TALES OF THE JIR

THE EDUCATION OF ESA DRUMM

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TALES OF THE JIR
THE EDUCATION OF ESA DRUMM

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ABSTRACT

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Tales of the Jir: The Education of Esa Drumm is a young adult short story that incorporates themes of morality, feminism, magic, and coming of age.
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PROLOGUE

The smooth stone just to the side of the gate’s archway cradled the large man’s frame well, allowing him to remain standing and giving the impression of alertness. It would take more than a casual glance to determine that his head was slumped forward, chin almost resting on sternum.

The hashir had watched the guard fight off slumber for the past quarter hour, fidgeting and adjusting his stance. This time however, there was no involuntary jerk back into consciousness, just the steady passage of breath ruffling his heavy mustache.

His colleague, while awake, was little more of use, his pale eyes focused unseeing on the distance. The hashir briefly wondered what internal notions the man’s mind was occupied by. Whatever they were, he obviously considered them of more import than his current duty.

These were family guards, tasked in their older years with the protection of a loosely fortified country house. One could scarcely blame them for their inattention on this temperate night. The glowing moon, while no rival to daylight, was still ample enough to make stealth an impossibility. Or so they believed.

A simple adjustment of breathing, and the hashir seemed to simply appear from the stone wall before them. Pale eyes roused first, but took far too long trying to blink away the apparition. A hand slid along the side of the guard’s face in a mockery of a caress, only to slide forward and crush his throat before a sound could be uttered.
He was eased to the ground as the other guard stirred from his niche in the wall.

A flurry of precisely placed blows brought his eyes wide open. He slid down the wall, a question lingering on his face as his heart ceased beating.

The hashir spared no time for moving either man’s body out of sight, planning to be far from here before their replacements put so much as a leg out of bed. Sure steps strode through the archway and seemingly melted into its heavy ironbound door.
CHAPTER I

The sword shifted in Esa’s hand, and what should have been a quick slashing movement, one designed to force an opponent back several steps, became something else entirely. The wooden practice sword flew from her sweaty palm like a launched arrow, bouncing against the sturdy support post of the garden shed she’d been using as her imagined target and rebounding, with surprising force, into the side of her head. She bit down on both the curses and cries of pain that immediately bubbled to her lips, refusing to give voice to yet another bout of incompetence.

Rubbing her ear carefully, she bent over, collected her sword, and got back into position. Instead of slashing, this time Esa put her slight weight behind what was, in her mind, a thrust. The dull tip hit crookedly, catching on a rough portion of the post before stuttering and shearing off to the left. Her first and second fingers somehow ended up smashed between the two wooden objects.

This time Esa could not contain a muffled scream equal parts frustration and pain. She kicked out at the fallen piece of wood, while cradling her hand against her body. Any movement felt as if it could snap her in half. Tears streamed from her eyes and she had no ability to stop them. Several minutes passed before each breath wasn’t a measure of time.
When Esa allowed her arm to rise from the protection of her torso, her fingers uncurled slowly. Both fingers were swelling, and blood had pooled under the nail of the second.

With slow and careful steps Esa crossed to where she’d kicked the sword, picking it up with her still throbbing fingers. She studied the plain wood blade, willed it to speak to her, to channel her desire, to show some spark of magic. Nothing happened.

Feeling more defeated than she had in some time, Esa stored the practice sword back in its hiding spot among the garden rakes and shovels. She pulled the door to the outbuilding shut behind her and began the trek back to the main part of the House.

* * *

Esa squinted at the letters on the page, their twisting and curving lines forming first one then another shape. Like snakes they undulated beneath her eyes, trying to avoid capture. Her head ached, proof that the lesson was almost at an end. She glanced around the room surreptitiously. The other students were working furiously, heads bent over pages, pens scribbling away.

She griped her pen more firmly, wincing as her damaged fingers protested. Her time was nearly up and the translation before her was nowhere near complete. Esa took a cleansing breath and tried to focus again. A small spark of green flared on the page.

“Decant,” she said under her breath, quickly copying down the decoded word as the letters paused in their relentless twining. She moved on to the next word.
Soft-soled boots sounded on the wooden floor behind her. Esa redoubled her efforts and felt her head throb in response. She tried looking at the sentence as a whole. After allowing the lavender solution to cool, slowly decant into...

“Into what?” Esa whispered desperately. She was out of time. Esa closed her eyes and scrawled the first thing that came to mind.

A shadow fell across the pages. Esa continued to stare at the words before her, looking much as she had for the past quarter hour. The pounding in her head certified that no more progress would be made, still she knew she must give the appearance of attentiveness.

The small sigh from behind her was nearly silent, a movement of air more than actual sound. She didn’t need to turn around to know that the accompanying head shake and disappointed look were also in full display. She set down her pen.

“Your penmanship leaves much to be desired, Novice.”

“Yes, Mistress,” Esa replied, knowing there was more to come.

“You’ve also misspelled both crystal and goblet in your last sentence,” her teacher continued. “I believe the correct spelling would be S T O N E and B A S I N.”

Esa’s heart fell, knowing that she’d been discovered.

The woman bent down, coming even with Esa. Her hazel eyes were kind, despite her professional tone. “It was a good guess. Next time know before you copy it down.”

“Yes Mistress Talibah.”

With a nod the woman straightened and moved once again to the front of the room. “Novices are dismissed,” she said, releasing Esa and the other five students.
Relieved that she hadn’t been kept late despite her poor translation effort, Esa re-shelved the text she’d be translating and set her desk in order. Her peers had of course done all of this far more quickly and made their exit.

She kept her head down as she passed Mistress Talibah, not wanting to see the pity on her mentor’s face.

* * *

Lady Mayve Drumm, Caliph of House Yarro looked up as the door to her private study opened and a man and woman entered. Like herself, wore the silver medallion that declared them Scholars of the highest level. Standing, she gave the man a questioning look.

“Mayve, might you have a moment?” Lord Alban Drumm said, responding to the questioning look in his wife’s eyes with a shrug. “Mistress Talibah asked to speak with us privately.”

She crossed to her husband, allowing him to take her hand within his own, before turning toward Talibah. “Of course. Please.” She gestured to the sitting area near the fireplace.

“Thank you my Lady,” Talibah bowed slightly before sitting opposite husband and wife. She noticed that the Lord and Lady Yarro had yet to relinquish each other’s hands. Much as she knew she needed to have this conversation, she hated that it fell to her. And it was apparent that they had an inkling of what she was about to tell them. “I’ve come to discuss Esa I’m afraid.”
Alban closed his eyes for a moment. “Tell us Tali,” he said, regarding the woman he’d known all his life. “Is it as bad as I’ve feared?”

“Wait,” Mayve scooted forward in her chair, pinning first Alban then Talibah with a hard look. “Before you tell us, whatever it is that you’ve come to, I must say first and foremost that I love my daughter…”

“As do I,” Alban interrupted.

“As do you,” Mayve agreed. “And should she have nary a drop of magical ability, I would love her no less. And the Holy Deities challenge anyone who would seek to make less of her because of that.”

“No one is disputing that my Lady,” Talibah said.

“We are in agreement my dear.” Alban took Mayve’s hand back and kissed it. “I seriously doubt that Tali has come to tell us that we should cast out our only child.”

“Indeed not, my lord.” Talibah seemed to grow larger in her chair, spine straightening and long limbs tightening with lean muscle. “I care for Esa as if she were my own blood and would be cast out in her stead before I’d let another do so.” It was a moment before all three Demae composed themselves and sat back in their seats once again.

Mayve nodded for Talibah to continue.

“Esa was tested and found to be Demae.” Both parents nodded. “It is no secret, however, that her magical ability is not as strong as we would like.”

“She is still young,” Alban began.

“She is twelve. Yes, still young, but she is working at a level much younger than her years. Her translation skills are weak, as is her recitation, and composition.”
“What level?” asked Mayve, “How behind is she?”

“She has made little improvement since we began formal training two years ago.”

Talibah met Lady Mayve’s stare without flinching. “It is my opinion that Esa might never achieve Mastery.”

Mayve tightened her grip on Alban’s hand.

“You said might,” Alban pointed out. “You are not convinced that she will not.”

“Esa is highly intelligent and a hard worker. She shows little skill in any of the traditional forms of scholarship, but…” Talibah chose her words carefully. “She does excel in one area. An archaic branch few Demae pursue any longer, as it rarely situates itself in practical scholarship. It was purely accidental that I even discovered her aptitude, but your daughter seems to have a gift for strategic thinking.”

“I’m uncertain of your meaning,” Mayve pinned Talibah with a curious look.

“Surely strategy is a part of the curriculum. Problem solving and the like.”

“General strategic thinking is, of course, still one of the foundations of scholarship, and Esa shows good potential in that area,” Talibah assured. “I am speaking of something a bit more specialized.”

“Specialized?” Mayve had no idea what Talibah could possibly mean. Alban however had a look of dawning realization on his face.

“Warfare?” He questioned.

“Yes.” Talibah let the answer hang in the ensuing silence. She simply regarded her Lady and Lord. The quiet did not last long.

“You are saying that my daughter - my twelve year old child - is a war mage?”

Mayve’s tone was frosty, evoking all of her considerable authority.
Talibah focused on keeping her face neutral, unsure if it was desperate hope or horror tinting Lady Mayve’s words. “No my Lady. I am saying that Esa has an affinity for battle strategy. I’m not certain how deep it goes. How much actual ability she has.”

“Then test her,” came Mayve’s terse reply.

“I’m afraid it’s not that simple. As I said, this is not an area of study any of the Demae in Yarro are currently involved in. The last war mage lived two thousand years ago." Talibah held up her hand, “Not that I’m saying she’s a war mage. The only reason I even bring it up is to exemplify that Esa’s magic is different.”

“She has always been different,” said Alban.

Talibah gave a small smile. “Indeed she has, my Lord.”

Mayve resisted the urge to pace. How long had she prayed that Esa would come into her own magical potential? “Does she seem to enjoy these exercises? This battle strategy?”

“Yes my Lady. She does seem to.” Talibah said.

Mayve nodded. “Proceed with this area of study then, Mistress Talibah. If you’ve found a way for Esa to succeed, by all means, do what you can to help her.”

“Thank you my Lady. My Lord.” Talibah rose and gave them each a small bow. She had just reached the door when Mayve called out.

“Speak with Boed, Mistress Talibah. Perhaps the Sain might have something useful to contribute.”

“Yes my lady.”
CHAPTER II

The smell of horses and dirt and leather made Esa’s nose twitch. The aroma wasn’t unpleasant, only different. The majority of her days were spent surrounded by the scent of paper and beeswax. Her eyes were accustomed to the low light of candles in the library, her fingers to the smooth feel of turning pages and smug of ink. Visiting the training yard felt at times, like venturing into a new and undiscovered country.

Esa squinted in the bright sunshine of outdoor training yard as she gripped the rough timber of the fence enclosing the practicing warriors of the Sain. The clang of metal and clack of wood against wood blended with the shouts and grunts of men and women, creating a general cacophony that no longer frightened Esa. And though she had not been forbidden from observing, she was careful to stay out from underfoot and not to draw attention to herself. The presence of such an enclave of the Sain was a tradition that House Yarro had maintained for all of known history. Perhaps even predating the Great Wars. Its proximity to the Outland Pass and the marauding desert people of the borderlands dictated the necessity of having warriors on hand despite Yarro lands being held by the Demae for eons.

If any of these elite warriors noticed that the pale and fragile looking girl who snuck into the yard several times each week was none other than the heir of House Yarro, none said anything - at least not where they might be overheard by their commander. Esa appreciated their acceptance, or at the least their tolerance.
Her eyes were focused on the bout closest to her perch along the fence. A pair of novices spared with wooden practice swords very like the one she constantly struggled with. The two girls before her wielded them with an ease and fluidity that Esa could only dream of. She watched as their steps mirrored each other, weaving in a pattern of footwork and balance that straddled the line between dance and combat.

“Thought I’d find you here.” A boy, as dark as Esa was pale, hopped up on the fence next to her. “Quit prancing about and finish it already,” he yelled at the circling girls.

“Cerin, you’ll get us in trouble,” Esa said, looking around to see if any of the instructors had noticed the two of them.

He looked over and smirked at her. “You mean I’ll get you in trouble. Relax. I’m Sain. We’re supposed to be loud and boisterous.” He leaned into Esa, bumping her shoulder affectionately.

Esa made a noise halfway between a sniff and a snort. “I’ll remind Lady Boed of that the next time I see her.”

“Not all of us can ascribe to the Lady Boed’s fierce stoicism.” Cerin’s expressive featured smoothed into a serene mask.

“Careful, you might hurt yourself.” Esa smiled, and the boy’s face returned to his usual grin.

Turning their attention once more to the practicing warriors in training, Esa couldn’t help but give a wistful sigh. Most of the Sain novices had already finished their drills for the morning and had either wandered off to find their midday meal or, like Cerin, were observing the remaining fighters. “She’s exceptional, isn’t she?”
Though Esa’s words were more statement than question, Cerin answered her.

“Top of our group certainly. Probably better than any of the novices when it comes down to it, maybe even some of them that’s already got their swords.” He nudged her shoulder again. “Good blood, that one.”

Esa nudged him back. “Says her twin.”

Cerin straightened up on the fence and yelled once more. “Enough then Banning. I’m hungry!”

A small movement from one of the girls’ wooden practice blade, almost too quick for Esa to notice, sent the other girl’s flying in an arch across the yard. The remaining sword flicked out, point at the throat of her disarmed opponent, hovering there for but a second to confirm her win. A few shout of “Well done” and sporadic clapping sounded from the remaining observers. The victor paused just long enough to remove her helm and smile before sheathing the wooden blade once more on her back.

Her hair, like her brother Cerin’s was done up in the multitude of tiny braids that most members of the Sain favored. They bounced and swayed as she hurried over to the fence.

“T ook you long enough,” was Cerin’s first comment. “Here I am wasting away to nothing, and poor Esa. Do you want that delicate Demae pallor to blister?” He ducked as Banning swatted at him, while Esa merely rolled her eyes.

“Esa’s no delicate lily to wilt in the sun,” Banning said. “Although your secret will be out shortly if you spend many more mornings out here.” She looked pointedly at Esa, “You’re nearly as dark as I am.” Banning winked as she grasped Esa’s pale hand with her much darker one.
Cerin gave a roar of laughter. “That would be a fine thing to see. Mistress Talibah walking into the library trying to figure why Esa’s as dark as mahogany.”

“I wouldn’t worry over Esa’s mistress, but Lady Mayve instead,” Banning responded.

“And I,” said a new voice from behind them, “would worry more about your own Lady Commander who is now late for her own midday meal.”

Esa and Cerin hopped down from the fence as if it had burned them. Banning slithered between the slats to also face the woman who’d come upon them - Lady Boed Elmster, Commander of the Sain at House Yarro.

While Esa did her utmost to avoid the attention of most warriors, she knew with certainty that she had never once set foot on the training ground without the Commander’s complete awareness. Boed’s grass-green eyes missed nothing, especially when it came to the area considered her sole domain. And while many Demae feared, or at least gave a wary respect and wide berth to her, Esa had never struggled with such apprehension. Even now, under the stern eye of the Lady, Esa knew that neither she, nor her friends were in any real trouble.

“Isn’t it enough, Novice Banning, that you kept half the company in the yard, luncheons getting cold, while you twirled and flitted around?” Boed’s copper colored braids were pulled back with a tie, lending an even more severe look to her already stoic features. “No warrior likes to be played with. Next time end it cleanly and quickly,” Boed raised an eyebrow, waiting for Banning’s response, “or perhaps I might decide you’re so advanced to face me in your next bout.”
“Yes, Lady,” the twins said together, despite the fact that Boed hadn’t been speaking to Cerin.

“Go then,” Boed said. Cerin and Banning scampered off toward the main building without another word.

Esa gave a small bow and turned to leave as well, but the hand on her shoulder stilled her feet. With extreme care, Boed lifted Esa’s right hand, frowning at the swollen and discolored fingers. “Has the pursuit of academic prowess turned dangerous?”

“No Lady,” Esa answered without looking up.

Boed pursed her lips. “Do you know why I have never forbidden you from my training yard?”

Esa shook her head, wondering if she’d been wrong not to fear Boed.

“Curiosity is never a bad thing. But, it must be tempered by knowledge of consequences.” Boed released Esa’s hand. “The weapon you so industriously borrowed from the barracks has been returned to its proper place. I ask you not to seek its return.”

Esa looked up, argument on her lips, but Boed held up a hand.

“Was it not I who tested you nearly two years ago?”

“Yes Lady,” Esa answered.

“You have no affinity for the sword. That has not changed, and no amount of desire on your part will alter that.” Boed’s voice gentled. “You are Demae. Is that not something to be proud of?”

“I am proud Lady, I just…” Esa balled up her fists, frustrated. “I am no great scholar. It just doesn’t feel right, and I can’t help but think there is more.”

“More to you? Certainly. We are all more than our gifts.”
Esa wasn’t sure how to explain that that wasn’t what she meant. “I… yes Lady Boed.”

Boed continued to look at Esa, waiting. When no more words were forthcoming she patted her once again on the shoulder. “You are always welcome here, so long as it doesn’t interfere with your duties. But Esa,” Boed gave her a squeeze, “no more swords. I’ll not have you hurt.”

Not waiting for Esa’s confirmation, Boed turned and walked toward the barracks.

Esa made her way back toward the main house, kicking every rock in her path along the way.
CHAPTER III

Lady Boed’s face reflected none of the curiosity she felt as Mistress Talibah Ammi strode through the double doors of the main barracks. The Demae Master wove through the boisterous crowd as though swinging tankards and twirling knives were a part of her everyday, and despite herself Boed smiled. She’d always been intrigued by the willowy woman, though she rarely had cause to interact with her.

Boed pushed back from her seat at the long table when Talibah’s gaze met her own and the other woman altered her course directly to where Boed was finishing off her meal.

“Lady Boed,” Talibah said in a voice that while quiet pierced the general chaos. “Might I trouble you for a bit of your time?”

Nodding, Boed stepped over the bench she’d been seated at and extended her hand toward a side door. She led the other woman into a small hallway and out a side door of the barracks. The evening was brisk but not overly cold, a remnant of the day’s unseasonal warmth. “What did you wish to discuss Mistress?” she asked once they’d put a reasonable space between themselves and the barracks.

“I come to you under the direction of Lord and Lady Yarro,” Talibah said.

Boed quirked an eyebrow, but waited for more explanation.

“You are familiar with young Esa.” It was not a question.
Again Boed nodded, wondering if this had anything to do with Esa’s unsuccessful forays with the sword and her appearance within the training yard.

“It is no secret that you carry a fondness for the girl.” Talibah continued. “And I am hoping to draw on that fondness by requesting your assistance.”

“It’s true, I care for the girl. She is under my protection, as is all of House Yarro.” Boed stopped walking, forcing Talibah to halt as well. “If you’ve come to ask me to ban Esa from the training yard I will do so, but the chit is smart as a fox and nearly as able to sneak about. I can give no guarantee that she won’t continue to enter with or without permission.” Though heartfelt, Boed’s tone was carefully neutral. Which made Talibah’s response startling.

It started as a giggle, then morphed into a wheeze, until finally Talibah gave a full-throated laugh that echoed out into the night, reverberating against the far buildings. It lasted only a few moments, and Boed found herself flummoxed as to how to react.

Talibah wiped away a stray tear, still clearly amused. “My apologies Lady Boed,” she said. “You must think I am quite odd.”

“Certainly not Mistress,” Boed answered, though her expression told a slightly different story.

“Tell me, Lady Boed, as a member of the Jir, are you familiar with its origin?”

Wondering at the change of subject Boed frowned, but answered, “In a general way I suppose. The strongest members of each the Demae and the Sain from each of the warring kingdoms joined together to end a century of fighting.” At Talibah’s confirmation she continued. “The Jir became the ruling class. Formed a council of those with both blood and power from the remaining Houses.”
“True enough,” said Talibah. “But the formation of the Jir was not an immediate fix. War continued throughout the eleven kingdoms for another half century until the Jir could bring everyone together under a lasting peace.” She paused, considering her words. “It is written that those last decades of war were the bloodiest, the most violent. That the threat of peace drove the fight to a level in which the unfathomable became reality.”

Boed listened with rapt attention. Intrigued yet still confused as to where this was all leading.

“There are stories, tales and legends mostly, about a small group of the Jir, Demae and Sain who decided to combine their skillsets. A perfect blend of the two castes. An ability to blend the scholarly logic of the Demae with the physical prowess of the Sain.”

Talibah folded her arms and waited.

Boed simply stared at her, interpreting that Talibah felt she’d made some point, but unsure as to what that point might be. The silence continued for some time.

“Mistress Talibah, while I’ve enjoyed your history lesson I don’t believe I understand what it has to do with Esa.”

“Esa has shown a gift with strategy. Battle strategy specifically.” Talibah pointed toward the training yard. “And you’ve shared with me that she’s intent on observing the Sain as well.”

“ You think she’s like these blended Jir?” The idea of it was slightly ludicrous to Boed. “She has no gift with the sword.”

“I’m not certain of anything. I merely wanted to ask if you might help me better determine the extent of her intellectual grasp of such things.” Talibah pursed her lips.

“As a consultant of a sort.”
Boed shrugged her shoulders. “I’ll offer what I can.”

Talibah smiled. “My thanks then.” She turned and walked a few steps before turning back. “Sneaky like a fox? Really?” Her chuckles remained in Boed’s ears long after the woman had disappeared from view.

* * *

Watching her daughter sleep was one of the few things that usually brought Mayve peace. The way Esa snuggled among the bedclothes, hair a mess of white-blonde tangles, made something in Mayve’s heart clench and release. Esa was her miracle. After years of failing to carry a child to term, despite dozens of healers and Demae versed in child bearing offering treatment, Mayve had finally managed to give birth to a healthy, if delicate, little girl. She and Alban had never experienced such joy as the moment their family became complete. In moments of silence like these, lurking in the shadows of her daughter’s room, Mayve felt free to let all the chains and responsibilities of her position drop and simply marvel at the child she so loved.

Not that Mayve didn’t express love toward Esa during waking hours, but lately every interaction teemed with political ramifications. The easy smiles of just a few years ago were a rarity on Esa’s face now. Mayve could only delude herself so much. She knew Esa grasped far more about the situation than the twelve year old revealed. If Esa didn’t achieve mastery... Mayve didn’t allow herself to finish that thought. Instead she reached out and brushed some of the hair away from Esa’s face, caressing the soft sleep-warmed skin. One last look and Mayve forced herself to leave, closing the door softly.
behind her. Her steps made hardly any noise on the stone floor, as she exited the family quarters.

It wasn’t all that late, but few people remained in the public areas of House Yarro. As she sat at her desk, she noticed that her correspondence had been sorted and laid out for her review. She paged through the usual reports and requests for funding. Besides the usual business dealings of running a House – Mayve left the day to day minutia to a trusted staff, but insisted on being involved in curriculum, staffing, and finance decisions – she contended with her own scholarly pursuits and the occasional requests for her expertise. Mayve sorted them into piles of “yes,” “no,” and “for further review.” A letter bearing the seal of the Jir Council caught her attention. Mayve broke the seal.

“My Dearest Sister,” the letter began, and Mayve continued reading with a sour look.

Lord Byron Crannog had made quite a name for himself as of late. His position as Archivist to the Council made him far more influential than Mayve, with his ready access to numerous members, despite her position as Caliph. She often wondered if the deities were somehow punishing her for her youthful arrogance. That she and her younger brother had never been close was to heavily Understate their relationship. Byron’s jealousy over Mayve’s many accomplishments in their youth had turned any sibling closeness into rivalry. Sain abilities had come to her as easily as breathing, something that couldn’t be said for her brother. He’d gone from quiet to waspish in the course of a summer. There had even been talk of abuses of the outer tenants, but Mayve had been little past girlhood then and little concerned with rumor. Her position above him as heir hadn’t helped matters, nor had her tendency to taunt his inabilities.
Now it was his turn. His marriage to Fia Crannog, a woman every bit as petty and ambitious as Byron, had produced four girls, two of which had already achieved their silver medallions. That the Crannog’s lived in the capital city of Lore made Mayve’s interactions with them infrequent, a saving grace that she thanked the Great Mother for daily.

And that grace was about to end, Mayve realized as she finished the letter. “I look forward to returning home and meeting my niece,” she read again, cursing, “Duggan’s get.” While the words gave the impression of familial interest, Mayve read the threat behind them. He had never treated Yarro as his home. Byron had spies here surely. She’d know that. What they’d told him about Esa had obviously convinced her brother that House Yarro might soon be without an heir. And opportunist that he was, Byron felt the need to evaluate the situation for himself.

It wasn’t unheard of. Male children had inherited before, when female rulers had been unable to produce an heir that could serve on the council of the Jir. But Mayve was betting Byron had something else in mind. No, her brother was quite comfortable in the capital. He wasn’t about to resettle his household in Yarro, House Seat or no House Seat. Considering what she knew of Byron’s family, ambition drove all of them. Suddenly the pieces fit together in Mayve’s mind. Even in cases where the only suitable heir was male, leadership of a House would always revert to the closest living female of the next generation. In this case, Cora Crannog, Byron’s eldest daughter.

Mayve wanted to shred the letter into tiny pieces. To send the Sain to Yarro’s border and refuse Byron entry. But, she could do none of these things, and while she knew that part of her unease lay in concern for Esa, she was cognizant enough of her own
ego to realize that being out-maneuvered by her brother played a part as well. Mayve folded the letter and placed it neatly back on her desk. Perhaps tomorrow might bring new insight. Mayve’s last thoughts centered on Talibah and the slim sliver of hope she’d granted.
CHAPTER IV

Esa struggled under the weight of the massive text, trying unsuccessfllly to wrangle it back onto the shelf just above her eye level. Finally on tiptoe, Esa was able to settle the tome into place with a last shove. She made her way from table to table, tidying up the random papers and placing books back on shelves. By now she’d come up with a rather effective system for such tasks.

This was not the first time Esa had been forced to stay long after her peers had retired for the evening. Such was the luck of a novice who failed to complete the daily assignments in a timely manner. Usually such things did not weigh on Esa’s mind. But lately it seemed as if she could do nothing correctly. That she simply could not excel.

Seeing Banning had clarified several things. Novices could be amazing. It was something she’d always known really. She hadn’t failed to notice the way some of her peers had mastered the tasks set them, nor the praise they’d received. Somehow watching Banning had cemented her own lack of skill. Not only had it set in sharp relief how hopeless her own struggles with the sword were, but had carried over to her lack of skill in scholarly pursuits as well.

She’d come to terms long ago with the taunting looks of the other Sain novices. The disdainful glances as she struggled with basic concepts, knowing full well that the only thing keeping her peers from outright torment was her position.
Now left once again to clean up after her more successful classmates, Esa could only dwell in a state of self-pity and frustration. Esa finished straightening the farthest desk with a sigh. She bent down to bank the fire.

“Last I noticed there was a battalion of servants to take care of such tasks.”

Esa straightened quickly, iron poker held tightly. She relaxed her grip somewhat when she spotted Lady Boed standing in the doorway. The firelight on her red hair and earth tone tunic and pants made the formidable woman seem to blend into the woodwork and stone. Esa was too surprised by her sudden appearance to even acknowledge Boed’s comment.

“Surely the heir has better ways to spend her time,” Boed continued. “Whacking about at innocent fence posts or sneaking into my training yard at least.”

The words might have bothered Esa, except there was a smile on Boed’s face and a teasing nature to her tone. “You mock me Lady?” Esa gave Boed an appraising look.

“A bit,” Boed said. “Come, walk with me.” She didn’t wait, but turned and exited the library.

Esa spend a second or two completely at a loss, before dropping the poker and running after the older woman. She caught up just as Boed was turning the corner that would take them outside. They walked across the courtyard and entered one of the public areas of the House where many of the Demae in residence had private offices.

Boed stopped at Mistress Talibah’s door and knocked once.

Doing little to conceal her surprise, Esa could only shuffle forward awkwardly, Boed’s hand on her shoulder, once the portal opened. The women exchanged greetings, but none of their conversation penetrated Esa’s consciousness. Her mind was spinning,
unsure of what she was about to be disciplined for. While she consistently let down
Mistress Talibah in terms of her academic performance, she’d obeyed Boed’s instructions.
Going so far as to lessen the frequency of her visits to the training yard.

“Esa?”

The tone of Boed’s voice brought Esa back into the moment, making her aware
that was not the first time she’d been addressed. Talibah and Boed were both looking at
her. “I’m sorry.”

“Take a seat,” Boed said, pointing to a group of three armchairs that had been
placed close to Talibah’s fireplace, a small round table at the center.

The ominous words were something she’d heard before. Usually right before one
of the lectures on her poor performance. Head down, Esa walked over and sat, waiting
for the latest update on how she needed to work hard, be smarter, or in any other way
stop bringing shame onto her parents.

Talibah joined her immediately, taking the seat directly across from Esa, while
Boed hung back slightly, placing her hands on the back of the remaining chair, but not
sitting.

Talibah looked at the bent head and stiff body of the young girl before her. All of
Esa’s body language communicated a novice awaiting punishment. She shared a look
with Boed. “Do you remember,” Talibah began, “when we studied some of the battles of
the Great Wars earlier this year?”

“Yes,” Esa said.

“Speak louder and look up,” Boed commanded.
Esa straightened in her chair and met Talibah’s eyes. “Yes Mistress, I remember.”

“It appeared that you enjoyed those lessons.”

Those had been some of the best class times Esa could remember. For once she hadn’t struggled to grasp the material. She’d understood the formations, the reasoning behind why certain campaigns had been successful and others had not. “I enjoyed them very much.”

“Good,” Talibah said with a smile. “Let’s begin with the Heron’s battle of the Kumi Islands then.” Talibah reached into a drawer in the table and pulled out several miniature ships, and began placing them in various positions.

It was only then that Esa realized that a map of the Eleven Kingdoms was painted upon the table’s surface. She looked between Talibah’s bent head and Boed who continued to stand silently on the outskirts of the circle.

“Heron managed to invade Eagle Cove, despite fewer forces and inferior weapons,” said Talibah once all the ships had been placed.

“I’m sorry Mistress Talibah,” Esa began speaking, but paused, unsure of how to ask in a polite way what in the name of all deities was going on. “Aren’t I here for… I don’t know why…” Esa took a short breath. “Am I in some sort of trouble?”

Boed laughed. “Leave it to the Demae to use a dozen words when two will do.” A wry smile lingered around Boed’s mouth as she left her spot and lowered her body into the chair. “Mistress Talibah seems to think you have some aptitude towards war-like thinking. She figured between the two of us we might be able to see if it goes deeper than that.”
*I know I’m awake*, Esa thought to herself. Still this was most definitely the strangest situation she’d ever experienced. When she finally dared slide her eyes from Boed to Talibah, her teacher only nodded, confirming Boed’s words.

“So Heron had fewer Sain and little better than wooden swords when he invaded the Sebelan coast. How did he do it?” Boed’s voice brought Esa out of her confusion and back into the map before her.

“He was a pirate,” Esa remembered from one of her father’s books.

Talibah’s expression asked for a bit more.

Esa studied the table closer. “He used trickery. Those ships on the northern coast couldn’t be seen prior to the first ships landing. He allowed Eagle Cove to think he had even less than he did, then brought the rest of his fleet in to flank the defenders.”

“Exactly,” said Talibah. “Now what about these ships here,” she pointed out two resting to the south.

Esa continued breaking down the basics of the battle, missing the conspiratorial grins on both her teachers’ faces.
“He’s not to be trusted,” Boed’s voice was grim. She stood on the southern watchtower, facing out toward the Tamm valley. It was a spot she frequented. From here she could see anyone approaching the castle from three directions.

“No,” Alban said in an equally serious voice. “And I’m especially displeased with the presence of his personal guards.” He too looked out onto the rolling fields and foothills. Through both Boed’s scouts and those loyal to Mayve among the smaller towns within Yarro, they’d managed to keep a steady stream of information flowing as to the movements and progress of their coming visitors.

“Hamak mercenary scum.” Boed practically spit the words. “What self-respecting Sain sells their sword? Little better than their raping, pillaging pirate ancestors.”

In spite of the gravity of the situation, Alban almost chuckled at Boed’s words. He’d never experienced her candid annoyance before. “We are agreed then. Byron’s presence alone was cause for me to worry. Bringing armed Sain into my home increases it tenfold.”

Boed nodded. “I’ve scouts riding circuit, as well as additional Sain within the House walls.”

“I appreciate all of that, as does my wife,” Alban said. “However, I’d like an additional favor. One I’ve not discussed with Lady Mayve.”
“Of course my Lord. If it’s within my power.”

“Teach my daughter to fight.”

“My Lord, I don’t think you understand.” Boed began.

Alban held his hand up. “She is no warrior. I know. I am not asking for that.”

“Then I am unsure what you are asking,” Boed’s voice was both heated and confused.

“Before the Sain novices come fully into their power they still learn the basics of attack and defense,” Alban spoke slowly. “I’ve seen some of the unarmed sessions with my own eyes. Surely there is something you can teach her.”

“It’s not that simple.” Boed said. “Yes, there are many drills that do not depend on the Sain gift per say, still there is a certain mindset to those traveling the warrior’s path. One that Esa, deities all bless, just does not have.”

“Teach her to run then.” Alban pleaded. “Teach her to survive. So that if she’s attacked, she won’t just simply submit.”

Boed took a deep breath and released it. She didn’t answer right away, and Alban vowed to give her as much time as possible to consider what he’d asked. The thought had come to him some time ago. It was unorthodox certainly, but he could not shake the feeling that it was the right thing.

“I can make no promise,” Boed said after some time, “that anything I teach her will save her life. But I will try.”

The relief Alban felt nearly brought him to tears. His voice caught, “That is all I ask.”
Esa took a bite of her apple, chewing thoughtfully as she studied the map spread before her. Talibah had asked her to draft an alternate battle plan for the legendary Forest War. That the real battle had taken place thousands of years ago, and the Kerran Sain had never known defeat seemed of little importance to her Demae teacher. Originally, she’d adopted much the same plan as Blough of Tek a, taking her army along the base of the mountains before committing a forward assault on the western Forest. And like Blough, Talibah had declared Esa’s forces decimated. Now she was working on a southern invasion, using the Adler River to help bring supplies and troops directly into the heart of the Kerran Forest.

She took another bite, wondering if a decoy from the Tizen border might split the Kerran fighting force. Esa set the apple down on the table, flipping to a more detailed map of Kerra and scribbling down a basic plan. She reached for her apple once again, only to encounter empty air. A loud crunch caused her to turn.

Alban winked at Esa as he took another bite of the crisp apple.

“Papa!” Esa scolded, reaching across the table and plucking the fruit from her father’s outstretched hand. “I’m certain there is an entire bushel of apples in the kitchen. Must you take mine?”

“I was simply testing your awareness of your surroundings.” He spread his arms to indicate the large open space of the main hall. “You failed, by the way.” His grin took any sting out of the words. “Hasn’t Boed gotten around to that part yet?”
“Lady Boed is already teaching me quite a bit. Detecting apple thieves hasn’t been a high priority.”

“Perhaps,” Alban said.

A strange look crossed her father’s face, but it was gone a moment later, replaced by a wide grin directed over Esa’s shoulder. She turned, catching sight of her mother headed towards them.

Mayve returned her husband’s smile before sitting next to her daughter and leaning over to place a kiss on her blonde head. “Ooo, maps,” Lady Mayve said spying the study area Esa had created for herself. “Are we attacking or defending today?”

Her mother’s comment did not stir the surprise in Esa that it had the first several times. While always interested, Esa’s parents had played a far more avid role in her education as of late. It was one of the reasons she’d taken to studying in the hall, as her old spot in the library became decidedly cramped with one additional person, let alone both her parents, Talibah, and on occasion Boed taking up residence.

“Attacking,” Esa answered her mother. “Mistress Talibah wants me to design a plan to defeat the Sain in the Forest War.”

“Good Luck,” Alban said, not quite under his breath.

Esa and Mayve gave him matching raised eyebrows before turning back to the maps.

“The river is key,” Esa explained almost to herself. “If I can find a way to get a significant amount of fighters here,” she indicated a place deep within the wooded terrain, “then that will even the odds a bit. I think the only way to do that is on the Adler. I just haven’t figured out how to keep them from sight.”
“What if you invaded from here?” Alban suggested.

Esa considered the entry point, and then proceeded to point out the many reasons why that particular spot left her forces vulnerable. The three of them spent a pleasant hour debating the merits of Esa’s plans, and enjoying each other’s company.

A discreet cough drew all their attention. Banning stood next to the table, spine straight, chest puffed out. “Message from the gate for you Lady Mayve.” She held out a scrap of paper. Esa smiled at her friend, but Banning was far too serious about her duty as runner for the Gate House to even spare Esa a glance.

Mayve took the paper. Esa watched her mother’s pleasant face fade into a tense frown as she read. “Milian sends word; Byron’s reached the valley. They’ll arrive tomorrow,” Mayve told them.

“How nice of him to send someone ahead to announce his arrival,” Alban said with a heavy dose of sarcasm.

Mayve patted her husband’s hand before addressing the waiting Banning. “Make sure that our scout receives a full meal and a soft bed.”

“Of course My Lady,” Banning answered.

She didn’t run, but Esa noticed the quickness of Banning’s exit. Her stride eating up great chunks of the stone floor in her hurry back to the Sain enclave. Watching the other girl had provided a nice distraction to the general foreboding that had settled over the table, erasing the light-hearted mood of a few minutes ago.

Her parents’ focus was centered on her when Esa turned back to face them. The worry in both of their eyes was unsettling.

“Mama?”
Mayve was silent for a while, and Esa could actually see the internal thought process her mother went through before Mayve finally spoke. “I believe that we should have a conversation, the three of us.” Mayve glanced around. “Perhaps somewhere a bit more comfortable.”

Esa could only nod as together they rose from the table and made their way toward the family quarters.

* * *

He’s related to me? Esa thought upon seeing the tall elegant man enter House Yarro’s courtyard. He was dressed in shades of grey, from the dark charcoal of his pants to the silver of his velvet cape. The tones highlighting his pale skin, making him appear ghost-like even in the bright sunshine of midmorning. The entire effect causing Esa to view him as entirely alien. True, the man did resemble her mother; with his dark eyes and light hair, but where there always seemed to be a smile lurking around the corners of Mayve’s mouth, Esa could find no levity on Lord Byron Crannog’s face. He walked stiffly over the cobblestones, eyes fixed on the spot where Esa and her parents waited. Trailing behind him to either side were, what Esa could only assume, two Sain bodyguards. Their close cropped hair and shirtless chests made her question their station, but the well used sword pommels sticking out from behind their shoulders proclaimed them as Sain without a doubt.

Esa chanced a look at her mother, but could read nothing more than regal patience. Boed however, stationed to the right and slightly behind Lady Mayve made no effort to
look anything other than intimidating. The closer Byron approached, the fiercer the Lady Commander seemed to grow.

He stopped several paces in front of Mayve and offered a slight bow, little more than a bending of his head. “It’s good to be home, dear sister.”

“Be welcome my brother,” Mayve responded. Neither sibling made any moves toward an embrace.

Byron gave the smallest of smiles. “Alban,” he acknowledged. “And this must be our young heir.” He stepped forward and offered his hand palm up.

It was perhaps the last thing Esa wanted to do, but she lifted her own hand to rest upon Byron’s as he bowed to her. She was surprised to find it warm, having assumed everything about her uncle held a lingering coolness.

“It is a pleasure to meet you at last my dearest niece,” he said while still holding her hand.

“The… the pleasure is mine,” Esa managed to get out the appropriate response.

Byron gave that same half smile again and gestured behind him. “My wife, and two of my daughters.”

Esa had failed to notice the women behind the hulking bodyguards.

“Fia, welcome,” Mayve greeted the Lady Crannog. “Cora, Nathara how did you find your first trip into the mountains?”

“Well Lady,” the daughters answered together.

All three Crannog women resembled each other. Their dark hair and eyes in combination with pale skin was both striking and unsettling. Esa noticed that Fia and the
older daughter Cora wore the silver medallion. Her father had told her that Nathara was about to receive hers as well. An accomplishment for someone only seventeen.

Neither girl offered Esa more than a glance during the introductions. Something for which Esa found herself grateful. The tension around the arrival of these strangers called family permeated the courtyard. Esa well understood that this first meeting would set the tone of interaction around the Crannog’s visit. It was a game of dominance, much like the events leading up to the first strike in the battles Talibah had her studying. And while her parents hadn’t precisely spelled it out, Esa had a good idea why Byron and his family were here.

“Come, let us offer you some refreshment, and allow you to rest after such a journey,” Mayve directed. Unseen hands pulled open the heavy double doors of House Yarro, allowing the large party to enter.

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Esa fussed with the ties of her blouse. The long suede vest, embroidered along the seams that her mother insisted she wear was continually catching the ties and pulling them, making Esa feel like she might be strangled at any moment. The rest of her clothing was much like her everyday wear, if a slight bit more elaborate. Other than the shoes. Instead of her normal boots, she’d found soft house shoes laid out. No amount of reasoning – this was the mountains, and even spring days like this still found frost on the ground every morning – had won her back her boots. Esa looked down at the offending footwear. The cloth and thin leather sole made her feel as if she were walking over ice,
the residual cold of the stone floors leaching up even through the plush carpet. She
shifted from foot to foot trying to rid herself of the feeling.

“Esa, quit fidgeting,” Mayve called out from the other room. Esa turned toward
the open doorway, noting that there was no possibility that her mother could see her.

“I don’t know how she does it either,” Alban said without looking up from the
book he was reading.

“Quite easily husband,” Mayve said, making her way into the room. She’d opted
for a more elegant version of Esa’s outfit, with a similar sky blue silk blouse under a dark
brown leather vest. Where Esa’s only came to her knees, Mayve’s brushed the floor,
giving it the impression of a flowing gown. The embroidery was more intricate as well,
and contained shades of silver as well as a matching blue. Taken together they looked, as
Esa suspected was her mother’s intention, like the Caliph with her heir. “I am a mother,”
Mayve winked at Alban, “I see all.”

Esa rolled her eyes.

“Shall we go to dinner then?” Mayve asked.

Alban put his book down and rose. He stood straight and bowed, first to Esa then
to Mayve. “My Ladies, please allow me to escort you.” He extended his hands out,
offering one to his wife and the other to his daughter.

“Why Lord Alban, how courteous,” Mayve took Alban’s arm with an equally
formal courtesy.

They entered the smaller family dining room where Mayve had made
arrangements for a feast in her brother’s honor. If the smells emanating from the covered
platters were any indication, then Esa was convinced that the kitchen had risen to the challenge. The atmosphere among those gathered however, was anything but festive.

Byron stood stiff backed and frowning, goblet of wine in his hand. His discontent was not immediately obvious to Esa. Cora and Nathara sat primly at the table, one on each side of their mother.

“Good evening Byron,” Mayve greeted.

“Sister,” he said taking a large sip of wine. “You really must look into importing some western vintages up here. Little better than swill this, but I supposed you’re used to it.”

“Yes, we’re quite fond of our own vineyards,” Mayve’s face was the picture of serenity. “I’d forgotten you didn’t find it to your liking.”

Byron drained the last of the goblet, making a distasteful face before joining his wife and daughters.

“Shall we,” Alban gestured to the table as well, giving Mayve a wink.

For the most part, dinner was a quiet affair. Esa did her best to keep her head down, not liking the tension between her mother and uncle. A tension that seemed to grow as the meal went on and talk turned to Demae scholarship.

“Nathara excels at translation,” Fia said. “She’s already working at a Mastery level, but we don’t want to push her to test quite yet. You know, let her enjoy herself and her studies a bit.”

“That’s wonderful,” Alban said good-naturedly. “I have such fond memories of my own novice years. Always a new problem to solve, a new skill to discover.”
“And how are your translation skills Esa?” Byron’s voice entered the conversation. “What level are you working at?”

Esa swallowed around a mouthful of food that had suddenly lost its flavor. “Um, translation is not my strong suit Uncle.”

“Ah, then you must be composition minded, like your mother perhaps? Or recitation? Your cousin Cora is well suited to that.” The smug look on his face made Esa want to sink under the table.

“Esa’s still young enough to keep her options open. We try not to limit our novices here in Yarro,” Mayve said, but where her voice was genial, her eyes were not. “I remember well how you loathed translation, brother. Master Sheld kept you two levels behind for most of your training if I recall.”

“It bored me,” said Byron, ending the conversation.

Dinner concluded soon thereafter, much to Esa’s relief.
CHAPTER VI

Esa rotated to the left, matching her opponent’s steps, trying to remember the footwork that she’d been taught. Right foot over left, hips loose. An arm swung out, and instinctively she ducked and kept moving. Another strike, a kick aimed at her side, and Esa jumped back.

She allowed herself a small smile as she continued revolutions around the dirt circle. Right foot over left, hips loose. The words were a mantra. They allowed Esa to concentrate without over thinking. Sporadic punches and kicks lashed out, and each time Esa managed to avoid them.

A sudden rush took Esa by surprise. Instead of circling, the woman across from Esa made a two-step run forward, longer arms reaching out to grapple instead of strike. She panicked. Instead of ducking and moving to the side, Esa swatted at the grasping hands and found her feet moving quickly backward. Too quickly. Unable to compensate for the change in direction, Esa stumbled and landed hard on her back. A heavy sigh sounded from above her.

Esa looked up at Boed’s disappointed scowl.

“Again,” Boed said evenly. “Without the mad scramble this time.”

When no hand was extended to help her up, Esa rolled to her knees and got back to her feet. She used her sleeve to wipe sweat from her face, grimacing when the saturated material did nothing more than move the moisture around. They’d been at this
for an hour already, and though Esa was very much aware that both Cerin and Banning would consider this a light workout, her body couldn’t seem to agree.

“The most important thing I can teach you is a very simple concept,” Boed said once they had resumed their positions. “If someone strikes at you,” she made a rapid swing at Esa’s head, nodding as the girl dodged the blow, “don’t be there.”

“Yes Lady,” Esa acknowledged.

“I am bigger, stronger, and more skilled than you.” Boed swung again. “But your smaller size means I have to reach much lower than I’m used to.” She emphasized her words by slowing her punch enough to show it caused her body to lean forward and down. “I’m slightly off balance, which gives you more time to get out of the way.”

All of this made sense to Esa, yet she couldn’t help but wonder at the completely defensive techniques Boed was teaching her. The warrior had not shown her a single offensive move. She’d spent most of her young life wishing for this training, it seemed ungrateful to ask for more. And yet, Esa couldn’t stop the words from tumbling forth.

“And then I strike?”

Boed’s words sounded like cracking ice. “Then you run.”

Frustration bubbled up inside Esa, and for a single moment her whole body tensed in defiance. “But I’ll never win a fight if I don’t learn how to hit someone.”

Boed straightened from her fighting crouch in reaction, and Esa ducked her head. Too late it seemed. “You want to hit something?” Boed taunted, and if her voice had been full of ice a moment ago, it was now laced with fire. “After three days of training, you think you’ve become the expert. Fine. Strike then.” Boed rotated her neck and settled back into position. “If you can.”
Esa knew what a serious mistake she’d just made. Hadn’t she spent the last year watching the Sain train? She had seen enough arrogant novices put in their place for a lesser insult. There was no apologizing now.

“Come now Esa. I thought you wanted to hit something.” Boed said.

Esa took a deep breath and blew it out through her nose, “Yes Lady.”

Boed’s arm struck out so quickly that only sheer instinct moved Esa’s head out of the way. The Sain had been holding back, but Esa hadn’t realized quite how much. There was no time to worry about whether her feet were in the right position, Boed was moving much too fast for that. It was all she could do to move out of the way. Esa tried to jump over the kick aimed at her ankles and was only partly successful. She tripped, but managed to fall forward into a roll that took her to the side and away from the redheaded nightmare.

Heavy steps coming toward her gave Esa just enough time to spring into a half-jump under Boed’s kicking leg and land behind the Sain. She tried a punch to Boed’s unprotected back, but her wrist was grabbed before even the thought of the hit could connect. Then she was flying.

The hard-packed ground came up to meet Esa’s back with an impact that drove all the air from her lungs. She lay there, certain that her spine was shattered, hoping that Boed wouldn’t be in too much trouble for paralyzing her.

“Again.”

All thoughts for Boed’s welfare ceased. Esa took a small breath and immediately began coughing. Didn’t the woman understand that she was dying?
“Novice, we’ll begin sparring again on the count of ten. You can lie there like a straw target, and I’ll treat you as such, or you can resume your stance and defend yourself. The choice is entirely yours.”

Another breath. Esa’s lungs burned, but she didn’t cough. She moved her legs a bit, then her arms.

“Five,” Boed counted.

Esa got to her hands and knees, looking across the circle at Boed. A smirk met her.

“One,” Boed finished counting. She didn’t run, but loped toward Esa, with all the grace and confidence of a feral cat upon sighting a baby duck.

Esa managed to get one foot under her before Boed struck and she was once again pondering the evening sky from the flat of her back. At least this time she hadn’t enough breath in her body to be driven out. Unfortunately her lesson wasn’t over.

“Again.”

*I’m really beginning to hate that word,* Esa thought to herself. She managed to find her feet fully by the time Boed reached the count of four. *Breathe in. Right foot over left, hips loose.*

Boed swung, Esa ducked. Boed kicked, Esa moved back. She felt centered, like there was a rhythm. That they were in actuality dancing. A glancing blow hit Esa’s shoulder and instead of moving back, she moved into it, letting the momentum spin her around Boed’s right side. Once again Esa was at Boed’s unprotected back. Instead of a hesitant punch Esa put all her energy, every scrap of it, into a two handed shove, just as the Sain was turning to meet her attack.
Esa’s hands never touched Boed. There was no feeling of flesh on leather, no give of the older woman’s body as a girl a mere third of her weight tried to push her off balance. And still, Boed sailed halfway across the training circle, landing on her side with surprising force.

Esa stood rooted, hands still braced against nothing but air.

Boed shook the braids from her face and rose to her feet. She approached Esa slowly, studying her. Finally she reached out and placed her hands over Esa’s, lowering them. “I believe we’re done for tonight.”

“Lady, I don’t… I…” Esa couldn’t wrap her mind around what had just happened. “I didn’t touch you.”

“I think my hip would argue that point,” Boed’s voice was light. She pulled Esa closer, forcing her to look up. “It’s fine. You did well. I want to see you here tomorrow. Same time.”

Something had just happened. What exactly, Esa wasn’t certain, but she allowed Boed to point her in the direction of the House with the promise that training would continue the next day.
Boed bent and stoked the fire, adding several logs to ward off the chill that had settled over the library. Once she was satisfied with both the warmth and light, she settled back into the space she’d created at the nearest table. Books and scrolls littered the surface as well as a leather bound journal. For the last several hours Boed had been ensconced in this farthest corner, only getting up from time to time to pluck another volume from the surrounding shelves.

A noise, very much like the sound of bare feet on stone floor, drew Boed’s attention, causing her to raise her head. As expected, a few scant seconds later Talibah crept around one of the bookshelves, brass candlestick held before her like a saber. It took all of Boed’s considerable self-control not to laugh outright at the picture the Demae Master presented. While usually pristine in her appearance, Talibah’s light brown hair, freed from its customary braid, was a wild frizzy mass around her head. Her wide eyes, nightgown, and, Boed leaned to the side and confirmed, bare feet, all contributed to the picture of escaped asylum resident.

“And a good evening to you Mistress Talibah,” Boed deadpanned. “How thoughtful of you to bring me an additional light source.”

Talibah lowered the candlestick and leveled a frown at Boed. She stalked over to the table and deposited the heavy brass object onto it with a solid clunk. “What in the name of the Mother and all deities are you doing here?”
Boed managed not to smile, but couldn’t keep the amusement out of her voice.

“I’d think it would be rather obvious. I, my scholarly friend, am reading.”

“I am not an idiot, I can see that.” Talibah walked around to Boed’s side of the table, flipping over books in order to see their titles. “Half of these are at a Mastery level. You can’t possibly ready them.” She leaned over Boed, paging through the chapter lying open.

“So I’ve discovered.” Boed slid her eyes to the left, wondering if Talibah realized that she was practically laying across Boed’s shoulder in her attempt to get to the books.

“A History of the Great Wars, Hierarchy of Gifts, Philosophies of Adler,” Talibah named off, before reaching out and grabbing Boed’s journal. “Corresponding incidents?” Half a dozen titles and pages were listed in Boed’s neat handwriting. Talibah began pacing as she ready the pages of notes.

Boed rubbed her hands over her face and stretched cramped muscles as Talibah continued to read snippets aloud. The snap of the journal closing and ensuing quiet drew her attention.

“You will tell me right this instant why you are in my library in the middle of the night, conducting deities only know what kind of research. Unsupervised.”

Boed wanted to confide in the other woman, and she certainly could use the help, but something stopped her from confessing her intentions. How did one explain that something that she knew to be impossible had occurred? “I’m simply reading Mistress.”

“Lady Boed, why are you lying to me?”
“You’re calling me a liar? Me?” Boed gestured to herself. “Commander of the Yarro Sain and Member of the Jir Council? The last person who called me a liar,” Boed paused. “Actually no one has ever called me a liar.”

“Well there is a first time for everyone,” Talibah huffed. “I need an explanation, and I’m guessing that it begins with Esa Drumm.”

Boed pushed back from the table and stood. She held out her hand to Talibah for the journal. The Demae glared at her and folded her arms over the book. Boed could not believe the gall of this woman. Here she stood in the middle of the night in nothing but a wispy bit of cotton and her bare feet, daring to stare down an armed warrior. Surely Talibah knew that if Boed wanted she could simply take the journal back. More even, she could have Talibah banned from the library, from the very House itself. Not that she would do any of those things, but Talibah didn’t know that. “You are trying my patience, Mistress.”

“Oh I haven’t even begun to try,” Talibah retorted.

Against her will a laugh escaped from Boed, accompanied by a wave of tiredness. “You have the spirit of the Sain, Talibah Ammi. Truly you do.” Boed sank back into her chair. “You wish to know why I’m here? Tell me of Ainlif.”

“Ainlif? What could possibly interest you in the dead House?” Talibah sat as well, but kept possession of the journal.

“Firstly, why is it a dead House? And why are there no histories about Ainlif? No Demae tradition, no Sain? It’s like a great void.” Boed listed the points off on her fingers. “Does that not strike you as odd?”
Talibah quirked an eyebrow. “Isn’t it a bit late for conspiracy? Of course there are histories.” Talibah pulled one of the volumes Boed had out and flipped to a chapter. “Right here,” she pointed to a passage, though she knew Boed could not decipher the twisting letters.

And at the end of the Great Wars a peace was finally had over all the Eleven Kingdoms that had joined the Jir Council. Peace however came with a price for which Ainlif paid the largest penalty; Jetter of the Stone Mountain Coast, the last living member of the Lore family line perished in the final days of battle, leaving Ainlif without a single living descendant. In commemoration of Jetter’s great loss the capital city was founded under the Lore name and the succession of House Ainlif discontinued.

“You don’t find that just a bit mysterious and vague?” Boed asked after Talibah finished reading.

“Of course it’s mysterious and vague, it happened over two thousand years ago. And Ainlif is not why you are sitting in the library at this time a night.” Talibah slid the journal back over to Boed. “Do you find me so dishonorable Lady Boed, that you would refuse my assistance at this point?”

Boed rose and turned to the fire without answering. She added several more logs until the flames rose to a level she deemed appropriate. While up, she also fetched her cloak from its peg near the mantle. Instead of donning it, she instead circled to the other side of the table and draped it over Talibah. Boed felt the other woman shiver slightly as she rested a hand on her shoulder, and nodded in acknowledgement at the barely audible “Thank you.”
Rather than resume her seat, Boed returned to stand near the fire. “I am unsure how to begin.”

“Perhaps at the beginning?”

“Your wit, Mistress, is a blade sharper than any sword I own.” Boed said. Talibah simply looked at her, completely unchastised. “Fine, as you say, the beginning. I’ve been training Esa on matters of unarmed defense.”


“This might go faster if you would let me speak a sentence without interruption.”

“Apologies. Please continue.” Talibah held her hand over her mouth, indicating that she would be quiet.

“I’ve been teaching her the basic foundations of a physical defense, should she be attacked. A possibility not so outrageous given our honored houseguests,” Boed continued. “She has been doing fairly well, but,” she paused, hoping to frame the incident in a way that Talibah might understand, “several nights ago Esa seemed to grow frustrated with the curriculum. She wanted to learn offensive skills as well. When I refused, she expressed her annoyance.”

“Something, I’m guessing, that is never tolerated in the training of a Sain novice.”

“Indeed,” Boed confirmed. “I did what I would do with any green novice. Showed her her own vulnerability. I did not hurt her, only stunned her a bit.”

For once, Talibah only waited for Boed to continue. A fact for which the Sain was grateful.

“She threw me halfway across the circle.”
Talibah’s face held traces of confusion. “Is that even possible? You’re three times her size. Even with leverage I don’t see how.”

Boed placed her hands on the table and leaned down close to Talibah. “She didn’t touch me. Was a good two hand lengths away. And from the look on her face it took her as much by surprise as it did me.”

“So she is Sain?” said Talibah. “The sword finally responded to her?”

“She was unarmed.”

“That’s not…”

“Possible,” Boed finished. “Yes, I’m aware. It still happened. You said you wanted to help. Help me make sense of this.”

Talibah opened Boed’s journal. “These incidents you’ve noted. Are they the same phenomena?”

“No. A weapon of some type was always involved.” Boed ran a hand over her face. “I’ve found nothing.”

“Well,” Talibah said, pulling several of the books toward her, “That’s about to change.”

Boed snorted as Talibah began running her finger down lines of text. “I tell you about something that is physically and magically impossible, and you don’t question, you don’t dissect it or tell me that I’m crazy.”

“As I said before, Lady Boed,” Talibah spoke without looking up, “It is far to late at night for conspiracy.”

“Just Boed.”

Talibah looked up at that. “I’m sorry?”
“You, Mistress, should call me Boed.”

Talibah smiled at that and went back to reading.

* * *

Banning watched as her friend stared at the pile of stones on the ground. They sat on the edge of the training grounds where when it was warm, like it was today, the two would often bring something to snack on and enjoy the beautiful day. They talked, usually about nothing of consequence, dreams and ideas mostly. It was on such a day several years ago that Banning had learned of Esa’s wish to become Sain, and it had been Banning who had comforted Esa when Lady Boed had declared it would not be so. It had also been Banning who’d stolen a wooden practice sword just to keep Esa’s dream from dying. Esa’s mood very much reminded Banning of when the other girl had been tested. Though Esa sat next to her, she was anything but present.

“I have to ask,” Banning said finally, tired of amusing herself. “What is so interesting about those stupid rocks?”

Esa looked startled for a moment, as if she’d forgotten where she was. Then her face flushed. “Nothing. They’re just rocks.”

“Well you’ve been staring at them like they hold the knowledge of the world for the past half hour, so I thought I’d check.” Banning lay sideways on the grass, propping her head on her hand while looking at Esa.

Esa made a face at Banning and lay back as well. “Do you ever spar with Lady Boed?” she asked.
“Once, in my first year of training,” said Banning. “She likes to personally test all the first year novices. Gage their potential or what have you. I swear my hands are still vibrating with the shock of meeting her sword. And we both used wood.”

Esa nodded. “She’s training me.”

“On the battles. I’d rather poke my eye out, but I thought you liked it.”

Esa rolled over and looked at Banning. “She’s training me at the indoor circle as well. No one else knows.”

“Great Lady Mother,” Banning sat up. “You are bouting with Lady Boed?”

“Every night for the last twenty.”

“Tell me not with swords? Banning couldn’t believe that the Lady Commander would spend every evening sparing with someone who was a novice, someone who wasn’t even Sain.

“Not with swords. Not with weapons,” Esa answered. “She’s teaching me how to avoid getting hit. Mostly it involves ducking and rolling.”

“Unarmed combat. Wow,” Banning grinned. “You must be so excited. You have to be the first Demae ever to learn this.”

“I don’t know about that.”

Banning stopped and looked at Esa. “Why aren’t you excited? This is what you always wanted. Or well as close to it as your scholarly little body can get.”

“I am excited. It’s just the other night…” Esa trailed off.

Banning gestured for Esa to go on, “The other night?”
“I was stupid. I wanted Lady Boed to teach me more than just how not to get hit, but when I asked her and she said no, I may have communicated some of my frustration.”

Esa flushed again. “Nonverbally.”

“Wait. You questioned Lady Boed? In a training circle? And then pouted?”

Banning’s eyes were wide. “Not perhaps the wisest of actions.”

“Agreed. As I said, I was stupid.”

“She put you flat on your back, didn’t she?” Banning smiled knowingly.

Esa poked her friend. “You are supposed to be on my side. How did you know that? Does she do that often?”

“She did it to Cerin. He laid there for almost a quarter hour trying to learn how to breathe again.” Banning looked at Esa with new respect.

“I can understand why. It felt like I’d been stampeded by a herd of cattle.” Esa fiddled with a piece of grass. “After the second time I did manage to push her. At least I think I did.”

Banning stood. “All right, on your feet. You managed to lay a hand on Lady Boed?” She reached down and tugged Esa up from the grass. “We are definitely sparring.” Banning pulled the reluctant Esa farther away from the training yard to a flat field on the far side of the barracks.

“Really Banning,” Esa protested. “I already have one Sain knocking me down on a daily basis. You feel the need to double that?”

“Oh, stop whining,” Banning said while tying back her braids. “Nobody’s getting knocked down. Remember when we used to talk about training together? How fun we thought it would be?” She bounced on her toes. “Living a dream, right now.”
Esa gave in and grinned. “All right, but be nice.” Esa rolled her shoulders and took a position opposite Banning.

Banning stepped to the left, smiling when Esa mirrored the movement. She gave a few jabs. Nothing that had any chance of landing, merely to test Esa’s reflexes. “You move right,” Banning complemented.

“Is there a wrong way to move?” Esa said.

Banning chuckled. “I’m sure there is, but I meant you move like us. Like the Sain.” She didn’t give Esa a chance to absorb the praise, but instead faked a jab with her left and swung toward Esa’s head with her right. Banning was ready to pull the punch at the last second in case Esa didn’t duck in time, but instead found herself swinging at empty air.

Esa had moved two steps back with incredible speed, and Banning had to adjust her footing to keep in step with the smaller girl. Banning struck out again with the same results. Every time she tried to hit Esa, Esa simply wasn’t there. After several minutes Banning held up a hand. “I can’t touch you,” she declared. “Maybe with my sword, but even then,” a shrug.

Esa beamed under the praise.

Banning wrapped an arm around Esa’s shoulders. “I know you said it’s a secret, but there’s got to be some way we can con Cerin with this.”

They walked back toward the House, laughing and thinking of the many ways in which to torment Banning’s twin.
CHAPTER VIII

It was strange, Esa acknowledged as she walked past the barracks and towards the fields, that Mistress Talibah would want to meet so far away from the House. Granted, normal hadn’t graced Esa’s life for some time now. Talibah wasn’t known for her love of the outdoors, but Esa had seen her, more recently as of late, along the edge of the training yard, usually accompanied my Boed.

“Hey! Esa.”

She turned at the shout. Cerin galloped over to her from the side door of the barracks. His hair whipped behind him as he ran, wooden sword bouncing in its scabbard against his back.

“Where you off to?” Cerin asked.

“I’m meeting Mistress Talibah on the far side of the fields near the woods,” said Esa. “Herb lore and its practical uses in warfare. Shouldn’t you be in the yard?”

“Forgot my leathers,” Cerin held up the gloves clutched in his hand. “Last time I didn’t have them I got blisters the size of your nose.” He tried to smack Esa’s arm with them, but she easily dodged. “You have fun with the weeds.”

Esa rolled her eyes and waved as Cerin turned and ran back towards the training yard. She continued across the field, enjoying the sunshine on her back.
Talibah rubbed her eyes. With the amount of reading she’d done in the past week glasses felt like an inevitable part of her future. Her translations were far slower than she’d have liked, but written language and dialect had evolved quite a bit over the last three millennia, and what would have normally taken minutes to read took far longer.

She refocused her eyes on the small volume before her. Its pages were faded with age and barely bound together, its text handwritten by some unnamed Demae. She’d discovered it buried under treaties and family histories in a wooden trunk tucked in a storage room of the library almost a year ago. She hadn’t given it much thought at the time, beyond the interest of a scholar in old books, but some notion made her dig it out after speaking with Boed. Her research to that point, despite her boasting, had turned up no historical incidents matching Boed’s description among the books of the library. But within the untitled little book she discovered, if not the exact answers she’d been looking for, then at least a word that gave voice to what might have happened – Hashir.

The Hashir, Talibah had been able to extrapolate, functioned in the centuries before the Great Wars as peers of the Demae and the Sain. Their gifts, unlike the scholarly and warrior classes, were not tied to one particular focus, such as a sword or a medallion, but to the land itself. A gift that lent itself to brokering peace among the constantly warring Kingdoms, but one that also allowed them to channel a great deal of magical force through their own bodies. Enough force, in one of the tales Talibah had read, to decimate a solid rock wall from several lengths away. Rare to begin with, the
Hashir were all but extinct by the Great Wars, and their history, by and large, had faded into the ether with them.

The old book had given Talibah enough of a starting point to search out legends and tie some of their stories to a very real, if no longer living people. Legends weren’t facts, but they were a start. One which Talibah was determined to get answers to.

She rubbed her eyes again, before blinking past the lingering traces of magic before them. She glanced at the clock on the far wall, wondering how long she’d been at her reading. “Surely that can’t be the time,” she murmured out loud.

Talibah stood, walking over to the clock still blinking. Her eyes were not playing tricks on her, it was well past the midday meal, and well past the time when Esa should have arrived for her lesson. “So help me, if she’s perched up along that fence watching Boed again,” Talibah huffed, before pulling open her office door, ready to drag Esa back to her studies by the ear if necessary.

* * *

Cerin kept sneaking looks over to the wooden circle, the excitement of the oldest group of novices executing their bouts much more interesting than the repetitive strike-block-strike of his own practice. Lady Boed made her way through the six pairs, yelling corrections and from time to time stopping the participants mid strike. This in itself was a skill to be learned, one he’d yet to master. Within the half-walled circle they used the sharp steel of real blades, and as such had to maintain complete control.

A light blow landed on his fingers. It didn’t hurt so much as get his attention.
“Eyes front brother dear, before the Lady catches you making love struck eyes at
the live weapons, and decides you should get a closer view.” Banning teased.

“Oh ho, and how would you know what they were doing if you weren’t looking
yourself?” Cerin slipped back into the pattern, putting a little bit more onto his strike
than before.

Banning smirked at her twin. “We women have the ability to perform more than
one task at a time.” She blocked his blow then parried, flipping his wooden sword into
the air and sending it bouncing across the dirt. She saluted him.

“Must you always show off?” Cerin grumbled, chasing after his sword. He bent
to pick it up, but stopped at the sound of both his and his sister’s name.

Mistress Talibah had stepped within the training yard, a sight most of them were
becoming used to. She had however, never before interrupted training by calling out or
coming within the outer fence. All over the yard, sword points dropped and warriors
stilled. Cerin quickly picked up his sword and ran back over to where the woman was
talking to his sister.

“Have you seen Esa?” the Demae asked Banning as Cerin reached them.

Banning shook her head, “Not since the morning, Mistress.”

“I saw her a half hour ago,” Cerin said before Talibah had even turned to him.

“She was in the fields,” he jerked his thumb over his shoulder in the right direction. “She
said she was meeting you. For herb class.”

Talibah’s face paled, and Cerin knew that something was very wrong.

Thundering footsteps sounded behind him, and he turned to see Lady Boed jogging over
to them. The Lady Commander spared no attention to anyone other than the Demae.
“Talibah? What is it?”

Talibah ignored Boed’s question, instead taking Cerin by the shoulders. “Where did Esa say she was meeting me?”

“The far side of the eastern fields, where it meets the wood,” Cerin tried not to wince at the grip.

Talibah released him and focused on Boed. “Esa’s gone. She’s been lured out of the House grounds. I think what you feared might be happening.”

Boed didn’t hesitate, but turned and sprinted toward the barracks, vaulting over the fence without breaking stride. Talibah hurried after, her progress more sedate but no less urgent.

Cerin met the confused eyes of his sister, who shrugged and looked around at the stunned faces of their fellow students. As one they sheathed their swords and took off in the direction Boed and Talibah had gone.

* * *

Esa kicked at a patch of tall grass. She’d thought she might be late, but there was no sign of Talibah. It was unlike her teacher to be anything but prompt. The whole thing actually wasn’t like Talibah. Esa knew that any herb that might grow here, or anywhere else within Yarro, was represented among the House stores. She’d seen them. Shelf upon shelf of little glass bottles, all carefully labeled. Why Talibah felt the need for them to see such sample in their natural habitat was beyond Esa, but she’d learned quite recently not to question the wisdom of those teaching you.
Maybe I should walk back, Esa thought. Perhaps she’d meet Talibah heading this direction. She’d only taken a few steps when she heard a rustling of branches and broken twigs. “Mistress Talibah?” she called out, feeling like an idiot for not checking the woods earlier. “I’m sorry I’m late, I thought you wanted to meet outside the woods.”

Esa stopped speaking as the two men stepped from the trees. They weren’t overly large men, but muscled and with an air of menace that raised the hair of Esa’s arms. One carried a sword, still sheathed in a back scabbard, while the other was armed with two long knives, both of which he held naked in his hands. “I’m s…sorry,” Esa stuttered. “I thought you were someone else.” She turned and started to run.

The impact between her shoulder blades knocked her to the ground, stunning her. Next to her on the grass lay one of the knives.

“Why didn’t you just stick her?” said a voice from behind her.

“He wanted her disappeared,” came the response. “Leaving a big puddled of blood where anyone can find it isn’t exactly subtle.”

Fear gripped Esa and she could only watch as the man with the knives squatted down, picked up the blade he’d just thrown at her. She didn’t move as the other man grabbed her by the back of her shirt and lifted her up.

“On your feet then,” said the man with the sword, shoving her forward and down to one knee. The man with the knives only laughed as he passed her.

The woods were just ahead. Even in her panic Esa knew that once she was under cover she was as good as dead. It’s a simple concept, Esa heard Boed’s voice in her head. If someone strikes at you, “don’t be there,” Esa whispered the words to herself. This time
when the man with the sword tried to grab her she ducked under his arm and rolled to the side, exactly as Boed had taught her.

She might have enjoyed the astonished look on his face if he wasn’t standing directly between her and the path back to the House. He came toward her slowly without drawing his sword. His first strike was a backhand swing that Esa easily dodged. She concentrated on her keeping her feet light, weight toward the toes.

“Can’t you do anything?” she heard from behind her. “She’s a little girl. Just grab her.”

It was only a matter of moments before the man with the knives reached her, and Esa was fairly sure that she couldn’t handle both men at once. The swordsman lunged forward in an attempt to follow his partner’s advice and simply grab her. It was a move Esa had hoped he would make. She hurled herself backwards and watched as the man with the sword went face first into the grass in a lunging move. Esa hopped over his prone body ready to sprint across the fields. A searing pain in her side brought her up short. She looked down to see a line of red forming through a hand length cut in her shirt.

“Where do you think you’re going,” the man with the knives said in her ear before spinning her around and backhanding her across the face.

Esa stayed on her feet, but it was a close thing. The man wiped his blade against his pant leg and sheathed it. She tasted blood. The entire side of her face felt like it was on fire. He reached out, grabbing a fist-full of her hair and Esa was too disoriented to avoid it.

“I’ve plans for you little one,” the man with the knives said.
He yanked her head back and brought her up against his body. Esa managed to bring her hands up, felt the hard muscle of his chest, and with the last of her strength tried to push him away.

A feeling very similar to what she’d experienced when sparring with Boed raced through her hands, only much stronger. A tingling in her arms traveled to her fingers, making them feel like sparks from the fire. An impact, like the feeling of thunder only without sound, crashed over Esa, stiffening her body and finally exiting through her hands. She watched as the man who held her was lifted from his feet and flung away from her.

Dizziness overwhelmed Esa. She swayed and darkness began to encircle her vision, narrowing on the man who now lay unmoving some distance away. *What have I done?* She questioned, yet knew the answer almost immediately. *I’ve killed him.* And then she knew no more, her body slumping to the ground.

* * *

Boed raced across the fields, long legs eating up chunks of ground as she ran flat out. Her hands trembled with the surge of adrenalin. Her thoughts were few. Now was not the time for panic or worry, so she buried such feelings for the time being. Her purpose was singular; get to Esa a quickly as possible. She’d deal with whatever awaited her when it came.

She crested the last rise before the fields met the trees and saw that Talibah’s instincts had been correct. Two armed men were with Esa. She watched as one swung at
the girl only to overbalance and land hard in the grass. Hope flared within Boed. Hope and pride in her student.

The other assassin drew a knife and slashed. Boed increased her speed, pushing even harder, but knowing she didn’t have enough time. She wasn’t going to reach them. He struck again with a blow that should have sent Esa to the ground. Boed drew her sword without losing a step. The other man had gained his feet again and drew his own sword. Then time seemed to stop.

A concussion, like an earthquake in the air, swept over the field. Boed watched as the man who’d been holding Esa flew backward and crashed into a tree. The other man, knocked from his feet as well, struggled on the ground. Boed released a war cry, seeing Esa slump sideways in a boneless way that could only mean unconsciousness.

Her want was to check Esa first. She fought that desire, using the toe of her boot to kick the prone man on to his back. Sword point at his throat, she commanded him, “Stand.”

He struggled to rise, so she pressed harder, watching with grim satisfaction as a stream of blood began to drip down is neck. “Who sent you after this child?” she demanded once he’d reached his feet.

“Duggan take you,” he spat. “You’ll get nothing from me.”

“I have an enclave of Sain who’ll contradict that statement soon enough.” Boed’s eyes gleamed fire. She pulled her sword from his throat, ready to strike him with the pommel and make him easier to transport back. The arrow tip that suddenly protruded from his neck caused her to jump back. The man pitched face first onto the grass, blood seeping out around him in a shallow pool.
Boed crouched down, trying to determine where the arrow had come from. The forest was the most likely source. She gave a glance toward the trees before she hurried to Esa, keeping low to the ground. She spared a thought and a glance to the second man, but he still lay unmoving where he’d fallen, and she could neither see nor hear any movement from within the forest.

Esa’s breathing was labored. Unwilling to wait for a safer time Boed sheathed her sword, cradled the girl in her arms and stood, careful the keep her back to the tree line. Every step she expected to feel the sharp pierce of an arrow. She kept walking.

By the time she was out of range she could see Talibah running toward her, twins in tow, half the Sain close behind. It was an easy thing, handing off the unconscious Esa to Talibah’s waiting arms. Boed knew it would take the deities themselves to get between Talibah and her charge. It was but a few moments work and a sharp whistle to organize a half dozen Sain to accompany her back to the would-be assassins’ spot. She passed the dead swordsman without pause, concentrating on the other man, hoping somehow, despite herself, that he was alive and able to give answers.

What she found was a man, very much dead, his chest crushed as though by a stampeding horse. Boed offered a quick prayer of thanks to any an all deities that this had not been her own fate, for she was certain that his injuries were very much the result of whatever magic coursed through Esa’s veins.

“Send for a cart,” she ordered. Her eyes lingered on the tree line, still searching for movement and finding none.
The last clouds of dust faded on the horizon, taking Lord Byron Crannog and his family from the city of Tamm. Esa stood on the southern watchtower, appreciating the peace that settled over House Yarro with her uncle’s departure. Her side still stung where the assassin’s blade had caught her, but otherwise she felt perfectly well thanks to three of Yarro’s healers. The chaos of the past few days was fading. Her mother had stopped calling for the execution of her brother the day before, electing to banish him from ever setting foot on Yarro lands again. That there’d been no evidence of his involvement in the attempt on Esa’s life had been the only thing that saved him - her mother’s conviction of his wrongdoing, an opinion that Boed shared, notwithstanding. Banishment, however, was very much within the Caliph’s purview, so at Talibah’s and Alban’s suggestion, Mayve grudgingly made do with that.

Both her parents still struggled with the discovery of Esa’s new gift. Alien and a bit frightening, they made sure to treat it as a subject purely academic for the time being. She was unsure what to think of it herself. She’d always known something about her magic was different, that she was more than just a mediocre Sain novice. The deities, it seemed, had a funny way of granting wishes.

Talibah continued to research the gift of the Hashir, while Boed had refrained from incorporating it into Esa’s training so far. Something Esa was grateful for. Her nightmares detailed a collage of the two times she’d used her gift as it was. Mashing up
Boed’s face with that of the man she’d killed. Everyone agreed that such training would eventually be necessary, but for the time being she had a reprieve.

“We’ve an appointment in the circle if you’re through brooding for the afternoon.” Boed leaned against the archway.

“I’m not brooding,” Esa said. “I just like the view from here.”

“The view’s nice alright,” Boed agreed. She ruffled Esa’s hair with an affectionate grin. “Still time’s slipping away, and you get to try to disarm me tonight.”

Esa groaned.

Boed rubbed her hands together and led the way down the stairs.

*I’ll sleep well tonight*, Esa thought, following her mentor.
EPILOGUE

The household was still as the hashir moved swiftly down the stone hallway toward the family sleeping quarters. If there were more guards within the house, their luck held this night, for the hashir encountered no one else while traversing the darkened halls. Several sconces glowed dimly within a medium size room, giving soft outlines to the shapes of couches and chairs. Doors lined three of the walls, leading into the bedrooms of the Lord, his wife, and his youngest daughter. The women were ignored. They played no part in the hashir’s errand this night.

Barely stirring the shadows, the hashir entered the Lord’s bedchamber, scowling at the sound of his deep even breathing. How dare he enjoy such rest. It was but a moment to stand beside him, and ever so tempting to simply snuff out his life. But the hashir refrained. There were matters to be discussed first.

The hand at his throat brought him awake quickly, eyes wide with panic.

“We had an arrangement, you and I.”

Byron Crannog tried to swallow past the pressure on his neck, but the hand only squeezed harder, making speech and breathing impossible. He struggled, tried to claw at the hand, and received a sharp blow in return. Finally when he was moment from losing consciousness the hand relaxed slightly.

“Tell me why you failed.”
He coughed, pulling great gasps of air into his lungs. “She was trained,” he managed. “She fought off two assassins.”

“No,” the hashir mocked. “That is why they failed. You failed by not discovering that fact sooner. I had to kill one of your assassins myself to keep him from revealing you. I’m very disappointed, and I really can’t see much use for you in the future.”

“Please,” Byron begged.

“I gave you one task. Eliminate one little girl as the heir to house Yarro.” The hashir used the grip on his neck to shake him.

“Artaith please,” he pleaded. “I’m your father. She’ll never achieve her medallion. She won’t inherit. Let me help you. House Yarro can still be yours.”

“House Yarro has always been mine,” Artaith Drumm hissed. “I am the eldest daughter. You could have helped me years ago unseat your usurper sister, but you were weak then, and you are weak now.” She tightened her hand on his throat once again.

Byron flailed on the bed, trying without success to break free.

“I gave you a chance to be a father,” she shook her head. “You failed me twice.” His struggles became more and more ineffective until at last he lay still. Artaith kept her hand on his throat, wishing the task hadn’t ending quite so soon. With a sigh she released her father, taking care to neaten the blankets and tuck him back in.

Dawn would be here soon, and she had so many things to do before she journeyed back to Yarro. Back home. Where she would soon take her rightful place as Caliph.
Ainlif: one of the original eleven kingdoms. Believed to be a dead House with no living descendants.

Artisans: minor magical class. Ability to imbue objects with magical properties.

Avowed: minor magical class. Joins the spiritual with the physical.

Caliph: hereditary ruler of a House.

Chandlers: minor magical class. Bankers of the Jir.

Demae: scholar class. Gifted with language, both written and verbal. Tasked with protecting and passing on the knowledge of the Jir. Identified by the medallion.

Deities: genderless gods of the magical classes.

Duggan: one of the Deities. Associated with death, trickery, and betrayal.

Edin: one of the original eleven kingdoms. Its people are often seen as reclusive, stoic, and secretive.

Hamak: one of the original eleven kingdoms. Known for its history of piracy and mercenary minded Sain.

Hashir: magical class of legend. Now used as a term to denote magical assassin.

Jedan: one of the original eleven kingdoms.

Jir: the ruling magical class, organized around a democratic council system.

Kerra: one of the original eleven kingdoms. Situated in forestlands, its people are traditionally Sain, but known for their social and affable natures.
Kumi: one of the original eleven kingdoms.

Lore: the capital city. Location where the Jir Council meets.

Lurra: the mother of the Deities. Also referred to as the Great Mother, the Great Lady, etc.

Sain: warrior class. Gifted with weapons in general, but usually have affinity with the sword in particular.

Sebela: one of the original eleven kingdoms.

Tamm: capital city of Yarro. Where House Yarro is located.

Teka: one of the original eleven kingdoms.

Tizen: one of the original eleven kingdoms.

Vien: one of the original eleven kingdoms.

Yarro: one of the original eleven kingdoms. Located in a mountainous region. Its people are traditionally Demae.