

Crown Jewels
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Chapter 1

Blue and white go together, but not in summer. Not when the white is wet, heavy snow piling against the low walls of the temple of Isa, the Elemental goddess of water. Not when the white is weighing down the crops in the fields and the branches in the orchards. Taya didn't mind snow but, like the rest of the villagers, she wasn't a big fan of summer storms.

At least it's water, she thought as she crossed the open yard separating the dormitory from the temple proper. Water was in short supply after a too-dry winter and equally dry spring and now, in early summer, the grasses surrounding the temple were as brown as they'd normally see in the fall.

"You called for me?" Taya asked when she reached the office of Isa's Favored. She was the youngest of the temple's Children, and in that middle ground – too old to be a child, but not old enough to be considered a woman – that always left them uncertain how to deal with her. She was tall – as tall as most men in the village – with short black hair and skin as tan as any farmer's at harvest time, even in the depths of winter. Now, in early summer, her skin was darker still.

"Yes. Please come in," the Favored said. The office was all dark wood and bookcases and, even in the middle of the day, its occupant relied on oil lamps for light. Taya expected the gray-haired woman to be working on some piece of paperwork at her small desk like always, but this time she was talking to a tall, broad-shouldered woman with close-cropped brown hair and wearing a faded green doublet. That wasn't what caught her attention, though.

The woman wore a knife. It hung low on her side in a well-worn sheath, its wood handle scored and chipped from long use and with a mottled stone mounted on its pommel. Anywhere else, it wouldn't have drawn comment, but here... No one wore a knife. Or an ax. Or anything that could be mistaken for a weapon within any of Isa's temples, let alone in her Favored's presence, but this woman did.

Taya looked a question at the Favored.

“Grandchild, this is Sergeant Kruger of the Royal Guard,” she said as the newcomer turned.

“You’re Taya of Winter’s Pass?” the sergeant asked in a raspy voice barely above a whisper that matched her scarred face.

“Yes,” she answered nervously. What would the Royal Guard want with her? It couldn’t be because of what she’d said last winter, could it? How would the king have even heard about her little tirade to begin with? And was he really that petty? She was just a teenage girl, after all.

Then again, after all she’d heard, he just might be.

“You have been chosen to become a Jewel,” Sergeant Kruger said. She reached into the satchel slung across her body and pulled out a carefully rolled sheet of heavy paper. She handed it to Taya.

Taya unrolled the document and squinted at it.

“Let me,” the Favored said and took the scroll.

“To all who read this,” she began.

“Be it known that Taya, of the village of Winter’s Pass, has been selected to represent the county of Thera as a Jewel. They are requested and required to report to Tavor House in the capital city of Banne no later than the 28th day of July for training.”

Taya blinked. A Jewel? Her? She’d heard the stories, of course – who hadn’t? Supposedly, the Jewels were the finest soldiers in the kingdom, so why her? She hadn’t raised her hand in anger in over ten years, not since she was old enough to understand Isa’s teaching. Her voice on the other hand? That, she’d raised on more than one occasion. Maybe that was it. Maybe the Jewels valued a sharp tongue as much as a sharp blade.

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Taya snorted as she walked across the courtyard to her room and began sorting through her few possessions. Her room was small, its white plaster walls reflecting the dim light coming through the arched window. If it were night, she’d light the oil lamp hanging from the ceiling but, for now, the sun was enough. She was nearly finished packing her few personal items when there was a gentle knock at the door. She turned and found Isa’s Favored standing in the door and, if she didn’t know better, Taya would swear she was nervous.

“I have something for you,” the woman said, stepping inside and holding out a cloth-wrapped... something. It was at least four hands long, and about half a hand wide. “Your father left this for you.”

Taya took the package and began to unwrap it, curious about what the father who’d abandoned her all those years ago left her.

It was hard to catch Taya off guard. It always had been – her quick mind always seemed to come up with what would happen next – but not this time. For the second time that day, she was surprised. The wrapping held a sword. She drew it from the dry, cracked leather scabbard it rode in and began to doubt her first impression. It wasn’t as long as the swords the baron’s men carried, or that she’d seen in paintings and on statues, but its blade was still longer than her arm. The blade was mottled gray with age and looked more like a carving knife than she’d expected.

“He said it was yours if you ever needed it,” the Favored explained when she slid the unexpected gift back into its scabbard.

Taya frowned, scowling in confusion. The gift might make sense if she followed the warrior’s element, Aia, but she didn’t. She was Isa’s Grandchild and her once-father must have known her Children sought silent serenity when he brought her there. She might have trouble with the silence, but serenity came easier with each passing day.

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Despite the wet, heavy snow soaking through their boots, it seemed like half the village stood outside the temple gates to see Taya off. That, at least, didn’t surprise her, she’d made a name for herself calling out the Baron and his so-called relief the past winter that still left them half-starved while he and his retainers ate their fill.

The Eldest motioned her forward. “My Children, I have wonderful news. Our own Grandchild Taya was chosen to become a Jewel.”

Taya could tell from their expressions that some of the audience doubted the sincerity of her wonderful news. She pasted a smile on her face and stepped forward.

“I’m sure you’re as surprised as I am,” she said, giving her voice a lightness she didn’t feel. “What are the chances that someone from Winter’s Pass would be chosen to represent Thera? And me? Really?”

There was a spattering of chuckles from the crowd.

“I don’t want to leave you, but Isa chose this path for me. I’ve given my life to her, and I wouldn’t be much of a Grandchild if I didn’t go where she sent me.”

Taya swallowed, tears tickling the corners of her eyes. “Thank you – all of you – for taking me in and raising me as one of your own. I promise I’ll come back and repay your kindness someday.”

She stepped into the deepening snow, her escort forced to follow as she strode towards the wagon with far more ease than she felt. True, she’d dreamed about leaving – dreamed about living the adventures she’d read – when she was younger, but now that her dream was coming true, all she wanted to do was stay in safe, comfortable Winter’s Pass.

Not that it mattered. Isa had her own plans.

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Taya removed the short sword her father left from her pack when they stopped for the night and studied it with uncomfortable fascination. Its design was similar to the large knives the villagers carried out hunting but was longer and lacked their noticeable belly. Unlike the knives, though, it had a steel guard spanning both sides of the blade before dropping down in a simple knuckle guard and a clam shell on one side to protect the back of the hand.

“What’s that?” Sergeant Kruger asked, squinting from across the fire.

“A sword.”

The guard scowled at the obvious answer. “Can I see it?”

“Yes,” Taya said gladly. The blade may have been meant for her, but she couldn’t imagine a world where she’d need it.

At least not before being chosen to become a Jewel.

“Not something I’d expect one of Isa’s Children to carry.”

“It was my father’s.”

The sergeant looked up and cocked her head in thought before handing the weapon back.

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They made slow progress at first but began to make up time when they dropped out of the mountains five days later. This was a whole new world for Taya; the farthest she’d ever traveled before this was Emmet, and that was only a half day from Winter’s Pass. But this... this was something new. The pines of her childhood died away replaced by tall, gray-barked trees with wide leaves her escorts called cottonwoods that made her sneeze.

Her and the oxen.

She’d never seen an ox sneeze before, and she would have found it funny if she weren’t so miserable. Sergeant Kruger took pity on her the second day and offered her a couple of peppermint leaves to chew on, telling her they would help. They did, but her eyes still watered with the desire to sneeze. They spent three days surrounded by the cottonwoods before, thank the Elements, the forest opened into wide plains dotted with the occasional aspen grove and both Taya and the oxen felt the relief of being able to breathe again. The villages became more frequent the farther away from home they got, but they never stopped at an inn for the night, her escorts preferring to camp alongside the roads, claiming it allowed them to travel farther each day.

“That’s the Crown,” Sergeant Kruger said a few days later, gesturing towards a massive fortress on the horizon. It was a huge stone keep, nearly as large as all of Winters Pass.

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They took their positions behind the murder holes and peered through, looking for any possible threats.

A plume of smoke appeared on the horizon as the riders cleared the fence that marked the edge of the Crown's defensive zone. She couldn't see the cause yet, but the size of the plume behind them said there was more than a hundred people causing it.

Many more.

“Contact!”

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“Are you all right?” Kruger asked, shaking Taya awake.

“What?” she said, blinking away the visions.

“You passed out there for a minute. Are you all right?”

“I think so.”

Taya frowned when they didn’t turn down the rutted dirt road leading to the fortress.
“Isn’t that where we’re going?”

“Eventually. We’ve got to get you signed in first, and then there’s some tests they need to do, and issue you your uninform, and...” Sergeant Kruger let her words trail off and she grinned

at the girl. “You’d be surprised at how much there is to do before you can even start learning to be a Jewel.”

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Twelve days after leaving home, a new set of walls appeared in the distance, this time surrounded by countless homes and streets filled with people.

Banne.

Taya never really thought about what the capital might look like but, even if she had, this mixture of city and fortress wasn’t anything she would have imagined. It wasn’t anything she *could* imagine. Maybe a hundred people lived in Winter’s Pass – and Emmet wasn’t much bigger – but there were at least that many travelling beside them on the broad avenue leading towards the city.

It was overwhelming.

But it wasn’t their goal, a fact Taya was thankful for. She felt a bit of her tension ease when they turned off the main road. Their new path was lined by what seemed to be warehouses – wide, squat buildings with large doors and small windows set high in the walls. They stopped in front of a tall brick wall with a bored looking man in a green doublet like Sergeant Kruger’s standing next to the open gate and holding a spear. He came alive long enough to examine a parchment Sergeant Kruger handed him before waving them through. Inside was a courtyard large enough to turn their wagon around and a trio of buildings. They pulled to a stop in front of the center one – two stories and made of brick – and Sergeant Kruger hopped down.

“Here we are,” She motioned for Taya to grab her bag and follow. Inside was a small room with plaster walls and a less-bored-looking middle-aged man standing behind a counter, reviewing what must be another new Jewel’s paperwork. The teen was short, with messy brown hair and a nervousness he didn’t even try to hide. The clerk behind the counter finished whatever he was doing and handed the young a piece of paper before saying something Taya couldn’t quite make out. He motioned them through a side door.

“Next.”

Taya stepped forward and Sergeant Kruger handed over the new Jewel’s summons. The clerk ran his finger down a list on the counter and frowned. He repeated the process, first skimming Taya’s summons before scanning the list. He checked her name off the list in front of him.

“Weapons?” he asked, not looking up as he rifled through another stack of papers. Sergeant Kruger nodded, and Taya pulled the short sword from her pack, laying it on the counter. The clerk examined the blade and cocked an eyebrow at Taya’s escort. She gave him an almost-smile and half shrugged. The clerk sighed as he pulled a tag out of a drawer and scrawled something on it before tying it to the sword and setting the weapon under the counter.

“Onyx, Second Cairn,” he said, handing Taya a parchment. “Door on the left, second floor, fourth door on the right.”

The fourth door on the right led to a room even smaller than her room back home but, unlike that one, there was a bunk bed in this one. And a roommate. The girl unfolded herself

from the lower bunk and stood when Taya entered. She was tall, with broad shoulders and long brown hair and brought herself to attention when she saw Sergeant Kruger.

“As you were,” the sergeant rasped and turned to Taya. “Good luck.”

“Um... Thank you.”

“What did you do?” the girl asked after Sergeant Kruger’s footsteps faded away. She was tall and slender with long blond hair hanging loose down her back.

“What do you mean?” Taya asked, slinging her bag onto the top bunk.

“Her,” the girl said, waving at the now-empty door. “They sent some clerk to get me, and you got Aia in the flesh.”

Taya looked back at the door and frowned. Sergeant Kruger was Aia? Aia, the warrior’s element? Aia, fire in flesh? Putting aside the fact Aia was a man, she hadn’t seen a hint of the passion his Children were supposed to hold. No, it was the stability of one of Ordra’s Children that filled the soldier’s core. She was a mountain that would stand against all until age finally wore her to dust.

“I didn’t do anything,” she said before remembering the previous winter. “At least I don’t think I did.”

Her roommate grunted. “Then what? Are you a princess, or something?”

“There isn’t a princess,” Taya frowned, trying to remember if she’d ever heard anything like that. “Is there?”

“Who knows? I heard a rumor Prince Ione is really *Princess* Ione, and they just say he’s a man to throw everyone off.”

“Well, that’s not me,” Taya said.

“I’m Sugilite, by the way,” the other girl said, offering her hand.

“Sugilite?”

“Not my choice, believe me” she said, rolling her eyes. “I’d much rather be Sapphire, or Amber, or something like that. Just call me Sugar. What about you?”

“Um... Onyx,” Taya said, squinting at the papers the clerk gave her.