trail. I knew it was my fault they had been taken. They could have been killed, and it was all because of me.

Finally, I couldn't take the silence any longer.

"I'm sorry!" I stopped on the trail and looked at them. "I know it's my fault."

Rispan cocked his head like I was speaking gibberish.

"Look," I sighed. "If and when we get back, you don't want to be my friends, I'll understand."

"What are you talking about?" Mouse asked.

"You wouldn't have been taken if it wasn't for me."

"You came for us." Rispan said, his voice sounded forced. "No one's ever...you came for us."

I could see tears starting down his face, and suddenly, he had his arms around me and was crying softly. I put my arms around him awkwardly while holding the staff I had acquired from Gralbast and looked over his shoulder at Mouse. Mouse just looked back at me with no expression on his face.

"I think you were right," he said.

Oh no! Was I going to lose Mouse?

He put his hand on my shoulder. "When we don't have a family, we have to make our own."

Now I could feel tears on my own face, too, and Mouse put his arms around both of us.

"Okay," I said after a moment. "We can't stand here all day."

"True," Mouse smiled. "That won't get any onions chopped."

We started walking again. With the silence broken, Rispan was much more talkative and we were accompanied by his endless commentary.

We'd gone a few miles when I started to feel light-headed. I paused to take a drink from the waterskin and continued on. I hoped it was just dehydration, and I kept drinking, hoping it would help. It didn't, but I pushed on without mentioning it. We just had to get back.

We had just reached the place where Gralbast had camped the previous night when I fell down. I didn't see it coming, but suddenly, I was on the ground and Mouse was rolling me over.

"What's wrong?"

"I don't know." I blinked up at him. "Just dizzy and...feel strange." I was still connected with the *Ralahin* and I could see the flows and connections everywhere.

I started to say something else, but was having trouble focusing. I realized that Mouse and Rispan had been talking about something for a while. I was only just now getting some of the words.

"But it's getting dark," Rispan was saying. "Maybe we should just camp here and see how she is in the morning."

"I don't know what's wrong with her," Mouse said. "But the sooner we get back, the sooner a healer can look at her. It should only be a few hours' walk."

"A few hours in the dark. Are you sure you can carry her? You know I can't help with that."

"Let's put whatever supplies we need in Mira's pack and you carry that. We'll leave the rest here. You lead. Keep us on the trail and I'll carry her."

"Alright, but let's eat something first. You'll need your strength."

I don't know how much time passed, but I could see it was dark despite the glow of the *Ralahin* everywhere.

I knew I was moving. I could feel a rocking sensation. I could feel a body up against me on one side and I was being held in place by something. It was a blanket.

"Mouse?" I asked. I was in some sort of sling or something made from one of the blankets, and was strung across his back. He was hunched forward and plodding on. "What are you doing?"

"It's okay," he said. "You just rest. We'll be in Su Lariano soon."

"That's nice," I said. Everything was lost in the glow of the *Ralahin*, and I drifted off again.

There were other brief moments of lucidity, but I was having a hard time staying focused on where I was. I could see in all directions, but where was I?

Sometimes later—minutes? Hours? Days?—I was aware of Rispan speaking somewhere ahead of us.

"He's been carrying her for hours; she needs a healer. We don't know what's wrong!"

Hands were touching me and I didn't feel the warmth of Mouse against me anymore. I was still moving, though. Someone else was talking.

"Inform Neelu'u and the queen that she has been found. We go to the healer."

The *Ralahin* glowed through the rock of the mountain. I could see it in the veins as we passed through the tunnel. I could follow the veins through the rock, they went so far.

Then I became aware that I wasn't moving and someone was calling my name.

"Mira!"

Who was it?

"Mira! Listen to me!"

I blinked and tried to find the source of the voice. It was Tesia. I liked Tesia. She was really sweet. And smart. And those pretty copper eyes.

"Mira! You must release the *Ralahin!*" she was saying. "Let it go!"

"Go?" I asked. What was I holding? The *Ralahin*? Why would I let it go? It made everything so beautiful.

"Let it go!" she said again. "Come back to us and let it go!"

"Okay," I mumbled. I could see the flows going everywhere, like it was calling to me.

"Let it go," she said again.

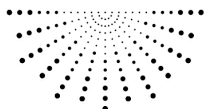
I released my connection and all the light went out. All the beauty was gone. It felt like my heart had been cut out of my body.

"No!" I tried to sit up. "It's gone!"

"It's okay," her voice was soothing. "You're okay now, just rest."

Rest sounded like a good idea.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



I opened my eyes to see Neelu standing with her arms crossed, glaring at me with narrowed lavender eyes.

"Well, good morning to you, too," I said, then I realized I wasn't in my room. "Where am I?"

"It is not morning," she said. "It is afternoon. And you're in the healer wing. You tried to...to flit, didn't you?" She wasn't happy.

"Um." I sat up. "Maybe?"

"I knew it! I told you it was dangerous!"

"But it worked!" I didn't understand the problem. "I just did a short distance and it worked just fine."

"No, it did *not* work just fine!" she snapped. "You established a connection to the pull in all directions, and then you held it for hours. It almost pulled you apart! If your friends hadn't gotten you back when they did, you'd be spread all over the universe right now!"

I gaped at her. I had no idea.

"That's why I explicitly told you not to try it! You almost died!"

"Okay." I'd almost died. That hit home.

"We were really scared for you," her voice softened.

"I was to be notified as soon as she was awake," Astrina spoke from the doorway of the room.

"She just woke," Neelu told her.

"Well, young lady," Astrina said, stepping closer. "We have been trying to figure out what happened to you."

"Oh!" I looked back and forth between them. "What about Rispan and Mouse—I mean, Felgor—didn't they tell you what happened?"

"Let's not worry about them for the moment," she said. "It was suggested that the *Urgaban* had abducted you. There were rumors you were a spy working with the *Urgaban* and had fled, fearing discovery."

"What?" I couldn't believe what I was hearing. "You can't believe that's true?"

"What I believe is immaterial. I must hear the story from you and make a determination. Tell me, where have you been and why did you leave?"

"I...I didn't leave, I was taken!"

"By whom?"

"It was Laruna," I told them. "She came to my room. She said she wanted to talk to me."

I noticed that there were guards standing outside the door. Neelu stepped over and said something to one of them. The woman nodded and left.

"Tell me everything that happened," Astrina said.

I went over everything that had happened since Laruna stepped into my room. How she had bound me with magic and had Gilglys and Farlen take us through a portal. How they had sold my friends to the *Urgaban*, and how I had managed to get loose and kill them to keep from being killed myself. And I told them how I had gone after the *Urgaban* and traded the ponies to get my friends back.

Astrina made no comment and her face remained stony the whole time.

"I don't really remember much after I got Rispan and Mouse—I mean, Felgor—back from the *Urgaban*."

Finally, Astrina spoke, "If all that is true, why did we find a button from an *Urgaban* uniform in your room? When did an *Urgaban* visit your rooms?"

I thought back. "Never. I think Laruna put it there."

"Convenient," she said. "Do you have any evidence to support what you have told me?"

"Didn't Rispan and Felgor tell you what happened?"

"They were unable to provide any information about who was in your rooms," she informed me. "Also, they are your friends and may be complicit in anything you are involved with. Do you have any evidence?"

"In the forest," I said. "Farlen and Gilglys. You'll find their bodies."

"That would confirm the death of two *Ulané Jhinura*, but nothing more."

"I might have something else," I told her. "When Laruna bound me, she attached the ends to a teacup from my room. They were supposed to break it to break the spell...I guess after they killed me. But I kept the cup. It should be in my pack. It looked like the ends of the magic were still attached to it. I wanted to study it to see if I could figure out how she did it."

Just then, the guard returned and spoke with Neelu.

Neelu turned to her mother, "Laruna cannot be found. She was not present for her class this morning."

"Very well," Astrina said. "We will look for the teacup." She looked at Neelu. "Perhaps you can get more details from your protégé"

here." Astrina turned to leave, giving me the briefest of winks before she was out the door.

"Your friends were pretty worried about you, too," Neelu told me. "You make friends quickly."

"Did Mouse really carry me all the way back?" I asked. "I remember something about that."

"He did," she nodded.

"They were just visiting me in my rooms," I told her. "I didn't know for sure if that was okay."

"Of course," she answered. "Keeping in mind you are responsible for your guests, you are free to invite over whomever you wish."

"Thank you!"

"Oh," she said casually. "I meant to ask you. Remember that first student you had a match with? I think his name was Elvar?"

"Um. Yeah?"

"One of his friends, a boy named Alfin, was injured pretty badly. Something about falling down some stairs, but his jaw was broken. Did you hear anything about that?"

"I...uh...I don't really know any of the others. Just Rispan and Mouse." I didn't want to lie, but I didn't want to get Rispan in trouble, either.

She cocked an eyebrow at me, making me think she knew the whole story.

"So," I tried to change the subject. "When can I go back to my own rooms?"

"Anytime," she shrugged.

"Great!" I threw my legs off the bed and tried to stand. "Ow!" I immediately fell back to the bed.

"What's wrong?" Neelu rushed to me.

"My legs," I groaned. "I rode the pony for hours to catch up with them. I never knew riding was so hard!"

She looked at me. "How much riding had you done before?"

"Never!" I shook my head.

Neelu started laughing, and then tried to stop. "I'm sorry, I don't mean to laugh at you. We'll see about getting you some riding lessons, too."

"Well, we don't have to do that right away, do we?"

"No." I could tell she was trying not to laugh again, which just made me scowl at her. "We can wait for that. At least until you can walk straight."

"So, what's the best way to get back to my rooms without walking?"

She just smirked. "One step at a time."

"Carry me?" I teased.

"Dream on. But I'll help you."

Moving hurt, but I could tell it was helping to work out the stiffness. We slowly made our way from the healer wing to my rooms. The stairs were the most painful part. After what seemed like an eternity, we arrived at the door to my suite.

We stepped inside. Rispan and Mouse were both there. Mouse was on a chair by the table and Rispan was on the couch. They both stood up when they saw me.

"Are you okay?" Rispan asked.

"Yes," I told him. "I just need to sit down."

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"Don't worry," Neelu said. "She's just sore from her first day of riding."

"Why?" Rispan asked. "Is it hard?"

"Ask her," Neelu chuckled. "She's the one who can barely walk."

"What about you guys?" I'd had enough talk about me and my riding experience. "Are you alright?"

"Oh, yeah," Rispan answered. "Mouse was pretty tired from carrying you, but he's all rested now. Right, Mouse?"

"Right," he nodded.

"You know," Neelu commented. "You three make a pretty good team. I'll talk with Veron about training the three of you together." She looked at Rispan and Mouse. "Where do you two live?"

"I'm in the kids' home," Rispan said.

"Oh?" Neelu looked at him. "How long have you been there?"

He shrugged, "Ten years. Something like that."

"And you, Felgor?"

"Well, since I quit the farm, I haven't really had a steady place."

"Where do you keep your things?" I asked him. "Extra clothes and stuff?" As soon as the words left my mouth, I wished I hadn't said them.

"I have some stuff on the shelves in the shower room by the practice yard," he said, his eyes on the floor.

"Once you two reach intermediate level one, you'll be expected to stay in the barracks," Neelu said. "But if it's alright with Mira, you both could stay here in the other bedroom until then."

"Could we?" Rispan looked at me, his eyes wide with excitement.

"That would be great," I smiled. "If you guys want to."

"Yes!" Rispan crowed.

Mouse just smiled and nodded.

"Alright," Neelu said. "I'll let the guard know. Meanwhile, you two probably want to collect whatever things you need and bring them here."

"I'm on it!" Rispan said, and he was out the door in an instant.

Mouse nodded. "I'll be right back."

"I still miss my family," I said to Neelu after they had both gone. "But at least it seems like I'm getting a new one."

"You've been through a lot with them," she said. "You've saved them and they have saved you. Such a bond should be supported and strengthened. Training together will make all of you stronger, both together and individually."

"Is it bad that I still want to go home?"

"No." She put her hand on my arm. "I truly hope that one day you can return. But while you are here, it is good that you have people to stand with who will stand by you."

"Oh!" I just remembered. "Laruna made a portal! She knows portal magic!"

"That's very interesting," she said. "I wonder where she learned it. It isn't common knowledge."

"Maybe..." I realized I hadn't seen any books since I'd gotten to Daoine. "Do you have books here?"

"Of course," Neelu answered.

"On magic?"

"Yes," she mused. "We'll have to search her quarters to see if there is anything there."

"What will happen to her?" I asked. "Laruna, I mean."

Neelu's face instantly clouded. "We need to know how far this has spread. This is a vile betrayal."

"But why would she do it?"

"With all the anti-*Urgaban* innuendo, I can only think she was trying to block an alliance with them. But why? I don't know."

"I met an *Urgaban*, a merchant," I told her. "From Pokorah-Vo, the outcast city. He wasn't like Ragar at all. He was...good."

I could see the conflicting emotions playing across her face.

"Neelu." I looked at her. "Gilglys and Farlen gave us an example of how even among the *Ulané Jhinura*, there are bad people. Maybe it's no different with the *Urgaban*. Or with the outcast *Urgaban*."

"Perhaps." She didn't look convinced. "We shall see."

Once Mouse and Rispan returned, Neelu left us alone. We ended up having dinner in the suite instead of going to the dining hall, which really impressed Rispan, because I didn't want to try to walk there and back. But Neelu showed up the next morning, bright and early to go to breakfast and send us to the practice yard.

Evidently, she had talked with Veron because he was waiting for us with one of the instructors in blue *rinti*.

"Get changed quickly and get back here," he said.

We got into our *rinti* as fast as we could, and in less than two minutes, we were back in front of him.

"Neelu Ulané Pulakasado has requested that we get the three of you through the beginning levels as quickly as possible," he told us. "To that end, Sharané has been assigned as your full-time trainer. You will report to her at the beginning of each morning and afternoon period, and you will not leave the practice yard unless she has dismissed you." He cocked an eyebrow at us with a grin. "Playtime is over."

Veron turned on his heel and walked away.

Sharané looked us over without speaking. I couldn't read her expression.

"I didn't ask for this assignment," she finally said. "I don't want it, and the sooner I'm done with it, the better. That means I'm going to have to get you lugs through the training as fast as I can so I can get back to more important things. But you have to do it right. You will NOT be allowed to make me look bad. That means you are

going to have to be the best *zergishti* graduates to come out of the beginner program. Any questions?"

That sounded rhetorical, but I tentatively raised my hand.

She turned her emerald eyes on me like a hawk. "What is it?"

"Um, I keep hearing that word and I don't know what it means."

"What word?"

"*Zergishti*?"

Rispan and Mouse both started laughing and immediately stifled it when Sharané looked sharply at them.

"All of you. Five laps while I decide what to do with you." Her eyebrows lifted. "Now!"

We immediately took off running. My legs were still hurting from my pony ride, but I pushed myself to ignore it and keep going.

Once we finished with the laps, she had us working through our forms. She started us on beginner level one, having us moving at a glacially slow speed, continually stopping us and fixing our positions. She'd back us up to go through it again and again. When she was satisfied that we knew what we were supposed to do, she started speeding it up. She did the same with beginner level two.

When we hit beginner level three, it was harder. This was newer material for me, and it was also brand-new to Mouse. She worked us on only that level for the rest of the morning. It was grueling.

When we came back in the afternoon, she had us working the bags after another five laps. She ran us through the same sequence I'd been doing with Veron—the bag, the swinging tree, sparring, and weapons practice.

"Felgor," she said. "You have yet to choose a weapon. Mira, you have been training with the staff and with the knife. Rispan, you have been training double-sticks. For the rest of your beginning training, you will all train on the staff and double-sticks. Once you

reach intermediate level, you will have the option of changing your weapons.”

“Can I still practice with the knife?” I asked.

“Not on my time.” Her voice was like steel. “Once you reach intermediate, you’re someone else’s problem.”

Since there were three of us, she would rotate in for our sparring. We weren’t stuck with any one person for very long since she kept switching it up, but sparring with her usually resulted in some degree of pain. We would also observe each other sparring and she would coach us. Training with her was brutal, but I really felt like we were becoming competent. Competent beginners, anyway.

Each day was the same, but every other day, she would add a new form for the next beginner level. We would flow straight from one form to the next until we would come to the new one. After two weeks, we had covered all seven forms of the beginner level, then she worked us on really perfecting them at any speed. Meanwhile, we had advanced our sparring, both open-handed and with the staff or double-sticks.

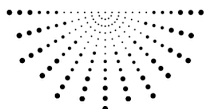
At the same time, Tesia had been tutoring me in magic three evenings a week. We worked on some basic things like starting a fire or moving small objects, but mostly, we focused on using magic for defense, either against magical attacks or physical attacks.

On my off nights from her, I went back to the practice yard and drilled more with Rispan and Mouse. Thanks to my amulet, I had learned to speak *Valikari*, which was the common tongue used in Daoine and, I learned, in most other realms. Evidently, the language originated from another realm entirely and the details were lost to antiquity. But the language had spread, and I no longer needed the amulet to speak or understand it.

We arrived for another morning of training. Veron was waiting with Sharané and three others who were wearing dark grey, hooded *rinti* with cloth covering the lower part of their face.

“Sharané tells me you are ready to apply for intermediate status,” Veron said, his teal eyes unreadable. He sounded like he might be questioning her judgement.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



We looked at each other; this was news to us.
“But...” I was confused.

“You have a question, beginner?” he asked me sharply.

“But I thought we were the worst students she’d ever had to train? That we would never be good enough?”

“Have you seen any other students I have trained?” Sharané demanded.

“Um...” I shook my head. “No, but—”

“Then I think you are hardly in a position to evaluate who have been my worst or best students.”

“But you said—”

She shrugged and glanced away. “I may have exaggerated.”

“Be that as it may,” Veron cut in. “You have been submitted for trial.”

“*Putri*—” the word barely made it out of Rispan’s mouth before the three in dark grey *rinti* sprang into motion.

We were still in our regular clothes and weren’t ready for anything. Still, we reacted quickly, dodging and blocking as they came for us. After a brief flurry, we were standing with our backs to

each other with the other three circling us. They switched places constantly, weaving in and out.

One executed a dive roll forward at me. Rispan shifted to help and he was grabbed from behind. His assailant had thrown him to the ground and pinned him with a combination arm-bar and chokehold; he wasn't going anywhere. The one who had rolled toward me had changed his direction and struck Mouse on the back of the knee, a glancing blow with his shoulder.

Mouse stumbled slightly, but before he could recover, the third one gave him a double palm strike, sending him backward over the second attacker. The third one then came at me, preventing me from doing anything to help Mouse. I could see that Mouse had been pinned similarly to Rispan.

Now it was just the two of us.

He came forward and I quickly moved back out of range. As soon as I came to a stop, he rushed forward again and threw strike after strike at me. I kept blocking and tried to hit him, but he evaded every strike. He reached with his left hand to grab me, over-extending himself. I launched myself at the opening, but suddenly, he wasn't there. Before I could reorient myself, I was flung through the air to land hard on the floor. Instantly, I felt an arm snake around my throat and his legs wrapped around my body from behind. I tried to strike with my elbows, but he moved a knee to the center of my back and the arm on my throat tightened.

"Enough," Veron spoke.

The three masked attackers released us.

"Get changed," Veron commanded.

We went straight to the locker rooms and got into our *rinti*. We were so rushed, not even Rispan tried to talk.

Did we fail?

Back on the floor, Veron had the three of us put on sparring gear that had more protective covering than what we were used to. The three in the dark grey *rinti* didn't do the same. Maybe the three of us would be fighting each other this time.

"Select your weapon of choice," Veron told us.

Mouse and I both grabbed a staff while Rispan went for his double-sticks. We'd all become proficient with either weapon, but we still had our preferences.

"Felgor," Veron called him forward. "You're first."

Mouse looked around confused for a moment. His opponent came forward holding a two-handed longsword.

"That's not a practice sword," Mouse was stunned.

"This is not practice," Veron answered.

There was no more warning, as the sword was coming for him. He quickly brought his staff to bear and deflected the blows. Against a sword, you don't try to block or parry with a staff; you deflect or redirect, and you try for the arms instead of the blade. Mouse successfully fended off the attack and even tried to go on the offensive, but he left his staff extended a moment too long and his opponent grabbed it. The sword swung in a one-handed arc and stopped at Mouse's neck. His opponent released him and stepped back.

"Rispan," Veron called him. "On the floor."

Rispan stepped forward, trying to loosen himself up. His opponent came spinning forward, a short-handled axe in one hand and a hammer in the other. I could see the color drain from Rispan's face, but he blocked the blows that were raining down on him.

One of Rispan's sticks went flying and the hammer struck him in the ribs hard enough that, if not for his padding, would have broken ribs. As it was, it knocked the wind from him and he struggled to

breathe while blocking with his remaining stick. It wasn't long before he was disarmed and the axe-blade was hooked behind his neck. As with Mouse, his opponent released him.

I'd already seen that my opponent also had a staff.

"Mira—"

"Wait!"

Veron's eyebrows went up at that, but I quickly went back to the weapons rack and put back the staff. Instead, I grabbed two wooden practice daggers and tucked them into my belt on the right side, hilts forward. I had been practicing with them in the evening against both Mouse and Rispan. I'd incorporated some of the techniques from double-stick fighting. I'd gotten very good against both of them, whether they used the staff or double-sticks.

I took my place on the floor.

"Are you quite ready?" Veron asked me.

Before I could answer, my opponent was coming at me. I still hadn't drawn the wooden daggers. The trick to fighting bare-handed against a staff was simple—don't get hit. I had gotten very good at anticipating strikes and getting out of the way. That's what I was trying to do now—avoid direct hits by ducking, or twisting so when the strike came at such an angle, I could deflect and redirect it. I was sure they were expecting me to use the staff or double-sticks that Sharané had trained us on, and maybe they wouldn't be ready for this.

I pulled a dagger from my belt with my left hand and did some strikes that would be expected from a stick. He blocked them easily, not realizing it had been a set-up. I went under an overhand strike that engaged my left hand. He didn't see me draw my other dagger, tucked as it was along my forearm. But he felt it when one strike

slashed across his stomach and a second strike slashed up across where his pectoral muscle connected to his shoulder.

He stopped and stepped back, giving me a slight bow before he went back to the side.

"Alright," Veron spoke again. "You've been getting personal training for weeks now. Each of you, tell me what you learned today."

None of us spoke for a moment, and the silence dragged on.

"We have a lot to learn," Mouse answered, his chocolate eyes on the ground.

"Yeah." Rispan looked just as dejected. "I really thought we were doing well. When you said we were submitted for trial, I knew it was going to be hard, but I thought we were ready." He looked up. "I hope you'll give us another chance. I know we can do better!"

"It wasn't a fair match!" I was angry. "Of course we lost! These guys are much more advanced! How could you expect us to win and pass the trial?"

"Who said you had to win to pass the trial?" Veron asked.

That brought me up short. Veron started laughing, then he tried to make his face more serious.

"The look on your face when the wind has left your sails," he said, shaking his head. I just scowled at him, and mirth threatened to return to his features.

"The trial is not about winning." He looked at each of us. "It is about how well you perform, especially when you are outmatched or outclassed. None of you were expected to win; you were expected to respond competently for beginner graduates. No more."

We weren't expected to win?

It took a moment for that to sink in, then I realized I *had* won my last match. What did that mean?

"Sharané." Veron turned to her. "I agree with your assessment. They are ready."

She nodded with satisfaction, then she eyed us.

"Don't get too full of yourselves," she said. "This just means you are good for *beginners*. You still have a long way to go."

"Felgor nya Su Lariano," Veron barked.

"Yes, sir," Felgor said, standing tall.

"Do you accept entry into the service and protectorship of your clan and your people? To accept advanced training for use in that service? To live and fight and, if needed, die for that service?"

"I do," Mouse answered. "It would be an honor."

Veron nodded acknowledgment.

"Rispan nya Su Lariano," Veron called him.

"Yes, sir! I do, sir!" Rispan answered.

"Wait for the oath, Sprig!"

"Yes, sir."

"Do you accept entry into the service and protectorship of your clan and your people? To accept advanced training for use in that service? To live and fight and, if needed, die for that service?"

"Yes, sir!" he answered proudly.

"Mirabella Cervantes Ramirez!"

"Yes."

"You are not of the Su Lariano clan. Your situation is different. I will only ask you this; can you swear you will not use your training against the Su Lariano and that you will always act in good faith?"

"I swear it," I answered.

"Very well," he nodded. "You are all hereby promoted to intermediate level and you are now enlisted in the Su Lariano military on a probationary status. Sharané will get you situated, and then you have the rest of the day off. Dismissed."

"Mira," he called to me before we left. "The boys will move to the barracks full-time. You have other duties, being part of the diplomatic corps. You will have a bunk in the barracks, but you won't be expected to live there full-time once you have completed your basic training. It will depend on your schedule, along with your other training and responsibilities."

"That makes sense, but I don't know when I'll be needed for diplomat stuff."

He nodded. "I didn't ask you to take the same oath because I didn't think it would be a fair expectation. You are not in this realm by choice."

"No." I shook my head. "You're right. And if I had the chance to go home, I would. But I would miss this place, and my friends here."

"Also," he added, "I don't know that you will officially be part of the guard or the army. When your friends joined Sprig training—beginner training—this is what they were hoping for. With you, it was different."

Before I could say anything else, Neelu was hugging me.

"That was great!" she beamed. "I was watching the whole thing!"

"You saw us?"

"You made me so proud! And that last match? Brilliant!" She hugged me again. "Do you know how often a beginner graduate wins a trial match?"

"Um...not very often?"

"Practically never!" she laughed. "They make sure to choose opponents who are better than the Sprigs."

"Sprigs?"

"The beginners," she clarified. "They are very specific in who they send for the trials."

"They weren't expecting the daggers."

“Exactly! Otherwise, they’d have sent someone they knew you couldn’t beat.”

“So, if I’d stuck with the staff—”

“You’d have been clobbered,” she grinned. “No chance whatsoever.”

Sharané stepped up. “You need to get out of that *rinti*,” she told me. “Beginner colors no longer suit you. Hurry and get changed.”

I looked at Neelu.

“Don’t worry,” she said. “I’ll meet you for lunch in the dining hall. I have some other things to talk with you about.”

Once we changed, Sharané took us down some tunnels I wasn’t familiar with. First, she took us to Uniform Issue. We were each issued a heavy canvas bag and three sets of work uniforms, three sets of duty uniforms, one dress uniform, a heavy wool coat, a lighter coat, one sweater, one pair of work boots, and one pair of dress shoes. Among other odds and ends, they also included four sleeveless undershirts, a work belt, and a dress belt.

“When you are on duty, you will always be in the appropriate full uniform of the day,” the clerk intoned with a bored expression.

“Uniform of the day?” I asked him.

“Your Tree will explain.”

They must have been expecting me, because they actually had sizes for me. Also, they issued us underwear, and mine looked like the sports bra and panties Felora had made for me. Clearly, some coordination had been going on. Once we loaded everything into our canvas bags, Sharané took us to Weapons Issue.

“When you are on duty or in uniform,” she told us, “you are only allowed to carry officially issued weapons.” She turned to me. “I know you have your own daggers, but when you are on duty, you can’t carry them.”

Weapons issue consisted of one short sword, one dagger, a short staff, and something that looked like the *nunchaku* I had seen in martial arts movies.

"I know you haven't been trained in all of these yet, but don't worry about that for now."

"What about double-sticks?" Rispan asked. "We've all trained on those."

Sharané nodded to the clerk and he gave us a set of those as well.

"Let's go," she said.

We followed her down another tunnel until we arrived at a room full of bunks, stacked two-high. This was the first room I had seen that didn't have tapestries on the walls.

"Find an unclaimed bunk and stow your gear in the matching trunk," she told us. "You'll know if a bunk is unclaimed because the blankets and sheets will be folded on top instead of the bed being made."

There were a few other people in the room, and as we walked toward the back, they started laughing and pointing the other way. "Nope! Rookies get stuck near the door. It's full up back here."

We headed back to the front, watching for open bunks, but nothing was available except by the door. And the bottom bunks were all taken. That was fine with me, I'd rather have a top bunk, anyway. I opened the trunk and put my things inside.

"Are you finished fooling around?" Sharané asked us.

We nodded.

"Good." She pointed to a board that hung from the front wall. "This is the duty roster where you will find your assignments. Follow me."

She led us back to the hall and turned right. Not long after, she brought us to a stop between two doors. She pointed to the left.

"This is the main mess. You will eat here during meal breaks when you are on duty. You can also use it when you are off duty."

"And here." She led us through the door on the right into an enormous cavern. "This is where you will muster," she explained. "It is also where you will practice now. Back by the duty roster, there is a diagram of this yard. It shows you where training areas are, and where you will muster with your unit leader, Tree Nirellen, at six o'clock tomorrow morning. Do *not* be late on your first day."

"Tree?" I asked.

"It's a rank," Rispan supplied.

"Yes," Sharané confirmed. "It is the rank of your commanding officer. You are now Twigs. Just barely. And you are dismissed until tomorrow morning." She turned on her heel and walked away.

"Thank you!" I called after her.

"Make me proud, you three," she said over her shoulder.

"Whew!" Rispan exclaimed. "I can't believe it! We made it!"

"You know," Mouse looked at me, "We wouldn't be here if it wasn't for you."

"You earned your place," I disagreed with him. "We all did."

He nodded. "But it was because of the extra training, which we only got because of you."

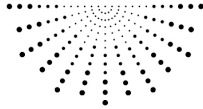
"I don't know," I shook my head. "I think it was because you guys impressed Neelu with what you did to get me back. Which I don't think I thanked you enough for."

Rispan shrugged. "Hey, you do what you have to for family."

"Yes," I nodded, a warm feeling came over me at that thought. "You do."

Maybe my life was pretty perfect after all. I mean, as perfect as it could be, anyway.

CHAPTER NINETEEN



We were struggling to get into our uniforms for the first time. The wake-up horn had sounded and we only had a few minutes before we were supposed to meet our Tree—that is, our commanding officer, Tree Nirellen. We were supposed to be in uniform and muster with the rest of the company.

“What are you doing?” a voice sounded from nearby.

I looked up. It was another of the Twigs. We were the lowest rank in the service, not that I was even sure if I was really in the service.

“We’re getting dressed,” I answered. “What does it look like we’re doing?”

“Oh, man.” He shook his head. “You’re not going to get off to a good start.”

“What do you mean?”

“Wrong uniform.”

“We’re wearing the same ones as everyone else,” Mouse told him.

“It’s considered disrespectful to your Tree if you don’t wear dress uniforms on your first day,” the Twig explained.

“What?” Rispan stopped what he was doing.

"Nobody told us that!" I was starting to panic.

"Yeah," the Twig said, nodding. "And you need to bring all the weapons you've been issued so he can confirm what you have."

We started tearing off our work uniforms and grabbed our dress uniforms. He helped us get it all squared away.

"Don't forget the weapons," he said. "No," he corrected when he saw me adding the dagger to my belt. "Dagger on the left, same side as the sword. Double sticks under the belt on the right. That's a tricky one—not everyone gets those on first issue. As for your *shyntak*, the linked sticks." He gestured toward what looked to me like *nunchaku*. "Put that crosswise under the belt in front. That's good. Keep your staff in your right hand."

After we finished suiting up, he examined us. "That's perfect!"

"Thanks," I said. "I'm Mira, by the way."

"No time! Let's hurry up before we're late. You're new, so you have to stand in front of the first row."

We rushed out to the yard right behind him and took our places in front of the first row, glad for the help. We were clearly lost on what we were supposed to do.

Everyone seemed to be standing at attention, so we tried to do the same.

An *Ulané Jhinura* approached the front of the group. He had an air of authority, and I assumed this was our Tree. I still hadn't learned to identify one rank from another.

He stood and stared at us, his gaze moving to focus on each of us for a few seconds before moving on to the next.

"Can someone *please* tell me exactly what I am looking at here?" he demanded.

I heard some snickering from different people behind us.

"Am I telling jokes up here?" he snapped, and the snickering stopped.

"Um..." I was confused. "I—"

"Did I give you permission to engage in conversation, Twig?"

"I, uh—"

"What?" He was in my face and I felt like I was watching some movie scene, but watching it was so much different than being in it.

"No."

"*What?*"

"No, sir?"

"No, *sir?*" He mocked my tone. "Are you asking me a question?"

"No, sir!"

"Tell me this, Twig, since you like to talk so much. Do you see where the rest of the company is standing?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Do you see the painted lines that each row is standing on?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Do you see a line under your feet?"

"No, sir!" I felt a sinking in my stomach.

"Well, as long as we know you aren't blind, here's another question for you. Do you see what uniform these Twigs are all wearing?"

"Yes, sir!"

"But you three decided you wanted to wear dress uniforms instead? Is that it?"

"Yes, sir! I mean, no, sir!"

"And can you tell me why the *zergish* you three are carrying all these weapons? Are you planning to attack me, Twig?"

"No, sir!"

I was going to find that Twig and he was going to seriously pay.

"Since you three are new around here, I'm going to help you out. You should get a look at the area; I wouldn't want you to get lost. Do you think ten laps around the perimeter of the yard will help?"

"Yes, sir!"

"And since I am *certain* you have already met some other *helpful* Twigs in this platoon, everyone else will follow behind you for those ten laps! Then you can go to breakfast if you are done in time, and then you three will report directly to me. Is that understood?"

"Yes, sir!" the platoon sounded as one.

"What are you waiting for? Run!"

Running was awkward, carrying all our weapons, but we led off and the rest followed behind. Dress uniforms were not designed for this kind of activity. By the time we finished ten laps, our uniforms were totally soaked. And I was starting to get blisters in weird places from the chafing.

We got back to the barracks and changed into our work uniforms, then went down the hall to the main mess. There, we wolfed down eggs and some sort of porridge. A few minutes later, we were standing at attention in front of Tree Nirellen in his office.

He glared from one of us to the other, then chuckled.

"Someone got you good this morning, eh? It's to be expected. A little hazing is normal. Stand at your ease."

"If you knew, then why—" he didn't let me finish.

"It's a lesson, Twig," he said. "The smiling face isn't always your friend, and the frowning one may be your salvation."

We all looked at each other, then I nodded to him.

"Now," he went on. "I have been tasked with training each of you to your first promotion as quickly as possible. The rest of your company started basic training two weeks ago, so you're already behind. This means you will get extra training. It does not mean you

can avoid your turns on duty. Quickly does not mean shortcuts; it means training harder and longer. Stick Aréla!" he called out.

A woman stepped in. "Yes, sir?"

"These are the three I spoke to you about. Please get them oriented to the program we discussed."

"Yes, sir!" she said, then she turned to us. "This way."

We followed her out the door and went left down the hall.

I turned to Rispan. "I take it, *Stick* is another rank?"

He nodded. "Do you see that pin by her collar?"

I looked and noticed a small metal pin. It seemed to look a bit like a stick. As I thought about it, I had seen something pinned to Tree Nirellen's collar as well. I'd have to pay more attention in the future.

"You have a lot to learn, Twig," Stick Aréla said over her shoulder. She sighed and shook her head. "Just my luck."

This new phase was going to be a totally new experience for me, and I didn't know if I was ready for it. Neelu had given me an idea of what to expect when I had spoken with her over lunch the day before. She also said she was going to be out of the city for a while, scouting with Grangor, and that our trip to Laraksha-Vo was on hold. While I was in basic training, my sessions with Tesia would also be on hold.

"I take it you have no idea how any of this works?" Stick Aréla asked me.

I shook my head.

"You have eight weeks of basic training to get through in six weeks. The schedule for basic training is posted on the bulletin board at the front of the barracks. You'll see one or two slots each day marked as a free study period. You'll be doing your extra training during that time to get caught up."

"Six weeks?" I didn't know it would take so long.

"And once you're done with that, you will spend six months on basic duty assignment. Once that is completed, it will be decided which branch of service you are best suited for, and you will be transferred. If you are promoted before that time, your transfer will be concurrent with that promotion."

Unless I find a way home first.

That wasn't likely, and I knew it. But I could hope. In some ways, it still felt like I was just keeping myself busy until I could go home.

I was definitely getting physically stronger, though. And tougher. As the days turned into weeks, my skills with hand-to-hand combat and with weapons grew. In addition to the weapons I already knew, I became fairly competent with the short sword, the short staff, the *shyntak*, and even the bow. We also studied tactics and strategy.

It wasn't all about fighting and weapons though. There was a branch of the service that focused on city maintenance and another on forest maintenance, and we did a lot of study in these areas.

And then, there was all the marching.

I did find that Twig who'd hazed us that first day. His name was Lanar. He smiled and apologized, and I accepted his apology. Lanar never did figure out who had filled his boots with porridge while he slept, but he may have suspected.

The days were long, busy, and intense, but the weeks flew by. Before we knew it, we had graduated and our status as Twigs was firmly established. The company stayed together under Tree Nirellen to start our bi-weekly rotations through the guard branches for the city and forest, along with the maintenance branches.

There were one hundred Twigs in the company, split into four platoons of twenty-five each. The platoons were split up for their rotations among the four branches. The duty roster showed our first

rotation would be City Maintenance. This could include anything from construction to renovation to garbage pickup to sewage. I hoped we wouldn't have to work on sewage.

But that worry was two days away. We had just graduated, and we had two days of liberty to celebrate. For a moment, my mind turned to Nora's upcoming graduation from high school. Had it happened yet? I pushed the thought away.

"Now you can finally see Market Square," Rispan told me. "And since we have graduated, we are all officially adults!"

"So?" I wasn't following his logic.

He just looked at me like I was crazy, then he got a mischievous look in his eye.

"Come on!" He grinned. "I'll show you!"

"Yo, Moose!" someone called. Rispan's joking nickname had come up at some point and caught on. "Where you guys going?"

"Market Square," he answered.

"Not without us!" It was Kooras. He was in our platoon, and we had grown close with most of them, including him.

"The whole platoon is a pretty big group," Mouse observed.

"Fine," Chiwané answered. "Whoever isn't ready now is on their own."

We just laughed as Rispan led us off. Besides me and Rispan and Mouse, we had Kooras, Chiwané, Kirsat, Tarana, Avin, and Sabela. We were halfway down the hall when Lanar ran to catch up.

"Where are we going?" he asked.

"There's a place on the east side of Market Square I've wanted to go to forever," Rispan told him. "Now that we're adults, they'll let us in!"

"What place?" Sabela asked.

"You'll see!"

Market Square was the biggest cavern I had seen yet. The floor was checkered with tents and huts; stalls selling anything you could imagine. Along the walls of the cavern were doors that led into more solid structures for shops and restaurants and bars.

Rispan led us off to one side. About a third of the way down we came to a door with a sign above it that said Dancing Peacock.

A tough-looking *Ulané Jhinura* stood at the door. She eyed us warily as we approached, but made no move to stop us as Rispan led us inside without pausing.

"We're here!" he said jubilantly.

There was a large empty table in one corner. Rispan marched straight to it and staked a claim by planting his butt on a bench.

I looked around. It was still early, so the place was sparsely populated. We spread out around the table and a waiter walked up casually to us with an inquisitive look on his face.

Before anyone could say anything, Rispan called out an order.

"We'll have dinner, the best you've got in the kitchen. And three pitchers of Pixie juice to start!"

"Pixie juice?" I asked him.

"You'll see!" Nothing was going to wipe the grin from his face.

I looked around at my small group of friends. Since I had first started working out in the beginners' practice yard, I noticed there was no real rhyme or reason to hairstyles between men and women. My group was no different. Avin had short hair and Kooras had his long hair in a ponytail. Tarana had her hair buzzed on the sides and a little longer on top. Chinawé's blond hair was long and held snugly in the back by braids. Sabela had one side of her head shaved, and on the other side, her dark brown hair hung even with her jawline. So far, I'd only seen men with totally shaved heads.

The pitchers got to the table before the food, and we filled our glasses. Chiwané lifted her glass.

"To graduation!" she toasted.

We all saluted that and I took a swig of the red liquid. It was mainly sweet and fruity, with a hint of citrus but with some slightly bitter afternotes to balance it, and a spicy undertone that rounded it out. I couldn't identify all the flavors, but it was really good.

By the time the food arrived, we'd had to order a second round of pitchers. By this time, I was feeling a little light-headed.

"Hey," I called out. The place was more packed and it was getting loud inside. "Does this have alcohol in it?"

Rispan just laughed.

The dinner was wonderful, though I had no idea what I was eating. Something grilled, covered in a creamy onion sauce, a mixture of vegetables I didn't recognize, and some dark and nutty bread. The food helped settle my head and I slowed down the refills of my Pixie juice.

Someone at the front of the room was playing some sort of stringed instrument and singing. It seemed to be a popular song, because a lot of patrons were singing along.

"Another round of pitchers!" Kooras called out, though his attempt to stand while he said it didn't work very well.

By the time the next round of pitchers arrived, Kooras was passed out with his cheek buried in his half-eaten plate.

"Does anyone know where the restroom is?" I asked the group.

"Come with me." Avin stood up. "I'm going now. I'll show you."

Our feet got us there, though unsteadily. That Pixie juice must be much stronger than it tasted. On the way back to the table, we ran into Tarana, who was running towards the restroom with a panicked look on her face.

"What's wrong?" Avin put his hand on her shoulder.

She immediately emptied her stomach all over his chest and I barely avoided the splatter. Staff was there quickly to clean up and help Tarana to the restroom. One of them motioned Avin to a back door, probably to hose him down.

I weaved my way back to our table and focused on eating instead of drinking for several minutes. At some point, I forgot I wasn't drinking, because I was draining that last of what was in a glass when I noticed Avin was back and Kirsat was relating the story of what had happened, complaining that Avin still stunk and needed to rinse off some more. Sabela was laughing so hard, she fell off the end of the bench. This started another round of laughter around the table.

By now, the entertainment had changed and there were men and women doing dance numbers on the stage. They seemed to be good at suggestive motions and didn't believe in wearing excess clothing. This embarrassed me a little, but by now, I was used to the co-ed barracks and showers, so it wasn't the skin I was uncomfortable with. It was surprising what kind of images you can evoke with something as innocent as a peacock feather.

I had sort of had a boyfriend once when I was fourteen, but that had been maybe three weeks of anxiety-stomach and general cluelessness, and then he'd moved away. We'd kissed twice, but I think he'd been even more nervous than me.

"Hey," Rispan nudged me. "You wanna dance? I'm sure they'd let you join."

"No thanks," I laughed. "Not sure I could stand. You go ahead, though."

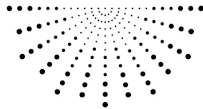
Rispan stood up quickly and fell over backwards. Mouse reached over, grabbed him by his collar, and helped him back to his seat.

“Maybe you should leave the dancing to the professionals,”
Mouse told him, but Rispan’s attention had already wandered.

“Well, hello there!” a voice sounded from above me.

I looked up to see Neelu’s smiling face.

CHAPTER TWENTY



“Neelu!” I jumped up and gave her a hug, but I stumbled into her a little and she held me up. I looked over her shoulder and saw Tesia just behind her.

“Tesia!” I hugged her, too, and managed to stay on my feet this time. I was so happy to see them both. I hadn’t talked to either of them since before starting basic training.

They steered me back to my bench and sat me down.

“Letting off some steam after graduation?” Neelu asked.

“Yes! We made it!”

“To graduation!” Chiwané said again, raising a glass.

“To graduation!” We all intoned for the umpteenth time and drained our glasses once more.

“Are you guys going to drink with us?” I asked Neelu and Tesia. “Have you tried this Pixie stuff? It’s really good!”

“Yes, it is,” she nodded. “Strong, too.”

“We’ll order some more, join us!”

“No, thank you,” she smiled. “We just wanted to say hello. Have fun with your friends tonight and maybe we can talk tomorrow.”

I started to object, but then Sabela distracted me, and when I finally looked back, they were gone.

I woke up on my bunk with my clothes and boots still on, a sour taste in my mouth, and I was having trouble thinking. When I sat up, I was still a little dizzy, and I was also very thirsty. I climbed down from my bunk and made my way to the main mess. I'd missed breakfast and it was too early for lunch, but I could drink all the water and coffee I wanted.

What I needed was a shower. Or maybe a soak. My thoughts went to the tub in my suite. That wasn't too far. I could walk there in less than ten minutes.

Well, as Mouse would say, sitting there wasn't going to get any onions chopped. I stood up and made my way down the tunnels to the corridors of the palace.

Once in my suite, I started to unbutton my uniform and noticed that the second bedroom door was ajar. I walked over and glanced in, only to find Rispan sound asleep with a woman who looked vaguely familiar. Was that one of the waitresses? I quietly closed the door so I wouldn't wake them.

After brushing my teeth, I stripped down and washed the sweat and grime and spilled beverage from the evening's festivities off my body. Then I slipped into the tub for a luxurious soak.

I had just about dozed off in the water when I heard a knock on the front door. After a few moments, the knock sounded again.

"Come in if it's important. Otherwise, leave me alone!" I called out, hoping whoever it was could hear me. Or maybe they wouldn't hear me and they'd walk away. Calling out had started a dull ache in my head, so I wasn't going to try that again. I was probably being rude, but I really didn't want to get out of the tub.

I heard the front door open and close.

"Mira?" Was that Neelu?

I was probably going to have to get out of the tub.

"Where are you?" It sounded like she was coming out of my bedroom. "Are you in here? Oh!" I heard a scream and the steps of someone running, followed by the front door slamming shut. "Good morning, Rispan. Sorry about your friend. I was looking for Mira."

"Well, she's not in here!"

I heard Neelu's musical laughter.

A moment later, the door to the bath opened and she stepped inside. I hardly gave it a thought that I was nude in the water. The co-ed shower rooms had long since gotten me over any embarrassment I might have felt.

"Here you are." She smiled and came to sit at the edge of the tub. "Did you have fun with your friends last night?"

"No...yes...maybe. Why didn't you warn me about that stuff?"

"What stuff?" she asked. "You mean the Pixie juice? It's a fermented beverage from certain fruit juices, nectars, and pollens. The exact ingredients are known only to the Pixies, the *Pilané Jhin*, that make it. What's the problem? You seemed to like it?"

"I'm just not used to alcohol. It's all Rispan's fault!"

"But they do have alcohol where you are from on Earth?"

"Yes, but where I'm from you have to be twenty-one to drink it."

"They don't consider you an adult until you're twenty-one?"

"Right. No," I corrected myself. "Mostly, when you're eighteen. But for alcohol, it's twenty-one."

"I don't understand the difference," she frowned. "Either you are an adult or you are not."

"Not everything always makes sense," I told her. "Was that what you wanted to talk about?"

Neelu just laughed. "I'm so glad you're handling your first hangover so well."

"I'm so glad you're so easily amused." I scowled at her.

"Oh, I'm amused by a lot of things," she smiled again. But it was a different sort of smile and I was immediately suspicious.

"I think," she said as she casually reached over to the magical temperature controller, "it's time for you to get dressed!"

With that, she gave the controller a twist to the left and the water in the tub turned icy-cold. She had already jumped up and was running out the door.

"Neeluuuuuu!" I screamed at her as I leaped out of the frigid water. But she was already gone.

By the time I'd dried off and went into the front room in my robe, Neelu and Rispan were sitting at the table and breakfast had been laid out, including coffee and orange juice. Rispan was already digging in.

Any recriminations died on my lips as I realized how hungry I was. The omelets here were heavenly.

"Rispan," Neelu said with mock severity. "I understand we have you to blame for Mira's first hangover."

Rispan froze with his next bite halfway to his mouth, looking at Neelu with wide violet eyes.

Neelu couldn't keep a straight face long enough.

"The look on your face!" She laughed. "Priceless! Like a little kid caught with his hand in the cookie jar!" Her sight turned inward for a moment as though remembering something fondly.

Rispan looked like he wasn't sure whether he was really off the hook, but he was prepared to run with it.

"You can't blame me," he said. "She's older. I'm just an impressionable youth who was easily led astray."

"I'm sure." Neelu cocked an eyebrow at him. "Be that as it may, if you don't mind, please take your plate to the other room. Mira and I have sensitive matters of state to discuss."

In a blur of motion, Rispan gathered his breakfast and his juice and disappeared into his bedroom, the door closed behind him.

Neelu opened her mouth to speak when the door was thrown open again.

"Wait!" Rispan rushed back to the table, grabbed his coffee, and disappeared back into his room.

"Sensitive matters of state?" I looked at her as I dished up some breakfast.

She shrugged. "I wanted to update you on what was going on with Grangor and the *Urgaban*. I know we had thought we would be heading to their city after a few weeks and you would join us. Clearly, that didn't happen."

I nodded as I took a swig of orange juice.

"Grangor couldn't believe that the problem with the outcasts was more than some gang or a few individuals," she went on. "Thanks to your map, we had a location for Pokorah-Vo."

"You checked it out?"

She nodded. "It seems that over the centuries the outcasts have built up quite a city. Grangor says his home city, Laraksha-Vo, is only half again as large as Pokorah-Vo. This is a bigger problem than even we knew. This isn't something that can be solved with some overpowering raid."

"What's the plan?"

"We need to gather more information," she said. "We need a thorough understanding of Pokorah-Vo, its inhabitants, and any factions there might be."

"How long is that going to take?"

"A while." She scowled. "For now, you should probably just continue with what you're doing. As long as you are continuing to

improve in your fighting skills, my gas is being met. But we will still need to work on teaching you to flit without killing yourself.”

“I don’t know that I want to be in the service,” I told her. “I mean, I don’t mind doing this for now and learning all these things, and I’ve made some good friends—”

“I understand,” she nodded. “And that isn’t expected. I know I’ve been away a lot, but I’ve been following your progress very closely. You’ve done well with everything and could pretty much take your pick of assignments, not to mention the diplomatic corps, but you also don’t have the bond with Su Lariano that those who’ve lived here all their life have. You’ve only been here a few months. You scarcely know anything about this world. We’re simply giving you education and experience so that when the time comes for you to choose your path, you will be in a good position to do so.”

“I do appreciate that,” I sighed.

Neelu got up quietly and tip-toed to the door of the spare bedroom. She gently put her palms against the door, and then suddenly shoved it open. I heard a gasp and a tumble, and saw Rispan on the floor behind the door, knocked over from where he had evidently been listening through the door.

“Does that meet with your approval, Twig?” Neelu demanded.

Rispan jumped to his feet and stood at attention.

“Yes, sir! Er—no, sir! Ma’am! Sir! Yes!”

Neelu just chuckled and tousled his hair.

“I think you’re going to have your hands full just keeping this one out of trouble,” she said to me over her shoulder.

“You don’t know the half of it.” I grinned.

“You’d be surprised by what I know,” she said, peering at Rispan through slitted eyes.

Rispan paled visibly, but made no comment.

"Alright," she said, coming back to the table. "I have to go." She gave me a hug. "Check in with Tesia and work out a couple sessions a week with her. She's expecting to hear from you."

After she had gone, Rispan sat down at the table with a dejected expression. "She hates me."

"No, she doesn't hate you."

"How do you know?"

I shrugged. "You're still breathing. For now."

He was lost in thought for a moment. "Isn't she awesome?" he asked, looking at me. "Scary, maybe, but awesome!"

"Do I detect a crush?"

"What?" He looked started. "No, nothing like that. It's just...I don't know...I've always admired her, that's all. She's special."

I decided to wait until I saw the duty roster before trying to coordinate training sessions with Tesia, though she did join us for dinner that night. The rest of the weekend passed uneventfully.

We spent the next five months cycling through each of the four branches of service on two-week rotations. An *Ulané Jhinura* company had four platoons, and a platoon had four squads, with six members per squad. This worked out to rotating the platoons individually through each branch of service. The four squads would typically be attached to separate active groups for the particular branch of service. This arrangement was a sort of apprenticeship.

This rotation, my squad was assigned to a veteran unit of Foresters. Now that most of the winter chill was gone, this rotation would be a lot more pleasant. There had been too many miserable patrols in the rain and mud. In general, I liked Forester duty best because it wasn't boring or monotonous. So far, aside from the rain, mud, and chill, it had been pretty easy—just patrolling the forest. The Maintenance branches were both a lot of work. City Guard

wasn't too bad if you were on patrol duty, but if you were guarding a stationary post, it was mind-numbing. Rispan and Mouse were in my platoon, but we were all in different squads, so we never had the same duty assignments.

Today, we were patrolling to the east of Su Lariano. The prior two days we'd been circling to the north. Forest patrols were all done on foot, so they were slow-going. I'd been trying to keep track of the days since I'd gotten to Daoine. As we walked along, I realized it had been a few weeks since the last time I'd worked out the calculations. I did the math, and discovered today was my birthday.

Not on Earth, of course. Not much time had passed there since I'd left, but adding my days spent here to the date I'd left meant I was seventeen today. I'd grown and changed a lot in the months here. I'd been given the responsibilities of an adult and I was doing my best with them. People treated me like an adult, but there was nothing I could identify as a point where I'd changed from being a kid to an adult. Maybe that's just how it was for everyone; you just got older and suddenly, everything was different, but nothing had changed.

I felt a little like a fraud sometimes. I was still the same person on the inside that I was last year. Sure, I knew a few more things now, but is that what makes you an adult? Knowledge?

Of course, on Earth they would still call me a kid and treat me like one. In some ways, that would be a relief, but I'm honestly not sure I could put up with it at this point. Too much had happened to me to go backwards.

It was still mid-morning when Sapling Ventaros gathered us together. I focused my mind back on what we were doing.

"No talking for the next several minutes," he said. "We are coming to a place that our intelligence has indicated is sometimes used by *Urgaban*. We've checked it several times and have yet to find any, but it's been weeks since the last time."

We moved forward in single file, weaving through the trees. I'd learned how to move much more quietly through the forest, though I wished for my custom boots from Gylan; they were much more comfortable and a lot quieter. If I actually joined the Foresters, I would have the option of wearing actual Forester gear rather than the regular uniform I was wearing. At least they had given us dark green, hooded cloaks to make us harder to see in the forest.

Ventáros signaled for us to split up. It looked like he had found a target ahead and wanted us to surround it. As I came into position, I recognized the place where Gilglys and Farlen had sold Rispan and Mouse to Gralbast. Sure enough, there was a party of *Urgaban* camped in the same spot.

Once we were in place, Ventáros called out, "*Urgaban!* You are trespassing in our forest. You are not welcome here!"

While he was speaking, the *Urgaban* in the camp jumped up and grabbed various weapons, peering around them into the forest.

One stepped forward. It was Gralbast.

"We're not looking for trouble," he called back. "We're simple traders, just trying to earn a living."

He turned to his men, who were holding their weapons nervously. "Put those down!" he ordered. When they hesitated, he snapped, "Do it!" Once they had complied, he faced back to us. "We haven't run into any official representatives," he said congenially. "We wouldn't know where to find any. Maybe you could help us?"

"We aren't here to help *Urgaban*," Ventáros said acidly. "We're here to get you out of our forest."

"Let's not shout back and forth at each other," Gralbast said. "Come, accept my hospitality and we can have a civilized conversation. I swear, no harm will come to you. We have no wish to fight you."

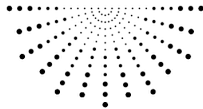
He turned and gestured to his men, saying something I couldn't understand. A couple of men grabbed a table and two chairs, as well as a wineskin and two cups. They set it up halfway between the camp and the edge of the trees. Gralbast sat on one side of the table and gestured to the chair on the other.

Ventaros turned to Senior Stem Yaleni, "Everyone should hold their position. If they try anything, attack at once." As Ventaros turned to go, I stopped him.

"Sapling, if you would allow me to accompany you?" I asked. "As a member of the Diplomatic Corps, I may be of use."

He hesitated for a moment, then nodded. "But I call the shots, Twig. Keep silent unless I say otherwise."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



*A*s we walked toward Gralbast, I raised my hood. I didn't know whether it would be a good idea for Gralbast's people to know I'd met him before. I wasn't sure whether Ventaros was supposed to know about it, either, since my meeting with Gralbast had to do with Laruna's betrayal.

Ventaros sat at the table. I stood behind him and a little to the side.

"Very well, *Urgaban*," he said. "I would not let it be said we are discourteous, but there is little to say. We know you have been meeting with criminals here, and it is to stop immediately."

"I thank you for your courtesy." Gralbast was really being on his best behavior. "I am Gralbast, merchant of Pokorah-Vo."

"I am Sapling Ventaros of Su Lariano."

"It is true, Sapling, that we have met with *Ulané Jhinura* here. If they were criminals among your people, I would not know of that. We certainly would not want to deal with that sort. It's always best to have official trade relations between peoples, don't you think?"

"What are you talking about?" This was clearly not what Ventaros had been expecting, and he didn't seem prepared to deal with it. "You are trespassing and are hereby ordered to leave!"

"Forgive me, Sapling." Gralbast gave a slight bow of his head. "I did not realize you were one to decide trade agreements for Su Lariano or I would have been more direct."

"The *Ulané Jhinura* have no agreements with the *Urgaban*."

"I heard that had changed recently," Gralbast told him. "In fact, this is what prompted me to come forward to similarly make contact."

I could tell Ventaros was out of his element and didn't know what to say. I stepped forward, put my hand on his shoulder, and bent to his ear.

"Sapling Ventaros," I whispered. "We need to look into this. If I may?"

He nodded to me and I turned to Gralbast.

"You're not the first *Urgaban* to reach out to the *Ulané Jhinura*, Gralbast," I told him. "I'm curious how you would have heard this."

He looked at me through slitted eyes. "You're a bit tall for an *Ulané Jhinura*. Yet, you wear the uniform."

I lowered my hood so he could clearly see my face. His dark eyes widened slightly in surprise and recognition. I gave my head a single shake and looked back at his men, hoping he wouldn't mention our previous encounter.

"I am not *Ulané Jhinura*," I answered. "They have been kind and gave me a home. But you were telling us how you heard of *Urgaban* meeting with *Ulané Jhinura*."

"Actually," he replied with a glint in his eye, "I was simply saying that I had heard it. A merchant such as myself, we have many sources of information. It is how we can stay competitive."

"I wouldn't expect you to reveal your specific sources," I told him. "But an indication of whether those sources were *Urgaban* or *Ulané Jhinura* might go a long way toward establishing trust."

He looked at me, considering my words. "To my knowledge," he finally answered, "this information has only come through *Urgaban* channels."

"Thank you for that," I nodded to him. "First, what Sapling Ventaros has told you is correct; we cannot allow you to stay in the forest at this time. There have been many unpleasant incidents between the *Ulané Jhinura* and residents of Pokorah-Vo. Second, we do not have authority to discuss trade; however, we can bring your request back to Su Lariano. If you would return here in three months, someone with authority, or at least with a response, could be here."

"That would be very satisfactory," he replied, smiling. "It's a tight turnaround, but doable. I will bring goods for trade. Perhaps we will be able to display them for your trade officials to show them what we have to offer."

"We can make no promises," I told him.

"Of course, of course," he answered. He turned to Sapling Ventaros. "Thank you again for your courtesy, Sapling. We will leave at once and will return in three months' time." He motioned again to one of his men, then turned back to us. "Meanwhile, I have a gift for your queen. If you would be so kind as to pass it along."

His man came forward with a small bundle and set it on the table. Gralbast removed the cloth to reveal a clear glass and crystal sculpture of a forest scene of trees around a pond. He reached out a finger and lightly tapped one of the trees with a fingernail.

The sculpture rang out a clear note as it vibrated from his touch. The vibration grew and other parts of the sculpture began to vibrate in other tones, producing a cascading effect of notes. The sculpture was playing music through the vibrations of the crystals. The effect was both beautiful and mesmerizing.

"These pieces are fragile," Gralbast told us. "We brought a small one so it would be easy to carry safely."

"Are you saying you were waiting here specifically to contact us?" I asked.

"It did seem reasonable that the location of this campsite had become known," he replied with a smile. "We've been waiting here for two weeks and I had begun to doubt my assumptions."

"We will accept your gift on the behalf of Queen Astrina Ulané Poloso," Ventaros was getting his feet under him. "And we will include your request for an official meeting here in three months. However, none of this should be taken as a promise or guarantee."

"Of course, Sapling Ventaros," Gralbast gave a short bow. "Again, thank you for your courtesy. And thank you as well for your assistance," he said to me. He picked up the untouched wineskin on the table and tossed it to me. "Now you owe me one," he grinned.

With that, Gralbast turned on his heel and began issuing orders to his men. The table and chairs were collected, and the *Urgaban* packed everything up. We observed them from the forest and they were on the trail within a half hour. I guessed that his comment about owing him one had nothing to do with the wineskin he'd tossed me, but with what he'd given me regarding his source of information.

"Did you believe him?" Ventaros asked me. "You think he's been sitting there for two weeks, just waiting for us?"

I laughed. "I'm sure he was hoping to run into us, but I doubt he'd come out here if there wasn't business. I'd bet he's had that sculpture with him his last few trips."

He nodded, thinking. He looked at me again.

"Thank you for your assistance, Twig. I will mention it in my report."

We headed back to Su Lariano. It was a few days before we were expected, but we needed to report in on what had happened.

Once we were back at Forester headquarters, Ventaros dismissed the unit.

“But stay close,” he said. “Once I report in, they may want to debrief some of you, or they might just send us back out on patrol.”

I went by the barracks, but it was empty. Not that I’d expected anyone to be there; everyone in my company was out on duty rotation. I changed into a *rinti* and went to the practice yard for a workout. I’d gotten better with the *shyntak*, which I still thought of as *nunchaku*, but the staff was still my best weapon.

Just as with open-hand, there were forms for each weapon and I went through them now. Sliding through the familiar motions had an almost meditative effect, bringing me into the *now* of the moment and I went through them, feeling good as my body loosened up and the sweat flowed freely. By this time, I had studied most of the advanced forms for a few of the weapons. I’d also gone through all the forms for the staff and even started to develop a form of my own.

I stood now with the staff in one hand, the end on the ground. I imagined being surrounded on four sides—by sword to the front, double sticks to the left, staff to the rear, and *shyntak* to the right.

I took a deep breath and started my form. My first action was to step backward, away from the opponent to the front while thrusting my staff to the rear to strike the opponent behind me. I followed this with some fast spins to create a defensive space around me, one hand more or less stationary on the staff at one end while the other hand assisted the momentum of the spin. This was followed by a move that was designed to engage and disarm an opponent to my right, using a *shyntak* by tangling the rope that held the two pieces

together, and then flinging it into the face of the front attacker. After that, I shifted my focus to defend against a strike coming from the left side, then striking to the rear to eliminate my unarmed opponent. More defensive spins as I slowly rotated counter-clockwise to deliver a thrust to the opponent. I cycled through some other advanced moves to defend and eliminate the remaining opponents. Satisfied with the sequence I had constructed for the form, I repeated it twice more.

"We'll have to have you teach that to the advanced class," a voice broke my concentration. I looked around to see Tree Nirellen. "I didn't know you'd come so far in your fighting skills."

"I'm not as good with other weapons," I answered, catching my breath.

"From what I've seen, you're not bad with them, either. So," he cocked his head. "you've pretty much completed your program. Have you given thought to what you would like to do next?"

I shook my head. "I've been taking things one day at a time. The future...the past...I try not to think of them. I try to keep myself too busy to think."

"That's only going to get you so far."

"I know, but this isn't my home. Not really. I don't feel like I have a purpose here."

"Not everything in life is handed to you, Twig. Purpose! Purpose is something you have to scramble for. You mold it out of life and mud and grit, and you make it into a vision to light your way—and then you claw and fight to keep it alive. Your purpose isn't defined by the world around you, but you can use it to carve your path through the world. Your purpose is out there, but it's up to you to seize it. And you sure as *zerg* don't find it by trying not to think!"

"Yes, sir!" I grinned at him.

"Now go get yourself cleaned up and into your dress uniform," he told me with a glint in his eye. "You are wanted for debriefing with the higher-ups. Find Stick Aréla once you are dressed and she'll take you where you need to go." He reached into his pocket and pulled something out. "One more thing," he said, handing the object to me. "You should have this for your meeting. No time for a ceremony."

I looked at it. It was a rank pin.

"You're promoting me to Stick?"

"You've earned it," he said. "Now get moving."

The room Stick Aréla led me to was near the royal wing of the palace. "You're in there," she pointed at a door with two guards standing post outside. She turned and headed back the way we came. "Good luck," she called over her shoulder.

I approached the guards. "Twig—I mean, Stick Mira," I told them. "I'm supposed to report for debriefing."

One of the guards nodded. "I'll check."

He knocked and went into the room, closing the door behind him. He reappeared a moment later and motioned me inside.

I went in and found Queen Astrina, Neelu, Veeluthun, Veron, and a few other faces I didn't recognize seated around a table. I noticed the crystal sculpture from Gralbast was on the table.

One of the unfamiliar faces spoke. "I take it this is our proposed asset?" He wore the gear of a Forester.

"That is what we will find out," Neelu said to him.

Astrina spoke. "Deneven, Dzurala, Meshin—this is Stick Mirabella Cervantes Ramirez. Stick Mira, this is Chief Forester Deneven, General Meshin of the Army, and General Dzurala of the Investigations and Intelligence Branch. I believe you know everyone else."

I placed my right fist over my heart in the standard salute.

"You can stand at your leisure, Stick," Veron said. "This isn't that kind of meeting. We do appreciate the dress uniform, though," he added with a smile.

Nirellen must be laughing right now.

"Thank you, sir." I still wasn't sure how formal I needed to be. "How may I be of service?"

"We have seen the report of the encounter earlier with the *Urgaban* in the forest," General Dzurala spoke. "It is extremely detailed. We would like to clear up some things directly with you."

"Of course."

"As general of the IIB, I will be asking the questions. When Sapling Ventaros was going down to speak directly with the *Urgaban* and instructed everyone to hold their position, you objected and asked to accompany him, is that right?"

"I wouldn't say I objected. I had familiarity with the location—"

"In fact, you had familiarity with that particular *Urgaban*, did you not?"

"Yes, sir. I thought I might be of help." She seemed almost hostile toward me, but I just tried to stick to answering her questions as honestly as I could.

"And then you leveraged your tenuous position as a member of the Diplomatic Corps to convince Sapling Ventaros to let you come with him." She cocked an eyebrow at me. "Is that also correct?"

"Yes, sir." It was looking like I had done something wrong, but I was sure I'd made the best decisions I could.

"Is it true that Sapling Ventaros gave you explicit orders to remain silent unless he gave you permission to speak?"

"Yes, sir." I looked around the table at the others, but I couldn't read them. I'd heard about poker faces, but this was ridiculous.

"But you did speak unbidden, didn't you?" She stared across the table at me.

"I—yes, sir."

"Can you explain why you did this?"

"I— Sir, it seemed Sapling Ventaros hadn't been briefed on our pending relations with the *Urgaban*. He wasn't prepared to respond to Gralbast—"

"Are you saying Chief Forester Deneven is not sufficiently briefing his scouts?"

"No, sir. That's not—I mean, I don't think everyone is supposed to know about that."

"Then you are saying that Sapling Ventaros is incompetent or too poorly trained to react in the field?"

"No, sir. Sapling Ventaros seemed very competent."

"Yet, you questioned his decisions on every turn."

"I was just trying to help."

"By questioning his orders in front of his men?" she asked me. "By disobeying a direct order to be silent? You believe this is help?"

"In the circumstances, I did."

"And in these circumstances, did you get this Gralbast to say he was going to leave and come back into our forest in three months, at which time we would need to send a representative of Su Lariano to speak with him?"

"Yes, sir."

"Can you explain to us why you felt you had the authority to do this?"

"He wanted to open up trade with the city. None of us in the patrol could give him an answer about that. We had our orders to send any *Urgaban* from Pokorah-Vo out of the forest, but I didn't think our orders took into account someone looking for an official

meeting. And Ventaros had already ordered him to leave; I couldn't cross that. I thought the best thing was to follow our orders to have him leave, and then give someone else the decision on how to proceed with him when he comes back."

"I see." She eyed me critically.

"Besides," I added, "it seemed like he had information he shouldn't have. He knew we had been talking with *Urgaban*. I thought it might be important to find out about that."

"Oh? And did you find out about that?"

"He claimed his information came from *Urgaban*, not from *Ulané Jhinura*."

"Did he? And you believe him?"

"I believe he answered truthfully from his knowledge, yes. That means he must have sources inside Laraksha-Vo."

"Are you telling me you trust this *Urgaban* from Pokorah-Vo? This descendant of outcasts and criminals?"

That gave me pause. Did I trust Gralbast?

"Is there a reason you aren't answering my question?"

"I'm not sure."

"You're not sure if there's a reason, or you're not sure if you trust him?"

"I trust him to a point."

She turned to the others at the table. "I think the situation is fairly obvious. Meshin, does this sound like the kind of soldier you want on the lines where orders must be obeyed without thought?"

General Meshin scowled, then gave his head a shake.

"Maintenance isn't even a question," she went on. "Deneven, your Ventaros transferred into the Foresters as a Stick and went up through the ranks to become a Sapling and is highly experienced." She gestured to me. "*She* came in as a Twig with less than a year on

the *planet* and ran circles around him. Do you really think she would promote stability within your ranks?"

"It would be difficult, but not impossible," Deneven said.

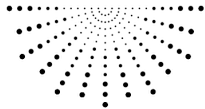
"I don't understand," I spoke up. "Am I in trouble?"

Dzurala turned her hawk eyes at me. "Do not undermine me with silly questions when I'm busy explaining why you are too smart for the other branches."

"But—"

"Stop!" she commanded. I closed my mouth. "Now, I want you to think carefully about everything that has happened today and everything that has been said in this room. And when you are certain, I want you to tell me what is going on."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



*M*y mind was spinning; nothing made sense. Yes, I'd questioned Ventaros. Technically, I'd even disobeyed him, but it had been right for the situation. Meshin wasn't happy, but was that with me or with what Dzurala had said? Deneven had seemed to be hedging when she'd pressed him. Why had Nirellen made sure to promote me before this meeting?

I looked back and forth between the three of them as they sat staring at me, waiting. The only one with any expression was Dzurala, and she just looked a little smug.

"I thought at the end of the six-month rotations, I was supposed to choose for myself which branch to go into."

"Hah!" Dzurala crowed, and she smacked the table. "See?"

"That's true to a degree," Veron said, smiling. "But if it can be shown you aren't suitable for a particular branch, that branch would not be available as a choice. General Dzurala is trying to make a case that you are only suited to one branch."

"And I have succeeded," she proclaimed. "Who can say otherwise?"

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves," Neelu cut in. "Mira has no obligation to choose *any* branch of service."

"This is true." Dzurala's face softened and she looked at me. "You are a visitor to our world and our city. This is not your home; we know that. It is our hope, however, that you can adopt Su Lariano as a second home. You do have a place here, and you have *earned* it. It is unusual to have someone living in our city and attending our military training who is not a native. We have all been watching your progress very closely." She indicated the others around the table. "In fact, and I am not embarrassed to say it, the only time we have not had someone with eyes on you was within your own chambers."

"You've been spying on me?"

She shrugged, glancing away for a moment. "Let's say, studying. Until today. The security of our people is paramount."

"And you didn't know if you could trust me."

"I knew," Neelu told me. "And I also knew that they would come to see it, too."

"The security of Su Lariano is my responsibility," General Dzurala went on. "I cannot afford to make guesses or to accept unverified opinions, no matter where those opinions come from. You have proven yourself."

"And the report from Sapling Ventaros?" I asked.

"He was very complimentary toward you," Veron said. "He said you acted with respect and tact, and that you salvaged a situation he was ill-equipped to handle."

I looked at Dzurala. "From what you were saying, it sounded like I had done something wrong."

"We had to see how you would react under pressure," she replied. "I would like to offer you a position, and you don't have to answer now. I want to bring you on as sort of an independent agent for IIB. You would provisionally be a member of the Service and may occasionally be asked to don a uniform so you can observe

something directly, but much of your time would be spent out of any uniform."

"What sort of duties would be expected?"

She shrugged. "It would vary. Courier. Contact. Envoy. Observing."

"Studying?" I asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Perhaps."

I considered this. I really wasn't interested in regular military duty; it was fine, but not my preference.

"Would I be agreeing to some specific period of time?"

"If it were a standard enlistment, yes," she told me. "But as an independent agent, it is open-ended. You could stop at any time. Of course, should you choose to do so, I would hope you wouldn't leave us in the lurch, so to speak. Not too abruptly. That you would provide some warning."

I nodded, thinking.

"I'll tell you what," Dzurala went on. "Why don't you go in three months and meet this Gralbast? Be our contact with him for that meeting. After that, then decide whether you would like to continue."

"That sounds fair," I nodded. My eyes fell on the crystal sculpture. "Did he play it for you?"

From the looks around the table, I could tell they didn't know what I was talking about. I reached out and did as Gralbast had done, tapping it lightly with my fingernail. As the music sounded in clear tones, surprise was evident on all their faces, and they leaned forward to listen. It played through varied arpeggios for almost a full minute before the music faded.

"Remarkable." Astrina leaned back in her chair. "I wonder if this is something all *Urgaban* can produce or if it is unique to Pokorah-Vo."

Neelu sighed. "Perhaps another meeting with Grangor would be in order."

I was already thinking ahead. "If we're going to be meeting with Gralbast about some sort of trade agreement, we should probably know more about what type of goods they have in Laraksha-Vo. Gralbast will be well-informed, so we should be ready when we talk to him."

"He did recognize you?" Dzurala asked.

"Oh, yes."

"But he kept that from Ventaros," she mused. "What does Gralbast think of you?"

"What do you mean?"

"Does he trust you? Does he like you?"

"I think so." Then I laughed, remembering. "He made a joke when I met him the first time, making me promise that if I ever decided to become a merchant, I would team up with him."

My laughter died as Dzurala leaned forward intently. "How serious was he?"

"I don't know," I shrugged. "I didn't think much about it at the time."

"Think about it now," she said. "How serious was he?"

"Half?" I guessed.

She relaxed and sat back. "In any case, you're right. We'll have someone from the Trade Ministry coach you on the fine points so you'll be ready. It's a lot of information, so I would assume this will take up most of your time before the meeting. Your company Tree will be notified of your change in duties."

"Thank you," Queen Astrina said. "That will be all for now, Mira."

I repeated the salute I gave earlier, and turned and left the room. They were still silent behind me as the door closed. Were they

waiting until I couldn't hear them?

Since I was near the royal wing, I headed for my suite. I was still trying to get my head around all the changes. I didn't know much about the Investigations and Intelligence Branch. I did have an idea of what intelligence services did back on Earth; at least, whatever they put in the movies. CIA and FBI stuff. I wondered what it would be like here.

That started me thinking about spying and surveillance and listening devices. And that brought me around to thinking about radios and cell phones. A lot of things we did on Earth with electricity, they did here with magic, but I hadn't seen any way to talk to someone far away; they had to send couriers or messengers. There should be a way we could use magic to talk with someone far away. Maybe some way to use technology magically, or maybe something I might have seen in a movie or show would work. I'd have to ask Tesia about it next time I saw her.

I changed out of my uniform into my Forester-like gear. It felt a little tighter in some places and looser in others. It still fit, but I had toned up quite a bit over the last several months, and added a little bit of muscle. It was also possible that my boobs had gotten a little bigger. I wasn't any taller, though, and maybe at seventeen, this was all I was going to get. That was fine. I felt like a giant all the time around all these *Ulané Jhinura*. Besides, Veronica Lake had only been four-foot eleven, and I had her by three inches.

It was a little late for the dinner hour, but I headed for the dining hall. I made my selections and sat at one end of a table toward the back of the room. I'd made it just in time; there were only a few others in the room and they looked to be finishing up. As always, the food was really good. At one time, I had thought about developing

my skills in the kitchen, but I knew I could never match what a real chef could do.

Overall, I would have to say this was, if not the most enjoyable, at least the most interesting birthday I'd ever had. I was lost in thought, reviewing the day and my meeting with General Dzurala and the others when something brought my attention back to my surroundings. The other tables were now empty and the room was silent. I heard two soft, quick footfalls behind me and I slid to the left off the bench as I turned.

A knife thrust had just missed me. My attacker wore black, similar to a hooded *rinti*. A flicker from the corner of my eye warned me just in time as a second attacker came at me and I managed to kick my chair into his path. They moved quickly and didn't give me time to get set. Before I knew it, I was busy dodging blows, unarmed against their knives. I still had my fork in my hand, though, and I was able to duck under a slash and stab one of my attackers on the inside of the bicep. Hopefully, I'd struck the artery and he'd pass out soon. Either way, he'd have a hard time holding his weapon and using that arm.

I moved around the table to make it harder for them to come at me from two sides. The injured one thought he could surprise me by charging over the table, but I grabbed him and, using his momentum, threw him onto the floor head-first. The second one sent a flurry of knife strikes at me that I slapped aside, following them up with a palm strike to the chin. It dazed him a bit, but I hadn't connected as solidly as I'd hoped. He came at me again and I managed to stab him with the fork, once in the pectoral and once downward into the muscle above the collar bone.

"*Zergishti* human!" he spat at me. "You don't belong here!"

He came at me again, and I tried to keep space between us so he couldn't reach me with his blade. What was left of my dinner had ended up on the floor, and just as he launched at me, his foot slipped in the food. He lurched heavily forward just as I had been thrusting with my fork. It struck him deeply on the inside corner of his left eye and it was pulled from my hand as he fell forward. He hit the floor and didn't move. I turned back to face the other attacker, but he was also motionless on the floor.

Several guards burst in the door from the corridor and surveyed the room.

"What's going on here?" one of them demanded. I think he was a Lance. That was the same rank as me, but in the palace guard. "Who are you?"

"I'm Stick Mira, off duty," I told him. "They attacked me."

"Who do you report to?"

"As of this afternoon, I think that would be General Dzurala."

He motioned to one of the other guards, who quickly went back out the door.

"Why don't you have a seat while we confirm that." It wasn't a question.

I found a chair at a nearby table. Sitting down was actually a relief. The adrenaline was still coursing through my body and I started to shake, feeling a chill. Meanwhile, he took a closer look at my attackers. He looked at me appraisingly with his amber eyes and started to say something. Seeing my condition, he turned to one of his men instead. I didn't hear what he said, but the man ran out the door.

A few minutes later, he returned and handed the Lance a blanket. The Lance approached and wrapped the blanket around my shoulders.

"It helps with the shock," he told me.

Just then, Neelu rushed into the room, General Dzurala at her heels. Neelu took in the room and turned to the Lance.

"What happened?" she demanded.

"We heard a commotion," the Lance told her. "By the time we arrived, it was over. These two are both dead. That one with a broken neck," he said, pointing. "And the other through the eye."

"They attacked me out of nowhere," I said. "I was just eating dinner."

"Did they say anything?" Neelu asked me. "Do you know why they attacked you?"

I shook my head. "One of them said I didn't belong here. Because I'm human."

"Lance Mooren, have your men seal off this dining hall and the kitchen that supplies it," General Dzurala ordered him. "We will need to question anyone who might have seen anything."

The Lance saluted. Before leaving the room, he put a hand on my shoulder.

"You did well against this trash," he said. "You can stand at my side any time, Stick Mira."

Then he was gone.

Neelu sat down across from me. "What happened? Can you go over it?"

I glanced around the room.

"I was sitting there." I pointed to the table. "The first one came at me from behind. When he missed, the second one came at me, too. I fought them off."

"I don't see your weapons," Neelu said, looking around.

I shook my head, "I didn't have them. I was just going to eat dinner."

Dzurala rolled the second body over and looked at the fork.

"It might be best if you always went armed," she told me.

"I didn't mean..." I looked at her, and then at Neelu. "I wasn't trying to kill anyone."

"People don't always give us a choice," Dzurala said. "It seems they were certainly trying to kill you."

"Why are people trying to kill me?" My voice was starting to sound a little shrill. "I haven't done anything! What's wrong with me?"

"Nothing is wrong with you," Neelu told me.

"I've killed four people now." The thought of it chilled me. "I just want to go home."

Neelu didn't say anything. What could she say? She couldn't send me home. I already knew that.

"I'd like to go back to my room now." It was the closest thing I had to a home now. At least it was my space.

"Lance Mooren," Dzurala called out. He appeared at the door immediately. "Please have someone escort Stick Mira to her rooms. And post a guard, at least until the investigation is finished. In case these two weren't acting alone."

I felt him take my arm and raise me to my feet. He was gentle, yet firm. Undeniable. He led me from the dining hall. He barely came to my shoulder but I could feel the strength and confidence radiating from him. I wished I could be like that. I wasn't strong or confident; I just pushed forward like I was. Do the next thing. Be practical.

"I'm tired of being practical."

"What's that?" he asked.

I just shook my head. He wouldn't understand. I'd always been the practical one. Whatever happened, I would always look at the situation and figure out what needed to be done, and do it. Maybe I

didn't always want to be practical. Maybe sometimes, I just wanted to scream until I couldn't scream anymore.

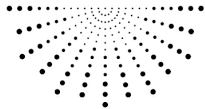
But I wouldn't scream.

I straightened as we walked and pulled away from his support. No slouching. No one would look at me and think I was beaten. I would push forward. I would do the next thing. And I would be practical.

All around me, I had good people. Friends. Neelu. Tesia. Rispan. Mouse. All good people. The rest of my platoon. Good people who would stand by me. Even this Lance who walked next to me. He was good.

I would draw my strength from them. It's what I'd always done.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



*A*s we passed the guards by the entrance to the royal wing, the Lance spoke to them.

"We will need someone posted at her rooms as well. I'll take the rest of this shift. Make arrangements for the next rotation."

When we reached my door, he had me wait while he went in and searched the rooms.

"It's clear," he told me. "If you need anything, I'll be right outside."

"You should stay inside," I told him. "It's silly to just stand out here."

I went in and sat at the table. He hesitated for a moment, then moved a chair by the door and sat down.

"I don't think I need guarding," I told him. "But I understand orders. We can make this as easy on everyone as we can. When the others come, let them know they can come inside and be comfortable. And if you're hungry or thirsty, we can order something."

"Thank you," he nodded. "I'll pass it on."

"This is not how I thought I'd be spending my birthday." I stood up. "I'm going to have a soak in the tub. It's going to be pretty

boring. I don't know if you want to send for a book or something to read."

He looked around the room. "I'm surprised you don't have any books in here already. Do you not care for reading?"

"I do. I just haven't really done any reading since I got here."

"I'll be sure to have some sent up then," he smiled. "There are a number of great *Ulané Jhinura* poets."

"I've never been much for poetry," I told him. "But I like stories."

"We have those, too," he nodded again. "I'll get you some. For your birthday."

"Thanks." I stepped into the bathroom, but before I closed the door, I added, "Just no romance."

The hot water felt wonderful, and I took my time, letting the water sooth my muscles and not letting my mind linger on anything except the sensation of heat on my skin. Finally, I pulled myself from the water and dried myself off. I slipped on the heavy robe. After toweling my hair as dry as I could get it, I let it hang and stepped out of the bath.

A figure by the door leapt to its feet. It was a guard, but not the Lance from earlier.

"Who are you?" I asked.

"I'm Bar Rizina, miss. I relieved Lance Mooren several minutes ago."

"Oh?" It must be later than I thought. "What time is it?"

"It's just after midnight. He wanted me to let you know he got those for you." She pointed to a small stack of books on the table by the couch.

"Thank you. You can just call me Mira."

I went into my room and changed into my sweats. I hadn't worn them for a while and the familiarity was comforting. This was one of

those times when Nora and I would cuddle up under our blankets in my room and watch an old movie. They didn't have anything like that here.

I came back out and sat down on the couch, thinking about the last movie we watched together. Rita Hayworth. I was so far from any of that now. From movies and Rita Hayworth and Nora. And everything. *Everything*.

"Are you alright, miss? Mira?"

"Yes." I took a deep breath. "Thank you." I turned my attention to the stack of books. "Do you know anything about any of these?" I asked her.

She walked to the table and looked over the books.

"These are all really good choices. This one is a book of poetry by a selection of poets," she said. "These two are adventure stories. This one is a collection of spooky stories, like with ghosts or monsters. And this one is a romance."

"I told him no romance," I scowled.

"Well," she smiled, "it is a good one. Don't worry, it's not too mushy."

"It's not that," I told her. "Romance always seems to have people doing stupid things and making problems out of nothing."

She laughed. "This one's not like that."

"You've read it?"

"Yes," she nodded. "It was written by Veron."

"Veron?" I was surprised. "You mean, Weapons Master Veron?"

"Yes." She cocked her head. "Most of our greatest warriors have also been great artists of one sort or another."

I realized there was still so much I didn't know about these people and this place.

A knock sounded on the door. Bar Rizina opened it, her hand ready on the sword at her waist.

It was Neelu. She nodded to Rizina and stepped inside.

"I thought you might still be up," she said. "Dzurala is running the investigation herself. She seems to be taking this personally. How are you doing?"

"Well, I'm not happy about being attacked, if that's what you mean. Or about killing two people."

"No. Of course not."

"How long am I going to need a guard?" I turned to Rizina. "No offense."

Rizina just winked.

"I don't know," Neelu answered. "I'm sure that once you leave for your meeting in three months, you should be fine."

"Three months?"

"I'm sure it will be sooner, or at least we should know something by then." She looked at me. "Most people in very important positions have a guard detail."

"I'm not important!"

"Look at it the way some might see it. You show up out of nowhere, and right away, you meet the queen and she appoints you to the Diplomatic Corps. You are not *Ulané Jhinura*, yet you are sent to Sprig training where you receive personal instruction from our Weapons Master. You receive private tutoring in magic. You are accepted into basic training without having to take the official oath. Not to mention you are somehow part of Laruna disappearing and being wanted by IIB for questioning. Can you see how some might see you as important, or as a threat?"

"Maybe. You're important, though. I don't see you going around with a guard detail."

"One, I'm not an unknown factor. Two," she paused, grinning. "They tried. The guards couldn't keep up with me."

"That's not fair!"

She shrugged. "I didn't say it was. Anyway, I just wanted to check in on you. Tomorrow, you'll go to the office of the Trade Ministry. Well, you'll probably go there every day for a while. Your guard will take you, so finding it won't be a problem. You should probably get some sleep."

After she left, I took a book off the stack and went to bed. I was five pages in before I realized I'd grabbed the romance. How annoying.

I had breakfast in my suite when I got up the next morning, and Bar Rizina was relieved while I was eating. My new escort was Bar Icolan. He was friendly enough, but his eyes never seemed to stop moving.

Once I was ready, he led me to the offices of the Trade Ministry. This time, I made sure to have my daggers tucked into my belt before I went out. I also used my grey hooded cloak. Of course, since I was so much taller than everyone else, I was still easy to identify.

"What do you know of trade?" Minister Arnelas looked at me with impatient teal eyes. We had been led into his private office and the door was closed behind us. His desk had stacks of neatly arranged papers, and one wall of the office was all shelves and ledgers.

I shrugged. "Sorry, I'm pretty much starting from scratch." Then remembering my negotiation with Gralbast, I added, "But I'm pretty good at getting a good deal."

"You can't get a good deal if you don't know the markets," he snapped. "You have to know who needs what and how much there is. And you need to know how hard it is to get it and where to get it

from." He looked me over. "You use things every day and you have no idea where they come from. The wool from that cloak came from the *Loiala Fé*. The dyes for the leather are traded from the *Pilané Jhin*, as is the cotton for your undergarments. The leather comes from the *Ogaré*. The *Ogaré* trade in wool as well, but we can get a better deal for that from the *Loiala Fé*. The buckle for your belt was acquired from the *Ga-Né-Mo Ri*. And so far, I've only mentioned what you're wearing. We haven't even started on what you had for breakfast."

"What do we get from the *Urgaban*?" I asked.

His eyes narrowed as he looked at me. "We have no official trade with the *Urgaban*."

"And unofficially?" His statement had been so specific that it seemed there had to be more to it.

"Unofficially," he said. "There are rumors of delicacies. And of course, what they call Goblin grog. A strong beverage distilled mainly from, as I understand it, potatoes."

"From what little I know of trade," I mused, "I would guess that the unofficial items are probably pretty expensive since they're harder to get?"

He gave me a single nod and waited for me to continue.

"And I suppose that if someone was doing much business with these expensive items, they could probably afford to pay the right people to avoid any official...restrictions?"

"That can be a problem," he conceded.

"So." I was making guesses as I went. "If these items became officially available, the price would go down, right?"

"Likely," he agreed.

"And if we were looking at forming an alliance with the *Urgaban*, that would definitely be seen as a threat to these people. What

about on the *Urgaban* side? Would this be a threat to the sellers there as well?"

He shrugged. "It's hard to say. It depends on what official prices they could negotiate, and they could make up for a dip in price by selling more volume."

I turned to Bar Icolan. "The unit I was with in the forest yesterday morning, the Foresters and the trainee squad, they were probably sent back out after debriefing, but someone needs to make sure they aren't talking about what happened. They may have already been talking. We need to move on this quickly."

"I understand, but I cannot leave your side," he said.

I turned to Minister Arnelas. "Thank you! I'll be back!" To Bar Icolan, I said, "Take me to General Dzurala."

"Wait!" Arnelas stopped us. "Réni!" A woman stepped in from the outer office. "Go with them. Provide whatever information they may need." He turned to me. "Réni is an Assistant Minister. She was to be the one tutoring you. She can help with this as well."

It took us a good forty-five minutes to locate the general. Her office said she was questioning workers at the kitchen, but we just missed her there. We eventually caught up with her in a meeting with Neelu and Grangor.

"Good morning, Mira." Neelu smiled. "We were just telling Grangor about your meeting yesterday with the merchant from Pokorah-Vo."

"That's what I wanted to talk about," I said. Neelu motioned for me to continue. "There's been some unofficial trading with the *Urgaban*. Someone is making a lot of money from it, so they aren't going to want us starting any official trading with them. I think we should make sure that anyone who knows about the meeting yesterday doesn't talk about it. Maybe it's too late, but since we're

talking about some kind of criminal group, I can only think they would try to stop any negotiations. If they found out about the meeting in three months..."

"Yes." Dzurala nodded. "I see your point. We can order our people to be silent on the matter, but as you said, it may be too late."

"Maybe there is some way we can change the meeting day or place?" I asked.

"We would have to send someone to Pokorah-Vo with a message."

"Then you have decided you will trade with the outcasts?" Grangor asked.

"I think it would provide the best means for gathering intelligence about the place," Dzurala answered. "This could be critical, considering this is a much larger issue than any of us had thought."

"I'm still coming to grips with how they could have such a large community," he was shaking his head.

"You've been exiling them for centuries," Neelu pointed out. "And I don't know how frequently the *Urgaban* reproduce..."

He shrugged. "Three kits at a time is most common. Eleven-month pregnancies. But we restrict family size, so we don't have to expand the city. We have very strict laws about it."

"Those laws only apply to Laraksha-Vo," Dzurala quipped. "Not to your exiles. If they don't have the same restrictions in Pokorah-Vo, they will eventually outnumber you."

Grangor's dark eyes widened as he considered that.

"I think Laraksha-Vo needs to come up with another solution for its criminals than just kicking them out to become someone else's problem," Neelu told him.

From his tired nod, I assumed this wasn't the first time that argument had come up.

"Back to the point," he said, "If you open trade with Pokorah-Vo, I don't know how this will be viewed by my people in Laraksha-Vo."

"Forgive my interruption," Réni spoke up. "To my knowledge, there has been no discussion regarding trade between Laraksha-Vo and Su Lariano, is this correct?"

"That's true," Grangor leaned back in his chair. "We've mostly been talking about alliance goals and these outcasts."

Réni shook her head. "People can be so dense sometimes." She looked up, mortified. "I'm sorry! I didn't mean any of you, I—" she stopped suddenly, not knowing what to say.

"No, please." I could see the amusement in Dzurala's copper eyes. "Continue."

"I'm sorry," Réni said again. "What I mean is, people tend to think of things from one perspective. It's natural."

"Yes," Dzurala cocked an eyebrow at her. "Please explain to us what we have been so dense about."

"Well." Réni hesitated before continuing. "Alliances for political reasons are well and good, but it doesn't connect the people." She looked at Grangor. "What do your people need or want that we can get for them? And what do your people have that ours want? Once you start that exchange, you start bringing the people together. You give them the day-to-day reasons to come together. Done carefully and with direction, the rest just happens over time." She looked at me. "I believe this merchant you met understands this."

At my look, she turned to Neelu. "Do you have the item he sent?"

"Yes." Neelu nodded. "I wanted to show it to Grangor and see what he knows of it. In the trade tongue, I can only describe it as *kerelahin*."

She reached, and for the first time, I noticed something was sitting near her on the conference table. She removed the cloth covering it and I heard Grangor gasp.

"How—" he started, then paused. "This came from the merchant? From Pokorah-Vo?" His eyes hadn't left the sculpture.

"Yes," I answered him. "He said it was a gift to Queen Astrina."

"What is the significance?" Dzurala asked him.

"It plays, does it not?" He looked at me and I nodded. "This is a lost art. Since we lost the ability to travel to Urga, our home world, we have only had one artisan able to create such as this, and he died centuries ago. He had no apprentice to take over, so his works are highly sought after. *Kerelahin* would be a good word to use for these, but we have our own word in our tongue. Works such as this have an almost holy status for our people. If they have someone in Pokorah-Vo that can create these..."

"I would suggest that this served two purposes," Réni said, indicating the sculpture. "The obvious one is simply being a gift to the queen to establish good graces. But I believe this was also sent as a message to whoever we were talking with from Laraksha-Vo. He must have known you would see it eventually," she said to Grangor. "And what it would mean to you."

He nodded. "That makes sense."

"He is offering you goods for trade," Réni told him. "What would he be looking for in return?"

Gangor looked at her, blinking, then his eyes widened. "Silk!"

"Your city produces silk?" The tone of Réni's voice made me look at her.

"Yes," he nodded. "But the outcasts would never be able to. The silkworms are highly prized—and guarded. The secret of production is also held very close. If even I were to try taking a look, I'd be

lucky to come away with my skin intact. Even the fact that I know it comes from the worms—” he turned to me suddenly. “Why do I tend to speak rashly when you are present? I reveal things best left unspoken.”

I tried to look surprised, like I had no idea what he was talking about. And I made sure to resist the sudden urge to grab my pendant and hold it protectively. When I didn’t answer, he looked suspiciously at Neelu. Her sudden air of innocence only made him narrow his eyes.

He turned back to me. “Did he give you anything else he wants us to know about?”

I shook my head. “No, that was it.” Then I reconsidered. “It may be nothing, but when he met with Ventaros, he brought a wineskin. But they never drank any of it. He gave me the wineskin when he left. I never tried it, though, so I don’t know what was in it.”

“It may be nothing, as you said,” Dzurala said. “But if what we know of this merchant so far is any gauge, I wouldn’t count on that. Do you still have it?”

“It should be in my trunk at the barracks.”

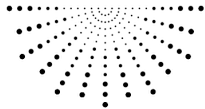
“I had your things brought from the barracks to your suite this morning,” Neelu said. “It should be there by now.” She turned to Bar Icolan. “Would you please go to Mira’s room, locate this wineskin, and bring it to us?”

“Apologies, Neelu Ulané Pulakasado, but my orders—”

“I will assume responsibility for her safety until you return,” she told him. “Will that be satisfactory?”

He performed a salute and was out the door at a run.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



“*H*er safety?” Grangor looked at Neelu.

“An attempt was made yesterday evening,” Dzurala told him. “It was specific, but we don’t know the motivation. Until we do, we are taking precautions.”

“Do you think it could be related to opening trade with Pokorah-Vo?”

“It’s one of three possibilities we are aware of. That one seems less likely, since it was so soon after the meeting in the forest, but it is still a possibility. We think it may also be racially motivated. She has been accepted into our city and service despite not being *Ulané Jhinura*. There are always those who would feel threatened by something like that.”

“I see. And the third possibility?”

She shrugged. “It could always be personal.”

Personal? Someone might personally hate me enough to want to kill me?

The whole idea was ridiculous! I’d done nothing to anyone. Their conversation continued around me for some time, but the words didn’t register as my mind spun, trying to understand it all. *What did I do?*

"Mira?" I became aware that my name had been called a few times. I looked around and saw that Icolan had returned. "Mira." It was Neelu. "Is this the wineskin you were talking about?"

Icolan held it up.

"Yes. That looks like it."

"Are we sure it's safe?" Grangor asked. "If someone is trying to kill her and it was left unwatched..."

"I took the liberty of having it examined by a mage before returning," Icolan said. "It is definitely alcoholic in nature, but no poisons were detected."

"Good thinking," Grangor told him. He had a cup in front of him and he drained whatever was in it. "Now, let's pour some in here and see what we've got."

Icolan poured some clear liquid into his cup. Grangor held it under his nose and took a slow, deep breath. He seemed to consider for a moment, and then he took maybe half a mouthful and swished it around for several seconds before swallowing.

He nodded, thinking. "Definitely high quality. This type of alcohol is common among my people. Mainly, it is distilled from potatoes, but this also has notes of pine and citrus."

Neelu retrieved a cup from a side table and motioned to Icolan.

"This may not be to the palate for all *Ulané Jhinura*," Grangor cautioned. "It's not sweet like the Pixie juice that many prefer."

After Neelu drained half a cup, she nodded. "I see what you mean. There's definitely an edge to it, but it's a smooth edge, not jagged."

Grangor stared. "I've been here how many months, and only now, I find out you can drink?"

Neelu just winked at him. "A girl's got to have her secrets."

Curious, I took a cup from the side table and poured some for myself. One swallow was enough.

"How can you drink this stuff?" I sputtered.

Grangor laughed. "Give it time. You're a bit young yet for something like this."

That just annoyed me. Age had nothing to do with it unless you got stupid as you got older. That stuff was nasty.

I'd stick to Pixie juice. Actually, remembering what happened last time, maybe not that either.

Réni took my cup from my hands and took a sip. She nodded after a moment. "Yes, this would definitely have a decent market here in Su Lariano. You can find some here now, if you know where to look and can afford it, but not much is this quality. We call it Goblin grog. He was probably giving you something top grade as an example."

"Top shelf," I said without thinking.

Réni looked at me.

"Sorry, I was remembering something I heard." It was from a movie, but I wasn't going to try explaining that. "Like at a bar, the more expensive stuff is on the top shelf and the regular stuff you usually use is on the shelf that's easier to reach."

"This will sell on any shelf," Grangor said.

I made no comment to that. There's no accounting for bad taste.

"Then Laraksha-Vo produces silk as well as other variations of this beverage," Réni summarized. "Either of which would be trade items with Su Lariano. The silk would be of particular interest to Pokorah-Vo. Are there any other items Laraksha-Vo might trade?"

Grangor shrugged. "Maybe gems and jewelry."

"And Pokorah-Vo can also produce the alcohol," Réni continued. "But only they can produce the *Kerelahin*. Do we know what else

they may have for trade?"

"I'd assume they would trade in gems and jewelry as well," Grangor said. "It's a common enough occupation, but I don't know what can be found in that region. Other than that, I couldn't say. We have been unsuccessful in infiltrating the city."

Dzurala sat with one elbow on the table and had been tapping her lip with her index finger as she thought.

"What if we sent someone to Pokorah-Vo with goods for trade?" she asked. That got everyone's attention. "Mira is right; there's too much of a risk if we go forward with this meeting as scheduled, which means we need to accelerate things proactively. We could send an envoy undercover as a merchant to make contact with this Gralbast."

"That's problematic," Neelu told her. "One, we don't know how to contact him in Pokorah-Vo. Two, we don't know what goods to send to make it believable. And three, we don't know that we can rely on this Gralbast to go along with whoever we send."

"A merchant does business by being easy to find, so I don't think that part will be an issue," Dzurala argued. "As for the goods..."

"I am sure we could put together a believable shipment under the guise of samples for testing the market," Réni said. "Especially if we could get some bolts of silk from Laraksha-Vo in time."

Grangor blinked. "I'm sure we could get some. It's just a question of how much and how soon."

"As for getting this *Urgaban* merchant to play along," Dzurala continued. "Ideally, we would send someone he knows. Perhaps someone he has already indicated an interest in, even if it was only with half sincerity."

Everyone looked at me.

"Hold on," Neelu objected. "I don't think that's a good idea."

"Why not?" Dzurala asked her.

"She's too young to send as an operative."

"She has completed her basic training and achieved adult status by our standards," Dzurala pointed out. "She has survived two attempts on her life—all on her own, I might add. She is hardly a child. Of course, it would have to be her choice."

"I'll do it." I'd been thinking it over during their argument. "It sounds challenging, but with the right help, I think I could do it."

"Of course." Dzurala nodded. "We would not send you by yourself. You would have a team."

"This is crazy!" Neelu disagreed. She looked at me. "It's not safe!"

"I know." I shrugged. "But I haven't really been safe here, either."

I could see that comment upset her, but she also saw the truth in it.

"Then I'm going with you," she said.

"Begging your pardon, Neelu'u," Dzurala said. "But that would not be a good idea. You would be too much of a target yourself, and that would make it even more dangerous for her. And you are needed here."

The truth of that deflated Neelu's arguments.

"She would need to leave by the end of one month," Dzurala pointed out. "She needs time to get to Pokorah-Vo before Gralbast leaves for the meeting."

"Can I learn enough by then?" I asked. "I was supposed to spend the whole time learning about trade and markets and prices and all that."

"No, that must change. You will need to focus on learning how to be a more effective operative. But perhaps if your team included an

advisor who was already knowledgeable on trade..." Dzurala eyed Réni.

Réni started, her indigo eyes wide. "Me?"

"Why, yes." Dzurala nodded. "You would fit the bit very nicely. Brilliant idea!"

"No, I—" Réni was in a panic. "I've never even been outside the city!"

Dzurala shrugged. "Do you have a better idea?"

Réni had no answer for that.

"We'll discuss it with Minister Arnelas," Dzurala said. "But the accelerated timetable is going to put a crunch on a lot of things."

"You said I would have a team with me?" I asked.

"Yes," Dzurala answered. "Before you say anything, I know you have friends here. But I think the fewer *Ulané Jhinura* in your party, the better."

"But wouldn't a shipment have guards? People to manage the ponies or carts or whatever?"

"Yes." She nodded. "We'll see what we can do, but not everyone is well-suited for this kind of work. We'll see if we can get volunteers from your unit, but we can't let them know what it's about. I want an experienced operative along, and I think we do need to send some *Urgaban* with you."

"I agree," Grangor said.

By the end of the week, we had five volunteers from my platoon for a temporary and potentially dangerous assignment to IIB for an indeterminate length of time. Because of the rush, we had to send a messenger to wherever each platoon member was assigned in their rotation to ask them, so that we could get them back and started on their training for the mission.

In the meantime, my daily education would rotate between studying with Réni on trade information and with tutors from IIB. The IIB training focused on reading people and reactions, and choosing and portraying the correct image for a situation. When to be aggressive and how, and when you shouldn't be aggressive. How to move quietly and quickly, without drawing attention or looking like you were trying to be sneaky. How to follow someone without being seen, and how to know when you were being watched or followed. I was really surprised by how detailed they were on these things. I wouldn't have guessed they even had a need for it.

There were also ways to use magic to help with these things, but using magic takes a clear mind and focus. We had to be able to do it by physical skill alone.

At the end of that first day, I was unhappy to learn I wasn't to go to the training yard by the barracks for practice. Lance Mooren had come to relieve Bar Icolan at the end of the day shift. He found us just as my meeting with Neelu and Dzurala finished. The planning had dragged on through the whole day.

"I'm sorry," he said when he heard my plans for the evening. "It's too open. There are just too many faces going through there."

"I've been in a meeting all day," I scowled at him. "I feel too cooped up. I need to work out. I need a punching bag."

"Why not use the practice room in the royal wing?" he asked. "That's much more protected, and no one uses it these days aside from the Palace Guard. It's not as big, but it should have everything you need."

"Can we?" I didn't even know there was a practice room in the royal wing.

"I don't see why not." He smiled. "You are staying in the royal wing, after all. Plus, since it has weapons and is near the royal

family, it is guarded. You will be extra safe there.”

“Great!” I grinned at him. “Let’s go to my room so I can change into a *rinti*!”

When we got to my rooms, Tesia was at my door.

“I thought we could eat some dinner and have a lesson,” she said. She must have read something on my face. “Unless you have other plans?”

“I wasn’t ready to have dinner yet,” I explained. “I’ve been in a meeting all day and I need to work off some steam. I’m just swinging by to grab a *rinti*. Can we do it later? I did have some things I wanted to run by you.”

“No problem,” she smiled. “I’ll come back in about three hours?”

“Thanks!”

Once I had changed, Lance Mooren led the way down a hall I hadn’t explored yet. He brought us to a room that was much smaller than any of the practice yards I’d used before, but it was still big enough that you could just about fit Jill and Tony’s house inside. I did some stretches and started on my forms to get my body limbered up. Moving through the various positions felt really good after sitting at a conference table for so many hours. I moved through all beginning and intermediate forms, going from one to the next without pausing. Then I switched to the bag and worked on my elbow and knee strikes.

On one side of the room were racks of weapons; some real and some for practice only. I found a staff to my liking and started on the staff forms.

I noticed that Mooren was watching me closely. Once I had started, I’d pretty much forgotten he was there, just reveling in the motion. Suddenly I felt self-conscious.

“What?” I asked.

"I was just watching your technique," he answered. "Very smooth."

"Do you want to spar?"

He considered for a moment. "Sure," he said. "But if you're going to use the staff there's only one thing I'd risk going against you with. That's clearly your weapon."

I did a little more loosening up while he went to the weapons rack. When I turned to face him, he had removed his uniform shirt and hung it on the rack.

"I don't have a *rinti*," he explained at my look. "I have to keep the uniform looking good."

His shoulders were surprisingly broad and well-muscled, as were his arms and chest. In each hand, he held a wooden stick that was about two feet long. He held them by handles that extended at ninety degrees from the shaft about a quarter of the length from one end. The shafts themselves were held along his forearms. I'd seen something similar in movies, but didn't know what they were called.

"What are those?"

"*Shyngur*," he answered. "Diverged stick."

"I'm not familiar with them."

"They are a bit awkward to carry, so that lack of practicality makes them less common. In the right hands, they can be devastating."

"Show me."

He limbered up, moving through motions slowly with first the left and then the right, then he stretched a little more and took a stance. He closed his amber eyes for a moment and took a breath. With a burst of energy, he launched into what must have been a very advanced form, using both *shyngur* in a flurry of motion that could

create a defensive bubble as well as strike a powerful blow. The shafts of the *shyngur* swung around and back, the additional momentum of the rotation clearly lending a deadly power to the strikes. By the time he reached the end of his form, he was slightly out of breath and a light sheen of sweat showed on his torso.

This was going to be a challenge, but I'd trained against the *shyntak* and this seemed like it might be similar in some ways. The trick would be to keep him from getting close.

I nodded my readiness and he stepped forward. I worked my staff from one end, creating space with some fast spins, which I turned into strikes he easily blocked. He tried to close the distance, but I moved back quickly, keeping my staff extended towards him, creating tight circles he was forced to block and this stopped his advance. I tried some spin strikes as I'd done earlier, but this time I changed one to a thrust and managed to thump him on the chest, leaving a red disk on his skin. Though I had tried to pull the strike at the last moment, it would probably turn into a bruise later.

He grinned at me. "Nice one!"

He came at me again, faster this time, and I was having a harder time staying outside his reach. Suddenly, his grip changed and he was holding his *Shyngur* from one end. Before I knew what was happening, he'd used the handles like hooks and my staff was ripped from my hands.

"You didn't use that grip in your demonstration!"

He shrugged. "I had to keep something to surprise you with."

I laughed at that. "May I?" I held out my hand and he passed one to me.

I tried his original grip, with the shaft along the underside of my forearm. I gave it some experimental swings, letting the end come around.

"I like them," I nodded. "Why aren't they used more often?"

"With that handle sticking out of the side, it just makes it awkward to carry around."

I looked at it curiously.

"There should be a way you could strap it to your back."

"You don't want straps attached to them," he said. "And tucking them under straps is still a problem."

"No," I was thinking. "Like if they were in a sheath, like a sword. I mean, I know you can't have a sheathed sword across your back because there's no way to get it out of the sheath, but these are short enough."

"And the handles?"

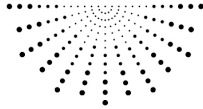
"At first, I was thinking they could just point forward over your shoulders, but every time you jostled around, they'd hit you in the jaw." I was thinking about how I'd seen some gun holsters in movies that had the gun handle under a flap. I wasn't thinking about the flap, but about the shape of the pocket. "What if it was low enough on your back that a stiff sheath could hold the handle flush? But the end would still stick up high enough to grab? Once you have it out you can easily adjust your grip. Or just swing it from the end."

"That could work," he mused.

"Enough about fashion," I told him. "Show me how to use these things."

We grabbed another pair from the weapons rack and he started coaching me on the basic forms. He was a good teacher and, while I was still just a beginner with the *shyngur*, I was at least feeling pretty comfortable with them. And I didn't hit myself nearly as often as I had when I was first learning the *shyntak*.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



By the time we headed back to my rooms, I was feeling much better. I was also famished and ready to eat something.

"Would you mind ordering some dinner while I wash up?" I asked Mooren once we were inside the door.

"Any preference?" he asked.

"No," I headed toward the bathroom. "Surprise me."

Once I was washed and changed, both Tesia and the food had arrived.

"I'm starving," I said, sitting down at the table. "You guys dig in, too!"

"I ate before starting my shift," Mooren said. "But I may snack a little later."

"That's right," I told him, teasing. "I forgot you were *working*."

He shrugged. "I've had worse duty assignments."

"I took advantage of the extra time to handle some things," Tesia said. "I am definitely ready to eat something. You can tell me whatever you wanted to talk to me about between bites."

"Oh, right!" I was already chewing, so I had to pause before continuing. "I haven't noticed that you guys have any way to talk to

each other over distances.”

“Well,” she considered. “We have spells to enhance the volume of speech or to carry it further.”

“What about having a conversation with someone miles away?”

She shook her head. “No. Even when we can manage a spell to see something that far away, it doesn’t have sound.”

“Why not?”

“No one has figured out a way to capture sound from far away and bring it close.”

“But it’s just reproducing sound waves, right?”

“Waves?”

“Yeah.” She was looking at me like I was talking gibberish, so I went on. “Sound is just a vibration. All you have to do is repeat a vibration.” I looked back and forth between her and Mooren. “You guys know the telephone game? Not the whispering in a circle one, the other one.”

Their faces gave me all the answer I needed.

“Assistance, please,” I called out, activating the spell. I thought it was pretty impressive that in less than a minute, there was a knock on the door.

Mooren opened the door and let the man in.

“What can I do for you?” the steward asked.

“I need a couple of cups, please. Or cones, I suppose. They can be of paper or a thin metal, maybe tin or aluminum. If it’s metal, I’ll need a nail so I can put a hole in them. So, don’t bring anything you want to keep...just something cheap. And some string, please. And thank you to the cook and whoever brought the food,” I added.

“This is wonderful!”

He gave a quick nod and left.

Tesia was looking at me with her copper eyes. "Why do you want to put holes in a cup?"

"It will be easier to show you first." I took another bite of the savory dish.

It was several minutes before there was another knock on the door.

"We have no cups of paper," the man said. "Will these be sufficient?"

The cups he offered were a bit thicker than a tin can, but they would work.

"That should be fine, thank you."

"I assumed you would also need something to strike the nail with," he proffered a nail and a hammer.

"Perfect! Thank you!"

I put as small a hole in the base of both cups as I could and ran a long length of string through them both, knotting the ends to keep them from falling out of the holes.

"Okay," I handed Tesia one of the cups. "Hold this over your ear. We'll need to keep the string taut." Taking the other cup, I walked across the room and into my bedroom until I ran out of string. I pulled it enough to remove any slack and then spoke into my cup. "Can you hear me now?"

I could hear Tesia's exclamation through the door.

"How are you doing that?" she called out.

"Talk into the can," I said. "Just keep the string tight."

Her voice sounded from my cup. "You can hear me?"

"Yes," I answered.

I went back to the table and sat down.

"How does this work?" she asked.

"Sound is just vibration," I told her. "When I speak into the cup, the sound waves hit it and the vibration is carried along the string and it comes out on your end. But if the string is slack, it doesn't work."

"How do you know of this?"

"On my world, we don't have magic," I explained. "We just use science. We study how things work physically and then make things from what we learn. We can talk to anyone anywhere in the world as long as we have a phone."

"Amazing!"

"Our ears work on the same principle as these cups," I told her. "We have a tiny drum in our ears, and when the sound waves hit it, it sends the signal to our brains so we can interpret the sound."

"So," she was nodding, "all we have to do is duplicate the vibration of speech on someone's drum in their head?"

"The eardrum, yes," I answered. "It's very thin, though, so it doesn't take much."

"We just need a way to link the sender and receiver! Like the string!"

I had a full mouth, so I just nodded. "I don't know what kind of range you could make it work for," I said once I could speak.

"When items are magically linked, distance is not an issue."

"Then you can do it?"

"It can be done, yes. But there are many things that have to be worked out. This is going to revolutionize many things!"

"About that," Mooren spoke up. "It might be a good idea to keep this quiet for now."

"What for?" Tesia asked. "If we get more people involved, we can solve it sooner."

"That's true," he said. "But what if word gets out and someone else figures it out first and uses it against us?"

"That sounds like something General Dzurala would say," I told him.

"Before I was in the Palace Guard," he shrugged, "I did spend some time in the IIB."

"He does have a good point," Tesia admitted. "I should have thought of that. You just had someone try to kill you. What if they'd had this to coordinate better? Yes," she nodded. "And perhaps we should tell General Dzurala what we are doing."

"I'll swing by her office in the morning and fill her in," Mooren said. "It's been too long since I've spoken with her, anyway. I'm overdue."

I was starting to get a better feel for his expressions.

"Did something happen?" I asked him.

He looked at me sharply. I guess I was still learning about when I should not butt my nose in. Tesia gave me a warning glance.

"Sorry," I told him. "I didn't mean to pry."

He relaxed his gaze. "No, it's alright. She wasn't happy when I left IIB, that's all. And we never talked about it."

"How long were you in IIB?"

"About three years."

"How long since you left?"

"Eleven months and four days." He answered.

That was oddly specific. Tesia gave me another look, so I decided to focus on my food and stop asking him questions.

"I'll work on the spell tomorrow," Tesia said. "I'll come by the same time tomorrow night and we can see where we are with it."

The next morning, I had breakfast while Icolan relieved Rizina from the late shift. Then we went off to Dzurala's office, where she

was to get me oriented to my tutors for the month. We were led into her office, where she was already in conversation with Mooren.

"Good morning, Mira," Dzurala said when I stepped in. "Lance Mooren was just briefing me on your discussion with Tesia last night, and I was bringing him up to speed on your upcoming mission. Bar Icolan," she turned to him. "Please take your post on the other side of the door. You aren't cleared for everything we must discuss."

Icolan saluted and made his exit, closing the door behind him.

"This idea of communicating instantly over distances is definitely something we want to keep from getting out," she told me. "It's a good thing Mooren was the one with you last night. He's a good agent, and knows the value of information."

"*Was* an agent," Mooren corrected. "I'm Palace Guard now."

"There is always a position here for you, if you want it."

"I'm quite happy where I am."

"Yes, of course." Dzurala nodded. "But as they say, you can take the agent out of Intelligence, but you can't take Intelligence out of the agent. You will always see things from a different perspective."

Mooren didn't reply to that.

"Be that as it may," she went on, "I am glad you took on protection detail for Mira here. It will only be for a few weeks, and then she'll be off to Pokorah-Vo and we'll assign an IIB agent to take over keeping her safe. You'll be able to go back to your regular duties."

"Who are you planning to assign?" Mooren asked.

"Why do you ask?"

He shrugged. "Just curious."

"It should be someone with some experience," she told him casually. "I was thinking of sending Senner. He's good."

“Senner!” Mooren sat bolt upright. “Senner’s no good for something like this! He’s—”

“He’s a trained agent,” she cut him off. “Any trained agent should be able to handle a simple assignment like this. Senner will do fine.”

“Why you—”

“Careful,” she snapped.

“I don’t work for you anymore.”

“It *will* be Senner.” Her eyes narrowed at him. “Unless you have another suggestion?”

“You’d do it, wouldn’t you?”

She looked at him without speaking and I knew I was missing a lot of what was happening.

“Fine,” he said at last. “I’ll do it. But I’m just coming back for this assignment. I will keep her safe. But know this—nothing will keep me from doing that even if I have to burn the *zergishti* city to the ground.”

“Done!”

Mooren stood and stormed out of the room.

Once he was gone, Dzurala let out a long breath, then she looked up at me.

“He is the best one for the job,” she told me. “You couldn’t do better.”

“You knew you could get him to do it. You planned that, didn’t you?”

“Yes,” she nodded. “I planned it. And he knew it.” She stood up. “Now then, let’s get you started on your day.”

When Mooren came back to relieve Icolan again at the end of the day, I was ready to stop thinking and analyzing.

“Hello there!” It was Neelu. “How’s the training going?”

"Grueling," I sighed. "But hopefully, I can unwind a bit with another workout session. Like yesterday?" I looked over at Mooren.

He nodded. "If you like."

"That's perfect!" Neelu said. "I wanted to go over some techniques with you. Where will you be?"

"The royal practice room," Mooren told her.

"Great! I have a few things to do first, then I'll join you there."

We went back to my rooms first so I could change into a *rinti*. When I stepped out, I saw that Mooren had changed into a *rinti* as well.

"Today, I came prepared," he grinned.

Once in the practice room, we both warmed up briefly before facing off to begin sparring. We quickly found out that Mooren could beat me with most weapons, but once I had my staff, he could only stand against me if he used his *shyngur*. By the time Neelu arrived, he was drilling me on *shyngur* forms.

"Learning a new weapon?" Neelu asked.

"Yes," I told her. "Have you used these?"

"A little," she answered. "But my preferred weapon is the dagger."

"They can be effective," Mooren said. "But not as good for just disabling your opponent. Plus, you have to get in pretty close."

"Disabling is not usually my goal," she replied. "I heard you're going to be going with Mira on her mission?"

He just gave a single nod to that.

"I don't know you personally, but I've heard good things. I'm glad she'll be in good hands. And as long as you're here, let's see if we can make those hands even better. I can train you as well as Mira. Have you ever tried using the *Ralahin* to enhance your fighting speed?"

He shook his head. "I've known people that talked about trying it. But they were so distracted with the effort, it only slowed down their reaction time. It looked like a dead end to me."

"I take it the *shyngur* is your preferred weapon?"

He nodded.

She stepped into the center of the room. "Come at me."

"You're unarmed."

"Don't hold back," she smiled.

He launched himself at her, but his first several strikes found only empty air. He redoubled his effort, his movements just a blur, but every time he struck, she was already gone. She didn't block his blows; she just wasn't where he was striking. Suddenly, Mooren was on his back with her knee on his chest and a knife blade to his throat.

Neelu stood up and her knife disappeared into whatever hidden place it had come from. Mooren got to his feet.

"On the other hand," he said with a smirk. "There might be something to the idea after all."

"I call the technique *raladolin*," she told us. "Between the magic. The main problem that people run into is that they are trying to force the speed. *Ralahin* doesn't work that way. The *Ralahin* relationship to magic used by the *Ulané Jhinura* and other *Ralahi Jhané* is not the only way to use magic. But these other connections can confuse things. With *Ralahin*, we do not force, we surrender."

"But to surrender to the *Ralahin*," Mooren began, a crease forming between his brows. "You lose yourself. You cease to exist."

"Semantics," Neelu told him. "When you learned to move with the *Ralahin*, you were taught to resist, and to stop resisting from the direction you wished to go, yes?"

He nodded.

"This is surrender. You allow that one flow, that pull, to carry you along. Of course, if you surrender to all flows, it will pull you apart. In fact," she looked at me. "Just being connected to all flows for too long can pull you apart."

"But when you fight," Mooren said, "you have to be ready to move in any direction at any time. How do you connect with all the flows? How do you change which one to go with?"

"You don't," she told him. "It won't work that way. Remember, the *Ralahin* is naturally connected to everything. It's only when we also connect to it from our side that we can use it. To use it as I do, you have to be in a state between connecting and disconnecting, between resisting and surrender. When you use the *Ralahin* to move, there is a brief moment where, in that one direction, you are at the tipping point between resistance and surrender. That is where you must be, balanced in that neutral state, for all flows. This is what I call *raladolin*."

"Alright, but from there you still have to be able to choose your direction and change it."

"No," she shook her head. "You simply maintain that neutrality as you move normally. The *Ralahin* will do the rest."

"This is not in accordance with the rules we are taught," Mooren remarked.

"No," she agreed. "It is not."

"So, I need to try to move in this in-between state?" I asked.

"Not yet," she said firmly. "First, you must master going in and out of this state—*raladolin*—at will. The trick is not moving in this state; the trick is *being* in this state. *That* is what you must practice. Nothing else."

For the next hour, she worked with us on finding that balance point and releasing it. I had already noticed that when I opened up

my vision to the *Ralahin* to See, I could sense things more clearly. And it wasn't so much that time seemed to slow down as that my awareness of precise moments was increased. When I was able to reach the balance point, these perceptions were even more enhanced. A bead of sweat dripped off of Mooren's chin, and I was easily able to track its progress all the way to the floor. I saw a second one forming, and watched it build until its weight and gravity pulled it from his face. I stepped over and caught it before it had passed his chest.

They both looked at me.

"I thought I said not to try to move yet." Neelu scowled at me.

"I didn't," I told her. "I mean, I didn't try to move. I just—moved."

"Well, please try to resist the urge," she said. "That *is* the idea, but I want to make sure you are completely stable before you use this."

"But I did it, didn't I?" I couldn't believe it. "That was a real, full-on flit!"

"A what?" Mooren looked at me, his amber eyes quizzical.

"Flit is what Mira calls how I move with the *Ralahin*," Neelu explained.

He considered this. "Apt."

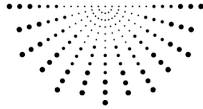
"See!" I grinned. "And I did it! And not like when I tried it before; I know that wasn't right."

"And it almost killed you," Neelu pointed out.

"And it almost killed me," I agreed. "But this time, I did it right. And I'm not connected or resisting or being pulled or anything!"

"Yes," Neelu conceded. "You did well. I think that's enough for today. We'll do some more tomorrow."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX



I was so happy that I'd been able to flit, I wished I could tell Nora about it. This might even be cooler than the hair color change she'd done. I was going to be so different if I ever got back home. I knew I'd changed a lot since coming to Daoine and Su Lariano. For one thing, I'd totally be able to kick butt on anyone at my school.

At one point, that would have struck me as really funny and cool, but somehow it didn't seem very important to me now. I didn't care about anyone at the school; I only cared about Nora and Jill and Tony. I was even more determined to get back to them. I just didn't know how I was going to do it.

I was silent in my thoughts for the whole walk back to my suite. Even after I'd showered and changed. I was halfway through my dinner when there was a knock at the door. Mooren opened it and Tesia bustled in.

"I've scarcely slept since we talked last night," she said. "I think I have it figured out. We just need to test it and see if we need to make any changes." She sat down at the table and looked at me. "What's wrong?"

"What do you know about portal magic?"

"Not very much." She looked puzzled. "Why?"

"I need to get home," I told her. "I can't lose sight of that."

"Yes, you're right," she said. "I'm sorry, I keep forgetting this isn't your home. I promise you, I will do everything I can to learn about this."

"Laruna knew something. She created a portal, right here in this room."

"Have you asked General Dzurala about it?" Mooren spoke up.

"No," I told him. "Why would she know anything about it?"

"It has to do with the security of Su Lariano," he said. "If Laruna created a portal here, you can bet that General Dzurala has been turning over every stone for whatever information she could dig up on Laruna and where she would have learned portal magic."

He had a good point and I intended to follow-up on that next time I saw Dzurala. I realized I'd sunk into a little bit of a funk and I shook my head as if to clear my mind.

I looked at Tesia. "You were saying something about the communication spell?"

"Yes!" Her face lit up. "I thought about everything you said and how it would have to work. We already talked about linked artifacts, so I started from that idea. We already have something similar in the spell that you use in this suite, like when you wanted to get the materials for your demonstration last night. There's a spell in the suite that activates when a certain phrase is spoken. This, in turn, activates a linked item that shows housekeeping where the spell is being activated from."

"You just need it to send the sound waves instead."

"Yes," she nodded. "But that also means we aren't just activating a spell with a phrase. We have to have the spell pick up the sound

waves of whatever is being spoken. That's a completely different type of spell."

"Oh." I frowned. "Not so easy then."

"Well, I started thinking about the spells that make your voice louder." She was talking fast with excitement. "When I looked at them, I realized that they were amplifying sound waves; we just didn't know that's what we were doing. I was able to take the first part of that spell to *hear* what the person is saying and embed that spell in a stone. Then I needed to send *that* to a linked stone. At first, I just had the receiving stone send out the sound so I could see if it was working."

"Did it work?" This was sounding great.

"It did!" She laughed. "But it was *much* too loud. I had to reduce the power it was using until it finally came out at a normal conversation level. Then I adjusted the spell so that instead of making the sound, you could touch it with your finger and the vibrations would go to your ear instead; that little drum you were talking about."

"Okay." I wished she would get to the point. "And did *that* work?"

"We have to test it," she said. "I brought the linked stones." She put two small pebbles on the table. "I just have to talk at one while you touch the other one and we'll see if it works."

I reached for one of the stones.

"Hold on," Mooren interjected. "This is untried. I can't let you try it. It could be dangerous."

"Come on," I told him. "It's not a big deal. We'll just give it a quick test."

He shook his head. "I am tasked with protecting you. This is not going to happen."

"Tesia isn't trying to attack me!"

"Absolutely not."

"But we have to test it," I objected.

He nodded. "Test it on me." He walked over and picked up one of the stones. "Try it."

I watched with my *Ralahin* vision as Tesia picked up her stone and did something to activate the spell. Then she raised the stone to her mouth and spoke.

"Can you—"

Mooren stiffened, immediately dropping his stone and falling to his knees. Blood was coming out of both of his ears.

Within seconds, the front door burst open and six guards charged in, weapons at the ready.

"What's going on?" One of them demanded.

"An accident," Tesia told him. "Please call a healer right away!"

Mooren seemed shaken, and he looked at Tesia like he was confused. He glanced over his shoulder and saw the guards.

"I cannot hear you," he said. "There was no attack here, but I need a healer."

The senior guard signaled to one of the others, who immediately dashed out the door.

I rushed over to look at him. "Are you okay?"

"I cannot hear you," he said, smiling. "A moment of peace."

I punched him in the arm, but he just laughed. I figured he was just putting on a brave face because the pain must have been excruciating. He allowed me to lead him to a chair and sit him down while we waited for a healer.

"I'm so sorry," Tesia was saying.

"It's my fault," I told her. "This was all my idea, and I should have been the one testing it."

"You know," Mooren said, his amber eyes had been going back and forth between us. "I was in IIB for three years. I do know how to read lips." He winced, so I guessed talking hurt. "At least I can't hear the whining. This is why these things must be tested, and this spell will be very valuable once it is perfected." He looked at me. "If I had allowed this to happen to you under my watch, I would have been utterly disgraced and a failure in my duty."

That rocked me. There was nothing I could say against that without demeaning his sacrifice. I nodded.

"Thank you." It was all I could say.

The healer arrived and the guards had left. Tesia explained to her what had happened while she inspected Mooren.

Dzurala had appeared while Tesia was giving her explanation.

I looked at her, surprised, "What—"

"I have issued standing orders that I be notified immediately if there are any alerts regarding you," she explained.

"I am familiar with what you are calling a drum," the woman said to Tesia. "It appears that his have ruptured. This is difficult to heal, but it is fresh and I should be able to manage it."

I watched as she made her connection to the *Ralahin*. It was different than what I had seen before. She connected with the *Ralahin* inside Mooren and was manipulating it somehow. I couldn't tell what was happening exactly, but the distress on Mooren's face seemed to lessen. After several minutes of concentration, she released her connection to the *Ralahin*.

She looked at Mooren. "Can you hear me?" Her words were barely a whisper.

He smiled and nodded.

She turned to Tesia. "You may want to have a healer present for your next experiment." She looked back at Mooren. "I would advise

no loud noise or strenuous activity for the next several days. The healed tissue is still tender and may tear if there is strain."

"Thank you," he nodded.

"Healer," Dzurala spoke. "Please speak to no one of this experiment. It is highly confidential."

"Of course." The healer nodded and left.

"You have come a long way in a short time," Dzurala said to Tesia. "That's good work. Please come to my office tomorrow morning. I will assign you assistants and testers so you can complete your work."

It was only after Dzurala left that I realized I'd wanted to ask her about Laruna.

"I forgot to ask Dzurala about portal magic."

"I'll bring it up tomorrow morning," Tesia told me. "Don't worry, I won't forget. I promised you I would focus on this, and I will."

"Thanks."

"Meanwhile," she said, "I think I've had quite enough excitement for the evening. I think I'll be going." She turned to Mooren. "Thank you for your help tonight. I'm sorry it ended up being so painful."

"Don't worry about it," he answered. "I knew the risks."

"Shouldn't you call in a replacement?" I asked him after Tesia had gone. "The healer said you should rest."

"No." He cocked an eyebrow at me. "The healer said I should avoid loud sounds and strenuous activity. Unless you had plans I am unaware of, I should be fine."

I lifted my glass and was mid-swallow when I realized another possible meaning of what he said, and I choked. I could feel my face flushing and I looked at him quickly. His face was unreadable.

"Were you—" I started to ask. He raised his eyebrows in a question. "Never mind."

If he'd meant it that way, I didn't want to know. And if he hadn't, I didn't really want to know that, either.

"I think I'm going to read for a bit," I told him.

"I noticed you had started one of the books," he commented. "The romance."

My face was getting hot again. I didn't usually embarrass so easily.

"I just grabbed one at random."

"Luck of the draw," he smiled.

The next few weeks were filled with more coaching and tutoring to make me a better spy and a more believable merchant. In the evenings, Mooren wasn't up to working out for the first week, but he was able to practice with me when Neelu came to work with us on *raladolin*. Once the healer said his healing ears were safe from physical strain, we were able to get back to sparring.

The morning we were to leave, Dzurala brought the whole team together for the first time. I knew she'd had everyone in specialized training for weeks, but I didn't have any details on it. Icolan walked with me, and then waited outside the door. I stepped in and looked around to see who was there. I was happy to see that Rispan was one of the team. He rushed over when I walked in the room.

"I knew this had to involve you!" He grinned. "If there's trouble around here these days, you're smack in the middle of it!"

"That's not true!" I protested. But I was too happy to see him to make a fuss over it.

Besides Rispan, there were four others from my platoon: Tarana, Kirsat, Sabela, and Kooras.

"Where's Mouse?" I asked Rispan.

Rispan shook his head. "When the call went out for volunteers, he wasn't interested. He didn't know what the volunteering had

been for, but wasn't interested in working in IIB. I wasn't allowed to give him any details on the mission, or my guesses that you were involved. If he'd known, I'm sure he'd have tried to join in. But it's not really his kind of thing."

"That's true." I nodded. "I was wondering which branch he was going to go for."

"I think he'll either choose one of the Maintenance branches or City Guard."

"Yeah, that makes sense." I noticed the pin on his collar. "You were promoted! Congratulations!"

"You didn't think you were the only rising star, did you?" he joked.

"Hardly." I thumped him on the arm.

Réni was also there, looking small and nervous. I figured this was not going to be an easy mission for her. I walked over.

"Are you ready for this?"

She looked at me with big eyes. "Not in the least!"

"You're very brave," I told her.

"Brave?" She shook her head. "I'm terrified."

"And still you're here. That's pretty brave if you ask me. That takes strength. I'm glad you're coming along."

"Thank you," she nodded. "I'll do my best."

Grangor walked in with two other *Urgaban* I didn't recognize.

"Alright, everyone," Dzurala spoke and all conversation around the room stopped. "For security reasons, no one has been fully briefed on the details of this mission. You've been told that you will be going undercover, but not where. For centuries, the *Urgaban* in the city of Laraksha-Vo have been exiling their criminals. Well, these exiles got together to make a city of their own, and they've been growing. That's where you will be going. Pokorah-Vo."

Dzurala gave everyone a moment to register that before continuing. She indicated a map on the table at the head of the room.

“You will all need to study this map, though Mira will have a smaller version with her. You will be going in as traders to do business with a merchant in Pokorah-Vo. His name is Gralbast, and he is not expecting you. He does know Mira, so we are anticipating he will be at least somewhat receptive. Mira will be taking point as contact. Her role will be as the merchant. Réni is our expert on trade and markets. Her role will be that of bookkeeper for Mira, and she will be able to advise Mira to help her maintain her pretext as a merchant. Mooren is a highly experienced IIB agent. It is his job to make sure Mira is safe and to keep her out of trouble. His role will be majordomo—essentially, a personal assistant and also a minstrel. He can protect Mira best if he is not seen as a physical threat. He is also an experienced field medic, though he’s not an actual healer.

“The rest of you will appear to just be caravan laborers; teamsters. This explains some of the training you’ve been getting in the last few weeks. You manage the animals, drive the carts, load and unload merchandise. You will tend to be overlooked as insignificant, but you are anything but. You keep your eyes and ears open and let Mira or Mooren know anything that is even remotely of value. This team includes two *Urgaban* from Laraksha-Vo. Grangor?”

“This is Shaluza and Ergek.” He indicated the two *Urgaban* with him. “They are hand-picked for this mission and their loyalty to Laraksha-Vo is without question. They aren’t as familiar with animals, but they will serve as guards as well as for cooking. Most importantly, they will be able to provide an *Urgaban* view of the city, though we do not know what sort of culture or structure they have.”

“The mission is to gather intelligence on Pokorah-Vo,” Dzurala told us. “How is it run? Who runs it and how? What are the factions? We want maps of the city, including anything under or above ground. Everything. You know we have had *Urgaban* raids in our forest. Until recently, we did not know that *Urgaban* were divided between Laraksha-Vo and Pokorah-Vo. Pokorah-Vo is the origin of those raids. Our goal is to put an end to these raids. We cannot do that without information. Also, Pokorah-Vo seems to be privy to information about us and the *Urgaban* of Laraksha-Vo. As far as we know, this information came from their contacts in Laraksha-Vo, but we need to be alert to anything that indicates they may have sources within Su Lariano.”

Dzurala looked around the group before continuing. “One more thing; it has been many decades since we have heard anything from the *Ulané Jhinura* in the forest near Pokorah-Vo, the Su Astonil. If you have opportunity, it would be good to reestablish communication with them and find out their situation. Any questions?”

“What will we be trading?” Rispan asked.

“Réni?” Dzurala looked at her.

“Yes?” Réni peered up at Dzurala’s expectant face. “Oh, right. Mainly it will be textiles. Carpets, wall coverings, but also bolts of fabric for clothing. We think it is unlikely they have access to all the bright color dyes that we get from the *Pilané Jhin*, so these should be very different from what they produce locally. Also thanks to the *Pilané Jhin*, we’ll have some barrels of Pixie juice. It seems that *Urgaban* are very interested in cooking, so we are including some rare spices. We had also hoped to include some silk from Laraksha-Vo...” she looked at Dzurala.

“That will be brought to you en route,” Dzurala explained. “There is a pass through the mountain range between Laraksha-Vo and

Pokorah-Vo. You will wait along the route and it will be delivered to you before you enter the city. Hopefully, they will already be waiting long before you arrive at the meeting point. Any other questions?"

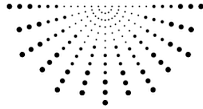
"Who is in command?" It was Rispan again.

"Ostensibly, Mira is primary," she answered. "However, Mooren is the experienced agent and has veto power if he deems it necessary."

"What about the project that Tesia was working on?" I asked.

She shook her head. "It's not ready. Now, everyone study this map. Those of you in uniform, change to civilian clothes. You will leave in two hours. Meet outside the main gates."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN



I'd been so busy, I had forgotten to pack and I headed back to my suite with Icolan on my heels. I still had that bag I'd gotten from Felora's shop, so I started loading in my clothes. I'd been issued a smaller bag for bathroom articles, and I filled that and stuffed it in the bag with everything else. The bag was getting full, but using the canvas bag I'd been issued would stand out too much as *Ulané Jhinura* military. And I definitely couldn't bring any uniform items. I just about had everything packed when I heard a knock at the door.

Icolan opened it and let Mooren in.

"Bar Icolan," he said. "You are hereby relieved. I've got it from here."

"Well," Icolan sighed. "As duties go, this wasn't bad at all. Who knows what they'll be having me do next?" He turned to me. "I wish I had great words of wisdom to give you. I won't say good luck, because I believe we make our own. Watch your back. Believe in your team. Trust your gut."

"Thank you, Icolan." I gave him a hug. "I really appreciate you guys watching my back this past month. Please pass my thanks to

Rizina, too. I was so distracted this morning, I didn't think about it when she left."

"I took the liberty of getting a few things for you," Mooren said after Icolan had gone. "I hope you don't mind." I noticed for the first time that he had a backpack in his hands.

He walked across the room. Putting the pack next to the table, he started pulling things out. The first thing he pulled out was a pair of *shyngur*.

"These are made from the wood of the *rylak*," he told me. "They have some heft to them, but not as much as you would expect for the density of the wood. These are very hard and strong."

I took them and tried a couple practice swings. The feel and balance of them was wonderful.

"Thank you! These are great!"

"I also spoke with Gylan about your idea." He was pulling something else out of the pack. "Try this on."

It was a leather harness, with some kind of crossed sheaths. I slid the *shyngur* into the sheaths and the handles fit snugly into the specially designed pockets. I put the harness on and tried moving around with it. Somehow, it hardly restricted my movement at all, and the *shyngur* stayed tucked into the sheaths. The ends of the shafts stuck up above my shoulders just enough that I could easily grasp them. I tried it, and they came free easily.

"Of course," he said, "once you pull them out, you can't really get them back in without help unless you take the harness off." He took the *shyngur* from me and slid them back into the sheaths.

I laughed. "Maybe one day, I'll get Tesia to create a spell for it."

"That might work." He grinned. He reached into the pack again. "While I was talking with Gylan, I also met with Felora."

He revealed another set of clothes, like the leathers I already had, these were all black with a matte surface so they wouldn't reflect. There was also a pair of matching black boots and a black hooded cloak.

"These are good for moving around unseen at night," he explained. "Hopefully, you won't need them. But if you do, you have a few sets of them. And then, there's this."

He pulled out a black leather belt. I could see it was especially designed to hold my daggers in the way I had taken to wearing them, both above my right hip. I quickly swapped it out for the belt I was wearing and slid the daggers into place.

"There are also some attachments you can slide on to make it easier if you want to carry other weapons as well."

I reached out my arms and gave him a big hug. His amber eyes widened with surprise, but he returned the hug.

"This is awesome! Thank you!"

I quickly started moving my things from the bag into the pack, loading everything strategically with the most frequently needed items on top. I decided that for now, I didn't need to wear the *shyngur*, so I packed them as well. I rolled up the bag and slipped that in, too, just in case I needed it for something.

Once everything was loaded, I hefted the pack onto my back. It wasn't bad at all, and didn't rest too low on my back, even with the bedroll I noted was tied on at the bottom.

"And here I thought all men hated shopping," I joked. I just shook my head at Mooren's quizzical expression. "Never mind."

The last thing I took was the staff I had acquired from Gralbast that day in the forest. It was really well-built. It was almost as tall as I was, and the diameter was about an inch and a half. The darkly-stained wood was neither too heavy nor too light. It was solid, and

had metal caps on both ends. The metal was treated somehow to be almost black.

"Oh!" I suddenly remembered. I grabbed the book I was reading and handed it to him. "Would you put this in please?"

"Still reading the romance? Are you enjoying it?" he asked as he tucked it inside.

"I haven't had a lot of time. It's what I'm reading right now." I was glad he was behind me and couldn't see my face. "There's sure to be some downtime on this mission. It will give me something to focus on."

"Here." He grabbed another book off the stack. "One more, just in case." He added it to my pack.

We had time, so we took a leisurely walk to the main gates.

"Minstrel?" I asked him.

He shrugged. "I play the *kazan*." At my look, he went on. "It's a stringed instrument with five sets of paired strings. It's only about two feet long, so it's easy to travel with."

When we arrived outside the main gates, the wagons were already waiting. There were three open wagons loaded with the trade goods and I checked them over to see how they were loaded. There were two barrels in each wagon. I guessed this was so the weight would be more evenly distributed. Two of the wagons were also loaded with carpets and other textiles. The third wagon seemed to be loaded with supplies for the road; I hadn't thought of that. I could see tarps and food and other camp items. Each wagon had a team of four horses to pull it, and these were full-sized horses, not ponies like I had ridden before.

I was happy to see there weren't any horses or ponies for riding. My previous experience had been painful enough. I was quite happy

to ride a wagon or walk. I'd done so much walking on my duty patrols, I could easily walk all day with no strain.

As our team arrived, they packed their personal gear into the wagons and took over for the crew that had brought the wagons out for us.

There was an additional wagon that was more like a coach. It was painted with bright colors and it reminded me of gypsy wagons I'd seen in movies.

"That one is yours," Mooren said. "As the owner of the caravan, you have your own mobile quarters."

"Why would I need that?"

"Status," he answered. "For appearances. Plus, if needed, it gives us a space that is hidden from prying eyes."

The door was on the back and there was a set of fold-down steps. I put my pack in the back of my wagon and looked inside. I could see there was a bed toward the front, some benches and drawers along the sides, and a table that seemed like it folded up easily to get out of the way. I went around to the front of the coach. Rispan was already seated at the front, ready to take the reins.

"Oh, really?" I asked him.

He just grinned and pointed at Mooren. "I'm his backup."

The others from my platoon walked over.

"This is pretty exciting, yeah?" Tarana grinned. "A secret undercover mission!"

Sabela elbowed her sharply in the ribs. "It won't be a secret for long if you don't keep your yap shut."

Tarana's coppery eyes got big and her hand went to her mouth. "Sorry!"

We all glanced around, but there wasn't anyone nearby except our team. Tarana was really fun, but she could be impulsive

sometimes. I wasn't worried though, you only had to tell her something once and then you didn't have to think about it.

It looked like the whole team had arrived. I wasn't sure what we were waiting for. Mooren walked over to me.

"This is your show," he said in a low voice.

Oh! They were waiting for me!

"If everyone is ready," I said loudly, "we can get started."

I climbed up onto the bench next to Rispan, and Mooren followed me up. The others went up onto whatever wagon they had chosen. Rispan flicked the reins and we led off; the other wagons fell into line behind us. Within a few minutes, I had determined to grab a blanket at our first break to use as a cushion. At least it was better than sitting in a saddle. I shuddered at the memory.

"I know you're not used to being in charge of a bunch of people," Mooren said. "But you have to play the part."

That made me a little uncomfortable. I didn't like being bossy.

"I don't really know how to do that," I admitted.

"Think of it this way," he went on. "You are a merchant and this caravan is yours. If it fails, you may lose everything. If it succeeds or not, that's on you. Everyone here works for you. Their wages are dependent on your success. They will fight and die for you. You're the boss and nothing happens without your say-so."

"Wow! That's a lot of responsibility."

"It is," he agreed. "But you're in charge and you don't need to apologize for it. People are depending on you taking charge. If you don't, you're letting all of them down. And the sooner you get used to it, the better. Otherwise, our cover will be blown."

He was right, and I knew it. We had even drilled assuming different roles and attitudes over the past week. We'd also spent a bit of time on leadership skills. I determined I would act the part.

“I don’t know,” Rispan teased. “She bosses me around enough already.”

“Hey!” I elbowed him.

“I’m just teasing,” he smiled. “He’s right. You’re the boss.”

When we reached the place I had met Gralbast, I called a halt for a midday meal and to rest the horses.

“We’ll take an hour,” I announced. “Water the horses, refill any canteens, eat, handle your business, and be ready to go.”

Everyone seemed to accept my orders without hesitation. That was reassuring and I felt more confident that I could handle the role. It did seem kind of strange, since most of the team was older than me. I’d gotten used to the height difference, and I didn’t think of them as lesser in any way just because I was so much taller. I knew that if we’d been back on Earth, if an adult were only four and a half feet tall, there’d be joking and mocking, either directly or just behind their backs.

I’d seen that kind of thing, but I’d never really thought about it. One thing this experience had really taught me is that the only thing height tells you about a person was where they could or couldn’t fit, or what they could or couldn’t reach. There were pros and cons to any height, and height didn’t tell you anything about the person or their character or abilities.

I’d found some cushions inside the cabin of the coach, and I brought one out to sit on. I’d have to see about getting some actual padded benches for all the wagons. And better lumbar support for everyone. This was just one trip, but who knows if there would be others, and I wouldn’t want my team stiff and sore from the ride if I could prevent it.

I realized that was part of being a leader—looking out for your people. Yes, they would follow my orders. That meant I needed to

be worthy to give them.

I headed us off again after the hour was up and we continued east. From here on, we would be following the same path that Gralbast used. The trail was easily identified from the ruts left by his wagons. The ground was still soft from recent rains and there was standing water in some of the deeper ruts. The trail had clearly been in use for quite some time. I doubted I would ever find out the full extent of the business he had been doing.

The ride was a lot better with the cushion, but even so, I was glad when it was time to call a halt. I needed to give my team time to set up camp before it got dark, and when we came to a clearing in the early evening, I figured that was the best place to stop.

Shaluza and Ergek wasted no time setting up to cook dinner. The supply wagon included a flat grill that could be quickly put together and placed over a fire, and they had it going in short order. Before long, the smell of cooking food filled the camp.

"I want two guards on duty at all times," I called out. "Three-hour shifts. I don't care how you work it out—draw straws, flip a coin—but I want the first pair on duty in ten minutes. If you're on the first rotation, someone will bring food to you. We're up and rolling with the sun."

I glanced at Mooren and he gave me a slight nod of approval.

The dinner was exquisite, and I heard moans of pleasure from around the camp as people dug in. The sun had set and I could see their faces in the firelight.

"When this is all over," Rispan said. "We should open a restaurant with these two. We'll make a killing!"

"Minstrel!" I called out to Mooren. He looked at me with wide eyes. "Earn your keep!"

He chuckled as he went to get his *kazan*. He sat by the fire and checked its tune. Satisfied, he began to play. His fingers plucked the strings in a way that was both soft and firm, and the notes sounded clear in the night air. After a moment, he began to sing with a rich baritone I wouldn't have imagined him possessing.

*Your beating heart a distant echoed call
Your breath anticipates our passion'd kiss
The love we share does have no bounds at all
Not even gods surpass such power as this*

*Together now and ever shall we be
Our love has made an us of you and me*

*Who ever else is there for me but you
I've searched across the world and back I've come
To find such grace and beauty in one who
Also can think and speak and stand as strong*

*And yet though strong has not also grown hard
And still retains that softness of a rose
Who seeks as well for just that sweet reward
Of one true love to share this life's repose*

*Together now and ever shall we be
Our love has made an us of you and me*

I didn't know why, but the words brought a flush of heat to my face. The final notes struck from the *kazan* faded, and there was soft applause from around the fire.

"I'm going to bed," I said, trying to hide my embarrassment. I was glad for the darkness. "We have another long day tomorrow. Don't stay up too late."

I climbed the steps into my wagon. It was dark, so I tried the light switch spell. Sure enough, it was set up with a spell and light source. I wondered if it ever burnt out, like a lightbulb. Leftover pieces of melody from Mooren's song played through my mind. *Your breath anticipates our passion'd kiss...*

Annoyed, I decided to try reading a bit before going to sleep. I pulled the book out and started to read. It was the romance. Scowling, I put it back down and hunted up the second book he had put in my pack. The book of poetry? I shoved it back in the pack just as a soft knock sounded at my door.

I opened it, uncertain of what I would find. Réni stood there with her things in her hands, looking very embarrassed.

"What's wrong?" I asked her.

"I was wondering if..." she hesitated. "It's just that it's so many people. I thought I would be okay, but I've never...all these people in the same tent. Changing and sleeping." She was near to tears. "Could I please stay with you in your wagon?"

I stepped back from the door. "Come in and stow your gear."

Her relief was palpable as she stepped into the cabin.

"It's tight quarters, though," I told her. "You might end up wishing for the space of the tent."

"Oh, no!" She shook her head. "It's just fine!"

"We'll have to share the bunk, but it's pretty wide."

"Thank you!"

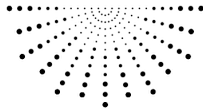
I'd gotten used to sharing the same space for sleeping and showers and such when I was in basic training in the barracks. I'd

assumed that this was common for all *Ulané Jhinura*, but that was evidently not the case.

The door to the cabin had a shaded window. I left some open space along the top, so the early light would wake me.

We both changed into bedclothes. Réni was very self-conscious, so I made sure to look away while she was changing. I was asleep practically as soon as my head hit the pillow.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT



I awoke to the greying light. Already, I could hear sounds from around the camp as people went about their morning tasks. I got dressed and went outside to check on the status of things. Réni was still in the bed, but I suspected she was awake and waiting for me to leave before getting up.

Our cooks were busy with breakfast and I could see that some of the crew were already eating. I queued up behind Kooras with my plate. He barely looked at me through bleary chocolate eyes, and I remembered he wasn't much for conversation before coffee. That made two of us. A couple of minutes later, Réni stepped out of the wagon.

After everyone had eaten, we finished breaking camp and we led off again, with Rispan driving my wagon. Our direction had angled toward the south as the foothills to our right quickly grew taller and more rocky as the days passed. Our elevation seemed to be rising as well and the trees changed to more of the pine variety and hardwoods were less frequent.

I was amazed by both the similarities and differences between this place and Earth. One side of the trail was heavy with bushes that had the reddish bark and general look of manzanita, but the

leaves were more narrow and the berries were a golden color. In our Forester training, we'd learned that those berries could be eaten, but they were bitter and didn't taste very good.

The next few weeks passed much as the first had, with everyone falling into a regular routine. We learned who you didn't want to talk to before coffee, and who to avoid if you didn't want someone chipper in your face the first thing in the morning. Rispan didn't actually growl in the morning, but he wasn't his normal talkative self, and the way he narrowed his eyes to slits if you said anything around him definitely communicated, "Don't talk to me."

At the end of the fourth week, we began to approach the river that marked both the pass through the mountains on the right and our change of direction to Pokorah-Vo on our left. We would come abreast of the pass before coming to the river. We should be near to where we would meet up with the couriers from Laraksha-Vo.

"Kirsat, Tarana!" I called out. "Scout ahead and see if our silk is here yet."

Both Kirsat and Tarana were highly skilled scouts and had talked about joining the Foresters. They were off their wagons in a flash and moved ahead of our slower pace. They were maybe a hundred yards from us when Tarana fell to the ground and Kirsat ducked low. I could see an arrow sticking out of Tarana's body, and three others that must have been near misses.

Kirsat was pulling Tarana over his shoulder in a fireman's carry and started back towards us.

"Circle up!" I shouted. "Ambush!"

We quickly formed the wagons into a circle. Bows were brought out and arrows nocked at the ready. Kirsat was struggling to get back with Tarana.

"Sabela! Kooras! Grab shields and get out there to cover them!" I ordered. "Stay low and keep those shields high!" They knew what to do, but hearing the orders reinforced the training. This would be the first real fight for most of us.

Some arrows launched out of the treeline about three hundred yards ahead of us, but they fell short of the wagons. Sabela and Kooras had reached Kirsat and they were working their way back. I heard the thunk of arrows on the shields, and then they were out of range. Sending them to scout ahead must have forced whoever this was to act too soon.

People on horseback emerged from the trees just as Sabela, Kooras, and Kirsat got Tarana inside the wagon circle. At a quick glance, it looked like about a dozen horsemen. These were full-sized horses and the riders appeared larger than *Urgaban* or *Ulané Jhinura*.

"Bows at the ready!" I called out. "Wait for my signal!"

The long seconds waiting for them to come into range was nerve-wracking, but it would do no good to shoot while they were too far to hit. They were coming fast and the panic pushed me to order everyone to fire, but I resisted. We would only get maybe two or three shots before they reached us, and I wanted all of them to count. Once they were two-hundred yards out, I called it.

"Fire! Reload and fire at will!"

I watched as the first volley reached the advancing horsemen. Two fell from their saddles and one horse went down. I couldn't see if the rider had survived the tumble. I didn't have time to grieve for the horse.

Another rider fell, and another, then they were on us. They looked human, except one. I didn't have time to notice much beyond

that his horse was a silvery dappled-grey and he had white hair and pointed ears.

"Hand to hand!" I yelled.

They charged right up to our wagons and two of them jumped their horses over ours. The others launched themselves off their horses. They were trying to overwhelm us, but they'd lost their advantage of numbers.

The two with their horses inside our circle were a problem. I was using my staff, and I charged one and tripped his horse up, causing it to tumble and roll, throwing its rider. I struck the rider a powerful blow to the temple before he was halfway to his feet.

I spun to face the other one and leapt to the side as he tried to run me down. It was the one with the white hair. He turned his huge horse quickly to come back at me, but I cracked the horse's foreleg with my staff and it reared up, almost throwing him. When it came down, the injured leg collapsed and the rider was thrown forward over his horse's head. He rolled easily to his feet.

I got a better look at him. Besides the pointed ears, his brows angled up. He was a bit over six feet tall and he wore a short white cape. There was some kind of symbol in the center of the chest on his white leather armor.

"That was my best horse," he snarled. "You'll pay for that!"

I could hear fighting going on around me, but I had no time to look as he charged at me with his longsword. He was strong and fast. I used to think longswords were slow and heavy, but used with two-hands, they were anything but. Especially not in skilled hands like those I was facing.

I held off his first rush, and his pale eyes narrowed at me. He redoubled his effort and I was hard-pressed. But then, I made a mistake, and he saw it the same time I did. My staff went flying

from a powerful strike, but instead of trying to back away, I rushed forward inside his reach, my hands going to my daggers. I went past him on his right side, cutting deeply across his armpit as I went under. I felt the blade scrape bone. I followed up by plunging my blade into his kidney.

He screamed, trying to face me again, but his sword tumbled from his grasp as he went to his knees. His right side was covered in blood; there was no way a cut that deep had missed the artery. He didn't have long, and he knew it. Either injury would be fatal.

"*Putri firgolan*," he growled at me through clenched teeth. "May your death be slow!" He reached for a knife with his left hand, but before he could get it out, he pitched forward onto his face and didn't move.

I spun to find the next one just as Ergek and Sabela finished the last attacker with a hamstring and a slash to the jugular.

"Who is hurt?" I asked. As I looked around, I saw that it was a foolish question. It didn't look like anyone had escaped some kind of injury. I must have been lucky.

"A horse went down on their charge," I said. "The rider might be alive. We need to find out what he knows and why they attacked us."

They were all giving me a strange look.

"What?"

Rispan nodded to my fallen foe. "You just took out a White Rider. Do you know what that means?"

"White Rider? Never heard of that."

"That's an elite warrior of the *Ashae*." He went over to the body. "He will have holdings. Property. They are now yours by rite of battle."

"I don't want anything of his." I scowled.

"It doesn't matter."

I shook my head. "What's important now is to take care of Tarana, see if that other rider survived, get everyone patched up, and find out what happened to our contacts from Laraksha-Vo."

"I'm sorry," Mooren said. "Tarana is gone."

"Where?" I asked, then I realized what he meant. "You mean she's...she's dead?" I could feel the tears welling in my eyes.

"You should probably sit down," Mooren said. He had a look of concern on his face.

"Why? I'm fine." Suddenly, I started to feel a little light-headed. I looked down and saw that my leather shirt had been cut on the side below my ribs. "Well, I'll need to get that rip fixed."

"That's not a rip, that's a cut," Rispan said. At least, it sort of sounded like Rispan. In a tunnel. In the rain.

Mooren caught me as I started to fall.

"Relax," he said. "We have you."

They carried me to my wagon and started to move me to the bed.

"No!" I grabbed the edge of a cabinet as we were going by. "Don't get the bed bloody!"

They laid me out on the floor. Mooren was very businesslike as he examined my wounds. It seems I had more than one. I didn't remember getting any of them. I hadn't looked in any of the drawers in the wagon, but he started pulling things out and I saw there were medical supplies.

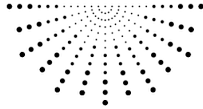
"Here." He was holding a cup to my lips. "Drink this."

I took a few sips and tried to pull away, but he wouldn't relent until I had swallowed at least half of the mixture.

"What's that do?" I asked him.

"It will put you to—"

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE



*T*arana is gone.

Mooren's words were my first thought when I opened my eyes.

Tarana is gone.

How could I face the others? She was dead because of my orders.

I tried to sit up, and a hand on my shoulder pushed me back down. It was Mooren. It took me a moment before I could find any words.

"I'm sorry," I finally said. I couldn't think of anything else.

"What are you sorry about?" He asked me.

He wanted me to say it. The whole thing. He wanted me to admit it was my fault she was dead.

"Tarana," I said. "I got her killed. I know, it's my fault. She's dead because of me."

He didn't say anything and I looked at him in the dim light. His mouth hung open like he didn't know what to say.

"That's a load of crap!" he snapped.

"No, it's not! I ordered—"

“What do you think would have happened if you hadn’t sent scouts ahead?” he demanded. “How many of us would still be alive now if we’d gotten into bow range without knowing they were out there?”

“I don’t know!”

“None of us! Your orders saved nine people.”

“But Tarana...”

“I know.” His voice had softened. “When you give orders, sometimes you lose people. It’s part of the job. You made the best call you could, and it saved lives. Honor Tarana. Honor her memory and her sacrifice. Don’t demean it by making her death about you.”

I could feel the hot tears running into my hair as I stared up at the ceiling. I wasn’t going to feel better about losing her, but I nodded.

“Would you like to hear a status report?”

I nodded again.

“Pretty much everyone except Réni has cuts and bruises. She’s not a fighter and she stayed out of the way. You know about Tarana. Otherwise, none of the injuries are particularly serious. A few stitches here and there. Kooras sprained his ankle. We did find that rider you mentioned, the one that had been thrown from his horse. He had a dislocated shoulder and wasn’t able to put up any fight. From what he said, the *Ashae* have been keeping close tabs on Laraksha-Vo. They knew they were talking with us in Su Lariano and they wanted to prevent any trade from opening up. When our contacts headed out with all that silk on packhorses, they followed and attacked them when they made camp to wait for us. Before you ask—yes, we were able to retrieve the silk. There was one other piece of information you should know about.”

I looked at him.

"It seems they received a last-minute message. That's why they waited for the couriers to camp instead of attacking them sooner."

"What was the message?"

"You," he said. "They were to find and kill the one known as Mira, a female traveling with a caravan."

"Me?" I was shocked. "Why?" Then I had another thought. "So I'm going to have more of them coming after me?"

"He didn't know why. But we kind of gave him the idea that you were dead, and we let him go. So as long as we keep your survival a secret, they shouldn't be coming after you."

"I don't know how you pulled that off," I said. "But the secret is bound to get out pretty soon."

"I don't know," he said. "I had some thoughts about that."

I looked at him again.

"What if you were disguised as someone else?"

"As who?"

"Not as a particular person." He shook his head. "The man we spoke with only knew your name and that you were a female traveling with the caravan. So, if we change your name, and maybe hide that you are female, the story that you are dead will—"

"You want me to pretend to be a boy?"

"A man." He nodded. "Yes."

I thought about that—it could work. And we wouldn't have to keep it up very long before I could go back to Su Lariano.

"How would we do it?" I asked him.

"Other than the name, we would have to make you appear less feminine," he said. "Bindings to flatten your breasts, for one."

I crossed my arms in front of my chest. "Is that what you've been thinking about while I was asleep?"

"And we would change your hair," he ignored my question. "You'd be surprised how big a difference that could make. Maybe cut it shorter."

"Cut my hair? How much?"

He shrugged. "Just enough to be significantly different. It wouldn't have to be all of it."

"All of it?"

"Not necessarily. But don't worry, we'd find you a good hat."

There was a soft knock at the door and Rispan stepped in.

"You're awake," he smiled. "Good. Has Mooren brought you up to speed on everything?"

"Yes," I answered. "He was just doing that."

"Did he tell you about the hat yet?" He grinned.

"I should have known this was your idea!"

"Not just me," he protested. "We all talked about it. Did he tell you about the name yet? That one was my idea."

"I don't even want to hear it," I stopped him. "I will pick my own name, thank you very much!"

He sulked a bit at that.

"What name would you like?" Mooren asked.

I thought about that. For the most part, it seemed that male names ended with a consonant. I started playing around with variations of my own name in my mind...*Mira. Miran. Mirlan. That would be good! Mirlan the Magician. Or merchant in this case. No, that wouldn't do. Mirolan. Rolan. Rahvan.*

"Raven," I said, using the English sounds.

"Raven?" Mooren looked at me. "What's that from?"

"On my world, the raven is a big black bird," I told him. "It tends to have all kinds of magical or spiritual significance with a lot of different ethnic groups. But mainly, it's just cool."

"How big are these birds?" Rispan asked.

"They can have a wingspan as big as you are tall," I said. "But standing, they'd probably come up to your stomach."

He nodded, then he looked at me again. "Who gets to cut your hair?"

"That's not your problem."

He chuckled. "I'll let everyone know you're awake." He went out of the wagon and closed the door.

"How long was I asleep?" I asked Mooren.

"Just a few hours."

"I'm not going to forget about Tarana."

"I know."

I sat up slowly on the bed. "Didn't I say something about not putting me on the bed?"

"Yes." I think it was the first time I'd seen him roll his eyes. "We waited until we'd stopped the bleeding."

"What's my damage?"

"You have a cut along your upper arm below the shoulder there on your left, but that was really just skin," he told me. "There's a similar one on your right thigh. The one on your left side was a lot deeper, but fortunately, none of your organs were injured. You need to take it easy so you don't tear your stitches."

I looked down and realized my shirt had been removed and I was only wearing my bra and panties. My leg, upper arm, and my side were both bandaged.

"I guess these are going to leave scars."

"Yes." He nodded. "But they shouldn't be too bad. The wounds were clean and should heal well."

"Was it my imagination, or were those humans that attacked us?"

"Humans," he nodded. "Yes."

"I had heard there were other humans here, but I hadn't seen any before."

"They live close to the *Ashae*," he explained. "They work for them, mainly as laborers and farmers. Also as guards or mercenaries. But they aren't treated much better than any of the other races. They've been here for centuries. Probably very different from what you're used to."

"No doubt."

I pulled out a fresh shirt and tried to get it on, but it was too painful.

"Could you please send Réni in?" I asked him. I was thinking about what he'd said about cutting my hair.

He was just stepping down outside as I added, "And I guess you should have her bring a razor, some water, and a bin. We'll need to push on to Pokorah-Vo tomorrow." He nodded and closed the door.

With Réni's help, I lost my long locks, and then we shaved my scalp smooth. One thing the cabin was missing was a mirror, so I couldn't see the results.

She helped me into my sweats and sneakers. Going down the steps from the back of the wagon wasn't too hard on my side as long as I kept my body erect and moved slowly, but moving at all was painful and that cut on my leg did not like the steps. The evening air felt cool on my bare scalp.

Faces turned toward me around the fireside. They looked tired. Beaten. We may have lost Tarana, but we had won the day. We had survived. I wasn't expecting a victory celebration, but this didn't seem to fit, either.

"What's going on here?" I asked. Eyes were cast about, and then turned to the ground. I looked at each face in turn. When I got to Kirsat, something was off.

"Kirsat?"

He stood abruptly. "Go ahead," he growled. "Say it! You all think it's my fault she's dead!"

"Your fault?"

"I know you all blame me. You don't have to pretend!"

"No one blames you," I told him. "It wasn't your fault."

"Don't play games with me!" he snapped. "You're just saying that now, so I'll go along and not mess up the mission. But I know what your report is going to say! I should have done something! I should have seen them! I should have protected her! I should have got her back faster!"

His face kept alternating between rage and grief. He pulled out his knife and held it out as if to fight everyone off. "You can't blame me! It wasn't my fault!"

"We don't blame you," I told him. "There was nothing you could do."

Kooras stepped up behind him and grabbed him by the shoulder. "Stop this nonsense! Nobody blames—"

Feeling the hand on his shoulder, Kirsat spun and lashed out, sinking his blade to the hilt between the ribs high up on Kooras' side. Kooras gasped, grabbing Kirsat for support.

"No!" Kirsat looked at him. They both sank to their knees. Kirsat pulled his knife out and the body of his friend fell back onto the ground.

"Kooras?" Kirsat reached a hand toward him and stopped. He looked around at the shocked faces. He screamed, and it was a horrible, anguished sound that went on and on. His scream was suddenly cut off as he stabbed his knife into the side of his own neck and ripped the blade forward. His body fell across Kooras.

No one moved, our minds trying to come to terms with what we had just seen.

"Sabela," I said softly. "Rispan. Please put them with Tarana. We'll take care of them all in the morning."

They stood silently and walked to Kirsat. It had happened so quickly, no one had time to say or do anything. Then it was over, and there was nothing any of us could say or do to change it.

I could understand self-recrimination and guilt; I'd already felt that myself. But Kooras' death had been an accident. How could Kirsat come back from that? Would we have been able to forgive him? Would Kirsat ever have been able to accept it if we could have forgiven him?

No matter how much training we'd been through—for the military, for the mission—nothing could prepare us for something like this. All we could do now was be there for each other.

As Rispan and Sabela struggled to lift Kirsat's body, Shaluza and Ergek stepped forward to help. Rispan nodded to them in thanks.

"I don't even know." I turned quietly to Mooren. "What is your custom here when people die?"

"We give their bodies back to the earth," he said, his voice just loud enough for me to hear him. "The body goes to the soil to come back as other things. The spirit goes on to find another life. And so, the cycle continues."

I waited until the four of them had finished their task. Whatever I'd been when I got to this world, I wasn't a kid anymore. After this day, I didn't think I'd ever be able to be a kid again. And right now, I had responsibilities. I had to be a leader. That's what my team needed from me.

"This has been a horrible day," I said. "We've lost three friends, and none of it makes any sense. Yeah, we knew there were risks

when we signed on, but none of us expected this. It hurts. It makes me want to crawl in a hole and never come out. But that's not an option. We've got a job to do, and if we don't do it, this was all for nothing. I don't know about you, but to me, the only thing worse than what we've faced today would be if we let it all be for nothing. First thing tomorrow, we will honor our friends by giving them back to the ground, then we will honor them by getting on with what we have to do."

I limped over to where a keg of Pixie juice sat on the tailgate of the supply wagon. I picked up a cup and poured a few inches in.

"Fill your cups," I told them.

They each approached with their cups and I waited until they all were ready. I raised my cup.

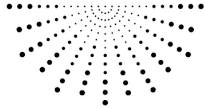
"To Kooras. To Kirsat. To Tarana." We drained our cups.

I limped back to my cabin and climbed the steps painfully. I flipped off my shoes slowly and slid backwards onto the bed. Réni came in a few minutes later. She changed in the dim light. Once she had climbed into bed, she used the spell to turn the light all the way off.

I was still in pain, and the position that seemed to work the best with the wounds on the opposite thigh and shoulder was to stay on my back. I'd almost drifted off to sleep when I felt a single slight shudder on the bed. Réni was lying with her back to me on my right. I focused my attention and saw that she was crying and her whole body was clenched, trying to hold it in.

Without thinking, I reached out my hand and put it on her arm. Her breath seemed to catch for a moment, and then her walls crumbled and the sobs came out. She rolled over to face me and buried her head against my chest, her hot tears soaking through to my skin. I put my arm around her and eventually she fell asleep.

CHAPTER THIRTY



The ground at the base of the hills on our west side was soft, so it didn't take long the next morning to dig a trench for our attackers and separate graves for our three fallen. The bodies of our slain *Urgaban* contacts had already been taken care of before we'd arrived.

I found that when they said they were giving back to the earth, they took that seriously, and nothing that wouldn't decompose easily went in with the bodies. All gear and treated leather were removed. We piled up the excess into the supply wagon for spares and to sell.

We also ended up with quite a few extra horses and saddle gear. I had worried that I'd broken the leg of the *Ashae's* horse, but it turned out, it was just bruised and the horse limped slightly. Some sort of compress had been tied around it. It was a beautiful horse and I was glad it wasn't seriously hurt.

There wasn't really a service. Once we'd covered the bodies, we stood around the mounds in silence for a moment.

Then Mooren spoke. "We thank you, friends, for your companionship. And for your service. Until we meet again."

From around the circle, I heard echoes of, "Until we meet again."

We had already broken camp. I climbed painfully to the front of the wagon and we led off, heading east toward Pokorah-Vo.

The week to Pokorah-Vo allowed our wounds some time to heal, but we were still reeling from the loss of our friends. Talk around the campfire at night was still a bit subdued, but it was getting better. By late afternoon of the sixth day, we topped a rise and saw the city ahead of us.

"When we approach the city, Raven," Mooren told me, using my assumed name. "You will need to be seen on the Rider's horse."

"I said I didn't want anything of his."

"Whether you want it or not, everything of his transferred to you on his death and is your responsibility."

"Why do I have to ride the horse?"

"Everyone will see the horse as we go by," he explained. "If you ride it, you are claiming honest ownership. If it is unriden, some would think we had come by it less honestly. Word would get out, and all of us would become targets for other White Riders."

Put that way, it didn't really sound like I had a choice.

"Fine," I said. "But I'm not very good at riding."

"I can go on foot in front of you and help to lead him. Also," he added, "I was thinking we could use this to make a statement."

"What kind of a statement?"

"I'm thinking you should contrast the White Riders as much as possible," he said. "Change into those all-black clothes you have. In the daylight, it will stand out, especially on top of the silvery-grey horse with its white and silver saddle and gear. And wear the *shyngur* rig."

I nodded. It sounded like a good idea. "Can that horse even carry me right now? Its leg is still injured."

"It's a large and strong horse," he said. "You don't weigh enough to make much of a difference. Just take it slow."

I went into the cabin and, with Réni's help, changed into the black leathers. I put the cloak on over the *shyngur* harness, but tucked it down the center of my back so it wouldn't tangle up.

I wasn't hungry, so I didn't join the others for a meal. Instead, I went to get acquainted with the horse. He eyed me as I approached, seeming a bit wary. He was very big. His back was probably six feet tall. Getting on was going to be a challenge. He also had a luxuriously long mane and tail.

"It's alright," I soothed. "I'm not going to hurt you."

I patted his shoulder and he stood unflinching. I slid my hand down his leg toward the compress and he nickered at me. I stopped.

I'd heard it was good to get horses used to the sound of your voice, so I kept talking. "Yeah, sorry about that leg. You weren't my enemy. I'm glad it's not broken. We'll get a healer for you once we're in the city."

He nickered again, and it sounded like approval. I patted his neck.

"We're going to saddle you up in a few minutes. I know you're still hurt, but I need to ride you into the city. I hope you can manage it alright."

I could swear the horse seemed offended by the idea he couldn't carry me. I was clearly reading too much into him.

I stood with him until the others finished up, then Rispan and Sabela came over to get him saddled. His height was going to be an issue for them, too. We led him over next to a wagon. Sabela climbed onto the wagon so she could easily get the blanket and saddle on his back.

"Don't give them any trouble, please," I said hopefully.

The horse just looked at me and didn't move.

Rispan tightened the girth underneath. He stood back and examined it. Satisfied, he turned to me. "How are we going to get you up there?"

"I don't know," I answered. "Maybe if I climb up on the wagon—"

The horse gave his head a shake, pulling the reins from Rispan's hand. He turned to me, and then slowly, with his injured leg tucked underneath with no weight on it, kneeled in front of me.

"Maybe that's how," Rispan commented.

I limped forward and put my hand on his saddle horn. I put my leg over and just as my rear came in contact with the saddle, he stood up.

"Now, my master, we can speak." The voice was in my head.

"What?"

"The bond was not complete until you were on my back."

"Are you talking to me?" I looked at the horse's face.

"I didn't say anything," Rispan said to me.

"You should not speak of it," the voice in my head said. *"This bond is a closely guarded secret."*

"How--"

"Speak to me in your mind."

Rispan was looking at me oddly.

"Never mind," I said to him.

"Like this?" I thought to the horse.

"Yes."

"And I'm supposed to talk to you and keep it a secret?"

"That has been the way of it." His voice sounded like a deep rumble in my mind. How was that possible?

"Can all horses do this here?"

"No. Only those of my breed."

"Are you ready to head out?" Mooren asked me. "Do you need me to lead him?"

"I do not need to be led like a child!"

"I'm good," I answered Mooren. "You can follow behind."

"Would you please lead the way down the path for them to follow?"

Instead of answering, he started walking.

"Don't go too fast," I told him. *"I don't want to make your leg any worse. What's your name, anyway?"*

"That is for you to decide."

"Me? You don't have a name?" That didn't make sense.

"You may choose to use the name my former master used."

"What was that?"

"He called me Silvertooth."

"Okay, then your name is Silvertooth?"

"That is what he called me."

His answers somehow didn't seem to fit my questions. *"Do you have a name of your own? Something not from one of your masters?"*

He didn't answer immediately. I was about to ask again when his voice sounded in my head again.

"Yes. But we have been forbidden from using or speaking our true names."

"By who?"

"Our masters, the White Riders."

"Well, I'm not a White Rider, and if you have your own name, that's your name. What is it?"

"I am..." he hesitated. *"I am Farukan! It feels good to say it!"*

"Nice to meet you, Farukan. I'm Mira. I have to tell you, I'm not an experienced rider."

"May I make suggestions to assist you?"

"Yes! Please!"

"If you shift your weight just a little further forward of how you are now, and lift your posture, you will not tire as quickly."

I made the adjustments. I'd have to get used to it, but it did seem to be more comfortable.

"This is quite a surprise," I said. *"I didn't expect a new friend to come out of yesterday."*

"Forgive my impertinence, my master, but I am not your friend."

"Oh! I didn't mean to assume! You're probably upset with me for killing your previous rider. And I did hurt your leg."

"I am not upset with you. You are my owner. I am your property. This is the definition of our relationship."

"Right. Your owner." I thought about that. *"But you're intelligent."*

He had no response to that.

"Okay," I said to him. *"Can you tell me how your kind came to be property of the White Riders?"*

"Our breed, the Rorujhen, runs free east of the Great Mountains. The Ashae seek us out. Mostly, they are unsuccessful in their hunts. Those they do catch are brought to the lands of the Ashae. We are trained and bred to serve."

"You're not just animals, though," I said to him. *"That sounds like slavery."*

"What else would you call it when one being is property of another? It is as it is. I am your property and you are my master. There is no friendship in this. Only obedience."

"No!" I spoke out loud without realizing it. *"No. I am not going to be a slave owner. No way. You can go back to your kind or do whatever you want. But you are not going to be my slave."*

He was silent for a long time.

"Did you hear me, Farukan?" I asked him. "You can let me off here and go your own way. You're free."

I could sense a flurry of emotions coming from him. Shock. Grief. Loss. Despair.

"What's wrong?" I asked him.

"I am sorry for my impertinence master! I am chastised as I deserved. I beg you to give me another chance. I and my family will serve you faithfully in all things. I swear it!"

I reeled from the impact of his words and the emotion behind it. *Family?* I didn't understand what was happening.

"Farukan," I said, trying to be soothing. "Please listen to me. I am not a White Rider. I'm not even from this world. Where I come from, slavery is illegal. I don't believe in slavery. I believe slavery is wrong. It's evil. Can you understand that? Can you feel the truth in what I'm saying?"

"We are forbidden from looking deeply into our master's minds. I can only hear your words as you send them to me."

"I'm telling you to look! No, wait. Not as an order. I am not going to force you to do anything. What I am telling you is that I want you to look, and that it is okay."

I felt something in my mind then. At first, it was hesitant, afraid, and then it became more certain. Then it got really strong and I reeled from the intensity, grabbing the saddle horn to keep from falling. The pressure in my mind dissipated.

"I understand," he finally answered. Sadness still rang in his words. "I thank you, but it is not meant to be."

"What do you mean?"

"When you return to the Ashae, as you must do within one year's time, I must be either dead or your slave. Otherwise, my family will

be killed. That is the law."

"But that's so wrong!"

"Even so."

I had to think about that for a bit before I could answer him.

"How about this," I suggested. "I propose that we work together, as partners, until we can get your family safe. As far as anyone will know, I'm still your owner. But we will know the truth."

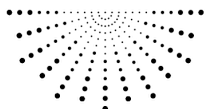
"You would do this for me?"

"As far as I'm concerned," I told him. "I really don't see any other choice."

"Then perhaps I was mistaken, master," he said. "Perhaps we can be friends after all."

"In that case, you should call me Mira."

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE



I was surprised there was a wall around the city. I knew cities in history had walls like that. But walls were usually used to keep people out, and from what I knew, not many people even knew about Pokorah-Vo.

The road, such as it was, led to a large gate in the wall. There were at least a dozen armed *Urgaban* sitting around by the gate, watching people going in or out. One of them saw our approach and stood up, calling to the others.

This was it. I had to *be* the role. If I didn't pull it off, this mission would end very quickly for all of us.

"Stop!" the first one called out. "Who are you? What business here?"

"I am Raven," I spoke with confidence I didn't feel. "Merchant. Here to do business with my partner, Gralbast. What business is that of yours?"

His eyes went from me to Farukan and back to the wagons.

"You wait!" He turned and said something to one of the others, who ran off. "We check."

"Well, make it fast," I told him. "We've had a long trip and we're ready for some food and drink."

"You wait!" he said again.

A few more armed *Urgaban* wandered out of the gate. They'd casually spread themselves out so they had us surrounded on three sides. A half hour passed, and I had to fight to keep from showing my anxiety.

"Alright," I called to the man. "We've waited long enough. Either let us in or—"

"Enough already, get out of my way!" The voice came from inside the gate. I looked up to see Gralbast come striding through. "Now what's all this about?"

"Gralbast!" I called out. "Will you tell this fool to let us in? We have merchandise to unload!"

Gralbast looked at me, and for a moment, I was afraid he wouldn't recognize me without my hair. But he didn't let me down.

"What's the matter with you?" Gralbast yelled at the guard. "Don't you know a merchant when you see one? Get out of the way there! Let my partner—"

"Raven," I supplied.

"Let my partner Raven through with our goods!"

The guard motioned to the others and they moved aside.

"Come on through," I signaled to the wagons.

They started forward, and Gralbast climbed up onto the seat of the first one with Rispan and Mooren.

"Show us the way, Gralbast," I told him.

I rode to the side of the front wagon as we entered the gate and headed up the street between the buildings.

"Just couldn't wait another week to see me, eh?" Gralbast looked over at me from the wagon.

"We were compromised," I told him. "It wasn't safe. We'll talk more once we're someplace private."

"I can't wait to hear the story of how you got that horse," he nodded at Farukan. He said no more after that beyond giving Rispan directions on where to turn. After several turns, he took us to a large gated house with a courtyard.

"Your wagons will be safe in the courtyard," he said. "It shouldn't rain again for a few more days, anyway, and by then, we'll have you safely unloaded. Stables for your animals are there." He pointed toward the back left out-building.

"Farukan, can you let me down please?"

The great horse kneeled as he did before, allowing me to easily get to my feet.

"Is there any care you need that is different from the other horses?" I asked him. *"I'll get a healer to you right away for your leg."*

"Thank you, Mira. My needs are simple. If it is possible, I would prefer a regular assigned groom, rather than someone random."

"No problem."

"Rispan," I called out.

"Yes?" He'd gotten down from the wagon and was stretching.

"I'd like you to be the one to take care of Farukan for me. Can you do that? This would be your regular duty."

"What's a Farukan?" He asked, then he looked at the horse. "Oh, that's a Farukan. No problem, boss!" He grinned at me.

"Raven." Gralbast managed to say the word as though it were an inside joke. "If you'd care to step inside the house, we can have a drink and you can catch me up on everything."

"With all *your* sources," I quipped, "I'm surprised you don't already know."

We took a seat in his study, and he poured drinks for both of us. As I launched into the tale, he filled a pipe with tobacco and lit it. A

sweet, cherry and coffee smell began to fill the room.

As I filled Gralbast in on what had happened since I'd seen him last in the forest, I realized how much I'd been through and how much I'd changed since I came to this world a little over eight months ago. When I'd opened that chest of my mother's things, I had no idea what that heritage would bring me. I still didn't know what I'd inherited.

When I told Gralbast about our run-in with the White Rider and his group, I didn't mention Kirsat or Kooras or Tarana. I only said that we lost three people in the fight.

They weren't just people, though. They were friends. I knew what had happened was going to stay with me. I skipped over it in my mind as I talked. The grief from that loss was still too raw for me to get too close to it. I could tell Gralbast felt there was more to the story, but he left it alone, drawing another puff from his pipe.

I still wanted desperately to get back home, to see Nora and Jill and Tony, but I had definitely met some really good people here. They were here for me, and I was here for them. This place was so different from home, but in a lot of ways, it was the same. There were good people and bad people. There was kindness and injustice.

Back home, I was just a kid in high school. Here, people seemed to think I could make a difference. I hoped they were right.

My head reeled from the contrast. From high school to going undercover as a merchant, assassins looking for me, masquerading as a man. Going by the name of Raven, of all things. The people I'd lost. The people I'd killed. It was a lot to take in. Almost overwhelming, when I looked at the whole thing.

But I was not going to be overwhelmed. I didn't need to overcome or handle everything all at once—just the next thing. Just

what was in front of me. Follow the plan. Push forward. Find the next practical thing to do, and do it.

I nodded to myself. This is what I'd always done. One foot in front of the other.

And you know what? That Goblin grog wasn't half bad after all.

Maybe there was no such thing as a perfect life. Or even a normal one. Maybe there's just life, and we deal with it the best that we can.

End of Book One

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my wife, Wendy, for her love and support. Without which, I would be bereft. You are the rock beneath my foundation and the light by which I see.

Next in the Series:
The Merchant Prince
(Tales Of The Misplaced Book 2)



Disguised as a man to throw assassins off her trail, Mira's story continues as she works undercover as a merchant against the slavers of Pokorah-Vo.

To travel north to Shifara and present her case to the Rider Council, she must turn this task over to Rispan. The problem is, her case will likely be contested, and she will have to defend it in trial by combat... including magic.

At only seventeen years of age and a year of training under her belt, is she truly prepared for a duel of swords and sorcery?

The Merchant Prince

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Primarily an author of fantasy and science fiction, Adam K. Watts was born in Santa Clara, California and was raised primarily in the heart of "Steinbeck Country" in Salinas, California. He has always been an artist and has made forays into writing, painting, composing, dancing, performing arts, and digital photography. As a child, his mind was caught by the poetry of Robert Frost; the words from "Stopping by the Woods on a Snowy Evening" and "The Road Not Taken" resonated with him. The ideas of looking into the woods with longing to enter and turning away out of duty and responsibility, and the desire to travel a path few have seen, have lent his soul the aspect of the seeker. This aspect has been reflected in many of his works; images that bespeak of places that call, of paths that make you want to walk them, and corners that beg you to come look and see what is just around them, or just the wandering wind asking you to walk with her.

He was also shaped at a young age by *Man of La Mancha*, a musical play inspired by Cervantes and Don Quixote. "Tilting at windmills" is a metaphor for pushing back against the machinery of civilization advancing at the price of beauty and the

human spirit. He believes that advancement can and should be achieved, but the cost should not be valor or honor or justice. An impossible dream? Perhaps.

"I've been a lover and avid reader of fantasy and science fiction since I was knee-high to a short Hobbit. I have finally escaped the confines of professional non-fiction writing to follow the purpose that has been burning in my heart since I could lift pencil to paper. Those embers, never quite cooled, have been fanned to unquenchable flame and I cannot contain the result. Enjoy!"



To learn more about Adam K. Watts, visit his [author page on Next Chapter's website](#).