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Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful,
committed citizens can change the world;
indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.
– Margaret Mead

endling
noun ~ end•ling ~ \ˈen(d)-ling\

1. the last living individual in a species,
   or, occasionally, a subspecies.
2. the official public ceremony at which
   a species is declared extinct; a eumony.
3. (informal) someone undertaking a
   doomed or quixotic quest.

– *Imperial Lexica Officio of Nedarra*, 3rd edition

PART ONE

EYES AND EARS

CHAPTER 1

A Very Good Question Indeed

My name is Byx. I am a dairne.

What I am *not* is a great hunter.

So why did I volunteer to go hunting for eshwins with my friends Gambler and Sabito?

Good question. A very good question indeed.

'Do you smell them, Byx?' Gambler asked in his hoarse, rumbling voice. 'Your nose is better than mine.'

Gambler is a felivet, a huge cat-like creature. His fur is black and shimmering as a river rock, save for the white lines striping his face. Sabito, a raptidon, is a great predator bird with a wingspan as wide as Gambler is long.

Gambler has speed, claws, and teeth. Sabito has speed, talons, and beak.

Me? I have a clumsy gait, silky white fur, and teeth that wouldn't frighten a kitten.

On the other hand, like dogs (to whom we bear more than a passing resemblance), dairnes do possess rather clever noses.

'I have their scent,' I called from my perch on Havoc. My dappled silver horse was gingerly stepping over

submerged stones in a shallow stream. 'But I can't fix the direction with the wind so fitful.'

When we reached the far bank, Havoc clambered up while I held on for dear life. The ground ahead was flat and fairly open, with widely spaced young trees, and we quickly caught up to Gambler as he raced along.

It's a wondrous thing, watching felivets on the hunt. They don't run so much as glide.

Sabito swooped down and levelled off just a few feet above us. He could hover for short periods, adjusting his wings a feather or two while using the lift of the sun's heat bouncing off the ground.

'They're just ahead,' Sabito reported. 'Do you see the meadow? Look beyond to the line of tall cypress trees.'

Where my powers of scent had failed, his raptidon eyes had succeeded. How impressive are raptidon eyes? Sabito could read a book over my shoulder.

From a thousand feet away.

'Perhaps, friend Sabito,' Gambler said, 'you could get to their rear and be ready should they flee.'

'I believe they intend to make a stand,' Sabito replied.

'Well then,' said Gambler, 'dinner is served.'

There was a time when felivets hunted my kind. That's no longer true. Still, it's hard to be a dairne near a hungry felivet and not feel a twinge of apprehension.

Felivet claws are like arrowheads. Their jaws can crush rocks. Gambler may be my dear and loyal friend, but he is also a ruthlessly efficient killer.

Which brought me back to my question. Why had I volunteered to go along on this hunt? Boredom? A feeling that I was a bit useless in the Army of Peace? A need to prove I wasn't afraid?

But of course I *was* afraid. A felivet, a raptidon, and a dairne against twelve hungry, frustrated eshwins? The odds were not in our favour.

Eshwins are strange creatures, a sort of cross between wild boars and bloated rats. They have vicious curved tusks and a habit of savaging easy targets: the young, the sick, the feeble. This particular pack of eshwins had attacked a family of cobblers, humans who were following the Army of Peace.

It's called the Army of Peace. It's not called the Army That Lets Eshwins Attack Others with Impunity. We were there to scare the eshwins off. If they could be scared off.

And if not? Well: Gambler.

We galloped into a wide meadow dotted with fading wildflowers, Havoc's hooves pounding the earth. The grass was up to his withers, high enough to conceal a crouching eshwin. But nothing – nothing – can hide from the eyes of a raptidon.

'Ambush ahead,' Sabito warned. 'They've split to your left and right and are waiting to close in behind you once you pass.'

'We're ready,' said Gambler.

Maybe *he* was. I wasn't.

I tightened my grip on Havoc's reins as he broke into a

full-speed run. Wind ruffled my fur and filled my nostrils with a hundred scents, including the rank stink of eshwin and the sharp, metallic smell of my own fear.

'You have four behind you and eight ahead at the tree line,' Sabito reported. 'The four behind are closing in fast!'

'Byx,' Gambler said, his voice eerily calm, 'can you do something a bit crazy?'

'You mean like go on this hunt?' I asked, gasping for breath.

'Would you mind very much falling off your horse?'

'Would I . . . *what*?'

'I want them to think you're helpless.'

'I *am* helpless!'

'That large tussock of gewgrass ahead would cushion your fall.'

Gambler wanted to use me as bait. That was the only way I could be of use in the hunt.

We all have our strengths and our weaknesses and must contribute what we can. At least, that was what I told myself as Havoc closed the distance to the tussock.

I readied myself by slipping my left foot out of its stirrup.

Closer. Hooves thundering.

Closer.

As I rolled off Havoc's right side I heard myself yelp. I hit the tussock hard enough to knock the air out of my lungs, but the grass and fungal mounds cushioned my fall and I was able to sit up.

Just in time to come face-to-tusks with a raging eshwin.

It charged, head down, and there was no way I could move in time.

The eshwin barrelled towards me, grunting its guttural cry of triumph – *errrOOOT* ! – and dribbling frothy saliva, anticipating the moment it would slice me open with its tusks.

'Noooo!' I yelled, pure terror in my voice, my limbs, my heart.

Which was when a black blur leapt from concealment, claws extended, mouth wide. Gambler hit the eshwin. Three seconds later the beast was ready to be skinned and cooked.

One down. Eleven left.

Three were still behind us, rushing at top speed, ripping through the meadow. But because of the tall grass, they were unable to see each other and were no doubt unaware that one of their number was already dead.

Sabito plunged from the sky like a falling star. He flared his wings, slowing, and struck one of the eshwins, sinking his talons into the creature's head.

Gambler, for his part, took care of the other two behind us. Three more eshwins were ready for the stewpot.

In the meantime, the eight eshwins hidden in the line of trees foolishly decided to come to the aid of their stricken pack members. They moved in a mass, grunting and squealing, a wall of rancid fur, gleaming tusks, and squinting red eyes.

Leading the charge was a creature so large she looked more like a horse than an eshwin. She was old, scarred from many battles. Battles she had probably won.

I saw Gambler's eyes go wide, which was not reassuring. 'I will deal with their leader,' he said, 'but you, Byx, you had best flee.'

'Flee?'

'I cannot take her and the rest all at once. *Flee!*'

Gambler moved to intercept the huge eshwin queen. Her fellow eshwins split left and right, aiming to encircle us while their leader fought Gambler.

Havoc had circled back to me. I grabbed his reins and hauled myself up into the saddle. The way back – retreat – was clear.

I'm no hunter, nor am I a soldier, and I am the furthest thing from heroic. Every rational part of me agreed with Gambler: it was time to flee.

But Gambler was my friend.

More than that, he was family.

I drew my little sword and urged Havoc forward.

CHAPTER 2

Creating Miracles

An hour and a half later, Sabito and I returned to the army camp. We were in central Nedarra, about a half-day march from the Telarno River.

We were bone-weary but pleased with our efforts, although Gambler had done most of the real work. After the last eshwin fell, Gambler decided to linger behind, content to 'dine alone,' as he put it.

'Byx! You're covered in blood!' my friend Tobble cried, running to meet us.

I dismounted from Havoc near the main campfire. 'It's not my blood, Tobble.'

'You're certain?' Tobble poked at me with his tiny paws, searching for injuries.

'I'm fine, Tobble. Better than fine. I hunted!'

'So I see,' he muttered, glancing at the rough-hewn sled hitched to Havoc.

We'd laced together branches with knotted vines and piled three dead eshwins on top. The rest we'd left behind for our soldiers to retrieve. An army on the march always needs food.

'I should have been there.' Tobble sent me an accusing look.

I hadn't told my faithful wobbyk companion about my plans. Where I went, Tobble inevitably followed, and I was doubtful enough of my own hunting abilities without having to worry about his well-being. Though he has the courage of an entire army, Tobble's just a fraction of my size. I feel as protective of him as he does of me.

We make an unusual pair, Tobble and I. While dairnes have doglike features, wobbyks look rather like well-fed foxes. They have large eyes, even larger ears, three tails, and a friendly, talkative nature. They're exceedingly courteous and seem, on the surface, utterly non-threatening.

But those gentle exteriors hide warrior hearts. It's astonishing how insane wobbyks can be when pushed to extremes. I'd witnessed more than a few soldiers of the Murdano, our mortal enemy, fall victim to Tobble's fury.

'I'm sorry, Tobble,' I said. 'I should have invited you. To be honest, I feared I wasn't up to the task. And I didn't want to have to worry about you, too.'

'I can take care of myself,' he said, jutting out his chin.

I patted his back. 'I am well aware of that.'

Tobble grumbled under his breath. I made out the words 'reckless' and 'rash,' and because Tobble is a wobbyk, and wobbyks are polite to a fault, I also heard 'no offence' and 'I'm sure you had your reasons.'

I recognised one of the stewards who fed and watered the horses. 'Dontee!' I called. 'Run and tell the cooks they'll

find many more eshwins just half a mile west. Send a wagon.'

'Eshwins?' Dontee repeated with a gulp.

'Don't worry. They won't be hurting anyone anytime soon.'

'So now you're the mighty hunter dairne?' Tobble teased. 'Meaning no disrespect, my friend, but you really must wash yourself in the river. You stink of eshwin!'

'They are disgusting animals,' I said. 'And of no use except as food.'

'Not "of no use," ' Sabito chided in his harsh-sounding raptidon voice. I hadn't realised he was hovering just a few feet behind me, riding the breeze. 'Eshwins dig up the roots of burrell trees, which helps the trees reproduce. And burrell trees, in turn, are home to many other species. No creature is useless, Byx. Each is a piece of a puzzle so vast that none can see it all.'

I looked at the ground, chagrinned.

'Forgive me,' Sabito said, softening his tone. 'I didn't mean to lecture. And I will concede that eshwins are not the most . . . lovable animals.'

I managed a smile. But Sabito was right. Every species had something to contribute.

I, of all creatures, should know that.

Once upon a time, dairnes roamed Nedarra, our homeland, in great numbers. Now just a handful of us remained. For a while, in fact, I'd thought I was the last dairne in the world: an endling.

Dairnes have always been hunted for our downy fur. But that's not the only thing that's driven my kind to the edge of extinction. Far too many dairnes have been murdered because of our unique skill: the ability to tell when someone is lying.

It is the gift and the curse of my species.

Humans *want* our fur, but they *fear* our ability to detect a lie.

I've learned a little about humans recently. Their desires can be powerful, but their fears are far more so.

Although, in fairness, perhaps that's true of us all. These days, fear never seemed to leave my side, unshakable as a shadow.

'See the smaller one on the sled?' I asked, and I heard an unsettling mix of pride and shame in my voice. 'That one was . . . mine.'

'Once again,' said Tobble, gazing at the limp and bloodied carcasses, 'I am grateful wobbyks are not meat eaters.' He gave a little shrug. ' "Remember we all have our place," ' he said. ' "The bug, the bird, the human race." '

'What was that?' asked Sabito.

'It's from a poem called "A Young Wobbyk's Introduction to the World." '

Sabito perched on a red-limbed mara tree. 'I would rather like to hear it,' he said. 'Are raptidons mentioned?'

'All six great governing species are included.' Tobble adjusted his carefully braided tails. 'Also wobbyks. Naturally.'

'Please, Tobble,' I said. 'I'd like to hear it, too.'

'I'm not sure I recall it fully,' he admitted. 'But I shall try.' Tobble cleared his throat. His voice was soft but clear.

Felivet, silent, stalks his prey.
Great cat shuns the light of day.

Terramant digs beneath the soil
In deep and dark and endless toil.

Natite swims the waters deep.
Seas and oceans are his keep.

Raptidon soars the cloudless skies
And scans the world with cunning eyes.

Dairne finds lies, a skill so rare
No other species can compare.

Human, never satisfied,
Too oft is moved by greed or pride.

Wobbyk, kind but fierce of heart,
Of all the world just one small part.

Remember we all have our place,
The bug, the bird, the human race,
As each day earth begins anew,
Creating miracles for you.

Tobble gave a little bow. I applauded and Sabito fluttered his wings. 'I quite enjoyed that,' said Sabito. 'Even though we raptidons are not given to poetics, as a rule.'

' "Creating miracles," ' I said, sighing. 'I'd argue that miracles are in rather short supply these days.'

'We'll get through this, Byx,' Tobble said. 'The Army of Peace will succeed. We have to.'

I stared at the endless lines of dusty tents, stretching out before us like huge gravestones. 'I wish I shared your optimism.'

How weary I sounded to my own ears! How jaded! What had happened to the old Byx?

Not so long ago, I was just a silly pup. The runt of my litter. Self-involved, naive, impatient to see the world.

Well, I'd certainly gotten my wish. I'd seen far too much of the world. I'd seen enough pain and danger and death to last several lifetimes.

I was no longer Byx, the innocent daydreamer, curious and carefree. The pup who could gaze for hours at a swarm of rainbow-winged butterbats dancing on the wind.

The old Byx didn't gallop into battle to kill eshwins, yelling in triumph like a fool as they fell.

Perhaps Tobble was right that better times awaited us. Perhaps the old Byx was hiding somewhere deep in my heart.

Perhaps.

But for now I had to go wash the blood from my fur.

CHAPTER 3

A Promise to Khara

That night I joined my comrades around a fire, one of hundreds that turned our camp into a twinkling reflection of the stars overhead. The eshwins made for a satisfying meal, and we were feeling drowsy and sated. (Tobble had dined on pan-fried crickets with maggot jelly.)

It was impossible to forget that war was brewing all around us, surrounded as we were by armed sentinels. Still, a welcome calm descended on me as I gazed at my dear friends. My old clan, slaughtered by troops of the Murdano, had been replaced by this new, multi-species family. Tobble. Gambler. Sabito. Renzo, the easy-going human who'd spent much of his young life as a skilled thief. Dog, his slobbering canine companion.

Maxyn, my fellow dairne, sat next to me. When we'd discovered his tiny, fragile colony of dairnes still alive, just knowing I wasn't an endling had seemed a kind of victory. But dairnes, it had turned out, were still endangered, walking the thin knife's edge over the precipice of extinction.

On my other side sat Kharassande Donati, now known as the Lady of Nedarra. Khara, my former captor, my

rescuer, my friend, the person for whom I would give my life if needed.

When we'd first met, Khara had been pretending to be a boy while she served a gang of poachers. She'd captured me, saved my life, then saved it again and again. Now she led an army unlike any ever before assembled: the Army of Peace.

We'd gathered not to fight a war, but to stop one. Two powerful tyrants, the Murdano in my native Nedarra, and the Kazar Sg'drit in Dreyland to the north, were poised on the edge of conflict. Both of them wanted war, but their peoples simply wanted to live their lives in peace.

It was a strange and untried idea: an army whose sole purpose was preserving peace. More than a few of our soldiers had never lifted a sword. They were farmers, bakers, herbalists, clerks, blacksmiths, coopers, midwives, masons, and carpenters. Some were servants or apprentices. Others had been thralls, freed by us, for Khara refused to tolerate slavery in any form. Many of those marching with us were young and green. Others were so old that this would almost certainly be their last adventure.

Fortunately, we had experienced warriors as well, hard men and women with sinewy muscles and appraising eyes. Some bore the visible scars of war. Even my friends and I had seen our share of danger in the months leading up to this moment.

As a crescent moon sailed the sky, we huddled together, telling stories and singing songs. Renzo, in fine voice,

contributed an especially bouncy tune. It involved a lad in love with a fickle lass, and although I couldn't catch all the nuances – humans are impossibly confusing when it comes to affection – I noticed Khara rolling her eyes more than once, her soft brown skin flushed in the firelight.

After a while we fell quiet, and Khara motioned for me to join her for a private conversation.

'Would you like company?' Renzo enquired, standing.

Khara laughed. 'Not in the least. This is between Byx and me.'

'Your loss,' Renzo said with a dramatic sigh, bowing with a flourish.

Khara's tent was identical to the one I shared with Tobble, although hers had a guard posted at the front flap, a burly young man clutching a long spear. He snapped a salute as we entered.

Khara lit a candle, then settled on her small cot, gazing at me thoughtfully. I sat on an overturned crate next to a makeshift table covered with maps.

'There's been an interesting development,' she said.

'Interesting good? Or interesting bad?'

'I may have to ask you to undertake a mission.'

I nodded. 'Whatever you command, my lady.'

'Byx, you're not one of my soldiers. You're a friend. I don't command you. I can only ask.'

'Nevertheless, I will do as you . . . "ask." '

'I'm not yet certain, but if I need you, it could be dangerous. It involves the natites. They're feeling us out,

trying to decide whether to support the Army of Peace' – Khara paused – 'or to oppose us.'

'Maybe I'm missing something. What can sea creatures do about a land war?'

'It's a good question, Byx, and the answer is that I don't know. Of the six governing species, the natites are the hardest to read. But if we can enlist their support, they could put an end to any plans by the Murdano to invade Dreyland by sea.'

'I don't envy you having to figure this out,' I said.

'The thing is, Byx, I won't be the one figuring it out.' She gave me a knowing, conspiratorial smile. '*You* will be.'

'Me?'

I think that's what I said. I may have managed nothing more than a yelp.

'The natites are asking us to send an ambassador. Someone to listen to their concerns.'

'But I'm just . . . I'm just . . .'

'Byx. The days of "I'm just a simple dairne" are over. If I can be the Lady of Nedarra, you can be Ambassador Byx.'

'No I can't!' I cried.

Khara leaned forward, arms on her knees. 'I can lead the army, Byx. But our goal is to stop a war, not engage in one. For that, we need diplomacy. And that means I need your help.'

It was such a simple statement. If Khara needed me to do something, then I would do it or die trying.

Although I didn't have to be happy about it.

'Would I be alone?' I asked, aware of a cold ache in the pit of my stomach.

Khara shook her head, and her dark curls glistened in the candlelight. 'Alone? No, of course not. For a start, no power I know of could separate you and Tobble. So clearly our excitable but ever-polite wobbyk will accompany you. I wish I could send Gambler with you, but, well, felivets and water . . .'

I smiled, recalling the sight of mighty Gambler tiptoeing nervously into a shallow subterranean lake.

'Maxyn isn't well enough to travel. And Sabito? If felivets don't like water, raptidons like it even less.'

'Renzo?'

'Renzo,' Khara repeated, and I could have sworn the idea of him leaving her side made her wistful. 'Yes, I suppose he might prove of use.' She nodded. 'Yes, Renzo. Absolutely.'

'When do we leave?'

'It's just a few hours to the Telarno, where we'll set up camp near a town on the river. The next morning we'll meet the natite ambassador. He'll take you, Tobble, and Renzo by watercraft to the natite queen's palace. There you'll listen to her thoughts and present her with the Subdur natite shield and crown we . . . borrowed.'

We hadn't so much borrowed those items as stolen them. But in fairness, we'd been afraid for our lives at the time.

'I'll do my best,' I said.

'I know you will,' said Khara.

We both stood, but as I moved to leave, Khara took hold of my arm. 'Byx,' she said, 'I have loyal generals and a devoted army. And I count Renzo, Tobble, Gambler, and Sabito as the truest of friends. But it's you, more than anyone, I'll be counting on in the days ahead.'

'Me,' I repeated. 'Why me?'

'Because we've been through so much together. And because I know I can always count on you to tell me the truth.' Khara glanced at the wrinkled pile of maps on her little table. 'I've done my best to plan for what's ahead, Byx. But one thing I know: the battlefield laughs at plans.'

I managed a small smile.

'As I see it, we face three important challenges as we try to stop this war. The first is to ensure that the natites are on our side. For that, I need you to be my eyes and ears. You'll talk to the natite queen, watching for signs of duplicity and listening for reasons to trust her.'

'I can do that,' I said, although I could hear the doubt in my own voice.

'The next challenge,' Khara continued, 'will be to recruit others to our cause. I'll need you to be the voice of the Army of Peace. To explain our mission and secure loyalty. You'll need to be convincing, if you sense they are wavering. Dairnes are trusted by other species, and we shall use that to our advantage.'

'I can do that,' I said again, and this time my uncertainty was obvious.

Khara put both hands on my shoulders and smiled. 'How lucky I am to have you by my side, Byx,' she whispered.

'You didn't say what the third challenge is.'

'The first two problems are diplomatic, but the last . . .' Khara's hands dropped to her sides. 'If – when – the Army of Peace comes face-to-face with the Murdano's army and the Kazar's forces, we'll either stop the war and prevail, or we'll die trying.'

I gulped past the sharp rock that seemed to have lodged in my throat. 'You can count on me, Khara. I promise to be your eyes and ears, as well as your voice.'

'My eyes and ears, my voice, and my heart as well.' Khara's eyes were glistening. 'Now get some sleep. You are about to go on an adventure.'

'A dangerous adventure,' I murmured.

'Byx, my friend. Is there any other kind?'