

On Lladrana Before Chapter One of Protector of the Flight

Lladrana, Summer, Dawn

The alarm klaxon sounded at dawn. Alexa Fitzwalter Vauxveau jumped from bed, confused. She didn't recognize the clanging pattern. With a whistle, her clothes flew onto her – tights, tunic. The belt with her baton swung around her waist, she headed for her chain mail.

Her shieldmate, Bastien, stopped her, face grim. "Trouble inside the Castle."

"Inside?" she said blankly. Then needed all her all her breath to keep up with her long-legged Lladranan husband as he ran down the winding tower stairs. He didn't stay inside the Castle but plunged into the courtyard.

Everyone who lived in the Castle seemed gathered in Temple Ward. A slice of narrow pale blue light cut the sky and people stepped back from Lady Knight Swordmarshall Thealia Germaine as she wielded her baton.

"Coming through!" said Alexa. Since she was smaller than most Lladranans she used the phrase repeatedly and everyone knew it. The mass of people parted and Alexa and Bastien joined the rest of the Marshall Pairs.

"What is the meaning of this?" Thealia's stern voice rose above the crowd, silenced them. "I see no invaders in the Castle. Our walls have not been breached. Who sounded the alarm and why?"

A young Chevalier – knight – inched forward. Alexa saw his Adam's apple bob a couple of times before he spoke. "I did. The volarans are gone."

Bastien swore beside Alexa, turned and ran. She knew he raced to the winged horses' stables.

"Gone, what do you mean, gone?" demanded Thealia.

The Chevalier licked his lips. "I was out and I heard this noise and I looked up and, and, and they all were flying away. So fast. Using distance magic. Even the mare and the new little filly. Gone. Even my Blue Sky! Gone before I could even call out."

Marrec, a Chevalier about thirty, a noblewoman's household Chevalier, came up and placed a hand on the young man's shoulder, squeezed. "He's right. There's no volaran in the Castle."

Babble rose. Alexa could barely believe it herself. It sounded as if this had never happened before, but since she'd only been in Lladrana four months she didn't know. She was glad she didn't have a volaran of her own. It would have been hurtful to think a friend had deserted you— Bastien! Bastien would be upset. She sent a note throbbing with love through the Song that connected them.

"My volaran said last night—" Marrec started.

"What! You can communicate with your volaran!" asked Thealia.

Alexa stared. Apparently Thealia didn't know some volarans were telepathic with their fliers. Or some fliers were telepathic with their volarans. Huh.

"Yes," Marrec said calmly. He was a tall, lean, tough man. A good Chevalier. "My volaran, Dark Lance, was acting a little odd lately, I asked why. He spoke in riddles but said he was waiting."

"Waiting for what?" Thealia sounded impatient.

Marrec shrugged.

Thealia's gaze pierced the crowd, the circle surrounding her drew back another pace. She tapped her fingers on her sheathed baton. "Everyone who has ever communicated with their

volaran, step forward." Her eyes narrowed as people shifted and men and women made their way to the center. "I rarely have heard of such a thing," she grumbled. "Who would have thought of this, which Marshall—" Her black-eyed gaze whipped to where Alexa stood, alone. "Bastien!" Thealia roared, and Alexa figured her voice bounced off every wall of the Castle.

Alexa forced an innocent smile. Another Lladranan drama about to begin. Interesting to watch. She liked thinking of that instead of feeling the pitch of her stomach at the thought of no volarans. Without volarans the Marshalls and Chevaliers couldn't get to the northern border when the monsters invaded. The horrors could pierce deep into the mainland.

This was disaster.