

Copyright © 2025 by S.E. Robertson.

Front cover art and design © [May Barros](#).

All rights reserved.

No portion of this book may be reproduced in any form without written permission from the publisher or author, except as permitted by U.S. copyright law.

Content Notes

All of these statements are based in my intent, and I acknowledge that I can fall short or make mistakes. Feedback in good faith is welcome.

Dysfunctional families / abuse: A major theme, depicted in several chapters.

- Verbal and emotional abuse
- Passive aggression and unrealistically high expectations
- After-effects: critical thoughts toward self and others, justifying the abusers' actions
- Non-familial: references to bullying in a school setting; descriptions of a dysfunctional hookup and breakup in the past

Fictional religions: A shrine and a church from two different religions are central locations. Fictional religions and philosophies are discussed, and religious ceremonies are depicted.

Violence: Grabbing and pushing in one scene. Two scenes of sword combat with ill intent. Some scenes of practicing swordfighting / sparring for exercise.

Sexual and romantic content: Same-sex flirting, kissing, and a non-detailed reference to other sexual activities. A romantic relationship is depicted, although it is not at the center of the story.

Mortality: Funeral rites are depicted. Characters discuss the legacy of a character who died before the story begins.

Alcohol: Depictions of alcohol consumption, including some intoxication; references to underage alcohol consumption in the past

Homophobia/transphobia: Not normalized in the setting, but a trans character is misgendered once in a flashback.

Strong language: A couple of instances of swearing.

Please read at your own discretion.

AI Statement

No AI was used by the cover artist.

In the editing process, the algorithm-based ProWritingAid plugin for Microsoft Word was used for grammar checking and "frequently used words" searches. No generative AI, word suggestion or text generation features were used. However, if this is outside your comfort level, do not purchase or read this book.

Chapter 1

Placida gripped her best friend's hands as the carriage rolled toward the harbor. Avoiding the sight for another minute, she dropped her eyes to their joined hands. Their knuckles were so bloodless with the pressure that their tawny and deep-brown skin nearly met one another in a sallow middle.

Her tears and nostalgia and buried anger had dried out into a kind of empty calm. She'd said goodbye to the boys in their friend group back in Murio, on the doorsteps of their respective parents' homes. Rone had lifted her off the ground with his hug; Joshi had made one last joke. Their families had hugged her, too, considering her an honorary daughter after she'd been such a dear friend to their sons. Placida had shielded the envy in her heart and bid them goodbye.

Now, she and Maisha had gotten a few more precious days together before their paths had to diverge. The funds from Maisha's family had paid for the best rooms the roadside inns had to offer between the Academy in Murio and the port at Costa where Maisha would set sail. They'd had long nights reminiscing, speculating, stretching out the remaining hours of one another's company. There were always letters after this. For what it was worth.

At some point along the road, they'd pushed the windows open, and as they approached the port, a warm, fishy breeze wafted through the passengers' compartment. The smell bypassed Placida's conscious mind, hitting her stomach directly, or maybe her spinal column. Something like that. She'd chosen to study for the priesthood, if you could call it choosing. Maisha, who was now a healer after her years of study and practicum, would know whether the stomach or the spinal column brought memories so powerfully and unfairly to the fore.

Placida was not twelve years old again, or six, or four, but tell that to her sense of smell. Salt and fish lay thick in her throat, and she knew the specific scent of potpourri at her next destination. It chased the edges of her memory, spicy and sickly sweet. She squeezed her friend's hands and felt a steadying squeeze in return. The two young women's eyes met, and Maisha smiled apologetically. It was hard not to resent her for being happy to go home after so many years away. Placida had succeeded in never letting it show.

"You're sure you don't want me to come along and see you off?" Maisha bent her head closer as if trying to pin Placida with her stern gaze. The gold beads threaded onto her braids clicked as a few slipped over her shoulder.

Placida's stomach sank. Maisha could hold her own in any situation. And her presence might keep Placida's parents off her back for a few minutes. In a letter in her second year, she'd let slip that her new friend was a noble from the Islands, and her mothers never stopped asking about it.

But then Maisha would have to see. All of it. That would be the last Maisha would see of Placida before she went home to her new life as a healer and a daughter of the tropical empire, halfway around the world.

No. Let it end on her own terms. Placida raised her head, not quite able to smile.
“Let’s get you on that ship first. I’ll be fine.”

Her friend gave her a slow, sidewise look. “Don’t let them get to you.”

“I won’t.” She’d made it twelve years in that house, plus eight more years of letters. She could withstand two days.

The carriage rumbled to a stop. The driver thumped on the wall separating her seat from the passengers’ compartment. Maisha and Placida pulled their fingers apart, stretching their arms after hours locked in the same position.

“Ready?” Placida’s voice sounded brittle. Her hand rested on the door latch.

Maisha shook her head and smoothed her braids back, the gold beads clicking softly. “Yes and no. There’s a philosophical topic for you, Speaker Placida.”

The joke broke through the ice-crust of fear; Placida poked her tongue out. “I don’t have to be a priest yet.”

“You could practice,” Maisha suggested dryly, as Placida unlatched the door and swung it open.

They stepped into a storm of activity. Two porters had already lifted one of Maisha’s trunks down from the carriage’s roof, and all around, passengers streamed to and from the waiting rowboats lining the piers. Despite herself, Placida’s chest lightened at the sight of the endless, calm heave of the sea. Before the bay opened up into its full breadth, the ever-present, always-changing line of ships stood at anchor, as they had all her life. Today, one of them would bear away one of her dearest friends.

Years ago, Placida had explained the Nessinian word *alasteni* to her new friend from a distant land: a friend as close as family was supposed to be. Maisha told her that in the Islands, they called such people *brother* and *sister* and *sibling*, regardless of family line. An only child, Placida had never gotten the hang of that. But they had been *alasteni* ever since.

The journey to the Furon Islands would take months. Commerce streamed back and forth between it and Nessiny — some of those ships surely bore wheat and olive oil going south, or spices and silks coming north — but Placida could never afford such a journey, and Maisha would be too busy with her new life. Besides, they each had their obligations.

Maisha turned, having shown her letter of passage to a porter while Placida stood woolgathering. “Well.”

No words could bear the weight of this horrible morning. Placida smiled. “Safe travels.” They stepped forward into one another’s arms, and maybe that made it better, by a fraction.

“You’d better write me.”

“You first,” Placida made herself say. And because she was a coward, she had to wait until Maisha said *I love you*, one of the phrases in Alhara that Placida hadn’t been able to forget. Only then she could say it, reversed into Nessinian. “*Alaste la.*”

Her last friend stepped back. Though her throat clenched, Placida kept from crying as she waited on the dock. From a distance, it probably looked like a smile.

“Our baby girl, finally returned to us!” Placida’s mother pinned her in an engulfing embrace before she stepped across the threshold.

“Your eyes look red.” The statement was left unfinished, the question implied. Placida’s other mother’s voice still held a trace of the Islands, fainter than Maisha’s.

Placida stepped out of her Mama’s grip and leaned aside to level a sunny smile at her Mae’s piercing gaze. “Seems I’m not used to the salt spray anymore.”

Mama Carina’s touch lingered on her arm. Her brown eyes were a mirror of Placida’s own, scrutinizing her. “Will you be here long enough to get used to it?” Her voice was a mirror of Placida’s, too, the Costan accent soaked in deeper, all sharp angles and flat vowels.

“The Academy already booked my passage west,” Placida confirmed, without directly answering the unspoken accusation. Her heart raced, but the old patterns flowed back into her like the steps of a dance she had learned through long, hard practice. “I’ve got today and tomorrow, and then I’ll head out the next morning.”

“At least you’ll be here for the graduation party,” Mama Carina sighed. Almost before the words were out, Mae Endana swooped in for her turn, shouldering her wife aside. Placida was enclosed in another embrace scented with lilac and the faintest trace of, yes, potpourri. Her throat squeezed at a flood of memories.

She was taller now, she noted with satisfaction. The shortest of her whole friend group, and yet she’d managed to outgrow the twelve-year-old who had left this house. She hadn’t come close to catching up with her Mae, who stood half a head over her wife and a full one over her daughter, even without the stately swirl of braids wrapped atop her head. But Placida was no longer tiny. No longer helpless.

When she’d gotten her fill, Mae Endana released her daughter and stepped back. “Come in, for as long as we’re permitted to see our only child.”

The three of them entered the house. Placida hiked her knapsack on her shoulder, containing enough clothes and toiletries to get by for two days. Her other luggage was already at the carriage depot, ready for her departure.

“Your room is exactly as you left it,” Mama Carina said, her tone a tangle of pride and accusation.

“Thank you so much,” Placida said, as her mother closed the door behind her. “It’s so good to be home.”

There was enough room to set a lamp on the side table, crammed between the single bed and the wall of crates and boxes. Placida fluffed the dusty pillow against her neck and reached for the letter from the Academy.

The particulars were written in a confident hand in gaps between the even lines of typeset letters. Report to *the shrine of the Divine Balance in Rolasari, in the Suzare holdings, Curno state*. She'd heard of Curno, of course. Due west, before you got to the mountains. Hills and farms and...more farms? It was supposed to be scenic. Terms totaling *six years*. Thanks to what she'd saved from her campus job and what her parents had scraped together, shaving two years off the eight-year maximum. Under the contract, she'd make hardly more than an apprentice. Paying her dues to the Academy, because her family didn't have the money to buy her out of any more of it.

She was to conduct weekly services and any and all ceremonies and duties of a priest to the satisfaction of *those responsible*. Responsible for...She reread the paragraph; the sentence was built to hold a name, and this puzzling phrase filled it instead. The woman at the placement office had talked about reopening a shrine that had lost its last priest and swordmaster. One had died and the other had retired, something like that. Someone in town had written to the Academy for a replacement. Was *those responsible* the entire town?

If these terms are not met, et cetera, the undersigned faces forfeiture of their status as a Balance priest, upon which the full amount of their Academy tuition is due, with damages and penalties described below.

And Placida was the undersigned. Of course. She folded the letter and shoved it into her bag, which had almost slipped under the bed. The priesthood had been a means to an end; she'd had to make a choice, to stay at the Academy and save her own skin. She'd worked to earn a title that didn't mean anything to her on its own. But if she lost it, then what? Coming back to Costa, sleeping here in a room already striving to become storage? She couldn't afford the rest of the tuition plus penalties. Especially if she lost her Academy degree.

Turning over, she buried her face in the dusty pillow. So don't fail. For once.

Chapter 2

Lunden Frieso tightened his grip on the scabbard laid across his lap as the coach rumbled through the northern gate of Reguli. It was a small gate, where farmers and merchants entered to reach the markets in the northern quarter, and it was the furthest from his family's neighborhood. It would be years before he'd have another chance to pass through the grand southern gate, with its spectacular view of the royal palace on its hill.

It had been eight years since he'd last seen it, just before he'd left for the Academy. His parents had taken him and his two younger siblings on a ride around the outer walls, and although Tufara and Daran had gotten the same rare treat of a seat on their parents' second-best coach, Lunden had been the focus of conversation. The forms had been signed and his passage booked to the other end of the country. His parents made it clear that if he embarrassed them and their family, he would be shipped back home in disgrace. They'd come in through the southern gate, had the driver turn so that the windows on Lunden's side faced the palace, and fired the same questions they'd asked in the dining room the night before.

"Whose idea was this?"

"Mine," Lunden had whispered, and then had to repeat it to his father's satisfaction.

"Why are you going to that school?"

"So I can get better at swordsmanship. Sir."

"And why is that?" his mother had asked evenly.

The palace on the hill caught the sunlight, lifted above the crowded rooftops like a pale ship sailing on a churning ocean. His parents stood guard there, as had his grandparents and their parents before them, going back seven generations. They were the best of the best; the safety of the kingdom lay in their hands. The Friesos were loyal and skilled enough to be part of the King's chosen. Lunden, Caion and Cana's eldest child, tried his best to be loyal. He had never been particularly skilled.

"Because I need to be good enough for the Guard," he'd said, drinking in the sight of the palace.

The streets seemed to have gotten smaller and more crowded in the years he'd been away at the Academy. As the carriage wound past the markets and tradesmen's neighborhoods and into the better residential district at the foot of the palace's hill, there were frequent stops to let others pass. The streets were jammed with carts full of firewood, a wagon load of chickens in crates, and countless riders and walkers. From this angle he couldn't see the royal palace.

With a deep breath like his instructors had taught him, Lunden straightened his spine and willed his jittering nerves to settle. The terms of his last obligation to the Academy were laid out in stark typeset letters with details written in bold black ink. The letter was folded into his inside pocket now, so he would not lose it.

He would work where the Academy sent him, at an apprentice's wages, serving the Academy's best interests. His parents had paid the maximum level of tuition, shortening his

contract to a mere two years; some of his classmates would be bound for as many as eight. But that would be wasting time, his parents had said. He'd wasted enough. In two years, he could come home and join the Royal Guard. Be part of the family.

It might have stung less if he'd done better in the senior tournament. He could have had something good to talk about. It had all ended in that last moment, dropping to his knees on the mat as his sword clanged to the floor out of his reach. His opponent, Rone Sidduji, had extended a hand to help him up. Lunden had pretended not to see it, or him.

The coach made yet another stop, this time outside the neighborhood gardens where Lunden had guiltily longed to play as a child. Three retirees dug along the rows of stakes and strings, while a younger man reached up to one of the trees with a pair of long-handled shears. Snippets of leaves and branches lay scattered around his feet.

Not far now. He'd reach the Frieso house well before dinner. Maybe there would be time to slip out and talk to his sister. Tufara's letters were sorted by date, tied with twine, and hidden under clothes in his luggage. It would be strange to face her in person now, after exchanging letters for nearly half their lives. Her letters had gone from brief, childish notes to hefty packets full of the stories she loved to spin. Lunden was the only one she'd ever trusted with them, and keeping them safe was a tribute to their childhood bond.

The coach made the last turn into the driveway. Lunden leaned into the turn, resting his hand on the hilt of his new sword. Just a couple of days. His ticket to his next destination lay alongside the letter from the Academy in his inside pocket. It had taken two weeks to travel the length of Nessiny, and it would take him another week to reach the small town in the midlands where he was to report. But he could not fail to see his family first. He was not a monster.

Lunden couldn't stop his knee from joggling as the carriage rolled through the gates and into the Friesos' immaculate courtyard. The driver pulled up the horses, and the footman leaped down to open Lunden's door. Lunden stepped out into a mirror image of his childhood. The same trees in pots flanked the doors of the manor. The same curtains covered the windows of the front parlor.

He left his luggage to the staff and stretched his calf muscles against the carriage step as he adjusted the sword to hang by his hip. Then he stepped away from the carriage, rolling his shoulders to loosen them after the long ride.

Flanked by the housekeeper and butler who had served the Frieso family all Lunden's life, a young woman emerged and waited on the front stairs. A soft shock ran through Lunden's nerves. Tufara. She almost didn't seem real, this nearly grown person, not the little sister he remembered. Some part of him attached her letters to her younger self: a child Tufara writing to a child Lunden, from some time before things went wrong.

The person facing him wasn't a child. She was almost two years younger than himself, not quite nineteen. She had always been slender, and seemed even more so in the simply cut silk dress she wore. Her dark hair was pulled back in a simple style as well. Even with the passage of time, he would have recognized her face at once, and the softer echo of

his features in hers. They had always looked similar, another point against them among the family. Faced with her at last, Lunden was stricken with a reluctance to speak and ruin it.

Besides, the staff were watching, and if he seemed too happy to see her, word would get to his parents. He'd never hear the end of it at dinner: *Lunden's playing favorites, as always. Why did we send you off to get this education you begged for, if you're just going to cling to your sister like a baby?*

"So nice to see you, Lunden," Tufara said. "The others are otherwise engaged at the moment. Can we get you anything?" Tufara's offer was more likely to be what it seemed than anyone else's in the house, and she wouldn't mind whether he said yes or no.

"No, just to have my things brought in," Lunden said for the staff's benefit.

"Yes, Master Lunden," the housekeeper replied.

"We'll see you at dinner," Tufara said, and waited for him to pass into the foyer before vanishing into her own life.

Lunden followed the butler up the grand staircase. It was quiet today, no one polishing the side tables or scrubbing the floors. His parents must be on patrol, and Daran would be at the training grounds. In the back of Lunden's mind, his brother and his parents felt like one person divided into three places.

The butler bowed him into his room, and Lunden shut the door. His childhood room was much the same, dusted and polished and left alone. It was simply furnished with antique furniture and wall plaques bearing some of the less notable ancestral swords. Two low bookshelves held his childhood collection of books. He had never been interested in amassing any other bric-a-brac. It would be too hard to justify.

The room had a bed and a privy cupboard; that was all he needed right now. When he came back in two years, he'd worry about the state of his living space.

Lunden unbuckled the Hand of Darano on its sword belt and hung it near the door, then sat on one of the chairs to pull off his boots. He stretched out on the bed, settling into the mattress's geography, to rest before dinner.

Chapter 3

Technically, Mama Carina spoke to some friend of hers, but Placida felt the words like darts in her ears. “Martino and Simonetta’s child just finished their apprenticeship as an earthbreaker in the Eytran church, you know.” Placida didn’t remember who Martino and Simonetta were. “Dredging the harbor, building up the seawalls, very important work.”

Placida took another swallow of wine before it was plucked from her hand by Mae Endana, swooping past the other way. “Enough. It’s for guests.”

“Okay, okay.” She slunk toward the sideboard to get something else. Water or juice? Boring or childish? She was old enough to drink wine now, without even sneaking around. It wasn’t fair.

The scent of vanilla and potpourri rolled over her as her mother loomed over her shoulder. “Don’t sulk. This is your party.”

Water, then. She poured some from the pitcher into one of their good glasses. Mae swept off with her unfinished glass of wine. Placida turned to face a side yard full of people she didn’t know. Or almost didn’t; she was fairly sure the cluster over there were cousins she hadn’t seen since she was twelve.

“The Academy, eh?” a voice said at her elbow.

She turned, snapping on a smile. “Yes, it was quite an honor to study there.” Another guest she didn’t know, a woman several years older than her parents, wearing an unadorned linen tunic and sandals that looked more comfortable than the heeled boots Placida had armored herself with. No jewelry aside from marriage rings. But some rich people dressed down. She might have been a neighbor or the owner of the shop Mama worked in; it was impossible to tell.

The woman she didn’t recognize squinted. “My second cousin’s youngest got into the Academy this past year. Danio Falzone?”

A first-year student would be twelve years old. Maintaining her smile, Placida managed, “I can’t say I crossed paths much with the youngest students toward the end. Congratulations to him, in any case.”

“Ah, and Batilda and Bertolfo down the road, their eldest graduated last year.”

As if summoned, Mama Carina popped in to turn the line of conversation into a triangle. “She’s working at the courthouse for her placement,” she reported. “Defending the law! Imagine.”

With that kind of posting, Whatsit’s Eldest would have also studied as a priest. Placida probably knew her, at least by sight. One of the elder students who knew exactly what they were doing with their lives, who understood all the airy philosophical tangles of *The Dialogues* and argued about them on the debate team without breaking a sweat. Anyway, Placida read the edges of Mama’s actual meaning. It had nothing to do with her former classmate.

Saying it felt like swallowing sand. “I’ll have responsibility over a shrine, all on my own.”

“So far away.” Mama Carina sipped at her own wine. “By the time you’re finished, I’m sure another position will open up at the courthouse. We’ll keep an eye out.” She patted Placida’s arm.

Whatsit’s Eldest was probably a clerk, Placida thought sourly, as Mama Carina fluttered away to greet someone else she didn’t recognize. It took more schooling to do anything else in a courthouse. Besides, the Academy did not hand prestigious placements to fresh graduates. They were all earning their dues.

And hadn’t she worked and studied all these years to get her degree in the first place? Weren’t they supposedly celebrating that? Mama’s sights were cast into the future, to a sufficiently impressive job title. All the hours Placida had spent studying and writing papers and debating her classmates over a holy text she didn’t care one whit about — “Excuse me,” the unknown woman said, and departed to greet some other guest.

With her glass of water, Placida headed for the buffet table, which was covered end to end with bowls of seasoned rice, piles of fresh fruit, and platters of garlic greens and marinated chicken. The house had swum in the tantalizing smells all day, but Mae had forbidden even the smallest taste until the party began.

The guests already had their chance. Placida loaded a plate, equally driven by hunger and spite. Rone’s uncles’ Islander restaurant had been a haven for their friend group, when they’d gotten old enough for unchaperoned trips into the city. All the same, it wasn’t her mother’s cooking. Even a shopkeeper’s family in Costa had access to ingredients, straight off the cargo ships, that were hard to get up north: papaya and coconut and spice mixes strong enough to make a Nessinian’s eyes water.

A bite of mango melted in Placida’s mouth. Today would be her last chance for years to taste any of this food. There were Islander settlers everywhere, but the further you got from the ports, the harder it was to get imported ingredients. Rone said even his uncles had to improvise with domestic substitutes when they stocked their restaurant, and they were in the Islander neighborhood of the biggest city in Nessiny.

“What’s that face?” Mae Endana glided in from the right as Placida swallowed the mango.

“I’m going to miss your cooking, Mae,” Placida answered. The diplomatic answer happened to be true.

“If you were staying longer, you could enjoy it more.” Her head tilted at a certain angle, one Placida had almost forgotten. As though she had to look at you from the lower corner of her eye to see how wrong you were.

There was no point in arguing, in reminding her that the Academy had already booked her passage west. This was not a tourist’s leisurely jaunt through the sunny Curnan hinterlands. But to bring that up would be tantamount to complaining, an unforgivable transgression. As a put-upon thirteen-year-old, Placida had bemoaned her Academy workload in one of her letters. Her mothers replied, *If you don’t like it, we’ll happily bring you home, and you can amount to nothing.*

"I'll enjoy it while I'm here," she said blandly, and took another bite of chicken as an excuse not to talk. With a courtly nod, Mae Endana continued her rounds of the guests.

Rone's voice rumbled in her mind. *They're your parents. They love you. And you don't know how long you'll have them.*

He still had both of his, mind. He was just dramatic sometimes. She'd met his parents plenty of times; they doted on their children, Rone and his little sister. They'd liked Placida, too. They'd invited her into their house and fed her nearly to bursting and said it was a blessing their son had such a good friend. They hadn't said a word about her career ambitions or what her parents did for a living or how much money they had. They didn't seem to care.

Placida had thought about that evening for a long time.

Anyway, if Rone saw how sulky she was right now, he'd shake his head and sigh. Too bad he was on a ship right now. Of all their friends, Placida was the only one who hadn't been assigned outside the country. Underachieving till the very end.

Mama Carina's orbit brought her back within range, and she took hold of Placida's elbow. "Have you seen Auntie Inira? She promised she would make an appearance."

Narrowing her eyes, Placida struggled to place a face with the name. Mae Endana's cousin? She'd given Placida some candy at the Winter Solstice festival when she was five. Mentally adding fifteen years to the memory of that face didn't help much. "I don't think I have."

The grip on her elbow tightened as Mama Carina scoffed. "Is she hoping no one will notice her girl Maji hasn't landed an apprenticeship yet? Or just jealous?"

Or busy. Besides, any child seeking an apprenticeship would have been no more than an adolescent. And her mother was comparing Placida's accomplishment to that?

Catching something in her expression, Mama Carina patted her arm as she let go. "Oh, you remember, you used to play with her eldest." Who would be some other kind of cousin. "You know, the one who always had scuffed knees and had no respect for her elders."

Now Placida wished she remembered this old playmate. She sounded entertaining. "It's been a long time, Mama. Sorry."

Her mother's lips thinned. "Not so long, young lady. You'll see. Years go by in a heartbeat. We'll find you a good job by the time you get back. Show those Academy bureaucrats your worth in the meantime. And keep us updated."

"I will, don't worry." Outbound letters weren't so hard. The replies were another matter. But at least she could wait to open a letter, and didn't have to react right away. It wasn't as if her parents could drop in, not with the expenses of traveling cross-country.

She sounded like a monster after all. *They're your parents and they love you*, as Rone would say. The voice that said *you should appreciate them more* had Mae Endana's cadence.

"The first priest on either side of the family for four generations!" Mama Carina said. "That has to count for something. We'll be sure to mention it."

It didn't have to count for anything with a potential employer. Mama Carina had only converted when she and Mae Endana were married; her forebears wouldn't have been Balance priests because they didn't believe in the Balance. She'd grown up going to the Church of Tufar in the next neighborhood over. And four generations back on Mae Endana's side would have been in the Islands somewhere.

It didn't matter that they didn't go to either church now. It didn't matter what Placida had learned or pretended to learn in the eight years she'd been gone. Only that her ordination might impress some stranger.

If she could hold onto it.

"Maybe you can make some introductions at the courthouse before you go," Mama Carina suggested. "Surely the Academy will forgive you if you spend *some* time at home. What are they going to do?"

Default on her expensive education, for one. Placida swallowed her first reaction. "I'll see what I can do. Thanks for the suggestion."

She shouldn't have been relieved when her mother headed off to talk to someone else. Another voice pointed out that Rone's parents wouldn't heap guilt onto her for a departure schedule she didn't set.

Rone's family wasn't hers. The Divine Balance hadn't seen fit to even out that particular stroke of luck. All things seek a natural equilibrium, insert some metaphor about how the sea is always the same level despite the motion of the waves. She'd tried that one in an early paper. By year eight, her strategies had evolved. But all her theology studies and her classes on human behavior had never explained why Rone's family and her own felt so different, even though some of their words were the same.

She ate her mother's cooking, savoring it while she could. Most of the day, she'd hung around, staying out of the way as instructed, while Mae Endana opened all the windows and chopped and fried up a feast for half the neighborhood. The knowledge of generations drained through Placida's grasp. She'd never been allowed to help before she left for the Academy. She'd hardly known how to build a fire in the stove, which had scandalized Rone. *My mothers say I don't do it right*, she'd snapped, and he'd stared at her, uncomprehending.

After some coaching at Rone's parents' house, she could make a fire and boil water for tea. Not that she'd suffered for her lack of skill, except by embarrassment. None of the Academy students had to cook for themselves; the cafeteria provided all their meals.

Not where she was going. She chewed a bite of fried potato, letting the spices fill her mouth. The placement agent had said that housing was included with this assignment, and that they would send a swordmaster to guard the shrine in accordance with Church of the Divine Balance policy. She knew Lunden Frieso to see him; he'd come in second to Rone in the senior tournament. Some rich boy from the south.

All the Academy cared about was restarting services at this shrine and pleasing whoever had bothered them about it. They hadn't cared enough to send a healer along with the priest and swordmaster to complete the traditional staff of a shrine. They hadn't even

cared enough to send a priest who believed in the Divine Balance, Placida thought, as she stabbed a forkful of greens.

Around her, a crowd of strangers stood in clusters in the trampled side yard where laundry usually hung. Neighbors talked to distant relatives, distant relatives talked to her mothers' coworkers, and her mothers' coworkers talked to her mothers, who probably thought their sharp-edged looks at her would slip by unnoticed. They didn't. She smiled back every time.

Chapter 4

“Not all of us have time to jaunt off to nowhere for years and years,” Cana Frieso said, waving away an offer of soup from a serving maid. As his mother took a sip of wine, Lunden watched the maid turn back toward the kitchens. He wondered how the kitchens worked, how the dance of activity would be different from the kitchens at the Academy. He knew better than to imagine cooking in the vast hall. It would be bad enough if someone found the cookbooks he’d bought in Murio.

“Two years,” Tufara said softly, in a tone that did not suggest a correction. She ate only bean spread on crusty bread and vegetable soup; the servants hadn’t offered her steak, as they had the others.

“That’s right,” Cana said, setting down her wine glass. “And by then, maybe we’ll have found you something useful to do.”

Attention swung toward Tufara, and Lunden’s stomach dropped. She had tried to get an apprenticeship, years ago. Their parents had laughed at her. The Frieso family did not work at publishing houses, with ink-stained hands and heads full of seditious ideas. They had made her burn the contract in the fireplace in their study. Lunden had read the whole story in a tear-spattered letter.

“Daran will be almost finished with his training when I get back,” Lunden offered, hoping that a compliment to his brother would draw those sharp gazes from his sister.

“Yeah, and then you can work for me,” his brother sneered. Their father ruffled his hair with a smile that echoed Daran’s.

“One thing at a time,” Caion said, withdrawing his hand with a gentle shove to his youngest son’s head. “When you’re an officer, Lunden’ll salute you like he should.”

Dropping his gaze, Lunden sliced off a chunk of beefsteak. At the Academy, people didn’t seem to relish this kind of thing, putting him in his place. Most of them ignored him, at least until fourth year, and then after the rumors faded. Thankfully, he was through with the Academy. Except for one person he hardly knew, a friend of the classmate who had beaten him at the end.

Then Daran talked about the day’s training, so Lunden didn’t have to say any more. His younger brother had been six when Lunden left for the Academy, and in the intervening eight years, he’d gotten through some of the adolescent gawkiness. He and their parents laughed over shared jokes and barbs about the other Royal Guard trainees. It was the same upbringing as their parents’, on the same practice fields, with some of the same grizzled trainers.

Lunden let their words wash through his ears and slowly ate the steak, though the rich sauce sat heavily in his stomach. He barely sipped the wine, even though he was legally allowed to drink it now. There was a chance it was a test, to see if he drank too much, if his decorum slipped.

After the servants cleared the plates, Lunden pushed back from the table. “I’d like to get some practice in. Good night, Mother. Father. Daran and Tufara.”

Tufara murmured her goodnights before swiftly taking her own leave. His parents grumbled at her disappearance, which sent a stab of worry into Lunden's stomach, but they did not push the issue. The less he talked, the fewer wrong things he would say. And if he made it clear he wasn't interested in talking to Tufara, they wouldn't target her for it later. He could find a better time to talk, when no one was watching.

His luggage had been delivered to his room during dinner, so he changed into some clean, simple practice clothes, buckled on his sword belt, and picked up the oil lamp from the bedside stand. The path to the basement took him past parlors and studies and the turning to the servants' wing before descending the last stone staircase.

Like everything else in this house, the practice room had not changed. Low ceilings, racks of wine bottles at the near end, battered dummy targets along the far wall, woven straw mats on the floors. It wasn't the soaring practice hall at the Academy, where Lunden had spent so many hours of his adolescence, or the Royal Guard's training yard, which he'd only seen as a spectator. Six generations of Friesos had trained here.

Lunden hung the lamp from a hook on the wall and walked to the center of the open floor. It was too soon after dinner; he ought to have left more time to digest. But the itching need to move would get worse if he had. As long as he didn't pay attention to it, the discomfort would pass.

The familiar stretching sequence eased the tightness in his shoulders and arms. When he'd last practiced here, swinging a wooden sword, he'd never heard of any of the Academy techniques. Now his body flowed into the routine without conscious thought. Before every practice and match, he'd executed the same set of stretches. The swordmasters of the Academy of the Divine Balance were passionate about routine. It was, perhaps, what he'd liked best about the program.

Once he had limbered up, Lunden unsheathed his sword and weighed it in his grip. The name, the Hand of Darano, had been his choice. The sword itself was not. The campus armorer had checked her list and handed each soon-to-be graduate a blade, brooking no second-guessing nor complaints. It had felt like an honor to stand with the other aspiring swordmasters and receive this blade. But he would not be allowed to wield the Hand of Darano once he joined the Royal Guard. He'd be given another weapon, whatever the Guard deemed appropriate.

For the next two years, though, this would be the blade with which he would carry out his assignment. Swordmasters were the guardians of the shrines of the Divine Balance, first and foremost. They might be known for their skill from one end of Nessiny to the other and respected beyond any besides the Royal Guard, but at the end of the day, they guarded shrines and the priests and healers who worked in them. That would be Lunden's purpose until the time came to fulfill his real purpose.

He began the first practice form, the second, the third. His mind cleared. The swordmasters' training forms were designed to ingrain precision and speed and harness momentum with perfect efficiency, each arc prescribed by hundreds of years of tradition. It

had also been useful that the forms were possible to execute alone. Even the training dummies were unnecessary; his foes were gravity and his own weakness.

“Hey!”

Lunden finished a thrust and stepped back, turning toward the stairs. “Good evening, Daran.” Keeping his sword point low, he crossed to the back half of the practice room so his brother would have room to train.

Daran scurried down the rest of the staircase, the lamp in his hand swinging wildly. He set it on the floor mat, where it cast stretched shadows of the limbs he hadn’t yet grown into. “Fight me.”

Lunden’s arms fell slack from a practice stance. “...What?”

“You heard me.” Fists tight at his sides, Lunden’s younger brother stalked to the rack of practice weapons against the wall. A whisper of steel sent goosebumps over Lunden’s skin. The lamplight caught the sword’s gleaming length.

Live steel? No. No, no. He wasn’t going to swing the Hand’s razor-sharp edge anywhere near a boy still in training. Lunden sheathed his sword. “Let me get a practice blade.”

Daran pointed his own blade at Lunden. “Afraid to face me? Didn’t they teach you anything at your fancy school?”

They’d taught him not to raise his blade to an overmatched opponent, unless it was to disarm them with minimal injury. A stab of guilt pierced Lunden’s chest. If his parents knew he’d thought of their Daran as overmatched —

His steps took him in a wide arc around Daran as he hurried to the rack. Feeling his brother’s glare on his back, Lunden pulled out one of the wooden practice swords. He firmed his grip on its leather-wrapped hilt as his palms grew slick.

“Use the real one.” The tip of Daran’s sword wavered from his too-tight grip. “Come on, that’s stupid.”

“Let’s start with this, okay? Get warmed up.” Lunden’s hands were shaking. He could parry until Daran got bored, then finish his practice.

“Is that what you do at the Academy, fight with play swords?” Daran’s face lit with a delighted sneer. He held the practice blade well enough, if a bit high, as Lunden side-stepped around him to the center of the room.

“For a while, yes. Until we learn the forms and the techniques, and develop the strength to lift the steel ones.” That wasn’t so different from anyone else’s training, after all. The rack in this room held wooden swords for the same reason.

Daran skipped forward, as obvious as a signal flare, and tried a downward strike. Lunden blocked it with the thunk of steel striking wood. Daran’s practice blade was dull, its point blunted, but it dented the wood well enough. Daran scoffed. “What, you think you’re going to get into the Guard with a play sword?”

“I hope so.” It was an understatement, the instinctive defenses blunting Lunden’s reactions as if he were speaking to his parents. “When my assignment’s over.”

"You'll be old by then. Twenty-*three*, they said." A wide slash from the side. Lunden took it two-handed. A chip dropped loose from the edge of the wooden blade when Daran wrenched his steel one free.

"That's not good for the practice blade," Lunden remarked, leaving the comment about his age aside. He'd be twenty-two and a half, but his brother wouldn't care about the difference.

"Then use the real one, like I told you!" His brother's voice cracked.

Lunden had sat on the floor mats with the other swordmasters in training as their professors lectured about controlling their expressions, keeping their faces impassive so they wouldn't give away their mental states to an opponent. He'd never had much of a problem with that. And it was a long-practiced reflex to sort through the possible responses as though rifling through a book, searching for the one that would cause the least hostile reaction. *I don't want to hurt you.* Too condescending. *Glad to see you too, little brother.* Humor never seemed to land when he tried it.

"I'd rather not."

"Why did you come back, anyway? With everyone making a fuss over you." Daran stalked around him, sword too high, pointing toward Lunden's throat.

"I had to see everyone before I report to my assignment."

"I bet you're only here to see Fara. You wrote *her* all the time." The Academy lecturers would have cautioned Daran about the undisguised poison in his voice.

Never mind that Tufara had been eager to write to him and Daran hadn't. Family wasn't a mathematics problem, perfectly balanced, factors on each side canceling one another out. Some people were more important than others.

And how long before their parents came looking for their favorite child? Lunden shifted his stance and calculated a flick of the wooden blade that would knock Daran's hilt out of his hand. He had to be careful. Two inches off target, and he'd shatter Daran's wrist. A trip to the nearest healer would put it right, but Lunden would never be forgiven.

Meanwhile, receiving no answer for his accusation about Tufara, Daran went on. "Why does she like you best? You're the embarrassment. Maybe because she's an embarrassment too. Weak and useless."

In his mouth, no words were ever right. Agree or disagree; it didn't matter. The worst answer of all was the one knotted under his ribcage. *How dare you call her that?*

Lunden stepped away from another wild swing. The younger brother took two stumbling steps, nearly overbalancing, and whirled around. "You got to go to some fancy school. You got all those letters. You get all the attention. It isn't fair. It isn't right. I'm *better than you.*"

"I know," Lunden said softly, steadying his grip. If he had never learned another truth from his upbringing, from every day of his life until he ran away to the north to be trained by strangers, he had learned that.

"I—" Daran stopped short, expecting a different answer. His face, not so different from Lunden's after all, split in a grin. "Ha. Right. Right, you know it. I know it. Mother and

Father know it. The Royal Guard knows it. Everyone knows it except you and Fara, and that's why you'll never amount to anything. When I'm an officer, I'm going to put you on all the worst shifts. Or maybe I won't let you in at all." A manic giggle rose as he circled Lunden counterclockwise. "How d'you like that? Both of you, sitting at home useless."

"I'm sure you'll do what's right," Lunden replied. "For King and country."

Daran scoffed. "You don't deserve to say that. You aren't in the Guard."

Neither was Daran. Not yet. But in this house, even a first-order swordmaster of the Church of the Divine Balance was outranked by a trainee in the Royal Guard. The Friesos were a loyal family.

"For the Crown and for Nessiny, then," Lunden shot back, his heart racing as he dared crack a joke. It was a line from a novel about the Royal Guard that his classmates seemed to love. He'd never read it.

A flicker of recognition passed over his younger brother's face, and then his expression darkened again. Gritting his teeth, he took a two-handed swing as though he were chopping a tree. Lunden blocked it, though the force almost shoved the wooden blade against his breastbone. A panting breath brushed his neck before Daran twisted his blade free. He had hardly gotten loose before he lunged again, this time aiming for Lunden's head. Lunden ducked, slid under Daran's reach, and aimed a flick of the wooden sword just beyond Daran's hilt. The trainee's form was overextended; he hadn't stretched beforehand; the cords stood out in his neck with the strain.

Daran yelled as the practice blade sailed out of his grip, flying with the momentum of the wild thrust he'd attempted and the countervailing force of the disarming strike. It hit the mats point-first and clunked to the floor.

Lunden lowered his blade's rounded point to the ground to acknowledge the end of the match. "I'm sorry. You fought well."

"Shut up!" The fourteen-year-old scrambled after his sword. "You don't get to beat me. You don't get to beat me! You keep making us look bad, nobody wants you, you don't get to beat me!"

"Lunden!" His mother's voice was a precise whip crack. Lunden's head jerked up as Daran spun around. Their parents stood on the stairs, cast half in shadow by the light spilling from the hallway above.

In stories, siblings cast blame on one another for squabbles and cried for sympathy. It had always seemed strange and unnecessary. It didn't matter who had started it or who had won; he was to blame. Lunden squeezed the hilt of the wooden sword with its now-damp grip as his parents slowly descended the stairs.

Once they reached the practice floor, Caion and Cana Frieso stood side by side as their sons formed a line opposite them. Their youngest grinned, standing at attention with his blade. Caion scrutinized his sons as Lunden's hands shook on the hilt of the wooden sword.

Their father's voice was slow and even. "Attacking your baby brother. Is that what they taught you at your precious school?"

Daran bristled beside him at being called a baby, but Lunden did not dare look beyond his parents' feet. "No, sir."

"And are they sending you out to nowhere to defend their shrines against children?"

Daran was shifting his weight from foot to foot now, bursting with the need to protest. Before he could, Lunden slipped in another "No, sir."

The calm tone evaporated in a bark. "Look at me when I'm talking to you!"

Lunden locked his eyes on his father's. He no longer had to tilt his head up much to meet his father's blazing stare. Even with the new lines between his father's eyebrows, the cold hatred in his eyes was the same. Sweat rose on the back of Lunden's neck.

"We coddled you, let you change your name, sent you to that school, gave you everything. This is the thanks we get. Attacking your baby brother like an animal. Are you jealous, Lunden? Because Daran is rising in the Guard? You could practice and make something of yourself. But you'd rather feel sorry for yourself. You've always been that way. Always whining, begging for pity. You haven't changed."

"Not a bit," his mother sighed, and Lunden's eyes darted between them.

His father snapped his fingers. "What did I say?"

"Sorry, sir."

"That school could have given you an ounce of respect, but it appears they even failed at that."

"At least we didn't have to put up with him for eight years," Daran muttered. A moment's silence froze Lunden's breath in his chest, and then his parents chuckled.

"I'm glad to see one of our children has a sense of humor." A smile spread across their father's face as he clapped Daran on the shoulder. "Not to worry, Lunden will be back soon enough. Back at home, disrespectful and lazy as ever. Maybe the Guard can whip you into shape. Or maybe it will be too late, and you can join Tufara in bleeding us dry for nothing. Or maybe we'll find him a job pushing paper right alongside her. Shut up in some tower, making yourself useful to the Guard for once."

"Wouldn't that suit him," their mother agreed, her gaze weighing Lunden down to the last ounce. "Making schedules or budgets or some such thing." She turned to Daran, her calculating look warming into a smile. "Why don't you finish your practice, darling, and go wash up?"

"I'm done," Daran said, and handed the practice sword to Lunden without looking. Lunden held both swords, points to the floor, as his brother slouched toward the stairs.

Their parents watched him go and then turned, shoulder to shoulder. Cana heaved a sigh. "You know, I had hoped for better. Gods know why. I'd hoped that school might have gotten some sense into you, after all that time and all that money."

He had studied the swordmaster's art every day, and when he wasn't in the practice hall, he had taken classes in economics, in history, in literature. At the end of it all, even with his failure in the final tournament, the Academy had awarded him their highest rank and said some words about his dedication to his studies. It didn't matter. It was never going to matter.

"Yes, ma'am." There was nothing else he could say. "May I go?"

His parents exchanged a look. His father flicked a hand at him. They turned to go as he carried the swords to the rack. By the time he had collected the two lamps and blown out the one Daran had brought, they were gone.

Chapter 5

Lunden counted his medication packets in the morning and choked one down with a cup of room-temperature water, though the apothecary at the Academy had told him they'd be most effective dissolved in hot water. Hot water took time. It had to be made in the kitchen, and drunk where people could see. It hadn't been important at the Academy, where he could get a mug in the cafeteria any time, and plenty of other students were doing the same thing. There, no one noticed. No one looked for an opening to question him.

That was not the case at home, of course. They'd say something about inferior Academy apothecaries, something about fragile bodies that needed to be propped up with medical assistance. They'd ask if he thought the medicine was going to make him any better at swordfighting. He'd rather not talk about it, and risk saying the wrong thing. After the debacle last night with Daran, he was on borrowed time.

With a bitter, familiar taste coating his mouth, Lunden buried the box with his remaining doses under clothes in his trunk. His fingertips found the other thing in the trunk that mattered: a book wrapped in soft leather and tied shut. All the other notebooks, migrated out of the same cover as their pages were filled, formed a stack at the bottom of this same trunk. But those were old notes, old failures. Last night's ink was hardly even dry: *I'm not thankful enough for all the things my family gives me.*

Lunden locked the trunk and pushed it back against the wall. One more night.

He didn't dare return to the practice room. The stretches were easy enough to complete in his room, though there wasn't space to practice most of the forms with his sword. Once he had limbered up, Lunden checked the lock on his trunk one more time and set out for the breakfast room on the second floor.

He'd developed a new tic of touching his side to confirm that his ticket to the town of Rolasari was still in the inside pocket of his waistcoat, next to the letter from the Academy detailing his new posting. It took effort to avoid touching it when the staff were watching. They were no more attentive than they needed to be, delivering a simple meal of flatbread and soft cheese and steamed vegetables at the table near the bay window. Lunden ate looking out over the rooftops of the lower slopes. The palace was only visible from his parents' bedroom window, apparently. That floor was private.

Afterward, he thanked the staff as they cleared the plates, and considered the risks. He seemed to be the first to breakfast today; if he cleared out quickly enough, he could escape another lecture about last night. The day was impossibly long. He might take a walk to fill the time. First, he wanted to talk to Tufara.

When Lunden knocked, Tufara opened the door by a polite sliver. Her arm relaxed. "Lun! Hello."

No one else called him that. She'd started before anyone else had known his name, when they'd been small enough to huddle together in a closet. Lunden's eyes flicked up to its closed door, across the room. "Hello. I, uh. Wanted to talk for a minute, if you want."

"Of course." She stepped back and let him in, and her eyes darted around the hall before she closed the door. Though she hadn't come down for breakfast yet, she was dressed for the day. Hoping she'd gotten enough sleep, Lunden watched her narrow back as she tidied something at her desk.

Tufara's room, like his own, was outfitted with furniture inherited from their forebears: desk and chair, bookshelves and canopied bed. Despite its neatness, it felt lived-in, crowded with books. The mantel held a collection propped up by brass bookends; the bookshelves were packed end to end with organized volumes.

His sister straightened, satisfied with the order on her desk. "It's good to see you," she said, and he knew it didn't mean anything more than that. No pressure, no guilt. She meant things the way he did, exactly as she said them. Tufara was simple like him, and in her presence, a tension in Lunden's muscles finally relaxed.

"It's good to see you, too. I'm glad you're well. I didn't mean to, you know. Ignore you when I got in. I didn't want anyone to give you a hard time."

She stood halfway across the room, hands clasped in front of her. "I know. It's not your fault. We'll take whatever time we have." Something flickered over her expression. "When are you leaving?"

"First thing tomorrow morning. Oh — I have the address of the place where I'll be staying."

Tufara's troubled look vanished under a bright smile. "Splendid! Here, let me get a pen."

He extracted the letter from his inside pocket as she sat at her desk and dipped a fancy metal-tipped pen. Lunden read the address, and she copied it. The Shrine of the Divine Balance, Rolasari, in the Suzare holdings, Curno state.

Tufara blotted the page, unlocked a drawer in her desk with a key she pulled from a pocket, slipped the page into it, and locked it again. Then she corked her inkwell and pushed her chair back. She was nearly his height when she stood. "Curno. It's all farms out there, isn't it?"

"I think so. And a shrine."

"Of course." The mischievous edge to her smile hadn't changed. "And all you have to do is guard it? Not even a castle, a shrine out in the country. You'll have so much time on your hands. You've got some books to read, right?"

"Some, yeah." In his letters he'd told her about the secondhand book shops in Murio, just outside the Academy.

"Good. Ooh, here." In her soft-soled slippers she ran to one of her bookshelves and pulled out a few books. Lunden let her pile them in his arms.

He tilted them to see the spines. Nothing he'd read before. "Thanks."

The thought of asking if they could hide in her closet one last time made his throat tighten shamefully. Tufara was the only person in the world who wouldn't mock him for that. "Fara, I — it's silly, but..."

She crossed her arms, cocking her hip. "A hideout for old time's sake?"

"Really?" Lunden bit his lip as the tightness of his throat threatened to turn into a laugh. He could stand to meet Tufara's eyes without panicking internally, and in doing so, saw that she meant it.

"Why not?"

"I missed it," he said. His voice failed him, partly; it came out strained and strange.

Her smile turned into something sadder. She stepped toward him and squeezed his arm. "I missed you, too."

She opened her closet door, and they crammed their nearly-grown bodies in, Tufara's books wedged between Lunden's knees and chest. The hanging gowns did little to hide them now. Tufara's shoulders shook with suppressed laughter. "Oh, gods, look at us."

It wasn't quite complete, so Lunden leaned out to pull the door shut. The light of the room narrowed to the crack at the bottom of the door. The last tension in his body released.

"I'm glad you remember," he said.

"Of course I remember." She pushed a whispering length of skirt away from their faces and rested her head on his shoulder. "As much as I hate to say goodbye so soon, I'm glad you can go somewhere else for a while."

In their secret spot, anything could be said aloud; it would never leave this small, dark place. They had forged this magic together, and somehow it still held.

And so Lunden said another thing that could only be said in secret. "Are you going to be okay here? By yourself?" The image their father had summoned after practice rose in his mind: both of them shut up in a tower, toiling away at some drudge work for the Guard. At least then they'd have each other. "Have they been talking about forcing you into a job all this time?"

A soft laugh, hardly more than an exhale, answered him. "I'll be okay. I've got lots of practice in keeping my head down. And next year I'll be twenty, and I can do what I want. I've got a plan."

Doubt pooled in the pit of his stomach. She only had to lie low and stay safe, and when he came back, he would take the full force of their parents' attention again. Like one of those metal rods they affixed to the highest towers, to channel lightning to the ground.

Lunden scratched a hand through his hair and then smoothed it into place. "I'm sorry I have to leave."

She gave him a gentle shove with her shoulder. "Don't be. You get to see even more of the world."

Plenty of his classmates were seeing the world now, on assignments in other countries — Kavera or Achusa or the Islands. Many had even studied other languages in preparation for the task. In comparison, a posting in the Nessianian countryside was easy.

But he knew from Tufara's letters that she had wanted to travel, that she had always envied his ability to go to the Academy. Even if she'd wanted to be a healer or a priest, their parents wouldn't have let her. It wouldn't have served their family's purpose.

"Tell me everything you see," Tufara said. "Okay? Promise."

"I promise."

They sat together in the dark for a few minutes longer. Eventually their absence would be noticed. For now, though, they didn't have to say anything.

"I heard some commotion in the hall yesterday," Tufara murmured. "They couldn't leave you alone for the few days you're here, could they?"

"It's—" Lunden stopped himself from the reflexive defense. *It's my fault.* Tufara would not stand for it. "Daran came down to the practice room to fight me."

"That little idiot. Of course he did."

"I didn't want to hurt him," Lunden said, although he didn't have to defend himself to her. "I don't know what he thought would happen."

"He thought he would beat a grown man, because he's a coddled fool. And, well, because he can get away with it. He can't take on some grown member of the Guard without someone stopping him. He knows he can get away with attacking you." Her sigh was swallowed by the air, by the soft fabrics hanging around them. "Soon."

"What?"

"Nothing." She slipped an arm around him to hug him sidewise. "You're getting out. You're going to be a swordmaster, and you're going to tell me all about your new life."

"It's not permanent. I'm coming home."

With her head still on his shoulder, she reached up to ruffle his hair. "Cross that bridge when you come to it."

A chill ran through him, despite the increasing stuffiness of the closet. "I am," he protested. "Where else can I go? I can't abandon our family. Who else would have me?"

"Okay, Lun. I won't argue with you. Just enjoy the experience."

He didn't want to spend their short time together arguing. He shifted the books jammed into his stomach and put an arm around her. If she believed he would enjoy this assignment, he would try.

Eventually, he decided it was time. She hadn't taken breakfast yet, and he couldn't hide forever. They unfolded themselves from the closet, shaking out their limbs. Lunden set the books on a chair by the wall.

Midway through his time at the Academy, Lunden had begun to suspect that other families hugged one another even when outsiders weren't watching. That it wasn't only something in books and plays. That the strangeness he and Tufara used to have, sitting together and talking, might not be so strange. The thought made his stomach hurt, and he'd tried not to entertain it for long.

If this was stupid, if it was the wrong thing to do, Tufara wouldn't tell. The pact they'd made when they were small had held somehow. Somehow, she'd kept sending him

letters, and his letters hadn't gotten her in trouble. Somehow, she still wanted to see him, and wished him well.

So he hugged her, and she squeaked and laughed at herself and hugged him back. It was strange. And good.

She wiped the corner of her eye as they parted. "Go bask in the Curnan sunshine, Lun. Visit a farm. Milk a goat or something. And tell me all about it."