

# ALLEGIANCE

Dragonics & Runics Part II

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Little Green Eyed Press  
California

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[www.awrighton.com](http://www.awrighton.com)

ISBN: 0-615-88440-7  
ISBN-13: 978-0-615-88440-0

Cartography by Gabrielle Donathan / © Maise Designs  
Cover Design by A. Wrighton / © Little Green Eyed Press  
Text Design by Traci Vermena  
Design Elements by Anabel Martinez / © The Artist and The Rogue



*In times of darkness, little Child,  
Brave Child.  
Close your eyes and hold fast your tears.  
Have faith in the unseen and words most fair.  
Darkness holds both good and bad,  
Decipher which is which and you will be glad.  
One, two, three.*

*Embrace the night.  
They need your warming touch,  
To find a way out of blackness' clutch.  
Inside the dark there is nothing to scare,  
Your allies are close by – reach out and they are there.  
Eyes to the sky, Child,  
Brave Child.  
'Ere they Ride.*



FRUTURI ESTATE  
EASTERN SYLER RIVER, FERTLOUX

*Nineteen Cycles Ago*

“Go to bed, Dylan.” Jakon chucked a pillow across the room at his little brother. “I can’t wait until I get my own room,” he muttered.

“You could have one, Mama said so. You just don’t want one because you’re nothing but a big baby!”

“Say that to my face!”

“Fine! I will!” Dylan ripped back his sheets and stomped to his brother’s bedside. Hands on his little hips, the brown-haired child stuck out his chest and stuck his nose in the air. “You’re a big baby!”

Jakon snorted and punched Dylan squarely in the ribs. He watched Dylan huff and fall to the floor; the solid smack of his tailbone against the wooden floor echoed. Jakon would have smiled, but a twinge of remorse lingered.

Gripping his ribs, Dylan fought back the pain-filled tears and bit his lip.

Jakon shook his head. “Don’t cry, little Fruturi,” he sneered.

“I won’t,” Dylan said with a snuffle.

“Remember what Papa said. We have to be strong.” He pointed first to his small bicep, “here,” and then his mind, “and here.”

“You’re the one who has to take over for Papa, not me!”

“Yes, well if you want to join those Riders you won’t shut up about, you’ll need to be twice as strong.”

“I am!”

Jakon rolled his eyes and tossed another pillow at his brother. “Your tears say otherwise, Dyl. Now, go to bed. The Sky Festival starts tomorrow and I won’t have you ruining it for me.”

Dylan slinked back to his bed, but stopped before sliding under the tousled covers. Looking back, he checked Jakon for movement before sneaking through the door into the adjoining room. It was another bedroom, larger and decidedly feminine. Flowers of every kind doused the walls and a smell of powder and candy lingered in the air.

“Delaney...” Dylan whispered.

The lump hidden under the mounds of sheets and pillows stirred.

“Delaneyyyyy...”

“What now?” The voice under the covers asked.

“Let me in! I had a bad dream...” Dylan whimpered as the lump rolled away from him and, in a moment of defeat, he sighed. “Please?”

“All right,” Delaney said, raising the sheets just high enough for her twin brother to climb inside. “But, I am not getting in trouble, if Papa finds out. I want to go to Ryxia tomorrow, not be stuck here with Mama and Nelli.”

“That’s where girls belong.”

“Says you. I am much smarter than most, Papa said so. You’ll see. Now go to sleep or I’ll send you back to Jakon.”

“I love you, Del.”

“Love you, too.”

The two youngest of the Fruturi clan snuggled into a lullabaic embrace. Despite appearances and their physical ages, the young Fruturi twins were quick-witted and well spoken. Many in the Crescent District secretly wished that Dylan could be the next heir to the seat in the House of Blood, as Jakon tended to fail to see past the glamour of the position. It was what Rathmond Fruturi had been working on for quite a while with his nine-cycles-old son. It was something Rathmond would continue to push upon Jakon, because the rules for senatorial inheritance in the House of Blood were airtight. The next eldest male child, or female if there was no male heir, inherited the Senate seat.

No exceptions.

Only one Fruturi was pleased with such strict rules - Dylan. With the guarantee of no political or hereditary duty hanging on his young shoulders, he was free to pursue whatever venture he wanted. And, as in the dreams he currently flew through, he fancied himself the next great Dragonic.

Past the darkest point of the night, when the two moons aligned, the Fruturi children, warm in their beds, heard only their dreams. They did not hear the muffled shout of their father who, in a sleepless walk down the hallways, had run into cloaked intruders.

Rathmond, for all his Fertlouxian size and ample quick wit, never

had a chance to react.

There were too many.

They were too fast.

They wrapped Rathmond tightly in the long, fine golden drapes choking him to prevent a struggle. And, once confined – they shot him. The Leader, whose appearance was the most concealed and indiscernible of all, then ran him through with his rapier for good measure. Twice.

The golden drapes seeped into a burnt orange as they stilled.

“Light it up,” The Leader commanded in a deep, stern voice. “I care not for hunting women and children. Let them come to us.”

Obediently, the men lit the draperies and furniture in the exterior hallways that provided the only means for moving between rooms. Satisfied with the growing blaze, the intruders exited through the only entrance and exit to the estate.

There, on the stone walkway, they waited.



Through the flames. It was their only way out.

Inside her self-barricaded room, Katryn paced back and forth methodically, her growing fear stowed away. Panicking would not help her children or husband now, but quick thinking might. Her severe blue eyes lit up as she turned for the painting of the estate in the spring, at the heart of the master bedroom. She tossed the gold-gilded frame aside exposing the knob for a hidden door. As she reached for it, the door opened on its own.

Katryn smiled weakly into the darkened doorway at the petite, red-haired woman lurking inside. Nelli, who had seen the intruders from the kitchen as she prepped for morning food service, had disappeared into the inner tunnels before the intruders lit the kitchen ablaze. As far as they were concerned, she did not exist. Neither did the tunnels.

Nelli grabbed Katryn's hand, pulled her inside the tunnel, and gave her free hand to her half-asleep, toddler son. Katryn offered a comforting, strong smile at the lean boy whose red hair flickered eerily

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in the soft torchlight. Why he did not cry, she did not know. The three ran through the secret passage in silence, rushing to make their way to the children's bedrooms. Katryn pushed hard to get through the boys' bedroom wall and scanned the room. Her heart sank. Jakon, wide awake and with exceptional hearing, stood in the back corner facing the door, stoic and unmoving. He stared up at his mother, silent tears streaking his face.

"Jakon, let us go. Come on, my darling."

Just down the tunnel, Nelli burst through Delaney's bedroom wall and fought back a smile when two heads popped out from under the bed sheets.

"Dylan!" Katryn shouted from the other room over the roaring, hungry flames.

"He be wit' Delaney, Milady!" Nelli replied, ushering the twins into the dark tunnel.

Drystan instantly hushed his mother and Katryn with a stomp his small foot to the ground. For the son of two servants, the tot was smart. In his own right, he was as smart as his Fruturi counterparts, Delaney and Dylan, who boasted only two months' seniority over him.

Katryn winced. The child was right. Yelling would giveaway the tunnels – their location. That was, if it had not done so already.

"Where is Masyn?" Katryn asked, barely above a whisper.

Nelli frowned and shook her head. "I do not know, Milady. He went to t'e library to find t'e Senator, once he don' smelt t'e flames."

Katryn nodded. "Quickly then, children. We run out of time."



The clouded skies released a downpour of warm rain mixed with crackling lightening and a deep rumble of thunder. The Leader hunched up his cloak and clasped it tighter to his face. "Tell me someone sees those bretzing Fruturis!"

"No... but I do have someone who might know where they are." The cloaked assassin dragged Masyn Hawne, freshly broken arm and leg,

behind him. With a toss, he threw Masyn at the Leader's feet. "Found this one sneaking out a window."

"Who are you?" Masyn asked, struggling to right himself and face the Leader squarely.

Masyn's captor shoved his broken form back to the ground.

The Leader shrugged. "I'm no one of no where. Where are the Fruturis?"

"You'll never find them. They'll hide and live - your foolish attempt at whatever this is, is futile!"

In a swift, fluid motion, the Leader rolled his eyes, withdrew his sidearm, and found his mark in Masyn's forehead. His body flopped loudly to the ground. Tepidly, the Leader stepped over it and nodded to the burning building. "There's a hideaway. Find its exit. Now."



Katryn almost seemed old with her jaw taut and her brows creased. Old and fragile. Katryn and Nelli stood at the peephole of the tunnel's exit, exchanging glances. They could see them – the intruders were a few lengths off, searching along the front of the house and edging their way around. They kicked the plaster and brick walls looking for something – them.

Katryn squeezed Nelli's hand. "I'll distract them," she whispered. "Find your husband and protect my children."

"No! I must be t'e one to distract t'em!"

"Nelli, Rathmond is dead. I know Masyn... he still lives. You must reunite with him and run, far away. I trust only you with my children, Nelli. You are family. Do you understand that? Do not let them forget what they are – who we are."

"Milady—"

Katryn pushed back Nelli's advance, instead embracing her in an awkward hug. "May the Gods be with you, Nelli. Thank you." Katryn knelt down and kissed each of her children on their foreheads once. They clung to her as one until she rose, dusted off her nightdress, and



pushed the exit open a crack. Her blue eyes glanced back and she forced herself to swallow her tears. "I love all of you."

Turning back around, Katryn dashed out of the tunnel and ran away from the tree line on a path straight for the intruders. She ran, fists clenched, as fast as her tightly bound dress would allow, trusting that once she was a safe distance away, Nelli would lead the children to the safety of the tree line edge. To freedom.

Katryn never turned back to check. Her feet flew across the soggy grass until she slammed into the wall of men. Their hands clenched onto her frame and blonde hair tightly, their jeers taunting her ears.

The cloaked Leader smiled. "Well, hello, Lady Fruturi."

"I want—"

A single gunshot echoed through the tree line scattering the sleeping ravens. Nelli motioned for Jakon to walk beside her. Without another glance back, Nelli pushed further into the trees pulling the children towards the foothills. Her right hand's knuckles turned white as her grip on Drystan tightened as she raced through the brush and branches. He struggled to maintain a firm grip on Delaney's left hand, but was too stubborn to let go. And, Delaney was too stubborn not to resist.

She struggled against the forward motion as she watched Jakon run back to the estate without a word exchanged between them. Without a glance or goodbye. Delaney clawed at Drystan's hand as Dylan had clawed at hers, forcing a pain filled release. She scampered back to the tree line edge catching herself on a thick frillic berry bush. She swallowed her plea for her brothers to return inside, her hand clamped over her mouth. Helplessly she watched Jakon continue his run towards their fallen mother with Dylan in tow, sobs ripping through his small form.

Nelli would have kept going. She would have run until the rolling foothills tripped her. But Drystan dug his heels in, desperate to steal back his mother's attention. Nelli was strong, but she was never good with danger, with panic.

"Mama! Mama, please!" Drystan softly cried.

Nelli stopped and turned to lecture her son, but found no words. Her eyes followed the Fruturi children. Her voice shuddered. "Children! No, Delaney!" Nelli surged forward and clenched onto Delaney's shoulder

to pull her into her chest. “O, phantos no...”

Settling into an awkward embrace on the ground, Drystan nestled beside them. Nelli rocked them both as she pushed aside brambles with her free hand, allowing a clear view. Watching. All she could do was watch. Anything else, would sacrifice herself, Drystan, and Delaney.

With a heavy heart, Nelli cuddled the children, whose muffled sobs scraped her soul. Through the branches, Nelli found the view of Katryn’s crumpled, shaking body sickeningly captivating. From under her long, chestnut hair, Delaney watched, too.

Sliding to Katryn’s side, Jakon clung to her hands. He rubbed the wet stickiness that clung to his skin and whimpered. “Mama...”

“No...” Katryn squeezed back, tears in her eyes. “Go... Jakon... Dylan... go...”

Dylan fumbled for his mother on his knees. He tried to crawl into her arms and nestle some small comfort out of her. But, her arms were still. Her chest had measured its last breath.

Another shadow joined those watching the boys cling to her broken frame. Though the man was shorter than all of them, the men shirked his presence, especially the Leader. His gait was marked with a slight limp and his personage jingled with the sound of heavy gold chains. “Finish it,” he said.

“I don’t meddle with children,” The Leader replied. “They, on the other hand, do.”

Without hesitation, or a flinch towards a second thought, the thicker of the cloaked intruders ran Jakon’s lean, budding frame through with his longsword. He twisted the hilt twice and withdrew.

“And, the girl? Where’s the girl? Finish them all or you don’t—”

Dylan convulsed in sobs that broke over the Shadowed Man’s hissing twinge of angry words.

The Leader exhaled and knelt. “There, there... it’s all right, boy.” He smiled at Dylan, his yellowing teeth too straight for normalcy. “You can stop reminding me,” the Leader said to the Shadowed Man. “Of the terms, we are clear.”

In a yelping scream, Dylan charged the Leader and beat his bloodied fists against his chest and face. The Leader scoffed, unamused by his wayward jabs. He snatched the boy by his collar and held him up high

in the air, his feet dangling helplessly. Raising Dylan to eye level, the Leader inspected his fierce blue eyes and chestnut hair.

He looked just like the Senator.

It was unavoidable. An unfortunate but necessary task. The Leader held Dylan's quivering body out towards the tree line. "Come out, come out, wherever you are!"

Delaney squirmed against Nelli's grip and then clawed at Drystan's. Nelli released her grasp at the draw of blood, but Drystan held fast. His grip turned white but remained strong. He stared at his dearest friend, and honorary sister, and then up at his mother. Nelli was far from their struggling huddle. She skimmed the estate's burning perimeter again and again, searching for her husband. Not once did she acknowledge Masyn's trademark Fertlouxian orange shirt on the ground beside Katryn. She just kept searching, scanning as she muttered fragmented Creipan to herself.

Nelli was lost to the tragedy. She too, was gone.

Delaney clawed again, harder this time, and Drystan finally relented and let go. He whimpered at the freshly raked skin on his arm, grit his teeth, and shook his head defiantly. He saw the glint in her eyes that he knew so well. Too well. "Laney, stay tère. Stay wit' us. Please..."

Exhaling, Delaney wiped her runny nose with her nightdress sleeve. She stood and offered a half-hearted smile and wave before she straightened her hair and trudged out of trees with as much grace as a young child could bear. Steady steps took her march right up to the Leader. Stopping in front of him, she stared up into his eyes. They were a dark blue. Like the ocean.

"That's a good girl." The Leader set Dylan down beside his twin sister. "Satisfied?" The Leader asked looking behind him, a stretched smile on his face.

The Shadowed Man did not answer. He stared at the twins before him – so alike Rathmond Fruturi in appearance it made his stomach heave, acid licking the base of his throat. Anger saturated his blood. He eyed the Leader expectantly, though he knew his reply. He had never been a man of strong backbone, except when it came to children. But, there were ways around hesitation. Will had its way. The Shadowed Man's smile grew as he watched the Leader stare blankly at the children.

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The Leader had warned that he would not participate. He had said nothing about not watching.

As if on cue, as the Shadowed Man's gloved hand swept to his hilt, the Leader stepped away from the mismatched twins – one defiant, the other yielding. “Sweet dreams, little ones. Better things await you,” the Leader muttered. “Better things await all of us.”

In a turning motion, as the Leader and his men backed away, the Shadowed man slashed through the soft skin of the children's throats. He stood staring at his hand's work for a moment, before he wiped his blade across his pants and turned away from their stumbling struggle. He rushed to catch up to the men mounting their horses on the northern side of the estate. “It is done,” he said as he grabbed onto his tan horse's mane and lifted himself into the saddle.

“Aye.” The Leader turned his horse alongside the tan gelding and grabbed the Shadowed Man by the arm. He had an eerily firm grip. “And the estate?”

“Let it burn. Let it flood. Ransack it, for all I care. My job is done.”

# LONG FORGOTTEN

*“We cannot forget where it came from...*

*We will never forget where it ends.”*

RED BEAR TAVERN  
SOUTHERN SOLERAN MOUNTAINS, BRYDELLA

Callon stared at the empty stein and whirled the lingering foamy froth about the glass. The tavern had not changed much from the stories. It still had the same drab walls with faded wood, though some places had started rotting through of late. It still had the unevenly lined stools with five spindly legs instead of four. And, the ale still seemed thinner than normal.

“Another.”

The barkeeper nodded and tapped the keg spigot. He sloughed off the tall foam head as he poured, one eye on Callon the entire time, but said nothing of it. Had he thought with his head and not his thirst, he would have considered the possibility that the barkeeper realized what he was. Had he stopped at just three ales, Callon might have considered that, because of his graying hair and hunched stance, the barkeeper might have known his father. But, he cared for nothing but the warm, fuzzy comforts hiding at the bottom of the stein in his hand – his sixth. It was something he always found funny, considering. Recognizing and connecting him to his father was about as likely as a Dragon being tamed by a woman. The only resemblance Callon had to his father was his temper and humor; he had his mother’s charming looks and the coincidence of his father’s rich brown hair was dismissive, at best.

No one ever knew he was Trent McKafrey’s son, unless they knew his real name.

“Long day?” The barkeeper asked as he slid the stein down the short distance to Callon’s perched hands.

“Long life.”

The barkeeper shrugged and set to wiping the bar top in a steady, swirling motion.

“Perhaps you should join those idiotic Rogues, then!” Grunted a husky voice from the nearby tables.

Callon glanced over his shoulder slowly, eyeing the man diagonally behind him. He was big –not in muscular structure, but rather the gut –

shorter, and was easily heading towards the double digits in ales.

“Yeah, you... you’d make a great addition, I’d reckon. Not only is life too long for you, but you’re a whiny pip!”

Callon blinked, took a sip with his gaze solidly fixed on the fat man, and then returned his attention to the bar. He leaned onto the wood bar as he drank through the foam head of his ale.

“I heard the Rogues are so desperate to return to the gavasti-ridden storm this Realm was before the Chancellor, that they’re kidnapping children and murdering any who resist. Heard of this whole Brydellan tailor’s family that got wiped out except for the young daughter. Who, surprise, surprise, is now missing. And, we all know what Rogues do with women – can you imagine what they’d do to that little girl?”

The husky man’s drinking buddy laughed into his glass of straight alcohol. “In true McKafrey tradition, eh?”

“Bretzing McKafrey. That sorry excuse for a man was inspiration to all rakes and rogues. Take ‘em – rape ‘em – slave ‘em.”

As their laughter grew, the barkeeper leaned forward. His drew together tightly, as if he were tempted to say something about the establishment’s favorite and most-missed patron, but Callon waved a dismissive hand in his face. He tossed his head back, pounded his ale, slammed down the stein, and pushed back from the stool. The five legs scraped against the stone floor in an irritatingly loud pitch as he turned around to face the pair.

At well over six feet tall, Callon stood as a sizable foe with an even worse temper. He cracked his neck making sure to hit each vertebra. The dim lighting rendered the scar on his lower right cheek even more excruciatingly painful than he remembered it being as a child. It was a look that he often used to his advantage, even though he could not quite remember what foolish childhood errand had earned the long scar. Callon stood, arms folded across his muscular chest, his brown shirt exposing a flash of the tattoo on his left chest. He stared through the pair as he shifted from leg to leg, sizing up the husky man and his dirt-covered companion. When his rapier hilts flashed in the lanternlight, he matched the flare with his own smile.

“Look who wants to dance, Fynn,” the husky man said, finishing off his ale.

“Be gone runt.” Fynn stood and smiled down at Callon.

The loud mouth made sense to Callon now, but it did not excuse it. He might be crass, brash, and a bit hot headed, but Callon preferred manners and politeness, even in the company of idiots. He exhaled and rested his hands on his hilts.

“Did I hit a delicate nerve, Puny One? It looks this little man is sensitive, Gol.”

“Do you need a moment?” Gol asked, smiling with a hole-filled grin.

Callon’s laugh started out soft, but grew to carry across the two-story tavern, amusement tweaking his face into a wide smile with every pair of eyes that fell on the standoff. For the two men before him, with perhaps less than half a brain between the two, he knew better than to engage them. Their stupidity discredited any nonsense or rare logic they presented. But, he could not forgive the rub at his father. It was not that his father was a saint; he was far from it. But Callon held firm to the belief that you only insulted those who were able to fight back. For his father, he would have to stand in his stead. “You should be respectful of the dead, whether you liked them or not, Idiotic Ones.”

“Should we? And I suppose you and those little swords will make me?”

Callon nodded as he stepped away from the bar. As he walked closer to the pair, the table behind them and to the right of them stood, fingers twitching by their weapon belts. That made six. Six was doable. His record while buzzed, drunk, or some combination there of, was five but, he had been sick that fight and there was always room for improvement.

“And my men?”

Callon nodded again.

Above, on the upper story, a small crowd gathered and hugged the railing. They whispered excitedly as they wagered bets, shoving coin at the greasy, tavernhand who had taken up booking for the spat. The aging barkeeper glanced at one of the onlookers expectantly. The hooded figure cocked its head, confused as the barkeeper gestured to Callon twice and then continued his insistent stare.

Another gesture.

A longer glare.



The figure shrugged and looked again, finally noticing the detail intended.

There, beneath the untied collar of the lone man's shirt, the figure made out a triplet of large pink scars that ran perfectly parallel to one another. The figure leaned back, and blinked. A Dragonic. And, certainly not one of the Council's Dragonics, considering they never leisured this far south of Aleria or west of the Soleran Mountains. Dylle rarely had the painful blessing of entertaining Council Dragonics, and they knew better than to fly about unannounced. Leaning forward and inspecting Callon from above, the figure found him unsuspecting and extraordinarily ordinary in look and stature. At least from behind, he was nothing out of the ordinary. He could have been anyone. But, he was a Dragonic – a Rogue. The figure locked their light blue eyes onto the barkeeper's gaze and nodded. Slowly, the barkeeper backed away from the escalating situation.

Callon waited for the charge from Fynn to draw his rapiers and when he did, Callon withdrew them with a fantastic metallic ring that whirled through the tavern air and pinged off the walls. Their swords clashed in a hum of steel that sent sprays of sparks about them. Eagerly, the other men advanced and without a second thought, Callon met them each with sword.

The figure watched the spectacle from above. It was obvious the Dragonic was well trained - too well trained in the Jeweled Rapier style to not be a master at it. He whirled and ducked, flipping out of the way of blades and daggers – a slighted laugh springing from his lips with each brash contact. He was good, excellent even, but he was not perfect. Either way, it would not last much longer. The sudden adrenaline rushed the alcohol through the men's blood to ill effect on all but one – and the figure would have returned to their seat for yet another ale shortly, had a seventh man not stood.

Callon did not see the man rise, steady himself on the back of a chair, and level his pistol at his chest, waiting for a momentary stillness. With a flap of cloak and creak of wood, the figure leaned over the rail and hurled a dagger at the armed man. The blade found its mark and pinned the man's arm to the wall. His pistol crashed onto the stone floor harmlessly.

Callon stared at the dropped pistol and tracked the trajectory of the dagger. The cloaked figure cocked their head in recognition before flipping over the railing and landing neatly on the ground floor at his side. In a magnificent rush of air and fabric, the cloak fell to the stones revealing a woman nearly as tall as Callon and athletically built. She wore a vest laced with long split sides that flirted with covering two rapiers. A burnt orange shirt flattered her tanned skin and her hair, pulled back into a slick ponytail with wild bangs. A thin russet scarf wrapped around her throat that made her pale blue eyes pierce any onlooker.

Gol sneered. "Stay out of this, Mouse!"

Mouse shook her head and withdrew her swords in a gentle clamor of metal, leather, and air. She spun to block a sneak attack to Callon's back, and then glared at him with tensed jaws. Callon gawked at her appearance. Before he could manage protesting against someone else fighting for him – let alone a woman – Fynn attacked again with his men, growling in intoxicated anger.

Together, the two duelists spun about the tavern, blocking and parrying in a death-defying dance of swordsmanship beauty. Her speed and agility amazed Callon and, when he accounted for her precision, he was floored. Mouse disposed of two of the men in the same time it took him to do so. She had the same flare with the blade that he had been taught and her footwork was excessively fluid. Though a logical impossibility, he could not ignore the prospect of another duelist trained in Jeweled Rapier style.

Mouse whirled around and ducked close to him, a frown on her thin lips. Before Callon could pull his gaze away from her piercing blue eyes, she withdrew another dagger, flung it behind his back, and killed her third.

Callon could not afford a long, shocked stare. As soon as she had turned to face him, two more men seized the opportunity of Mouse's turned back. He ducked under her arm and intercepted them both.

Mouse slid across a table and tackled Fynn, her arms wide. She kept her dominance for a three heartbeats before Fynn smashed her back against the table. Jumping to her feet, she drew her two rapiers countering any move Fynn made. Wit and speed against brute strength

was an easy enough match. A match with a predictable end, until Fynn snatched a wench's tray and slammed the metal sheet into her forehead. Dazed and stunned, she floundered for bearings. For the room to stop spinning. For there to be one Fynn, not three.

Callon turned at the metallic thud and discharged his opponents. Scrambling, he ran to intercept another round of metal tray to the face, but found that the pinned gunman had freed himself from the wall and now pointed his sidearm at the brunette. He doubled back, leapt onto a table, and flipped across another to reach the man. Before the gunman could change his target, Callon ran his left rapier through him to the hilt.

The dying man gasped a harsh, "Mouse," as he passed, pulling her attention away just long enough to allow Fynn to swipe his blade along the side of her bodice.

Gasping at the sudden pang, she whirled around and crossed her blades, slicing through Fynn's thick legs and a femoral artery before backing off, holding her side.

"Call... them... Call them, you fools! Someone bretzing... call them!" Fynn commanded as he scrambled to stop the gushing blood.

Callon rushed to her side, allowing Gol, the last man standing, to dart out of the tavern. His calls for help echoed in through the open door and bounced around the tavern. Mouse shoved off his advances of help and instead, grabbed his hand and pulled him towards the rear exit. The barkeeper patted her on the back as they fled, carefully concealing the exit behind their retreat.

"Mouse!" Fynn weakly shouted. "You can run from me, but you cannot run from them!"

THE OUTER ALLEYS  
DYLLE PROPER, BRYDELLA

Callon did not want to fight her grasp, though any and all semblance of common sense screamed for him to do just that. Mouse seemed harmless enough to him, and he would never admit it, but he was genuinely curious about her. He would be curious of anyone with that caliber of swordsmanship, and add to that women did not fight – at least not with swords – with mastered expertise.

Mouse said nothing as she ran. Head down, her eyes darted ahead, navigating the dark maze – her free hand tightening on the dampening left side of her corset. She ripped Callon around corners and tugged him down short flights of stairs. She sped up and ran full speed towards what looked like a dead end, lurching left at the last moment. Pulling him down the thin alley, they both turned sideways to squeeze through to the last door on the right.

Fumbling for the key around her neck, she unlocked the cracked wooden door and pulled Callon through. He took in the small room, if it could really be called that, and found the soot-coated fireplace provided an appropriately morbid touch. Callon watched Mouse as she latched, bolted, and barricaded the door behind them. Satisfied, she darted across the room in three strides to the bed.

“Look, Lady... er, Mouse, I appreciate your help and normally I’d be all about pleasing you right now...”

Mouse halted her hectic shifting of the pads and pillows, jerked up straight, and cut him an angry look.

Callon shrugged. “Well, why else would you bring me back here?”

She rolled her eyes and sighed. She retrieved a square parcel from the pads, and only after she was upon Callon did he realize it carried replacement daggers and a folded drawing. Mouse shoved the charcoal drawing into his chest and stared at him. When he did nothing, she shoved again.

Callon unfolded the drawing in his hand and considered the drawn figure. He could not be sure, but with the faint freckles and mess of

tight, short curls, the young boy in the aged drawing could have been his Wing Third, Tomal, or any other freckle-faced man alive.

“Why are you showing me this?” he asked, tracking her scampering feet to the small hole of a window near the roof. She stood on a chair to peek out, scanning the alley on the other side.

“Should I know him or something? He looks... so... common. And, why do you—”

Popping off the chair, Mouse scrunched herself into a hunched position out of eyesight. Callon instinctively crouched down, too. Someone was coming.

Back at the start of the their alley, deep angry voices shouted. “Open in the name of the Council!”

Door slam by door slam, they made their way down the alley.

Mouse snatched back the drawing, folded it in half, and stuck it inside her bodice. Kneeling low, she unwrapped the rest of the parcel and hid the three replacement daggers on her person. Then, she low-crawled away from the window and cracked door towards the far wall.

“That has to be a record,” Callon muttered, as the door next to them was kicked in after no one responded to their command. “Well, this should be fun,” he mumbled as he began to rise, hands on his hilts. He never made it above a crouch.

She jerked him back down hard.

“What in Udlast? Woman – we’re going to have to fight them—”

Mouse’s face darkened as she gripped his jaw and tweaked his gaze to find a now-exposed exit tunnel in the far wall.

Callon looked down at the coldness pressing against his throat. He rolled his eyes and scoffed. “Are you always this persistent?”

She did not bother answering.

“Because only wanted enemies of the Council—”

Mouse pressed a tad harder.

“Right. Bad time to discuss the semantics of the situation. Off we go.”

Together, they crawled through the escape tunnel that ran under the main street. They resurfaced next to a bakery, whose tenant blinked twice and then bolted their front door. Scanning the street, Mouse dragged Callon out and limped lightly to the forest behind the building.

Callon followed, willingly now, though she still kept her dagger exposed and firmly pointed his direction.

“You can put that away, you know. I’m coming. No point in leaving you to die because you had a moment of insanity and hopped into a simple bar fight.

She said nothing to his sarcasm as she lowered her dagger and replaced it in her belt. Pushing through snagging branches and over broken boughs, Mouse led him to an outcropping nearest a sheer mountainside and stopped. She pointed to the sky.

Callon shook his head, a laugh in his smile. “I don’t follow.”

In a flash of fluid movement, her bloodied right hand yanked open his shirt collar and tapped his bonding scar. At their newfound closeness, Mouse could see her reflection in his deep blue eyes. She frowned.

Callon shut his eyes and, despite his nagging voice of reason that had finally sobered up, he put his fingers to his mouth and released a shrill whistle.

A whistle he knew the Council Dragonics would recognize.

A whistle he knew Syralli would respond to first.

In a blink and half breath, the giant sun-colored Beast swooped down, joining the pair. Syralli stared, teeth bared at Mouse, who merely stared right back at her. Dreading a lack of time to fully comment sarcastically on the situation, he hoisted the fearless woman atop his Beast and joined her in the saddle. He commanded Syralli to lift into the air.

As they rose, Callon made out the unmistakable forms of Council Dragons perched along rooftops. Even his blood shivered at their tattling bellows.

Callon shouted above the roars in a stabbing bout of Drakanic, “*Up, Syralli. Quickly!*”