

# Talyn – Chapter 1

By Holly Lisle

# Talyn – Chapter 1

**2005 by Holly Lisle, All Rights Reserved**

This is draft copy. It may contain typos, spellos, and other errors, and may not be copied, reproduced, or quoted in any form or format.

Pada and I stepped out of the Shields Building at twenty past the Dog on the last day of Madrigas, to find shreds of the moon peering out from behind scattered clouds offering the only light on the dock. The air bit into me – my light uniform had been enough when I went in, but while I worked, early spring had given way to tenacious winter, and I was not more than three steps away from the warmth of Shields than I wished I had my cloak.

“Lamplighters are late again,” Pada said. Pada has a great gift for stating the obvious. Conversations with her ever include such statements as, “Ah, the tide is high,” and “Well, the streets are certainly crowded today,” which makes her wearing company to keep.

The whores who clustered by the front door late at night, hoping for safer custom than from sailors in port, gave us good even, and we nodded acknowledgement. We in Shields guard all the taak, and the lands beyond, and we thus represent all.

Beneath our feet, the ancient boards of the dock creaked and shuddered. Beyltaak has no money for renovation, but I wonder every time I step out the door of Shields if this will be the time the boards concede defeat and dump me into the icy bay.

To our right lay the warehouses – looming hulks of black against black, since the lamplighters had not been through. To our left, the ships – and I couldn't help but notice how few rose and fell against the wharf, their wooden hulls bumping softly at their moorings, their furled sails flapping in the wind off the bay. Poor business, and in spite of that, the inescapable stink of fish.

When we were past the whores, Pada picked up the thread of her previous narrative in mid-sentence. "... and then he said, 'I would that you would, with me, just once, for I dream even when waking of knowing the pleasure of you.'" Pada rolled her eyes. "And then he offered me whole bolts of fine ribbed velvet in red and purple, like I was some street tart who'd flop on my back for his bedamned rags."

I watched Pada from the corner of my eye. Even in the dark, I could see her fury. She's prettier than me – delicate and blonde and fair, with huge blue eyes and the features that gather men's glances like flowers attract bees. She takes all such adulation as her birthright – as her due. But she thinks men should just admire her from afar, and give her things. "If you don't want him to make such offers, stop leading him around by the nose."

Pada stopped dead on the dock and stared at me as if I'd slapped her. I was watching the whores behind us, and the dark cluster of bones-players before us, and movement at the mouth of the alley just beyond that, and I thought perhaps, whether we were in uniform or not, we might keep moving. None of those on the dock at that moment were the best of company. But no, Pada would have her dramatic piece.

"I?! Leading him around by his nose?! He clings to me like a motherless calf. And for this, I should take his cloth and bed him?!"

I decided to get moving again; unlike Pada, I do not trust the

Shielder uniform to keep away all evil, any more than I trust my looks to turn all men to pudding. I'm tall, with nice eyes and features that people either call strong or angular – or sometimes handsome. My mother was a great beauty in her day, but all I got from her is good thick auburn hair. The rest of me is a female version of my father. It's a look that works much better for my brothers.

"Talyn, do not walk off and leave me when I'm speaking with you," Pada shouted from behind me.

I kept walking, and after a moment heard her clipped steps hurrying to catch up. Good. I wanted to get off the dock and into the safer, already-lighted part of Beyltaak.

Pada caught up with me as we passed the gamblers. They paused to touch fingers to forehead, and again we nodded acknowledgement, and kept moving.

Under her breath, Pada hissed, "Think you I should bed him for his cloth? That I should let him value me so lightly?"

"Not what I was saying at all," I told her. "I think you should have pugged him months ago, without any gifts or bribes." I kept watching her from the corner of my eye. "Had it been me, I would have dragged him into a closet, ripped his fine velvet off him, and ridden him until he screamed." She turned horrified eyes to me, and I had to hide my smile. Shielders live under Ethebet's Law, but to the best of my knowing, Pada has never once availed herself of her privileges. Instead, she guards her dusty virginity like the least privileged of Mindan taakswomen. I added, "If you have a fine bull in your corral, don't cry ruin when he won't pretend he's a steer for you."

She dared not respond to that, so she returned to her original rant. "Ribbed velvet!" she said. "It's insulting. Some of the Shielders get gold and diamonds and bolts of Drabadi silk and apartments on the Bay from their lovers."

I'd been hearing this part of the refrain for at least two months now – so often I think I could have done it word for word in tandem with her. I knew what was coming next – and indeed, it came.

“He could sell his bedamned ribbed velvet and get me that little place on Short Street if he really loved me.”

I have the patience of the Five Saints – mostly – and have learned the art of keeping my tongue still in my head when around Pada, who has all the discretion of the wind. But at that moment a long day fighting heavy attacks while waiting for replacements who arrived late and dealing with a new commander brought in from Havartaak who must have been sent to us to keep his previous command from killing themselves – added to sheer weariness at Pada's endless complaining – overcame me, and I said what I really thought.

“And then the difference between you and the working girls waiting back at the Shields door would be ...?”

In most instances, I've found it a poor idea to tell a friend what you really think, if what you think is not what your friend thinks – and I have generally found this out by doing it, and living to regret it. This time was no different. I heard the words hit the night, and cringed, and Pada leapt into me.

“How dare you?! How dare?! To suggest that I could be compared in any way to a ... a whore ...”

In for the whisper, in for the shout. “Because it's true,” I said. “You are offended not because he tried to bribe you to bed him, but because you didn't think his bribe was good enough. You say if he loved you, he would give you something bigger and better – but if you loved him, you would not want silks or diamonds or apartments. You would want only him. As you set this up, Pada, your virtue is no issue – only your price.”

I think had she carried a blade, she would have run me through in that instant, the murder in her eyes shone so clear. But she had her tongue with her, and in a pinch that always seems to serve. "You're a fine one to talk of virtue," she snarled. "You'd bed a man because you liked the color of his eyes."

I smiled a little. "I have pugged a man because I liked the color of his eyes. And enjoyed every minute of it, too. And got nothing from it but the pleasure of the business and a wonderful week with him a year later, when he took his week's leave in Beyltaak just so we could be together."

"And you haven't heard from him again, have you?"

"I have not."

"Because no man can respect a woman who does not guard her virtue."

"Because he got killed in the mountains when the northern line moved and the Shielders in his unit got separated from the Senders."

This set Pada still for a moment. I hoped it might embarrass her enough that she would put her nattering to bed for the night, but I do not have this sort of good fortune. She started back quick enough – but at least on a subject other than poor nose-ringed Dosil the velvet merchant.

"What happened with you and that broaching spell today? I thought sure you'd missed it entirely and I was moving to intercept it when at the last instant you blocked it."

So our new topic was to be my inadequacy. Joy. Friends from work rarely become friends in the true sense – in all the years I'd been in the Shielders, I had yet to make a friend I thought I would want to see if ever the war ended and the Joint Forces released me from duty. Proximity, danger, and the fact that our lives depend on each other all meld us into a

unit, but many of us are of metals that do not blend well.

But, ah the war. We will not soon see the end of that. For three hundred years and a score, we of the Confederacy of Hyre, who hold the western half of Hyre, have been locked in battle with those king-pimping bastards from the Eastil Republic; we fight for independent home rule for each taak, and for the democratic voice of the citizenry, for moderate taxation and the right of all capable citizens to use magic. The Eastils fight to force their king and his government by representation on us, and with it heavy taxes, endless restrictions, and both votes and magic in the hands of only those whom that shit-gobbling, child-devouring King Trimus deems worthy. We also dispute ownership of a couple of prime pieces of land and one tremendous bay, but ours is no mere squabble over real estate. We Confederates are almost exclusively descended from the proud, free, nomadic Tonks who once roamed the steppes of southern Tandinapolis. Some of us can trace our lineage a thousand years. Those Eastils are a mixed and grubby lot, most of them ancestors of prisoners sentenced to the colony on eastern Hyre before the war began; criminals drawn from cesspools and prisons and brothels in Velobrina, Kadine, Marqal, and even Franica and The Path of Stars. Some of them or their ancestors fled there voluntarily hoping to practice their weird religions and weirder predilections. And there they all remain and scum, as everyone knows, breeds nothing but more scum. So until we defeat them and force them to either see reason or flee, our war will go on.

“The Eastils threw a unit of a different sort of senders against our detail,” I said. “They’ve a new twist on their shield-broacher spell that hides anything coming head on. I could not see the one you mention when it first came at the shield; only a slight sideways turn in its arc put it back into my sights. It could well have come through on me.”

“I thought perhaps you were not concentrating,” Pada said.

The thought that I could shove her off the dock and into the bay crossed my mind, and evidently my eyes, because she immediately backtracked. "... but you said ... a new spell?"

Changing the subject is as close to an apology as Pada will go. I didn't pursue her slur – I just said, "They've come up with something subtle. I suspect if we cannot backtrail their Senders and have our Senders destroy them, they're going to be trouble."

"Not for me." Pada looked smug.

"Oh? You learn some new magic I need to know about?" I kept my voice even. It has been a rough day for everyone, I reminded myself. Don't shove her in the bay. Don't shove her in the bay.

We came even with that alley I'd been watching – and out of the shadows stepped two men, both big, both armed with long knives, both staring at the two of us unblinking. They reeked of cheap wine and salban smoke, and they wove from side to side as they stood.

I braced myself and ran personal defense and attack spells through my head and tried to remember who had last been court-martialed for use of magic against civilians, and how that had gone.

The bigger of the two – Mountain Left, I thought – said, "You're ... shuh ... shuh ... Shielders, aren't you?"

"We are," I said, praying under my breath that those two would suddenly get scared and run away. If I remembered correctly, that last court-martial had ended in a permanent placement in eternally-frozen Gavas Base.

"We juh ... juh .. jusht wanted to thank you. Good work." They raised their daggers to their foreheads, and bowed, and I could envision sliced foreheads or one of them losing his

balance and sprawling forward and running me through by accident. But they survived the salute, and so did we. They faded into the shadows, we hurried on our way, and my heart moved out of the back of my mouth and down into my chest where it belonged.

I am daily grateful for the Shielders uniform, and for the men and women who have fought so long and hard to make it a symbol of good.

As uniforms go, it's rather ordinary. Emerald swordsman's shirt, front-lacing vest and pants, both in black camlet cloth, low-heeled soft leather boots, and the beret. The Shielder beret is black, too, and the pin on the front is the sword-and-star. Unit insignia, ribbons and ranks go on the vest and the shirt's dropped shoulders, just above the sleeve gathers. But all Shielders wear the same beret, and that beret is, many times, more magic than we would dare cast. It can be a symbol of fear – for each wearer is a warrior and a master of magic, and if pressed we can link into the web of actives Shielders to channel the power with which we can defend ourselves or protect others – but it is also a symbol of respect and devotion and love. We hold the line for everything we love – and everything our fellow citizens in the Confederacy and its many taaks love.

Only Senders, who wear a variant of the same uniform, differing in nothing but the color of shirts and berets – garnet – and two crossed lightning bolts as their beret pin, receive the same respect as Shielders. The Conventionals – cavalry, foot, artillery, engineers and miners – see us as doing the least work and getting the most glory. But they cannot do what we do. They volunteer – joining at nineteen or twenty, and serving a six-year enlistment, after which they can choose to stay, or choose to return to civilian life.

We in Magics Senders, Shielders, and even Intelligence – wake up one morning shortly after reaching adolescence to find our



mothers crying over our beds up in the eaves and men in uniforms down in the kitchen waiting to tell us that we have magical talent that has manifested and that we will be going with them. Intelligence knows before we know. And their people get to us the instant they discover us. I was thirteen when they came for me. Pada was twelve. Some of my comrades have started as young as ten.

The first thing they tell us is that we will be in the service of the Confederacy until we break or die. Not an easy thing to find out as a child. They train us, they hurt us, they take everything we have and everything we love away from us ... and then gradually, they give us power, and skill, and privilege. We pay for it with our lives and futures, but we are in turn well paid. With respect. With love. With some freedoms beyond those enjoyed by other citizens.

And yet, I cared little for magic and would have given away even Ethebet's Law for a chance to pursue my own loves and dreams.

We stepped off the dock onto the reassuringly solid bricks of Sheep Street, and around a corner onto Market Street, and Pada said, "And there's the Star's Rest," breaking the silence with another of her startling observations.

"And the sky is, miracle of miracles, still dark at night," I muttered too softly for her to hear me. She would not have appreciated my sarcasm.

The Star's Rest is Magics' place Shielders, Senders, Intelligence, and those few we choose to bring with us. The doormen know us by name, as we know them; old Shielders and Senders introduce the new, old doormen stand watch alongside new to make sure each knows the people he should. Magics owns the Star, just as Conventional owns the Rowdy Bosom over on Hasty Street, and within the Star's walls, we have our own tiny kingdom. We pay our doormen well, both in tips and

favours, and in return they keep the world away when we would spend a little time among our own, private and – because we are in private – able to behave or misbehave without censure, and without bringing shame on the uniform.

Mardoc greeted Pada and me with a bow and a faint, sad smile. “Is all well with you?” I asked him, and he nodded, but added, “How well it is with the rest of the world remains to be seen.” He ushered us through, and closed the door quickly behind us.

Pada and I tucked our berets into the cap-loop on the left side of our pants, walked through the foyer, and moved to the West Dining Room; but even before we saw inside, we both felt the wrongness in the Star. From the gathering rooms to the front and the recreation rooms in back and even the bedrooms upstairs, quiet bore down on us – the murmurs of voices kept low like the slow roll of breakers along the shore, an absence of laughter, and whispers everywhere, when anything short of shouts inside the Star’s Rest usually proved futile. Our annoyance with each other put aside, Pada and I exchanged worried glances and hurried into the dining room.

From a back table, a familiar voice. “Heya! Talyn, Pada! We’ve seats and news.”

My friend Karl. He and I, sent together to an emplacement near the front lines just prior to what our intelligence assured us was going to be a hellish combination attack, had spent the eve before the battle taking what comfort we could find from each other, so certain were we that we would die on the morrow. We did not, and our familiarities with each other have been a source of some discomfort to each of us in the intervening years. We remain friends, but suffer awkwardness in each other’s company when alone. In spite of the fact that Karl is square-jawed and broad-shouldered as the hero of any saga, with gleaming black hair and eyes like anthracite, neither he nor I ever made any pretence of love in our brief,

desperate union. Whatever we've been looking for, it isn't each other.

Beside him sat short, pert, chirpy Dardie, his current lover and one of the Shielders on his watch, who did not know of Karl's and my indiscretion; and beside Dardie sat her runner, Jass – Intelligence's newest find, and a nice little boy. I put him at twelve. He still suffered from homesickness and yearned to go back to the life he'd imagined before his magic interfered. When they took him away from home, Dardie gathered him in like a lost hatchling, and he followed her around everywhere. It breaks your heart to see it – we all started there, but we never realize how pathetic we were until we watch the new ones wandering around all lost and scared.

I took a seat beside Jass, while Pada scooted into the booth next to Karl.

One of the serving girls came by, and I ordered black lager and a thick steak – rare – and steamed greens. Pada got herself brown stew and one of those weak little horse-piss beers she claims to like – she thinks she's too delicate for a real drink. But what do I know; maybe she is.

When the serving girl left, I leaned forward and said, "What of the news, then? Has a city fallen to the Eastils? The front line moved closer? New magic against us?"

"Rumors of a cease-fire," Karl said, and sat back.

"Where?" Pada asked.

Karl shook his head. "Not a local cease-fire. A real cease-fire – the whole line, negotiations on both sides with the Feegash standing the middle to arbitrate, and the possibility of an actual stand-down for all of us."

The girl came back with the drinks – mine and Pada's, and refreshers for Karl and Dardie and Jass, who drank his lager

black as mine. Good lad. I nodded to him, and he caught my glance, grinned a little, and took a sip. Didn't choke, either.

The serving girl left again, and I said, "Pig-balls. Not even the Feegash could untangle our war, nor would they try."

Pada agreed. "The disputed High Valleys and all the riches they contain remain disputed, and Whayre Harbor sits idle, with the richest fishing and the best trade routes blocked and under attack."

I nodded. "And how do we reach settlement, when we are free, while the Eastils have their pissless agglomeration of a republic where the few speak for the many and not a city or town can raise its own army or mint its own coin or field its own defenses, and where the money flows to king and court and damned little flows back? Are the Eastils suddenly come to reason, to disband their republic and their monarchy? Or are we expected to bow, who have not bowed to man or god in our lives?"

Karl said, "I don't know how it's to be done. I don't know what they're saying, or what they're planning, but I know at least some of the rumors are true. My brother Borin came in from the front lines today, and told me the Feegash observers are supposed to be arriving on the morrow, with the first light. They're to be on both sides of the line. They will offer themselves hostage to the cease-fire while their negotiators work out the details."

My food came – a slab of meat thick as my wrist, charred black on the outside, good and bloody on the inside, and with it, some of the Star's fire-sauce, and red-top and root-greens so lightly steamed they still crunched when I ate them. Perfect. But I didn't have as much appetite as I had when I walked through the door. The idea of a cease-fire, of peace obtained not by a clean win but through the negotiation of strangers

who would not have to live under the peace they decreed, made me sick.

“It will come to nothing,” I said, hoping my words would be true. I hate the war – but I believe in all that we fight for. And though I was not a volunteer and would not have my freedom until the Confederacy found its way to peace – if then – still I knew I would rather fight than become a voiceless part of the Eastil Republic.

“This time,” Dardie said, “I think it might come to something.” She sipped her own drink and shrugged. Even she didn’t look her usual optimistic self. “Racel from headquarters told me the full-wings have been running in circles for two days, putting together disarmament plans for each of the taaks in the Confederacy.” She kept her voice low – I knew anything she got from headquarters was supposed to stop with her, but this mattered to all of us.

“Disarmament –”

I think Pada and I whispered the word together. I know her expression of horror reflected how I felt.

“The Eastils would never give up weapons or shields,” Pada said.

I agreed. “They’ll say they have – and then when we sit here helpless, they’ll come pouring over our borders and murder the lot of us before we can raise a shield, or even a cry.”

Jass, who’d been sitting and listening to all of this while sipping his lager, finally spoke. “My da says the Eastils couldn’t get a straight word out of their mouths with a drop-line and a sharp knife.”

We all laughed at that, but it was muted laughter, burdened by the weight of unfunny truth. We suspected that peace unearned would come with a later, bitterer price – and after three

hundred years of war, we wanted our peace free of strings.

Hell, we wanted to win – and if the rumors had any real truth to them, our leaders and our enemies were conspiring to take our win away from us.

We wouldn't stand for that. Would we?

#

Bellies down, faces in the dirt, nine men worked their way along the mountain ridge under cover of darkness; they braved the cold and the reality of potential death at any instant, knowing that if they got through and if they succeeded, their actions could win the war for the Eastils.

Captain Gair Farhallan signaled his men to stop with a quick wave of one hand. Behind him down the line, everyone froze. Below and beneath him, far north and east of where intelligence had reported the closest enemy position, a cavalry unit worked its way along the very trail Gair had mapped out for his own use. Worse, the unit traveled north – the same direction Gair wanted to go.

Mounted on small, rugged mountain ponies, heavily armed, the unit looked to be making good time. But where? Where had they been, and where were they going? The path, about half a league on, split, with the eastern branch going through a narrow pass and into Eastil territory. The western branch, the one Gair had wanted, dropped quickly down the mountains and into an uninhabited, heavily-wooded valley that led eventually to populated Confederate lands.

Gair and his men were supposed to head into enemy territory, assume their cover as Confederate civilians, and make their way as far west as Injtaak, the Confederate taak, or city-state, that sat closest to the mountains and the Eastils. Republic spies had reported Injtaak to be the locale for the Confederate half of the peace talks, and the likely presence

of most of the major taaklords made the gathering an opportunity to throw the whole of the Confederacy into disarray. The mission held incredible potential for the Republic, but also the potential for a terrible public debacle if the Confederates caught Gair and his men either before or after they completed their mission.

Gair and his men had trained for years to blend in with the Confederates – language and customs lessons, map studies, political briefings. He knew the Republic had trained other squads in the same fashion, but none of the squads knew each other. Each small company would be attached to a fighting unit, like Gair's company had been – kept close to the front lines, available to send across the border at a moment's notice. This seventh mission marked a turning point for Gair – this time, he and his men would be doing more than acquiring information. This time they had a chance to take home the big prize.

But as he watched the enemy pass and wondered where they headed and what they planned to do, he wished he dared have his mage-communicator send information back to the Republic's forces gathered on the eastern slope of Mount Terfa. Further, he wished he knew – or had time to find out – whether they would turn east or west at Saryann Pass.

But he had neither the time nor the manpower to go after the troops to be sure of their movement. He only had the men he needed for his mission – no extras – and he had no more time to spare than he had men. And he dared not have his communicator open a speech-line to the unit communicator – some Magic on the other side might be listening in, and the open line would signal his squad's position as clearly as a cookfire or shouts.

So Gair waited, resenting the length of the line of horses and men and weapons, and the fact that he would have to take his squad down the mountain by the harder, riskier alternate route

to avoid scouts and outriders, and resenting every moment that he lost waiting. If anything else slowed them down, they might have to move in daylight in order to make up the time.

The cold of the rock beneath Gair seeped into him and chilled him, flesh and blood and bone, and he suppressed a hard shudder. Slowly and cautiously, he pulled his cloak tighter around him. He felt for his men, stuck behind him, none of them any warmer than he was as they hugged the ridgeline on top of this mountain, in this cold, beneath the pale hard eye of the moon and the unforgiving stars. He would be glad when they could move again. Movement gave warmth and purpose and a feeling of security, even if that security was false.

Two days, he thought. At the outside, three. In that time, they could end a war, destroy the barbarians' governments and their resolve, and open the door for the Eastil Republic to come in and bring civilization and order to these lands. He buoyed himself with those thoughts as he waited to take his men down the mountains.

#

I woke with my seven-year-old brother sitting on the foot of my bed in the eaves like some demented gargoyle. He wore my beret on his head and my cloak around his shoulders.

"Stand and be recognized," he said.

I threw my pillow at him, but not hard. I did not want to knock him from the bedstead and cause him any hurt. He laughed at me, and said, "So, then ... what gifts did you bring me?"

"I brought you nothing, you beggar. My company isn't enough for you?"

"I want a beret and boots and a cloak like yours, and sugar-strings and ..."

"If you're lucky, you won't get what you think you want," I



told him. "Except maybe the sugar-strings." Of my parent's fourteen children, eight of us are in the service, six of us drafted into Magics. Which has to have been a source of delight for the Forces, since my father took an early option to participate in the Breeder program. I love my taak, I love my countrymen, I love the Confederacy and all it stands for ... but I do not want to see Riknir follow in his brothers' and sisters' paths. If he has no talent for magic, and no taste for war, I will be the happiest big sister in Beyltaak.

I rolled out of my narrow bed, keeping my head down – years of sleeping under the eaves had honed in the lot of us a habitual half-crouch on waking that returned instantly whenever we came home. I could stand straight in the center of the loft, and did. My parents kept all our beds up there still – even though four of my older siblings have married and we could never manage to all be home at the same time. Those beds stood as a mark of my parents' faith in us, I think – that we would survive service, that we would come home as we could – or perhaps they were a way of warding off disaster, a superstitious talisman. As long as the beds remained in their places so we could have our own when we came home, then we would stay safe.

I cannot say, but I know I found it a wonderful comfort to come home, always knowing that I had a place to stay, and that the place was mine.

Rik said, "So you really didn't bring me anything?"

I rubbed the sleep from my eyes and yawned. "If I had, I would not give you a thing. You vex me."

He pointed at me and grinned. "You're lying. You did bring me something."

"If I give it to you, will you leave me in peace long enough that I might wash and dress?"

He nodded.

From my kit, I produced first the bag of sugar-strings, and handed it to him, and acted as if I would close my kit. He thanked me, but I saw his face fall. He is as transparent as only a child can be. I winked at him then, and opened the kit back up, and from it pulled a black beret on which I'd embroidered the silver sword and the gold star, though inside of a red circle that marked it as play clothing instead of the green shield that would mean it was a true uniform – the embroidery would have to do, because he could not have an actual pin – and a cloak like our uniform cloaks, heavy lanolin-rich wool on the outside, fine green silk on the inside, with a bit of gold piping all along the edge, and a solid silver cloak-brooch nothing like the official one. I did not want anyone mistaking Rik for a Sender, nor did I want him getting in trouble for impersonating one.

He didn't care. His eyes shone. "Tally, they're beautiful." He held the gifts reverently, and touched the sword and star on the beret, and ran a finger along the piping on the cloak. Then he put them carefully on the foot of one of the narrow cots, and ran over to me and hugged me, squeezing as hard as he could. "Thank you."

I pulled him close and ruffled his hair. "I'm glad you like them." I hoped I would never see him in the real uniform. If the peace came, it would at least spare him that.

He took his gifts down the ladder and gave me my few minutes with wash basin and brush. I tugged on work pants and shirt, pulled my hair back – though not in the braid mandated when I wore the uniform – and went down the ladder after him.

The smells that had been tugging at me up in the loft now hit me full-on – a pie cooling on the pie rack in the kitchen, bread baking in the oven, bacon strips and potatoes frying on the griddle, and fragrant tea on the boil. My mother hugged

me. "I did not hear you come in last night, but your father did."

I returned the embrace with one of my own. "Edrig let me in – he stayed up late tinkering with a design in the workshop."

She shook her head. "That child. He and the boys in the smithy have some idea for a new war engine that has had them up all hours. I have been by once or twice, just to see what they're about." She shook her head. "They will put their days into it, and their nights, and will use materials and effort that might better be spent on something practical, and in the end they'll make a tangle of it."

I sighed. "Aw, Ma, you never think he will do anything – but he's a good boy."

She turned away from me to the griddle, and flipped bacon and potatoes. "All he hears are his dreams, and all he sees are his dreams, and dreams will not buy land or win a war."

My mother, Five Saints bless her, hates the impractical with a passion that most mothers reserve for dirty children and a messy house. After fourteen children though, I suppose she had to focus on a war she thought she might win.

And yet, in spite of my mother, most of my siblings and I harbored secret dreams – little shards and scraps of fantasy that we held tight to our hearts and cherished while we imagined what life might be if we could do what we wanted.

My own personal bit of madness did not garner quite the level of dismay from my mother as some of the whimsies of my siblings. I had long yearned to set myself up as a jeweler, working with gold and silver, electrum, bronze and copper and fine stones; I had a workbench down in the long hall behind the house, and there, next to my father's kilns and smithing fires, I kept my table and peg, my apron and soldering irons, my mandrel and files and saws and drills and hide mallet. I'd

accumulated the tools over the years and learned to use them gradually in the same period of time, and in the past few years made more than a coin or two from my work. My mother respected anything that paid, and when I spread a bag of gold rhengis on our table before her and told her it was the price I got for a granulated gold ring with a fine bezel-mounted clear ruby – a piece she had only the day before declared gaudy and lumpish – she spoke not another word against my pursuit of nonsense in time that might be better spent, and even let me start showing Rik how to do some of the simpler tasks.

So my visits home became near-unalloyed pleasure – during the day, I spent time with Rik and worked on my jewelry, in the evenings I sat with my parents and whichever other siblings managed to find their way home for a day or two, as well as the ones who still lived there, and I told tales and listened to tales and spent time with the wives and husbands of my various sibs and played with my growing collection of nieces and nephews – and only rarely did I have to fend off questions of when I would marry and take deferral for Breeder rights. In spite of the war, our lives were good. The house purely burst at the seams sometimes, but always my parents made room for an extra place at the table and extra sleeping space in the loft.

“And what will you be working on this time,” she asked me, putting crisp bacon and a pile of crunchy brown potatoes in front of me.

I dug into the food with glee – my mother’s cooking is the stuff of legend, and even simple things have her magic touch. “I have a commission from the Beyls for a silver brooch, a complicated bit of cut-metal work with granulation, and with a handful of opals to shape and set. I expect it to take me all of this visit and much of my next one.”

But I do not think she heard anything past “the Beyls.” They are the first family of Beyltaak – not the original founding

family, certainly, but the latest ones who managed to grab the power and the name and hang onto them.

“The Beyls,” she whispered. “Why, you could become famous doing work for them. Perhaps they could even do a few favors for you ...” Unsaid were the words, “and get you out of the military.”

I grinned. First, jewelers don't become famous. They are simply workers, even if they are workers who do what they love. Second, the Beyl son in my unit liked my work enough to buy some of it from me, but a direct connection to the great family had not even been enough to keep him out of the Shielders. It certainly would not garner me my much-dreamed-about freedom. I did not, however, voice these objections to my mother. Wonderful woman though she is, once she makes up her mind that a thing might happen, no reality can shake her.

My father finds this quality about her charming and amusing. He says her eccentricities come from the fact that she came from Dravitaak, down south against the underbelly of the world, where children were born with their brains already frozen solid. He humors her and loves her and loudly agrees with some of her more outlandish notions, all the while nodding at us behind her back, so that we might know when she has once again taken the bit of fancy between her teeth and run with it.

He does not, however, tolerate the same flights of fancy from any of us. I remember from my earliest days hearing him tell one older sibling or another, “There is no known fact that cannot be shattered by one clear-eyed observation. So keep your eyes open and your mouth closed, and do not think you know anything. Theories are your friends; facts can get you killed.”

We stepped out into the world a dubious, watchful lot, my brothers and sisters and I; but, in spite of our huge

representation within the military, all of us were still alive, and I do not credit that to luck. Neither does my father. Each time one of us walks out the door, he hugs us and whispers, "Watch your back." He seems to think my mother does not know of this piece of advice he gives us. He whispers, always, perhaps thinking that he'll upset her with his worries. But once I had to take my leave when he was not at home to give me his usual benediction, and my mother walked me to the door, hugged me and pushed food into my pack, and as I was getting ready to step out the door, said, "He is right, you know."

I remember turning back to her, puzzled.

"You father," she said. "He is right. Watch your back."

Up in the loft, a few visits later, the older ones of us who were home for a few days lay talking in the darkness after both parents, down in their room, had started to serenade us with their snores. We discussed them, as we often did, and I mentioned Ma's warning.

My oldest brother, Tyrig, laughed. "She knows all about him," he said. "She knows he thinks her theories are silly, and she knows he tells us about them behind her back. Much of what she does when she is with him is for his amusement, and perhaps for ours. She plays the fool, but she is no fool." He chuckled. "Before the two of them received their Breeder program deferrals, she was a spy for Dravitaak – that was how she met Da." And he said something next that I'll never forget. "In a fight, she'd be as good with a blade as she is with her whisks and spoons. If ever she tells you something in seriousness, heed her – I trust her cautious view of the world more even than Da's."

So this was the woman who made me my breakfast that morning – a woman awed by celebrity, opinionated about everything, overtly silly and stubborn, and underneath all of that, wary

and perhaps even dangerous. After twenty-one years, I knew her only somewhat. She drove me to distraction with her worries that I would not marry, or would not marry well, that I would fall under bad influences in the services of my taak, that I would eat too little and grow thin and scrawny and sickly – and she loved me, as I loved her.

“Why breakfast this morning?” I asked. I will take my mother’s cooking whenever I can get it, but usually she subscribes to the old adage, “He who wakes last eats little.”

“I wanted to talk with you.” She served up a plate for herself – much smaller than the monstrous serving she put before me – and sat across from me at our long, narrow plank table.

Something about her voice rang alarms inside of me. “What has happened?”

She smiled a little. “More than all the others, you are your father’s daughter. Wary every step you take. I’m grateful for it, truly. I worry less about you than the remaining thirteen combined.”

I speared one of the potatoes with the point of my knife, ate it, then took a sip of the bitter spring water she paid to have hauled from her home taak – stuff that she claimed had restorative properties. She watched me.

“And ...?” I asked.

“He has been recalled to active duty.”

I put down my knife. “Da?”

She nodded.

“They can’t recall him! He far exceeded the quota he needed in order to fulfill his Breeder requirements. And he has been doing Shielder training all along.”

She sighed. "He did, and he has. But he could not make the Forces not need him. He is to travel to Injtaak, to participate in a meeting of all the major taaklords. I do not know what his duty will be."

"When is he to leave?"

"They came for him well before dawn this morning. He has already gone."

I stared at her. "Already gone?"

"They gave him only enough time to pack a single bag. They promised that he would not be gone long – that this is a temporary assignment."

I sat there disbelieving. "You have no idea why they wanted him?"

"None. They told me nothing, and him nothing except that his taak needed him and his skills for a little while."

"In Injtaak."

She looked at me.

I did not say anything.

She asked me, "I want to know ... what have you heard?"

And that was the question she was not supposed to ask, and I was not supposed to answer. She'd been in the Forces, she knew the rules, and I still wore the uniform and would owe my oath to my taak for the rest of my life. Yet men had come for my father, had taken him away, and my mother, like most mothers, excelled at worry.

I said, "This goes no farther than you."

"I know that. And you know I shall say nothing. Only tell me that he is safe."



“The Feegash are gathering the taaklords from every taak in the Confederacy to Injtaak. Across the mountains, the leaders of the Republic will meet in a town called West Strovin. From what I was able to gather before I came home last night, the Feegash will begin negotiating a peace between the Eastils and us.”

She looked thoughtful. She moved her potatoes around her plate with the point of her knife and stared off at nothing for a long time. Then she looked at me, looked at my plate, and said, “Eat. Your food will get cold.”

I took another bite of the potatoes, a bite of bacon, more of her tonic water.

She held her silence for a long time, until finally she sighed. “The Feegash,” she said. “I could be no more surprised had the Saints themselves decided to step down and involve themselves in the war.”

“Nor I,” I agreed.

Nor, perhaps, even the Saints themselves. The Feegash came from Ba’afeegash, a small rich mountain kingdom in the heart of the ferocious Great Heart Mountains in southern Tandinapolis. In recorded history, Ba’afeegash had never been overrun, conquered, or under the rule of any but the Feegash. It was the most ferociously – even violently – neutral country in the world. It called no one enemy, but tolerated no threat. No one – no one, crossed into its borders with a weapon and lived to tell the tale. It lay in such an inhospitable region, with its borders so well-laid-out and planned, it was said that two lads with pea-shooters could hold off an invading army, so long as they did not run out of peas.

Ba’afeegash’s army was small, but it contained what most Conventional insisted were the most vicious fighters anywhere. If ever the Eastils resorted to the utter cowardice of mercenaries and hired the Feegash, we would have to do the

same or acknowledge defeat. Thank the Saints that in this the Eastil bastards had always agreed with us – that this was our war, and no place for outsiders.

Second to their mercenaries, the Feegash were famous for their negotiators. But whereas any who chose to pay the coin can acquire Feegash mercenaries, Feegash negotiators charged nothing, but went only where they thought they could help. They were held to be the fairest, the most reasonable, and the most resolute negotiators in the world.

Which begged the question: After more than three hundred years of unending war, why had they come to Hyre? I told my mother, “Yet my sources are good – and that Da has been taken off to Injtaak seems to add another layer of proof.”

“Well, I can understand why the Beyls would want your father on hand. He has a touch with magic no one else could match. I can think of a hundred ways he could help to guarantee the safety and success of the mission, and I daresay the Forces can think of a hundred that have not crossed my mind. And peace would be a good thing, could the Republic be held to their end of it. I suspect, though, that not even the Feegash can give us that.”

I dug into the rest of my breakfast, certain she was right.

#

Gair, asleep beneath dense undergrowth at the base of the mountain, woke to his communications man shaking him by the shoulder.

“Trouble,” Lorek said. “I got a coded send from base. Meeting is moved up a day – if we keep to our current pace, we’ll arrive too late.”

Gair swore, and forced himself to wakefulness. “From this instant on, we are Tonks. We speak only their language, –” He

caught himself in mid-sentence and switched to Tonkin. “Damn ... we’re going to have to buy horses and race to Injtaak.”

While Lorek roused the sleeping squad, Gair crouched over the dirt, stick in hand, sketching out the lay of the land before him, placing every landmark and digging furiously through his memory for someplace close where they could get the horses they needed. And he tried to figure out his story – because a bad story might let them get all the way into Injtaak and the meeting, but would surely not let them get back out. And he wondered who had changed the date of the meeting – the crafty Tonks or the wary Feegash. Bastards, all of them.

By the time his men gathered round him, he had a plan that would get them the horses they needed, and get them to their destination on time and without raising the countryside against themselves. He sketched it in the dirt quickly, and then he and his squad moved out.

Check out the TALYN extras

## **Where to buy**

- Amazon
- Barnes & Noble

Contents © Holly Lisle. <https://hollylisle.com> All Rights Reserved