

DARCARA

K. Michele Moseley

Book Sample

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Prologue

Lewin was there the first time I ever had a vision, when I fell out of the tree in my grandmother's back garden. I was nine, which would have made him ten. They must have a sense of humor, since we called the tree "the Dargun." Imagining it in our minds as a huge, winged beast with armored scales and breath of fire, we attacked from all sides with our swords and axes—even if they were just sticks. When I was standing on a branch as high up as I was tall, my head filled with weaving ribbons of color, which blocked out all other thought. The vision was clearer than my eyesight, but the images came from somewhere beyond the physical. And even though there were no words or sounds, I knew the shapes and colors were saying my name.

Aenya.

Lewin ran to fetch Mami. She bent over me on the hard dirt, tangles of gray hair coming loose and falling over her eyes. I wasn't hurt besides a bump on the head. But I was frustrated, unable to explain what had caused me to fall.

"She just let go," Lewin said as I struggled to sit up. Once standing, I tried to scratch what I had seen into the dirt using my stick.

That's when Mami's face changed from concern to fear. She glanced at Lewin, swallowing hard, trying to decide what to say. I think she figured—and was right—if she didn't explain we'd go seeking answers from somewhere else.

"It's the Dargun," she said, looking in turn to each of our curious, furrow-browed faces.

We had learned about the Dargun in our lessons—the brutes our ancestors worshiped as gods who lead our people to destruction. But the Dargun had been killed, and now, Elriyon is ruled by the people strong enough to protect it. If you weren't a warrior—a Laeoh, trained and prepared by the Council—you were an Opil, a common laborer. And if you were Opil, you may as well not exist. The Dargun had been gone for decades.

If the Dargun were still alive, what would they have to do with me? And how would Mami know?

"Do you see it too, Mami?" I asked, my heart racing in fear or excitement, I didn't know which.

"Not so much—not anymore."

"There are still Dargun?" Lewin asked, his eyebrows shooting up his head.

Mami regarded him, the lined ends of her lips curving up before falling again, a clear admission. "You can't tell anybody." I'd never heard her sound so fierce, not even when Lewin snuck a squirrel into the house and it escaped into her pantry. "The Council—they won't like it. Promise me."

Lewin and I exchanged a glance, feeling suddenly grown-up in the solemnness of this secret. And we nodded our pledge.

Part I

Chapter 1

I can tell he's trying to keep his footsteps light, but full Vigil armor weighs almost as much as he does. Letting out a slow and silent breath, I try to make myself believe that I am a part of the stack of logs which serves as my current hiding place. I have to pity what is a feeble attempt at stealth—his breath is loud, his size audible in his movements. The dagger lays steady in my right hand as he inches closer.

And closer.

I feel the slight change of his pace. His movements all the more cautious. Once he steps past me, I will only have a fraction of a second to strike.

Now.

I slide my left foot out of my hiding place and the rest of my body follows, *“like liquid out of a bottle”* as the instructor would say. In a blink, my right arm and the dagger I'm holding wrap around his neck. He's a head and a half taller than me, and three times wider, but if he moves, his throat will press the knife.

I win.

“Catae!” I shout, alerting Instructor Gan to my success. Jord's body relaxes, the game over, but we must hold still so my form can be inspected. Instructor Gan's steps are steady and firm as he comes around the bend.

We're in the topmost room of the Eluit training center. It rings the perimeter of the high tower, giving us a circular track for running and a perfect place for playing cat and mouse—though I'm not sure which one I'm supposed to be. The instructor's mole-like eyes are narrow, dangerous. I keep my chin high, and, through the edge of my vision, watch the corners of his drooping mouth turn up in a satisfied grin. Still, it's impossible to tell if he is pleased or just veiling contempt.

“And the last part, Aenya?” He says, his voice thick and tight.

I suppress a sigh. Instead of simply lowering my knife from Jord's neck, I pantomime sliding it across and push him to the floor. He crumples, as he is supposed to.

Inspector Gan waits, his wrath bubbling just under the surface.

Feeling foolish, I plant my foot on Jord's chest. A slow count to three plays in my mind. Then I thrust my arms back as if about to take flight.

This is the act I will perform at the Assigning Ceremony tomorrow—showing the Council and my Rulers that I am well suited to the tasks they've chosen for me. I'm not to know my Assignment, but the training I have received the last four years indicates that I will be a Vigil, the Councilhold watch. Depending on my Assignment, I could join the inner guard at the Cashlan or for the higher Council members of another Hold. The last part of this performance though? I can't begin to guess what that means. But tomorrow, I will have to perform it. And tomorrow, it will all be over.

Jord stands, and we bow to one another. He departs to find his mentor, leaving me with mine. I pretend to be busy adjusting the back of my soft, leather shoe so I don't have to face him. Heavy

boots land beside me, and I straighten. My eyes focus on a spot on the wall so as not to meet his. He likes it that way. And I like that, no matter what happens tomorrow, I'll never have to be alone with him again.

"You did well today." It's not a compliment. Nothing with Instructor Gan is ever a compliment, more of an assurance that, at least for now, I won't be punished.

"Yes, sir." I say. He's not a tall man, but he still towers over me. Even though he has more gray than black in his hair, he hasn't lost any of the bulk he gained during his days as a Defender.

"And I know you will not hesitate in your performance tomorrow."

I clench my teeth so tight my jaw hurts. "Yes, sir."

He steps around me, a vulture circling. From behind, I feel his gaze moving the length of my form. I've been trained to show no fear. He knows this. And he knows I don't like him being where I can't see him. Still, I can't leave until he dismisses me. He holds me in his scrutiny, inspecting me like a well-made sword, one ready to bring him the glory he's worked for. As his eyes continue to linger, I have to swallow back my disgust.

"Dismissed," he says, his voice sweet. Merciful.

I nod and march toward the door, pausing only to take my cloak from the hook. The door shuts, and I breathe again. Now, I can fly down the stairs and into the fresh, cool air of the night. Free of the Eliut, unexpected sadness presses in on me. It's possible I'll not see another evening at Seagate.

Lewin is already waiting for me, as usual. Stepping into the twilight, I pull on my gray cloak. It is the color of the Laeoh, the honored warriors Elriyon depends on, the ones I have been trained the last four years to join. I try to shake off the stiffness in my muscles.

Lewin smiles, his brown clothes dusty and smelling of hay and dirt. His large hands dig deep in his pockets, his broad shoulders hunched against the cold. He's clearly a man now, but the boyishness hasn't faded from his open face.

"How was your last day?" he asks.

I shrug, my head pounding already.

His grin flickers, concern seeping in.

I force a smile of my own, feeling guilty for only thinking of myself. "Your da said I did well. He's looking forward to tomorrow."

Lewin is an Opil—a laborer—sent at the age of twelve to the Seagate farm, rather than the Eluit, for training. He may have dishonored his da by not being positioned at the Eluit, but Instructor Gan found a way to make his son useful when I became his pet project. Everyone at the Eluit knows the threat of punishment is always lingering in the air. But some instructors are worse than others. If I don't do what I'm told, or if I'm found when I'm supposed to be hidden, speak or show emotion out of turn, I know to expect Instructor Gan's thin, metal cord snaking around my legs, and Lewin will have it even worse when he gets home.

Lewin tries not to seem as relieved as he is. He'll be allowed to eat tonight and won't be going to work tomorrow with open welts on his wide back. Honestly, he wouldn't have been a bad fighter, even before years at the farm put power into his arms. But he could never have entered combat with any kind of intent to actually harm something—even if it was after him first. I've

often wondered what that means about me and why I was chosen for training while he was sent to the farm.

We hear footsteps behind the heavy Eluit door. I jerk my head to Lewin, and we begin a brisk walk down the street. We keep that pace for a while, only slowing up when Lewin's breathing grows rough and pushes against the night air. The stones paving the road shine wet from the heavy mist.

"So," Lewin says, "have *they* had anything to say about tomorrow?"

I don't answer right away. In the fog, I have to use my ears and intuition to sense anyone who may be nearby.

"Nothing yet," I whisper, rubbing my eyes between my forefinger and thumb, head pounding from the visions that I have to hold back while I'm training. It's exhausting, but Lewin pays for my distraction if I'm not careful.

Lewin wants answers as much as I do. A few weeks ago, a vision came in the night, when the images are strongest. Sometimes I see a single color or many blended together in different patterns. Sometimes the images resemble real things or at least an impression of them. That night, I saw the purest rows of silver and bronze, and they could have stretched on for miles, like open fields of shimmering grass. The next morning, I scratched the shapes in the sand, trying to explain the colors and what they meant to Lewin.

"Out there!" I said, gesturing to the high, stone wall which separates the Councilhold from the sands and sea.

Lewin's brow furrowed in question, puzzled.

"Not Seagate, further. The land outside. The Dargun are out there somewhere. There must be people who aren't part of the Councilholds. And why would I have vision unless—"

His face relaxed, but his eyes remained wide with wonder, knowing what I was about to say but not letting himself fully believe it.

"Unless we're supposed to be out there too."

At that moment, we started to plan our escape. For the first time in years, we remembered what it felt like to talk about the future with excitement. It was like it was before the Eluit and the farm, honor and shame, tried to divide us. I was sure the visions would guide us every bit of the way. But, now that the Assigning is happening tomorrow, now that I haven't seen anything else, I'm terrified that I missed what comes next.

"Did my da say anything about where you will be positioned?"

I shake my aching head.

"Are you nervous?" he asks. I stare out at the mist over the homes which get smaller and shabbier the closer they are to the sea.

"Are you?" I reply. "Or do you have a plan all worked out by now?" I catch an edge in my voice and try to soften the tone. Now that his apprenticeship in Seagate is over, new workers can take his place. So, he'll have to be moved. It's already understood that if I'm Assigned to stay here in Seagate Councilhold then I have to find a way out. Once I do, I'll meet Lewin on the road to the

Burgen farm at the eastern edge of Seagate's boarder. We've only heard rumors of what he will suffer working there if our plan fails.

Sneaking is what I was trained for. The rest, I'll have to figure as we go. Lewin looks at me, uncomfortable, turning his head and straining his eyes to see for himself that no one is around.

"If you are Assigned to Sungate," he says, his voice quiet and calm, "I can wait for your party to pass by. Once you get to the inn, we can slip into the forest. I'll have to make a distraction, but that shouldn't be hard. I just wish I could see the place and the road beforehand since that's all I have so far."

"And if it's Northgate?" I ask, hopelessness thick in my voice.

"Then I'll have to leave tomorrow night and try to meet you on the road north."

I snort, not meaning to. If Lewin were trained, this wouldn't be so hard. Sneaking out in the dead of night is something anyone from the Eluit could do with little trouble. We just wouldn't do it—or at least, the others wouldn't. Lewin may have to try to sneak out of Seagate on his own. He may have to try to distract a party of newly Assigned Laeoh warriors, and their keepers, in a terrain he only has a few days to navigate. I try to keep my voice soft, "Can you get around your da?" Though Instructor Gan isn't the least of our obstacles, he will likely be the first.

"It's a ceremony day. He will have to attend the celebration at the Cashlan with the Rulers and will probably be more than tipsy by nightfall. It's the one time I ever *could* get away. And I will, don't worry. You look like you swallowed a loc-toad."

I can't help but laugh. How can he be so calm? "Swallowed a loc-toad" is the term we've used since we were children for being particularly glum, after his cat got sick from eating one of the horrible, brown creatures.

Don't worry. Right.

We reach my family's grand house—the one we moved to when Da became the Council's chief advisor.

Even now, Lewin's the one person besides Mami who knows about my visions. What will happen to us if this doesn't work? If we are separated, trapped, and nothing more than Laeoh and Opil for the rest of our lives?

And he says, *Don't worry.*

Chapter 2

The next morning the bells seem louder than usual and make my tired ears ache. *Six o'clock*. I slide out of the soft warmth of my bed, my feet recoiling on the cold stone floor. Forcing myself forward, I splash tepid water on my face at the marble washbasin and rub the crust out of my eyes. Bringing my towel down my cheeks with a rough wipe, I stare at my reflection in the silver mirror.

When I squint, the gray and brown of my walls and furniture resembles the inside of a well-lit dungeon. My thick not-quite-red hair, plain brown eyes, slight frame, and pale skin stare back. To me, I don't look any older than I did four years ago. How could they think me a warrior?

I cross the room to my wardrobe without my usual lightness of foot. Just as I am smoothing down my tunic, they come to me.

Clearer than any dream conjured in my mind, bright, cool colors weave in and out of one another. I close my eyes and take in the images, my body swaying with the motion.

It is timeless. And it is just a moment. The colorful lights fade, the rhythm slows, and then they are gone. It was peace, an absolute and encompassing calm, mixing my blood with thick, warm honey. Still, I caught something else behind the comfort. *Caution*.

I want to ask why, but it's already over. I blink and return to myself, annoyed that the message hadn't just stopped at reassuring, annoyed that there is so much I need to know. I glance out the window at the fading dark of the morning. There's still time for me to make it to the sands for a few moments before the ceremony. Holding my leather slippers in my hands, I pull the heavy door. It slides open with a groan.

The grand portraits of the family in the corridor glower down at me. As much as I want to leave, guilt twists in my belly as I think of them. But it almost doesn't matter. I'd be leaving home no matter what, and at least now, I'll be leaving for something better. I stomp down the stairs looking at my feet, causing me to just about collide with Ida, our maid.

"Oy," she exclaims, startled. "I'd just come to fetch you, but you're already running me down."

"Sorry, Ida, I'm trying to get out early so I don't have to talk to anyone."

"Nervous?"

I shrug. She has no idea.

"Well, Marda set up a basket of bread and cheese for you. Don't get sand in your shoes and say hello to Lewin for me."

I hold up my shoes to show they are safe and smile. "Thank you." I give her a quick, one armed hug. My stockinged feet slide on the stone floors as I sprint toward the kitchen. I bid Marda a quick hello and give her a peck on the cheek, something like a goodbye. But she's bustling about and muttering and doesn't seem to notice me. It appears that she's speaking to the great expanse of bubbling pots and saucepans, making lists, and fussing. She has a lot to prepare for tonight's dinner celebrating my Assigning.

There is a chill in the air when I reach the gate to the sands. The enormous iron doors grind open with a sharp creak as the fishermen come back in with their morning catch. The gate is left

open during the day, but can be shut in an instant if the Laeoh stationed at the sides suspect any threat. Glistening, black gual-crabs skitter out of the rocks and burrow in the mud-like sand before water laps over them. The shifting clouds, the almost still water which shines pink under the rising sun, bring the vision back to my mind. After finding a flat boulder to sit on, I push a clump of orangish frizz out of my eyes and pick a long stick out of the sand. I try to manipulate the ground to mimic what I had seen, but it won't give the same feeling that I had before. It never does. I wish I could draw it, on paper with real colors, and give it to my grandmother. Would she be able to feel it too, maybe even tell me what it means? But Mami—the only other person I know who has ever seen a vision from a Dargun—is too afraid to even talk about them anymore.

Gazing again at the waves, the deep clanging of the second bell echoes behind me, ringing past the stone walls and out over the sea ahead. Releasing my breath in a sigh, I adjust my tunic. The thin gray cloth of the uniform offers little protection from the cold. I close my eyes and listen to the sea. This could be any other morning, but it's not.

It's the first of the year, I turned sixteen last month.

And now it's time for my Assigning.

Instructor Gan's voice lingers in my head as the last bell sings out its damnation. "*You're far too old to be tardy, Aenya.*" The tone of his words drips a false sweetness, but I know what lies behind them. I hug myself against the cold and continue staring. My fingernails bite into the muscles of my arms as I will myself not to shiver. Defiant, I stay planted on the boulder, the cold seeping past my tunic and into my skinny legs, bare feet already going numb in the sand.

"That's pretty," Lewin bellows behind me. He's right in my ear. Great. Today, even *Lewin* can sneak up on me. I show no sign of surprise—hearing Instructor Gan's voice shout, "*Be still!*" in my head. But my heart thuds and my vision narrows, preparing for battle. After a breath, I turn to glare at Lewin, annoyed.

He brushes his own wild hair from his forehead. It's the same color as mine and one of many reasons we are often mistaken for brother and sister. "What is it?" he asks, indicating my sand drawing.

"Something that came this morning." I sigh, wishing it had offered any information that was actually useful.

He opens the parcel of food. Marda has been packing the same meal for us for years. We ate her bread and cheese even back when these mornings were only about splashing in the waves and crushing gual-crabs to use as fishing bait. Now our mornings are about forming dangerous, impossible plans. "You should be more careful," he says, in a jesting tone, but meaning it entirely. "Someone *else* could have snuck up on you."

"I don't think anyone else would be sneaking."

But he continues as if I hadn't spoken. "You didn't even hear me coming when you were all entranced by Dargun-speak."

I whip my head around looking for people who may be in earshot, but the sands are deserted this early on ceremony day. "Now who isn't being careful?" I scold, kicking at him.

"Sorry," he whispers, sincere. "Did they tell you anything about—" He gestures to my scribble.

“Nothing helpful.”

We’re quiet then, watching a gual-crab bob his eyes out of the sand before pulling them in again.

“We’re going to get out of here,” he says more to himself than to me.

I give an involuntary chuckle at his optimism. He smiles with one corner of his mouth and points to my drawing again. “So, do you know what this one means?”

I glance back down, feeling a slight stirring. The meaning grows less clear the longer I search for it.

After a long moment, I say, “It’s odd.” I look up to watch Lewin study it. “It was so smooth and comforting. They told me to take courage. But then I also think it means I should be careful, cautious about something.” He stares at the sand. “Do you see anything?”

“The usual,” he says with a shrug. “I feel something. If I didn’t know it was a drawing of a vision, I don’t know if I would. I can tell it has power and is, I don’t know, significant? But I don’t know why.”

I recall the silver and bronze vision that made me think of vast fields and land without stone. Can we really get there?

The ceremony will take place at half-past seven, giving the attendants time to climb all those stairs. I picture Mam and Da lining up on the vast roof of the Eluit with all the other parents of those being Assigned—all hoping for the most honorable, and least dangerous, positions for their children. They will all be as nervous as I am, but for a different reason. Every time I think of my new position, all I can imagine is the satisfied rage on Instructor Gan’s face if he catches us.

“It’ll be over soon. I’ll see you at the party,” Lewin says, his tone bright.

Yes, the party to celebrate an Assignment I’ll never serve, with a family I’ll never see again, and that’s only if everything goes right.

“Mhm,” I offer back, trying to sound more hopeful than I feel. I tense, the unmistakable sense of someone watching me prickles the back of my neck.

Lewin’s eyes narrow, noticing something too. “It’s my da,” he says, trying to punctuate the statement with a reassuring grin. “I’ll see you after.”

Chapter 3

My back straightens, the muscles tense. Lewin offers a wave with his finger, my dismissal. As I walk back toward the gate, I hear him scratching at the ground with my stick—probably concealing my drawing with one of a cat chasing a toad.

“I thought I might find you here,” Instructor Gan says, his voice oily through a pasted smile. His hair has little of the dirt-brown it held when my training began. Instead, dull, muddy waves of gray fall almost to his sagging cheeks. He keeps his beard cut close, so it’s always easy to see when a grin of satisfaction becomes a sneer.

“Yes, sir,” I say, eyes forward, face void of expression.

“Saying goodbye, are you? I suppose I can’t fault you that. It will all be over after tomorrow, and your stubborn friendship with the *rabble* hasn’t impaired the Council’s opinion of you too badly.” My instructor’s voice takes on a gravelly edge as his smile widens, relishing the greatest pride at my Assignment. He should be thanking Lewin, since our friendship has been the primary motivation for my success. I train hard, keep quiet, do better, and Lewin doesn’t get hurt. When my stomach turns again, and my head throbs, I realize I’m pushing back a vision. Lately, I haven’t even been aware of when they begin until the discomfort starts—resisting becoming more natural than accepting when Instructor Gan is around.

“Yes, sir.”

I walk in silence beside my keeper. The path to the Eluit, made blurry by a spreading bank of fog, seems colder and longer today than any time before. I watch my tiny feet next to his enormous ones on the cobblestones, squinting against the brightness of sunlight through the mist. As we get further up the road, the shadows of the houses grow larger.

When I am beyond the Opil huts and cottages for the Laeoh warriors and am passing our house, Instructor Gan excuses himself.

“I’m to have a word with your father, Aenya,” he says, beginning to turn away. He does so pride himself on being close to the family of the Rulers’ chief advisor. “Do see to it that you arrive on time.” He dismisses me with his eyes, although he’s the one who walks away.

It takes a moment for my mind to clear, and my shoulders relax. Soon, heavy footfall sounds behind me, and someone lumbers, rather than walks, to my side. It’s Jord. Originally from Northgate, Jord Lirtaic is tall and stout with boulder-like hands that seem to drag on the ground.

“Hi, Aenya.” His voice is loud, thick with enthusiasm.

“Good morning, Jord,” I half sigh, not intending to. I add a smile so as not to come across as put off by him. There is a slight bounce in Jord’s earth-quaking steps this morning.

“I could hardly sleep last night. You?”

“Not really, no.”

“Do you think you know where you’re going to be Assigned?” I’m relieved that he doesn’t wait for an answer before moving on. “My da was a Defender at Northgate, but I heard that they are calling for fewer people this year. Rius Triun is upping the number of Vigil in town and at the

Cashlan, but that seems terribly dull. Vigil at the Cashlan would be the worst, especially with Rieve being Assigned this year too.”

I couldn't agree more, I think, looking up at the Eluit's twin fortress. The Cashlan is half obscured in the mist, the sky the same slate color as the old stones. All the way up the hill on the cliff, it is where the Rulers live and work. A sturdy barrel of a fortress, it watches over the Hold the way an instructor watches his students. I don't know Rieve all that well. His official title is Orec, the future Ruler, Rius Triun's son. Despite being in the same year, we haven't crossed paths much. He seems haughty and pretentious enough from afar. I wouldn't care to be his personal guard, even if it would be safer than moving to the outer Holds.

“And with the wedding and all, I think they're afraid that someone will come after the Ceilay or something. I don't know why that would be,” Jord goes on.

I had forgotten. The Orec, upon being Assigned, also chooses his Ceilay—often from the same class of students—whom he courts for the next year before a grand wedding and fat babies. There has been much chatter among some girls in the Eluit, and most believe Rieve will choose Whint.

The conglomeration of students awaiting the ceremony comes into view. The Eluit appears sinister in its immense strength. Made to mirror the Cashlan, it's a single tower, wrapped with a hundred years of ivy, full of honor bought by the sweat and blood of children. The bleak skies don't help.

Rieve is closest to the great doors with his usual cloud of stooges and admirers. Whint, a tall, dark haired huntress, is facing Rieve and trying to, as usual, place herself between him and the rest of the assembly. She has never been strong enough to shoot the farthest, but she is the most accurate. When Rieve speaks to her, she gives him a tight, doe-eyed stare with the words “pick me” notched in her gaze. I wish him and Whint well, hoping neither will be my problem after today.

A vision breezes over me. I should resist it this close to the Eluit, but I don't, hoping for some clarification on what I saw earlier this morning—something about the plan that I missed when Instructor Gan was near.

In violet and blue waves, there are darts of brilliant red and shimmering gold. I wish I could close my eyes against the brightness, but it's happening behind them. A flush comes over me. A warm softness—like a hot but not burning gulp of tea spreading down my ribs—and then it is gone. I don't know what it means, but I stand a little straighter, and some of the turning in my stomach slows.

Jord's brows are raised in concern as I return to the present—Lewin says I look like I'm asleep with my eyes open when the visions come—but then Jord's friend, Doyleen, calls to him and he walks away. I pretend I can't hear the chatter around me and fight the urge to fidget by taking slow, deep breaths.

The Shandos, our elders, argue with raspy voices as they arrive at the Eluit from their mildew and vine encased apartments. Their old throats can no longer carry any real volume after so many years shouting orders. First to their students, then to Laeoh, and finally as teachers to small Councilhold children in their lessons on Elriyon history. The Shandos were once the most

formidable of any Laeoh warriors, the ones who killed the Dargun. As they approach in their violet robes, they don't seem to notice the other students or me as we bow low—we're just shadows on the wall to them.

The clouds begin to fade as we wait for the final minutes before the drums. The soon-to-be Laeoh, scattered in clumps on the cobblestone path, chatter with the greatest excitement. I try to imitate the gleefulness surrounding me, but it isn't worth the energy. Giving up, I gaze towards the cliffs. The dark green flag of Elriyon sways above the Cashlan. Beside it are three gray and black pennants, the colors of Seagate. Below them waves a golden banner, flown only during times of great jubilee, not usually for Assignings. Ah, Rieve's engagement. I roll my eyes. None of it will matter to me soon enough. Could Lewin and I leave by way of the cliffs if I'm Assigned as a Vigil to the Council? That will probably be the hardest post to escape.

Someone from inside opens the doors. The commotion around me deadens. All backs straighten, and all feet shuffle to form three lines parallel to the curve of the Eluit's exterior. A drum picks up from above, and we all march in time to the *tum tum TUM*, slamming down one foot on the final *TUM*. It takes a startling amount of effort to make this much noise when I walk. Climbing the twelve levels of stairs in this fashion will be slow. Very slow.

My eyes adjust to the darkness of the Eluit's interior—the only natural light coming in streams from the skylights above. The oil lamps lining the classroom walls along the stairs are not lit. The smell of old wood and sweat assaults my nose as we march. The Shandos' scowling faces are fixed on us as we emerge from the arched hallway. With the drums' rhythm, we take the first steps to ascend the staircase which wraps around the whole interior and ends at the roof. Many complaints are echoed by my fellows. After several years of countless ascensions, the staircase is what the majority of them loathe the most. Appraising looks from below continue to bore into us with each curve and landing.

Tum tum TUM.

The Shandos, at one time, also attended the ceremony on the rooftop. But the stairs were nearly impossible for them, and often nothing would begin until late in the afternoon. The Council tried having inconspicuous nurses positioned in the classrooms to lend aid, but the Shandos would refuse to be given help. It wasn't until Shando Carmok collapsed and died, just before the level nine landing, that the Council intervened. They decided, since the Shandos are the *foundation* of Seagate, they should be *symbolically* confined to the first floor during ceremonies.

The final door is the only one perpendicular to the stairs, and the only one I have never passed through. As I do now, the sun again pierces my eyes. Surrounding us are probably eight feet of wall around the perimeter of the building with steps leading toward the center for seats. On the uppermost steps sit students' families, important officials of the Council, and Instructors. The final two steps are for us.

I find the faces of Mam and Da. Da's is set and proud, and Mam is bobbing her head like a pigeon to find me in the crowd. The unearthly pull from Instructor Gan's gaze compels me to look at him. His old, fixed stare holds me tight—his prized pig for slaughter.

From below, the ceiling of the Eluit and its pattern of skylights seem tiny and intricate. The holes in what is now the floor beneath us are huge, and the glass covering them doesn't appear sure of its ability to bear so many very muscular youths as they walk across.

One line of us after another seat ourselves on the steps, leaving a gap every so often so we can make our way to the center when our names are called. I am in the last line to be seated. When I am, and when we hear the last *tum tum TUM*, Rius Triun stands. He moves to the seemingly precarious center without any visible lack of confidence, and raises his hands, the sun shining on his bald head.

"You see here," he turns to indicate us, "the next links in the fine armor, the next arrows in the full quiver, the stones that sharpen the shining blade of Elriyon!"

A cheer rises from the onlookers who sound like many more than their number. When they quiet, he goes on.

"Each, in turn, has given their blood and their salt, and will continue to do so, in order to uphold the might of our land." As he speaks, some parents mouth along, while others hang on every word. "Each is an honor to me, and an honor to all of you." He lowers his hands and takes a very slight bow. "I am among your number today, as my son, the Orec Rieve, will also receive his Assignment."

I can't see Rieve, but I imagine his chest puffing out and his back stiffening.

"May we now raise these mere disciples to their rightful places as Laeoh of Elriyon!"

Another loud cry resounds. Goosebumps rise on my arms and the back of my neck.

Rius Triun steps back and takes his seat beside his wife, Ruson Lileth. A Vigil at their right stands and pulls open a scroll. He shouts to be heard over the wind.

"Dorney Welmtaic."

Dorney, large and scowling, steps unhindered into the center. She stands straight for a moment, no movement visible save for a slight tremble in her hands. She emits a sharp roar, which causes most of the crowd to jump, and then pantomimes swinging a two-handed weapon over her shoulder and across her chest before thrusting it out in front of her. After a slow count to two, she clunks into the one-knee, head-down bow we have all been taught.

"Defender at Councilhold Northgate."

A slight sob emanates from behind me, probably from Dorney's mam. Northgate is at the very tip of Elriyon, and while no invaders have bothered to try an attack on the Laeoh in years, shocpa, savage apes who hide in the snow, are not so diplomatic.

For the next hour, names are called, deadly acts pantomimed, tears stifled.

"Joanlen Verntaic." He throws invisible daggers. "Defender at Councilhold Seagate."

"Dolyn Thomtaic." He stalks his prey before thrusting a sword through it. "Vigil at Councilhold Sungate."

When called, Whint spins in a circle pantomiming stringing and firing arrows at what looks like an impossible speed. "Emissary at Councilhold Seagate." She seems to suppress a frown as she brings her head up and returns to her seat.

“Jord Lirtaic.” He lumbers down and makes a motion of swinging a mace over his head before bringing it down hard with a guttural cry. “Defender at Councilhold Sungate.”

There is a collective gasp.

Sungate has never had many Defenders, preferring a heavy inner guard, as they, for the most part, stay within their walls. Anyone who gets too far from the wall may encounter uavers, troll-like half-humans known to take even the strongest warriors and leave nothing behind. Jord’s face turns ashen, his light smile gone.

“Aenya Ellartaic.”

My heart flutters against my ribs with a painful rhythm. Every gaze shifts to me. I hadn’t thought of what that would be like when I was watching everyone else. Rising, as if lifted by invisible hands, I put one foot and then the other on the floor of glass and wood. It feels solid enough.

I’m soon in the center viewing hundreds of waiting faces. All are watching, passing judgment, expecting perfection. From the corner of my eyes, I see Mam and Da sit to my right. I manage to fight the pull to look at Instructor Gan again. Focusing on the Rius, I take a deep breath again. Just one more day of this. I can act for one more day. As I prepare to perform, I hear Instructor Gan’s voice in my head marching me through each step.

Standing, I begin to count *One, two, three*. I slide my left leg out until I am crouched low and then, as if sliding on ice, draw the rest of myself to the side until I am centered. Then I pull my left arm across while stepping to the right—a deadly and silent stroke. I raise my leg as though it now rests on a just-fallen body. *One*. If I let the count pass three, everyone will know it’s over and won’t know I didn’t finish. They won’t wait any longer. *Two*. Instructor Gan’s hard face swims into my mind. I can’t do it. Gritting my teeth, I finish my act with the ridiculous pose Instructor Gan insisted upon. When I thrust my chin upwards and snap my arms back—as though about to take flight—I can feel Instructor Gan’s relief. My performance was flawless.

The Rius smiles, but I don’t know from this distance if it is a warm or sinister expression. I fold into the one-knee pose.

“The Council of Seagate.”

My mind leaps to refining the plan. How soon can I tell Lewin? And then I realize that he didn’t say “Vigil.”

Just Council.

The stunned silence from the crowd grows into a slight murmur and then full applause and cheering. For the first time in my life, I feel like I might faint. My vision blurs, my legs feel weak as I stand. There must be some mistake. Those were only rumors, and if they’re not, only one Laeoh holds the position at a time. It’s one of assassin, military slave. Someone who works singularly but is never truly alone. I’ll be moved to the Cashlan in the morning.

We have just tonight to get out.

I catch Instructor Gan’s gaze again as he nods content, his face still fierce and focused, all his hopes coming true.

I try not to fall over as I drag my heavy legs, step after step, back to my seat. I want to hang my head in my hands, but I know how that will look.

I keep my eyes fixed on the centermost spot, watching now identical shapes come, perform, go. As Rius Triun calls the last few names, cheers and sobs continue from those around me. Rieve is last. I watch through a daze as he crosses to the center and uses a pretend sword to fight off a ring of enemies. He places a foot on a pretend enemy and thrusts his face toward the sun, brandishing his sword high.

“The Council of Seagate.”

I scoff. For him, all this means is “Rius-in-training.” Instead of returning to his place, Rieve stands and waits until he is joined by his da.

Rius Triun raises his hands and signals for all attending to join him in chanting the closing statement of, “May Elriyon rest, for while in your hands, she is strong.”

When all is silent, Triun again addresses the crowd. “As is custom, upon the Assigning of the Orec, it is also time for him to announce his Ceilay. A woman who will loyally serve the Councilhold and Elriyon with strength and honor.” He turns to face the Ruson and grins—an unexpected moment of tenderness. “A woman who will stand beside him and preserve the reign of Elriyon.” He extends a hand to his son. “Orec Rieve, name your Ceilay.”

Whint already wears a victorious grin.

Rieve takes a breath and lifts his chin in a show of great weight and importance before calling out, “Aenya Ellartaic.”

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