

# **Lights Templar**

## **Book I**



**Lights Templar**  
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**by**  
**Michel Dupont Jr.**

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Dedicated to Anna









## *Chapter 1*

She landed near the main traveling road around where the attacks occurred. The flying spell was convenient but took a lot of energy to maintain, even for someone at her level, plus the wreckage was near the road in the forest, which caused other difficulties due to the trees.

She looked around before going in, it was a beautiful spring day. The sun was out and the trees had regained their color. Even with this nice scenery, Alexandria felt uneasy. This was her first time alone outside the floating city of Astrum and even then she had only ventured to the port town of Newport. Most merchants had been avoiding this road due to all the resent raids, which meant that the only other human type she would run into would be the raiders themselves.

"Well, too late to worry about that. Still, no need to go in unprepared."

She tied her long straight hair so that it would not get in the way, followed by a quick detection spell that would warn her if anyone was nearby.

"Okay, the first thing I need to do is find the destroyed caravan and see if I can find more information. This should help me locate the raiders' camp and then head back and report its location. Alright Alex, this is your first adventure so don't muck it up."

After about one hour of following the road she reached her first goal. What remained of the merchant caravan was pretty gruesome.

"Right, so ignore the blood everywhere and focus on the details. The merchandise and bodies of the merchants are gone, the caravan is in pieces like it was snapped in half."

The detection spell alerted her that two things were approaching her. Alex cast a spell that would allow her to see what triggered it. What she saw was a woman and a man, both protected by a half plate, armed with a sword and a big red cloak. Their armor reminded her of what the Crimson army wore but for them to be here made no sense, so she concluded that they had to be sell swords. Seeing as these two could not be the raiders, she decided not to hide but to stay her ground.

As they got closer, she saw that the man looked like he was studying her. She figured that made sense. Here she is, dressed in light cloth armor, blond hair that went all the way down her back, without any weapons but a small dagger. Clearly she did not really fit the environment.

The woman was the first to approach her. "Hi, I'm Anna and this here is Mike. Are you investigating what happened here...alone?"

Standing as straight as possible, with her most confident voice Alexandria answered. "Why yes, I'm Alexandria and I was sent by the city of Astrum to investigate these savage crimes being committed."

The two strangers looked at each other with a half smile. "What did I say that was so funny?"

Mike looked up to her, still holding that half smile. "Well, I'm not sure I would advertise that you are alone out here to strangers."

Alex's eyes widened after that comment and her face turned a light shade of red, due to the shame and annoyance of already having made a mistake so early in her adventure.

"Stop teasing her, you've made your fair share of mistakes yourself."

"Let's not bring those up. Plus, I was mostly answering her question."

"Ignore him for now, Alex, and let me give you our full introduction. We are traveling sell swords. We try to help those that we can and also those that the larger armies ignore or just can't help. We have been doing this for a few years now so we have experience, which at this time is telling me that we should help you with this mission of yours. If you are interested in our help, that is."

While Alex instantly started to like this person, she did not know how to react. "Wait, so just like that you want to help me?"

Mike seemed surprised as well, "You sure about this, Anna? Is this one of those?"

Anna just smiled and shrugged as an answer to his questions. Seeming to understand that action as a response, he continued. "I guess we are saying that Alexandria. Keep in mind that I get the feeling that this is a bit more than just caravans being raided, so you may be stuck with us for a while depending on your goal, if you accept." He extended his hand and smiled. "So what do you say?"

She started to reach out for his hand, but then stopped. "Wait. Look, I appreciate the help but you guys are sell swords. I can't just ask you to do this for free and I currently have no money to pay you with. I guess I'll have to decline your offer, it just would not be right."

He looked at Anna, "She does have a good point there. What to do?"

Anna responded by rolling her eyes. This was something she felt she needed to do. It looked like part of the young girl wanted their help but something else stopped her from just accepting it. She thought that people were funny that way; the ones that needed help rarely accepted it and those that did not need it often begged for it. Why was that, she wondered? She looked at Mike, who

looked like he may have figured out a way to convince her.

"Here is something, we will help you out but in exchange we have two magical items that we need information on. We have been told that these items are very old so getting information could be as hard as us accompanying you and helping you out. Does that sound fair to you?"

A smile popped up on Alex's face, "Sounds more than fair. Thanks for your help with this. So where do you want to start?"

Anna glanced at Mike. "Well, normally I would start by wanting to get to know you better, and exchange general information, but I think my partner here has a different idea."

He shrugged at that comment. "You're painting me in a bad light. I want to know about her too but I don't feel that this place, surrounded by evil acts, is the proper place to start a conversation of that type."

"Now now, if you're going for an excuse, at least explain the real reason, don't make one up."

Realizing that he had already lost this argument, he dropped his shoulders. "Fine you're right. I'm more curious about the situation than the person and it should be the other way around."

A half smile appeared on Anna's face. "Oh, you know I'm teasing. Stop acting like the victim husband in a marriage."

At that Alexandria laughed because that was pretty much the situation that was happening. She was really going to like traveling with these two.

"So Alexandria, what information do you have on these attacks?"

"Not much. Every caravan that has passed through this section has been attacked in the recent weeks. The only reason anyone know about it was that the merchant got feed-up and organized

a group to see what was happening. They found a situation like this. They got back to the town and asked for help. Unfortunately none could be provided at that time so I figured I would step in."

This last part got Anna's attention. This person was clearly starting out and already she was doing things not because she has to but because it's the right thing to do. She wanted to help her more because of this.

Mike then realized that this young lady would probably be with them for a while longer than this mission."So no survivors, no leftover cargo and always around here. Yeah, there is a group around here alright and they must be strong if they stay in the same location. That or they are large, which prevents them from moving fast."

During the explanation, Anna performed an inspection of the wreckage and the area around it."They will be easy to follow. They are not bothering to hide their tracks at all."

Alex, thrilled, figured that this was great news. Because of her reaction Anna figured she would add more detail."That could mean that they are sloppy but the rest of the scenario does not support that. First, there is nothing left of the cargo, even what was probably damaged during the attack is missing. Also, what would sloppy people care about the dead bodies? They would just leave them there. No, I also have a hunch that it's a large group. Oh and Mike, it seems that they have an ogre, or at least something of comparable power."

"Ahhhh, that's just not right. Then yeah, an ogre type creature is not going to be part of a small group. There is something bigger behind this."

Alex was surprised. This was supposed to be a small group of bandits or something like it. Why would a large group even care about shipping lanes? Plus, how did Anna figure ogres from the

debris? All that she saw was wood smashed apart. While she knew that her books would have gaps in them that could not account for experience, she was only starting to realize how big that gap really was. She felt a hand on her shoulder, which brought her out of her head and back to reality. Mike wanted to show her something and pulled her closer to the scene.

"The important part here is not that it's destroyed but how it got destroyed. Look closely right about here."

He pointed at a specific spot where a piece was broken in two. On the top side it looked like the wood was compacted by something heavy that landed on it. Most likely something big but blunt. Under it, the wood looked fractured like it was split apart by pressure that was put on it. Alex now understood why it could be an ogre or something of comparable power. The side of the big blunt indent was like a branch, meaning the weapon was probably a club the size of a branch. Swinging around something like that was not something that a normal human or goblin would do; it had to belong to something bigger. Big creatures that swing tree branches around are not the type to be with small time bandits. The pieces did seem to fit.

As she realized this, her detection spell warned her again. She started to say something but noticed that the others were already reacting by looking at the direction where the warning came from.

Mike put his hand on his sword, ready just in case. "For a place that everyone should avoid, there sure are a lot of people around today."

As good as they both were Alex could still get more information using her magic again, "Seems like the person coming our way is a human female with shoulder long blond hair."

Mike gave a puzzled look at Alexandria. Why was hair length and color important? Anna chuckled at his confusion.

Clearing her voice, Alex continued. "She is wearing priestly garb in the standard white and a blue colors. What is odd is that she is also wearing a half plate like both of yours and carries a spear as a weapon. It's not the standard for priests to be armed, which is usually handled by the Crusader branch. Right?"

With that information Mike looked at Anna. "Do we introduce ourselves or avoid? Priest encounters are fifty-fifty for us, but given the information here, a priest could be a good thing."

"I agree. An introduction would probably be for the best. Alex, care to handle it? Mike will stand back and try to look intimidating."

Mike shook his head, "Again with the bad light."

As this new stranger was approaching, Alex carefully thought about how she should handle the situation this time. As the priestess neared, she posed herself in a more relaxed and friendly fashion.

"Hi there, my name is Alexandria. From the looks of it you seem to be traveling alone. I would just like to warn you about the recent raids in this area and to be extra careful if you plan on continuing alone."

The priestess stopped and looked at the three people in front of her. She smiled and focused on Alex. "Hi, my name is Rosamia. I appreciate the warning given but I was already aware of the situation. I've been avoiding some patrols using a tracking spell in order to get to Newport to see if there is any way I can help with this problem."

Her answer puzzled Alex. "Wait, did you say tracking spell? I thought that only Crusaders used those spells."

Realizing that she was being a bit too intrusive, she gave herself a metal slap and quickly apologized. "I'm sorry, I should not have asked that question. You can ignore it if you wish. On another note, we are also trying to get more information on this. Are you interested in joining our group?"

"No worries. As for your offer..." It was true that Rosamia wanted to help with the situation and that these people so far seemed nice, but could she trust them so easily? No, she would not get caught in that way of thinking. In order for trust and understanding to occur, someone needs to make the first step. The other way leads only to constant worry, which often prevents anything from happening. She was also looking for something and you typically don't find anything new by doing the same things. This time she was going to take a chance.

"After having thought about it, I will join your group. Again, my name is Rosamia. I'm a priestess but due to a close friend I also have good battle experience, which may come in handy."

"We are glad to have you. Behind me is Anna and Mike, both are sell swords, and I'm Alexandria from Astrum. I mostly specialize in anything magical." It was hard to hide but she tried to mask her excitement. For years she had wanted to go away from the library that may have been her only home. Reading between studies about adventures and heroes, she dreamed about being a part of something like that and now it seemed like it was starting to be a reality.



Anna approached Rosamia and extended her hand. "Welcome to the party. Let me fill you in on what we know so far."

Rosa took in the information given by this woman with long brown hair. After everything was said, her main feeling was concern. If this was a large group, where are they headed and what is their plan when they get there? Would a large attack happen again on a town or city, and could she do something to help this time? Realizing that she was getting lost in thought, she asked, "So, what's the next step?"

It seemed like the brown-haired warrior had already thought of something. "Well, our first step should be to go in the forest and find a patrol. This should help us confirm our guesses on their organization and get a better idea on their size. Ideally finding a main camp location should be our main goal. Once we get there we can figure out the next step. Anna, if you can guard our backs, I'll take point. Alexandria, stay with Rosamia between the two of us. Rosamia, seeing as you mentioned something about tracking the enemy, can you let us know if you see something that we missed?"

"Sound like a good plan, and yes, I should be able to inform you on the general location, but only if they are goblin type creatures. With my skill level, it's a limitation of the spell."

Alex looked at Anna as they prepared to leave the road and go in the forest. "No additions to his plan?"

"Nope, it's the way it's worked between us for years now. I come up with the goal and he comes up with a plan. The plans don't always work out, but the same could be said about the goal sometimes."

"I see. Well, let's hope this one works out okay."

"Hum, yes, let's."

The way she said this made Alex a bit nervous. She could tell that both of them seemed worried about something that they did not want to share. While fighting ogres was not an easy thing, it should be something they could handle now, so what could it be? No sense in worrying about it, she thought. The real adventure was about to start.

## *Chapter 2*

About an hour's march in the dense forest and still the tracks were easy to follow. This had Mike worried. Something was not right and he could not figure out what. After a while he called for the rest of the group to stop.

Rosamia was puzzled. "The spell is still not picking up anything, did you see something else?"

He motioned for the group to gather around. "I figured I should tell you about these." He pointed to another group of tracks going in a different direction. "I think it's safe to say that there is more than one patrol moving around in this forest."

This situation was staring to make less and less sense to Alex. "From what you are implying, you're making me believe that we are hunting down a monster invasion force or at least a part of one, and that's impossible."

She saw that the two warriors around her were questioning her statement. Feeling a bit frustrated, she continued. "Most, if not all, of the monsters come from beyond the great desert that is surrounded by the great mountains to the Far East. The journey across is near impossible, so much so that the only real way over is using the Portal Tower's now active portal. While the monsters have taken over the tower, they have yet to make any other progress due to the efforts of the Crusader army holding them at bay. There is no way that a large monster army could slip past them."

"Being a part of the order, I can confirm what she is saying. Currently the majority of the Crusader branch is at that location. I also find it

really hard to believe that they would slip up as much as losing track of a group as big as you are implying."

"What you are both saying makes sense, and I don't think they would mess up like that as well. Still, I can't shake this feeling off."

Sensing his frustration at not being able to understand his feeling, Anna intervened. "Let's just continue for now. Things will probably be clear soon enough. Still, just in case, let's try to treat this as an army that could attack us and not just a small group."

With that they continued on.

Shortly after Rosa's spell picked up a target, she went to stop the group but Mike was in the process of doing so. He looked at her and asked for a count. The whole group was waiting on her at this point. She signalled for three in front and another three from the side. He nodded and looked at Anna, who nodded back in acknowledgement. She positioned herself to meet the enemy on the side and he aimed for the front.

Keeping in mind the warning given that they should prepare for an army, Rosa cast a defensive spell on the group to deflect incoming projectiles. At least arrows wouldn't be a problem anymore. She then looked at Alex, who was looking from front to side anxiously. Taking out her spear, Rosa tried to give her some last minute advice. "Try to relax, our main task is to cover them and warn them of new targets assuming they don't see them. The last thing is to try to limit yourself to spells that are target-directed or that will not get in their way."

"Okay, that makes sense. I can do that." Rosa gave her a warm smile and went into a defensive position; the first battle in a new group is always the hardest.

The front group was the first to arrive. Three green humanoid creatures appeared. Goblins are typically smaller than your average human but that did not make their blood-red eyes look any less fierce. All three attacked Mike with their short swords. He swung his sword horizontally with most of his strength at the first goblin's weapon, knocking it and the goblin into his partner. He then stabbed his sword forward and dispatched the third one. Twisting around, he slashed at the other two that were busy trying to get up.

Anna took a more dexterous approach to her attacks by avoiding the first slash and attacking back when the goblin's guard was down due to his own attack. She kept aiming with precise quick slashes or stabs to dispatch the others.

"That wasn't so bad." As Rosa turned to answer Alex, her eyes went wide.

"We have four coming from the front again and another four from the other side." Why were they so near? Could it be the second patrol? Wait what was that tremor she felt from the ground?

For a while everything stopped and they all looked at each other. The ogre was near and he was coming from behind them. Mike fell back to meet it head on. "Rosamia, Alexandria, deal with the goblins in front. I'll go deal with the newcomer."

Both ladies nodded and started making their way to the front. Suddenly Rosamia stopped and looked to the side where Anna had dispatched the first troop. "Six more just showed up. Alex, we need to ..."

As Alex turned, she saw an arrow coming directly at her face. At the last second the protective shield popped up and absorbed the blow. This was too much for her, trying to hide her magic skill would have cost her life if not for the shield that Rosa put up. She looked at Rosa and

asked if she could grab the attention for the four incoming goblins for a few little while. Rosamia agreed and headed in the direction of the incoming enemy.

As she neared the group, Rosamia launched a quick magic bolt to the head of the first target. It would not kill him but would get his attention and he would be disoriented for a while by the blow itself. She thrust her spear forward and scored a hit against the next goblin in his abdomen. Quickly pulling out the spear and changing her grasp on it, she delivered a jab in the third goblin's face using the butt of the spear like a quarterstaff. Rosa had to dodge the fourth goblin's attack but this helped her find an opening where she could strike at his back. She really did not know what spell Alexandria was about to cast but she could safely say they she had the attention of this group like she was asked to.

While dodging the tree branch that the twelve foot ogre called a club, Mike looked around to see what the current situation was. Anna would be done in a few seconds and would probably join him after. The other two seemed to have worked out a plan between them for the new arrivals. So as long as no new patrols showed up, they should be able to survive this. He saw that Anna was in fact now heading his way. He gave her a glance that she acknowledged and went on the attack against the ogre that had missed him again.

His goal was to gain more of the ogre's attention in order for him to ignore Anna so that she would have the perfect opening. Mike ran past the ogre, which forced him to twist in order to take another swing at Mike with his club. Taking advantage of the slow club, Mike slashed at the side of ogre's kneecap. The hit cause the ogre to stop the swing and fall on his only good knee. With

his eyes looking at Mike and his hand preoccupied with his destroyed knee, Anna was able to deliver a serious blow to the chest. Mike gave a sword thrust to the ogre's back as both him and Anna disengaged from their target to see if the wounds would be enough for the ogre to fall.

As they disengaged, they realized everyone had stopped for a second. The sky above had turned dark with thick black clouds. Everyone looked down to see what the reason was for this weather change. Alex's eyes crackled with light. Her right arm was extended, reaching to the sky and small sparks could be seen going between her fingers. The six goblins shot as many arrows as they could while running at her but the shield deflected all of them. In a quick move, Alex kneeled and touched the ground with her hand that was a few seconds ago trying to reach for the dark sky. As soon as she connected to the ground, eleven bolts of lightning rained down from the sky and landed on all the goblins and the ogre. As she stood back up, the sky turned back to normal and the only ones still standing were the people in her group.

Anna was the first to fill the silence that was created after the attack. "That was very impressive, very flashy, but still impressive."

She was about to tell them that this was not even the half of it but was cut off by Mike. "A bit too flashy, mind you. Quick, we need to move from this location. We may not have much time."

Alexandria froze. "But I thought that, I mean, the archers... I used the best targeted spell that I knew that could help out all. Did I do something...?"

Again Mike cut her off, this time intentionally. "You misunderstand. Yes, the spell was too flashy. Combat can attract others with sound alone. What you did pretty much told everyone in the forest

looking up where we are. Still, we had two patrols on top of us. There was no way to know if there would be a third and you did what only you could to protect us. You made a call in battle and because of it the fight is over and we are all okay. So no, I'm not saying you did something wrong, but I am saying that we need to find cover out of here quick because of it."

She nodded back at him, realizing his intention, and also that she needed to stop thinking that these people would kick her out if she did something wrong. He gave her a warm smile, confirming her thoughts.

"Here is the modification for the plan. I would like it if we could move away from here but lay in wait somewhere that we can ambush whoever comes here, preferably in a way that they can't see or hear us. Is that something that can be helped by magic?"

As they started walking, Rosa could not really think about anything for the situation. Crusader spells could have helped with the request but she had only learned so few of them. She looked at Alex, who seemed to have thought of something. "I can cast a spell over us that will make it impossible for them to see and hear us. They could still bump into us and it will fade if any quick action is taken so we will have to stay as still as possible."

"That's perfect. Let's go over there and then you can cast the spell. It should be a good spot to wait for them." They positioned themselves and she cast the spell. This action puzzled Rosa. It was true that she knew little of arcane magic due to her using holy magic, but she did know that the spells this young woman was using were of a very high level and she was casting them as if they were



nothing. She was very impressed and glad that she was on their side.

Anna turned to the others, "May as well let the opening be done by the magic users, when they arrive. We can finish off the rest. The thing is, how is that a modification to the overall plan?" Mike gave Anna a bit of a maniacal smile; she was not sure she was going to like where this was going.

"It's a bit of a long shot, but the idea is that last attack should make it so that a large group gets sent to investigate. When we destroy that group and they don't come back, what is the next step that the leader will probably make?"

"There is a good chance they turtle up and recall most in order to make a strong defence. At least until he knows more. Never mind, I get it now."

Confused, Alex asked what she had missed. "The main goal is to figure out their size, right? Not to destroy them, that last part is a perk." Now both of them understood if they go on high alert and recall most of their forces and they are able to find the main camp in time, they will have a perfect count of the enemy, at least more so than before.

Alex gave a small chuckle. "That's an interesting way of using the enemy's tactics against him. So is he one of those natural leader types that always has a plan?"

All Mike answered with was, "I wish..."

Anna continued the explanation. "No, he had to practice it for a few years. One of us had to be more commanding during combat when it's not just the two us. While I could take over, it's not a position I enjoy."

"By the looks of it, you two have been close for a while now. I think that both of you are very fortunate. It would have been nice if my Crusader

friend and I had made that same decision a long time ago."

"I take it that he is on the front line at the Portal Tower?"

"Yes he..." Rosa stopped answering Alexandria's question and focused on the tracking spell. "It seems that we have a group coming from the north. So far ten of them, but they stopped like they are waiting for something."

"They are probably waiting for the big guns to show up." Mike agreed with Anna's assumption. "It makes sense that some of the heavy hitters would take more time to arrive. We should take note of the time it takes, it could give us a clue on how fast they are able to react."

It took a lot longer than expected for them to move again. While Rosa's spell could only tell her about the goblins, at present count they numbered fifteen. "Okay, like Anna mentioned, Alexandria and Rosamia, you have the first blow, then we will jump in. Ready?"

Alexandria smiled, "I have a classic that will really send them burning, pun intended."

"May as well follow fire with more fire on my end."

"Sound good." Both Anna and Mike slowly positioned themselves so as to not cancel the illusion spell.

The group waited to see what the big guns would be. The result was a bag of mix blessings. On the one hand it was good that they didn't have to fight anything new, on the other hand, four ogres would be an interesting challenge. Still, they all agreed to continue with the plan. Alex waited until a group of them gathered to be able to get as many as she could with her spell. Unfortunately it seemed that the group did not want to cooperate. They created three distinct groups of two ogres on

one side, most of the goblins in the middle, and the last two ogres on the other side. She could only wait for so long, "Fine then." She cancelled her current spell, something one should avoid due to the loss stamina that would still occur, and tried something experimental. In the end she hoped Rosa would understand.

Rosa was still waiting. As she looked at Alex, she understood her frustration. Still, it looked like she figured out her move, a move that she did not really understand. Alex clapped her hands together and muttered some incantation. Red flames circled around her hands. After the spell stabilized, she spread her arms. The red flame split, creating a ball of flame in both hands, essentially splitting the spell in two. While Rosa understood the idea, she had no clue how you would go about accomplishing it. Then it occurred to her that she was about to cast something at two of the three groups, so which one would she leave to her to handle? Not taking a chance, she put more energy in her own spell.

Anna signalled to Mike that she would head for one of the group of ogres and that he should head for the other. As he acknowledged her, Alex quickly stood and threw what looked like a fireball at the one of the group of ogres. The ball ignited as it landed on one of the two, and a large explosion occurred around them. While the explosion was not enough to put them down, it did destroy their weapons, burned most of their straps holding their armor leaving them with no defence, and caused them to scream in a way that made her wish that a silence spell was in effect. The surprise was the second fireball thrown in just a few seconds after the first one, leaving the second ogre group in a similar state to the first.

Anna and Mike moved in as planned. A few steps in and a ring could be seen on the ground surrounding the goblins. They only had a few seconds to look at it before it erupted in a six foot pillar of flame going straight up. No screams were heard from the goblins. The charred remains were all that was left after a few seconds when the pillar dissipated. Anna was seriously impressed with these two ladies; they both had experience with priests and some mages but none could hold a candle to these two. Not wanting to let them do all the work, she hurried to her targets.

The ogres were still trying to brush the flame off them and they paid Anna very little attention. That would probably be their last mistake. With most of the armor burned off, she had her pick of weak points. For the first one, a stab to his upper abdomen. While he may not die instantly, he would not be capable of anything in a short while. The second ogre took her a bit more seriously and tried to go into a defensive position. She pulled her sword out as the first ogre that was falling on the ground and charged at her new target. He tried to grab her, but she dodged under him and slashed him in his armpit. Twisting on her feet, she slashed at the kneecap, forcing him to fall on the ground where a final stab in the back of his neck did him in. As she disengaged, she looked over to see Mike dispatching his final ogre as well. The fight was over in less than a minute.

Alexandria was ecstatic, "Yes, all that and not even a scratch. So what next, scout out for the main camp?"

They all smiled at her energy and enthusiasm; it was very infectious. He figured that he would be the one to break her mood, even if it was the last thing he wanted to do. "Sadly no, they will either fan out or do a massive recall. In either case it

means that we find a spot and wait for a long time."

"Considering the time of day, we may as well camp out for the night once we find this spot. It's getting dark and that will make things harder if we keep moving." Mike and Anna's answer made sense to Alexandria but she had to admit that it still hurt the rush that she was on from their consecutive victories.

The group found a proper spot and Alex informed them that she could not use the same spell again to hide them but could use something similar. The first spell would make it hard for the enemies to focus on them, making really hard to aim things at them. The second would create a fifteen-foot cone of silence around the camp to once again let the sound come in but not go out. Once cast, they picked the order of who would stay on guard. They decided on Mike, Rosamia, and Anna. As Mike took position outside the circle to start his shift, the girls got as comfortable as they could and ate some rations.

Alex turned to Anna. "So I have to ask, why are you dressed like the Crimson army?" Anna felt a bit sad that she was going to go first. She really wanted to know more about them and not go over her own past.

"That's where we originally came from. We were basically kicked out. Well, I was anyways."

This puzzled Alex even more. "They actually kick people out? Seems contrary to what I read."

"It was a special case. I was an outsider from the start and was asked to join by the main Commander. While that was very nice of him, it was also very unexpected and unappreciated by everyone else." Anna glanced up and thought back to four years before.

"The only person at the time that would give me the time of day was my guardian. Unfortunately, she was also very busy and had little time. Since no one would approach me, I killed my time helping the villagers with tasks that they needed, most of which was helping them against the wild life that caused issues. The villagers were happy about the help, while the Crimsons did not care at all. Mind you, these actions did attract the attention of one person." She looked in Mike's direction.

"It was the first time anyone had asked to spar with me, I was stunned. After a while he asked me why I was helping the villagers out. I simply answered that it was the right thing to do. He laughed and agreed that I was probably right. At the time, I did not know that this person was one of the best of the trainees, I just knew that he was better than I was. Figuring that I had nothing to lose, I asked if he would mind being my ongoing sparring partner. He thought about it and added that he would also help outside of training in order for me to get better. I was obviously happy, but had to ask why. He just said that it was the right thing to do."

Alex listened to every word as if reading an interesting book. Rosa, being less interested and having the next watch, found a better spot and tried to get some rest.

"We practiced together for two years and in the end we were equal in overall strength using our own personal advantages. Then came our final test before officially being Crimsons. The Commander at Arms did not approve of me, he never did, so for the final test I had to fight one of the top swordsmen in the Crimson army. There was not much that could be done. Before the match Mike and I got invited to talk to the Crimson

Commander. We figured that maybe he could do something about the Commander at Arms unfair decision." Anna's tone turned sombre after recalling the events that followed.

"The option given was for me to leave. The way he looked at it, he gave me a chance to show the others that outsiders should be accepted, not rejected. That goal had failed and there was nothing to do at that point. My staying would only cause more issues with what the Commander at Arms had planned."

She looked at Alex with sad eyes. "So I left. As I was leaving, he was waiting for me at the door. Two years was going to make for a hard goodbye but then he turned it around and said that he was coming with me. I was happy. I asked if he was sure about what he was saying. He answered something very corny and thoughtful at the same time. We both looked back one last time and left. We have been traveling together for about two years now." She once again looked in Mike's direction. They had been together for a while now, time sure flew by.

Alex only had more questions after a story like that. "I would not have expected that they were so closed minded. It's also too bad that you could not show that ace a thing or two before leaving. I'm sure you would have won."

"I did win. Before leaving he bumped into me. I was so pissed after knowing that I had to leave that I challenged him. The only witness was Mike that joined up later after finishing his talk with the Commander."

"I knew it. So you've been together for four years all in all. Are you two, you know..." Anna turned and gave Alex a small smile. "You seem to want to know a lot. How about we turn this around

a bit. What about you, Alexandria? With the spells you cast, what's your story?"

Rosa suddenly turned around and focused her eyes on Alex as well. Alex tried to deflect the attention a bit. "Why so interested in my story and not hers?" Rosa shrugged. "Her core history is similar to mine, mind you, she has a better ending. Yours, on the other hand, is a complete mystery to me. Also, as a friend I'm curious."

Alex looked at Rosa's smile. "Did you say friend? Just like that? But you don't know anything about me."

"Yes, I said friend, and yes, you're right that I don't know much about you, but I know that you have a good heart by caring about the people around you. You work hard, that's obvious by your current level of magic, and also your curiosity is infectious. So yes, I want to be your friend. I'm sure both Anna and Mike feel the same."

Alex had had rivals, enemies and also people that wanted to be with her, but only because of what she could give them, not because of who she really was. Rosa seemed genuine in what she was saying. By the look on Anna's face, she seemed to agree. After all this time, could she believe?

"I... I'm not sure what to say. I mean, yes yes, I want to be friends, but I can't share like Anna just did... I... I'm sorry..." Rosa stood, went to Alex, and gave her a hug. "That's all right, you can tell us when you are ready or when you can. It changes nothing." A small sob could be heard.

Anna stood up. "I think I'll take the second watch after all. You can stay with her. I'll go inform Mike of the change."

As Mike saw her approach, he instantly dropped his serious face and gave her a warm smile, "Any issues?"



"Nope, only things that would make you glad that you took first watch. I'm here to inform you that I'll be taking second." Puzzled, he started to ask but was cut off. "I'll explain later, but for now just go with the assumption that we will be with those two for probably a long while."

A small chuckle could be heard as he approached to hold her in his arms. "I figured that one when you meet her at the caravan. I will admit I am surprised that Rosamia will stay around. I get the feeling she has a mission or something she needs to prove."

"Hmm, don't we all? Still, she wants to help Alex as much as I do, probably more so, and because of that she will probably stay around." She turned to face him. "So tomorrow, you're planning on trying to attack that army, right?"

He let her go and looked into those beautiful green sparking eyes of hers. "I'm not removing that option from the table. They are both really strong with magic, more so than anyone we have seen. We are equally as strong as them with a sword. I don't know; we will see when we can see their numbers."

"I was thinking the same. We could probably take around six ogres and a good number of goblins but I'm thinking if there is more than that, I'm not so sure those two will agree to just let them go and report back to Newport."

"So what you are saying is that tomorrow will be a fun day." She grabbed his hand and gave him a smile.

The night was uneventful, which allowed everyone to rest up and regain most of their strength. The idea today was to find the enemy camp as quickly as they could without running into anyone along the way.

They ran into some unavoidable small goblin patrols along the way but eventually made it to

what had to be the main camp. From the look of it they had been there for a while. The surrounding forest was cut down and the trees were used to make makeshift walls around the camp. An entrance could be seen protected by one ogre and three goblins.

Mike turned to the spell casters. "Anyway you can see inside without going in?"

"Very easily." Alex started casting a quick spell, raised her arm, and opened her hand. After a few seconds a small bird landed in her hand. She brought it closer to her and whispered another spell. Once it was complete she let the bird go. It flew straight at the camp and landed on top of one of the tree trunks.

"I'm able to see what the bird is seeing right now and it's not encouraging. Here is what it looks like." She took a stick and started drawing on the ground a circle for the camp. She added 'X' for goblins, 'O' for the ogres and an 'A' for an orc. Most of the goblins were grouped together and totalled in the twenties. The ogres were stationed at specific spots, one on each edge of the camp, one in the middle, and two around the orc, making for a total of eight ogres, counting the extra at the door.

Mike looked at Anna. "There is more than we thought, should we just go with the original plan, or go for it anyways?"

Alex looked surprised. "Wait, you thought that we would go against that?" With as much resolve as she could muster, Rosa looked at everyone. "We need to do this. They have already killed enough innocent people by the time we get back and the army gets here they could be gone and more could be dead. I'm sure we can do this." With that they all looked at each other and agreed.

After they agreed on a plan of attack, Rosa again cast the deflection protection spell. Alex cast

a spell that made a small flame dance around her wrist. She looked at Rosa. "Something I've been working on for a while now, it's like a delayed spell." Rosa smiled again, impressed with her.

Anna and Mike rushed at the ogre guarding the entrance from each side, both scoring a hit in the abdomen. It fell on the goblin in front of it, leaving only two. Mike reached out and broke one of the goblin's neck. Anna picked the goblin's dagger and stabbed him in the neck while dodging his swing. While the two retrieved their swords, Alex and Rosa rushed to the entrance and met the now alert camp that was charging at them. Rosa opened with a pillar of fire that scorched a few ogres and killed many goblins. This gave Alex time to once again call the lightning from the sky. With this half of the goblins were defeated along with two ogres.

The goblins kept rushing, only to be met by the two warriors that kept them at bay. The orc then ordered the ogres to start throwing boulders at the party. Thankfully only a few boulders had been prepared and the bombardment stopped quickly, unfortunately this allowed the goblins to scores a few hits against Mike and Anna.

Bloodied, the warriors rushed towards the last five ogres, leaving the goblins to the casters. Rosa asked Alex to ignore the goblin and to provide backup against the ogres, saying that she would take care of them herself. Eight goblins remained and Rosa quickly used her spear to dispatch a few. She then shifted to defence and had to wait for an opening. They were too close for her to cast a spell but her spear would be good enough to keep them off Alex.

Since fire seem to work well the previous time, Alex split another fireball spell and aimed one at each ogre that Anna and Mike were headed for.

That should help them finish them off faster. Trying to slow the other ogres down, she summoned a cone of ice and threw it in their direction. It managed to trap one of them in place. As she turned to see how Rosa was doing, she noticed that the trapped ogre had picked up a supply crate and aimed it at her. His aim was way off due to being half frozen but it was going in the right direction to hit Rosa, who was still defending herself against the goblins. She tried to position herself to miss the crate and got rewarded with a few hits from the goblin swords. Bleeding, there was nowhere for her to go. Alex reacted and threw her prepared fire spell at the crate, which exploded and caused a lot of shrapnel to fly everywhere. Luckily the magic shield protected them; the goblins where not so fortunate.

The warriors made quick work of the two burned ogres. They aimed their sights on the frozen ones next. From what seemed out of nowhere, the orc attacked with his two swords. With the remaining ogre joining in, they got boxed in. They focused on defending the swords and tried to protect themselves against the powerful blows of the ogres, but even that would cause some harm. Mike gave Anna a signal to get ready, and she agreed. Mike purposely made an opening on himself, which caused a large hit from the orc but allowed Anna to slip past the ogre that was still half frozen. She quickly dispatched the frozen enemy from behind, leaving two others and the orc. She could see that the others had joined up. Alex cast a lightning bolt at one and Rosa conjured another pillar of flame for the other.

The orc jump back. He just could not believe that only four humans had destroyed his camp. He prepared for a final charge against the male that was the most wounded of the bunch only to see a

blue cone coming at him. A few seconds later he was completely frozen in place. What a rotten way for it to end.

They had won the fight. Rosamia started magically healing the injuries to the group. While they all agreed that this was a great victory, they still did not know how so many had gotten this far in. Were there other groups like this? They had to find out.

## *Chapter 3*

Rosa inspected the orc that seemed to still be alive. "Great, he's still alive, I'll cast a language spell. It won't last long but we should be able to understand and talk to him. While I interrogate him, I'll have him in a holding spell. He won't be able to move unless I want him to." She turned to Alex. "On my mark, drop your freezing spell. You can do that, right?" Alex just blinked for second, this Rosa seemed different. "Ah yeah, no problem at all."

As Rosamia prepared her spell, Anna couldn't help but wonder what was driving her right now. She had mentioned that their past were similar, but with her something bad had happened. She wondered how this situation related to that issue. It was really the only explanation for the forcefulness she was exhibiting. By the looks of it, Mike seemed to be wondering the same thing. Still the only thing to do at this point was to see how it played out.

Rosa gave the command to Alex. As soon as the spell was lifted, the orc tried to move away but was caught by what felt like a giant invisible hand. Rosa held her hand as if she was gripping something. As she tightened her hold, the orc's body seemed to compress on itself even more.

She approached the orc, her eyes and voice were filled with anger. "You will tell us what your target was, how you got here, and if there are more of you around." At that the orc just laughed. He was quickly cut off by his own screams as the

invisible hand squeezed some more. "I WILL NOT ASK AGAIN."

Alex reached for Rosa's shoulders. "Rosa, what's wrong?"

She turned to see Alex's eyes; they had fear and worry in them. She took a breath and exhaled some of the anger she was felling. "I'm sorry but you don't know the pain that these monsters have caused. They kill during the night and they leave no one living behind. I can't just..." She was frustrated by not being able to say the right words to explain it to her.

Anna did not understand the emotional baggage Rosa was working through but she figured she could maybe help defuse it by making the orc talk about something, anything really. "So fine, you don't want to answer her, still I'm stunned that there is no boasting of how your army was able to pass through the Crusaders and that this small victory means nothing." Considering the current strength of the grip, the orc was only able to let out a small chuckle. Realizing that too much strength was being applied, Rosa relaxed the spell a bit.

Now able to talk, the orc replied, "Your victory does mean nothing, so does your Crusader blockade. Soon all your cities will fall and there is nothing you can do about it."

Anna was not impressed with the answer but continued with her questions anyways. "You sound so sure but for something you treat as nothing, they sure have held your kind back for a while now. I'm not so sure I need to worry about anything falling just yet."

The orc laughed at that statement. "You are as blind as everyone. The way is opened now and you shall fall."

Rosa jumped in. "What do you mean the way is opened? Have you created a tunnel of some sort to go around the Crusaders that they can't see?"

"Haha tunnels, yes, you are correct, priest. We painstakingly dug them and plan to attack your Crusaders as they sleep and dream of their loved one that they will never see again."

Rosa was furious and raised her hand. She was about to put as much force as she could in the spell, but was stopped by another hand. She looked and saw Mike eyes. They seem to mimic her anger but at the same time they were calmer than hers, like a silent rage. "No tunnels. Your people found or opened a new portal and that's how you will go around the army." The orc stopped his laughter. "Hmm, so I guessed right. Thanks for letting me know."

This time it was the orc that was furious. Rosa and Alex were a bit confused. "Wait, you guessed, but you sounded so sure of yourself."

"Of course, I needed him to believe. In order to do that I also had to believe that I had figured it out. It's not so convincing otherwise." He looked back at the orc, who now probably wanted to kill him more than anyone for making a fool out of him. "The thing I really have no clue on is how we would find this portal and can it be shutdown? I don't think that's something he will tell us."

At that question Alex started to think out loud and looked like she was going over pages of notes in her head. "Closing portals permanently can be done but it's not easy. In the case of the Portal Tower, due to its size and strength it would take at least ten highly skilled mages, and some of them better be on the Council. Now if we are talking a small portal, so that its power would not be detected easily then that's a different story. In



order to find something like that you would need something from it."

Rosa listened to every word and wondered why Alex had stopped, "Something from it? What do you mean, like a part of the spell that was cast to open it or maintain it?"

"Well yes, that would do it, but I don't think you would need that much... Hmm." She looked at the orc. "I wonder how much time it's been since he passed through this portal. Going through something like that leaves a residual mark on you for a while. The longer the distance, the longer it stays." She approached the orc that was now trying its best to move away from this odd girl. She cast a spell that had a lot of intricate words and hand gestures, but after a while she extended her hand at the orc. A faint glow could be seen around him. She continued the casting. As she was talking the glow could be seen leaving the orc and was being collected in a tiny glass orb that had appeared in Alexandria fingers. Once the glow was all collected, the casting stopped. Somewhat tired after doing that, Alex had to gather some strength. Anna tried to help support her. "Okay, so that spell is easier to understand than it is to implement. The books forgot to mention how draining it is to use it as well."

Able to stand by herself now, Alex looked at the glowing blue-green orb in her hands and explained. "He did in fact hold some residual magic from the portal, or something like a portal, but it is very small. With certain items I could create something that would give us only a general direction of its location. It's the best I could do."

She looked at Rosa to see if it would be good enough. She replied by giving her a hug so strong that she lost her balance again, still weak from the spell. "That's fantastic news, thank you so much."

During that touching moment the spell holding the orc let go. He figured that it would be a great time to try to run away from these monsters. As he turned he was greeted by the man's sword now firmly in his chest. He was so focused on the witches and he had just disappeared. Again he thought, what a rotten way to die. He dropped on the ground, never to come back up again.

Mike sheathed his sword back in the scabbard, "So where are we going in order to find those items you need, Alexandria?"

"The town of Newport should have everything and it is just a few days walking distance from here."

"Alright, Newport it is."

The day's walk was pretty silent. Alex was mostly gathering her strength back and everyone else was mostly going over what had happened and what their new target was. During the night Mike figured he would break the silence. It was getting to be a bit too much and plus he could tell it was starting to annoy Alexandria. "So Alexandria, I know now is not really the time, but are you recovered enough to look at that magic item of ours?"

At that point Alex did not care if she had the strength or not. "Sure, what do you have? You never really explained it." Mike took out something that looked like a crystal ball the size of a small fist. It had a faint reddish glow to it with what looked like a black dragon footprint floating inside. Alex took the ball and examined it. "What do you know about it?"

"It was given to us by the Commander of the Crimson when we left. He mentioned that these, Anna has one too, are probably the last of their kind and that it would give us extra power if we ever needed it. He also added that this extra power

would come at a price. He made no mention of what type of power or price he was talking about."

Anna gave Alex her orb. It had the same shape and mark inside but this one had a faint greenish glow. "For me this gift had a tainted feel to it, considering how and when it was given. Still, I am curious as to what the old man gave us. Is it something that you can figure out?"

"Well, it's not your run of the mill enchantment, I can tell you that. It feels familiar, mind you... Hmm, I'll cast a spell on it to make sure."

Anna gave her a concerned look. "If you need to rest a while longer it can wait. I mean, it's been two years so a bit more is not an issue."

Alex smiled. "It's fine. You don't need to worry about me that way, it's a simple spell anyways. It's decoding the result that's the hard part." She started to cast the identification spell that would give her the information needed. She realized that the others did not know this but this type of action was something she could do in her sleep now. While being curious as to what this parting gift was, she did not expect much from it, even if it was rare. Most of these items turned out to be trivial. The spell was cast and her mind received the information. She knew why she thought it was familiar. She had read about it over and over while she was a child. The thing is, she did not want to tell them about this. Why the heck did they have it in the first place? Again, things made no sense.

Perplexed, she asked them, "So this Commander gave this to you with no instructions, correct? No hint, no nothing on how he wanted you to use it?"

"Okay, now you have me worried. What did he give us?"

Alex thought for a while on how she should start this explanation. "Alright, this is going to be long so bear with me okay. Many years ago, during the war of the dragons, brave warriors were picked and an enchantment was put on their weapons. This enchantment allowed them to focus a key emotion while fighting. This emotion would then be converted in a destructive blast; the more potent the emotion, the stronger the blast."

She looked at everyone that had all eyes focused on her. "So far great enchantment, right? The issue came when the emotion was too strong. When used, the blade glowed of the color of the orb. When a stronger emotion was used, the glow shifts. Red becomes pink, for example. If for some reason you shift so much that the glow becomes white, then this will unleash a destructive force strong enough to kill a dragon in one blow. It will also drain the user completely, essentially killing him."

She picked up the second orb that glowed green. "Using this enchantment is like casting spells. Every time you use them it drains your stamina a bit. The trouble with this enchantment is that there is no limiter to stop you from casting that one ultimate spell. That was part of the point back then and why they linked it to an emotion. The idea was that they would link it to the reason why you fought. Let's use rage as an example. There would be a time when the fighter would get so mad he would eventually turn the blade white and destroy whatever evil force pushed him to that level."

She looked up at both of them again. "These orbs that you have are that enchantment. The red one is linked to rage, obviously. The green one is linked to compassion or love. That color was never too clear in the books. So I have no clue why this

was given to you as a parting gift, and no one in history has never not turned their weapon white, I really don't recommend ever using it."

While Mike seemed to be thinking things through, Anna asked Alex a few questions. "Okay, let's go with questions you may know and skip the ones where we wonder what the old man was thinking. So mine is green, how does that work? Killing people out of love or compassion seems like an odd emotion to link this with."

"I think the logic with that emotion was fighting to protect those you cared about or loved. We were losing the dragon wars in theory, so any weapon that could be used was used. Most of these orbs were red, but not everyone that was pissed off was mad enough to kill themselves in order to destroy their targets. So when volunteers could not be found, another type of person was selected, but with the same end result. Green was rare and that's why the explanation is a bit incomplete, but the effects and end result is the same as the other. Did he give you the green one?"

"No, the truth of the matter is that I just picked it because it appealed to me more. I did not really give it much thought, considering the other news I was thinking about at the time."

Mike looked up. "As for me it was the last one, mind you, given the choice I'm sure I would have picked the red one."

"Well, that is pretty much all there is to these. Once the warrior is killed, the enchantment burns out. Applying the enchantment is easy enough. Just hold the orb to the weapon and say the magic word, which will break the orb and then automatically enchant the weapon to the wielded. A magic word that I will not tell you. While I have not known you two for that long, I am not

interested in seeing you die." She turned to Rosa. "I'm not interested in seeing any of you die."

Rosa looked down with a small smile. "Don't worry about me on that one. I have no use for enchantments that can kill you like that. Witnessing something like that once in your life is more than enough."

While Alex was about to jump in with a question, Anna interrupted her. "I think we both agree that something like that would be of no use to us." Anna looked at Mike, who only nodded in agreement. She gave a puzzled look back at him. She would have to push the issue further later, she supposed.

The rest of night was peaceful and the next day's march was normal. The awkward silence of yesterday was gone and easy conversation made the day pass pretty quickly. The group arrived at Newport town near the end of that day.

The reason behind the creation of Newport was as an access portal to the floating magic city of Astrum. This portal was heavily guarded and permission is needed to use it. More often than not, mages came down from the city and meet with whomever they had business with. Because of this, a large number of inns could be found. At the edge of the town a large mansion was built. This place was reserved for long meetings and also for very important people that want more comfort and security. Wide selections of merchants took residence to sell their exotic items or even to sell items on behalf of Astrum.

As they approached the town, Alexandria covered herself with a shawl to hide her long hair and also to cover part of her face. Rosamia looked at her with a half smile. "Anything we should know?"

Taking a moment to choose her words properly, she replied, "Not really, no, but at the same time I would rather not be recognized. If that happens I may not be able to journey with you anymore. I would rather avoid that."

She thought that they would push further but instead Mike asked a different type of question. "Is there an inn that you would recommend that would have fewer people?"

"There is one, it's called the 'The Blue Fountain Inn'. It's located pretty far from the market place and maybe that's why it's not as popular as the others. Still, it's probably the best place for us."

Seeing as they got in late, the only people around where the guards. They found the inn pretty quickly with Alex's direction and it seemed fairly empty. The group rented two rooms with two beds each for a few nights. They needed to find materials for a spell and may require a place to rest and recover after the casting. Due to the time, they agreed to go to bed and talk about their next steps in the morning over breakfast.

The next day the group agreed that the first step would be to finish the location spell. Alex explained what would be needed in order to finish this first goal. "I will need three items to complete the spell. The first is an orb about the size as your enchantment orbs that you both have. Second, a map of the area, the bigger the area the better. Keep in mind that while a bigger area is great, it's more important that the map be very detailed. The idea behind it is that the spell will consume and use the knowledge from the map in order to guide us. A bigger area means that the spell will have a bigger range, assuming the portal is very far, but better detail will mean that the location given will be more precise. Given the weakness of the residue

magic found on the orc, I think that precision will be more important than range. Still, if a map can be found that has both, then so much the better. The last time is pretty simple. Basically I need an object to act like a compass needle. Anything will do as long as it can be used to point out something."

Anna looked at Alex questioningly, "I get the feeling that you're describing all these items in so much detail because you will not be there to purchase them."

Fidgeting a bit, she responded, "I was hoping that I could convince you guys to get the items and that I could stay here."

Anna had a sarcastic smile on her face. "Now, is that because you need to prepare for the spell or because you want to avoid being seen?"

Alexandria dropped her head and tried not to not face Anna as she answered. "Can I say a bit of both?" They all realized that this was not her preferred way to go about it and that her staying had more to do with her reasons for staying hidden.

"It's all right, Alex, we will go get the items, it's no problem at all. Rosa, do you want to stay here as well or join us?"

She thought about it for a minute. "I think I will stay here with Alex. If anyone asks who or why she is staying in the room, I can easily tell them that she is feeling under the weather and that I stayed behind to help her recover. This should help her avoid attention and my being a priestess tending to her should make it more convincing." Alex was not sure if she wanted to cry or smile. These people could have easily pushed the issue a few times but decided not to. She really believed that they would wait until she was ready to tell



them. She wished that there were more people like them in Astrum.

With that ironed out, the group split and agreed to meet back in the room where Alex and Rosa would be once they found the items needed.

Anna figured that seeing as it was just the two of them now, it would be a good time to go over his response of the day before. "So what was that nod about?" Not knowing at all what she referred to, he just looked at her, confused.

"You know what I'm referring to, when we all agreed that using those enchantments was a bad idea, you just silently nodded."

"Oh that, well yeah, I agreed as well."

"Not good enough. There is a 'but' in your head. Look, I'm okay with secrets but I have a feeling that this won't end with a happy surprise." She gave him a half smile, "So spill."

He took a deep breath. "I'm worried, that's why it's in my head. Sure, I'm not too keen on realizing I lost control during battle and the sword is already white, but at the same time, look at what we are doing."

Now she understood his reaction. "Hmm, first we take on a camp that pretty much holds as much as we have faced together and next up is a portal. It's bound to have more enemies than that camp, and knowing us we will probably try to close the thing. Now you're thinking what's next and that the power those enchantments will bring should help." She looked at him with a heavy heart. "But is it worth the risk? That's what you are trying to figure out, right?"

"Yeah, Alexandria mentioned that no one has survived. While I don't think we are better than them, I do think that we have an advantage they did not have. We have each other and we are also fighting side by side. In their case I would think

that they were all solo fighters. Even those that protected someone surly did not have those they wanted to protect next to them."

"Hmm, so basically as long as we both don't lose control during a battle, we will be able to keep each other in check because of how we feel about one another."

He took her hand and gave her a smile. "Don't you agree?"

"Yes, I do. Our feelings for each other will keep us from this terrible fate." She reached out and hugged him. "After all these years, you're still corny."

"There is only so much I can change. Anyways, we still don't need its power, so let's leave this for later, assuming later is ever needed. Plus, we still have to find that map."

"Sound good. Still, there is one thing. If the time does come, you need to promise me that we will talk about this again. Basically if you plan on doing it, so will I. No going off by yourself on this one."

"I promise."

Alexandria was sitting by the window of the two-story inn. How many times had she spent like this wondering about what others were doing and imagining scenarios in which she would be a part of something? She figured that finally that wish had come true, more so that she could have ever hoped. Still, she had to wonder, would she have enough power to close down a portal if it came to that? Normally only mages could perform something like this. Still she wondered if a priest could do certain parts of the spell. As she heard the door opening, she put those thoughts in the back of her mind. It was something to figure out later.

Rosa stepped in the room with a tray of food. "Seeing as you're 'sick', the owner insisted that I bring you soup and a light sandwich. I hope you don't mind."

"That's fine. Sorry again for all this. I mean, I should be the one getting the materials for the spell, or at least my own food. It's just in this particular town it really can't be helped."

"It's all right. Again we are friends now so don't worry about that. We all know that you're not doing this for the fun of it. Whatever reason you have for doing this, we will believe that it needs to be done."

"I'm not sure why I deserve to be around people like you guys but I sure am thankful for it." She gave Rosa an appreciative smile and then looked at lunch. "Chicken soup... Should have figured."

Rosamia sat in a chair opposite to Alex while she ate. "I think now would be a good time to explain my 'episode' that I had when I was interrogating that orc the other day."

Alex quickly swallowed what was currently in her mouth. "Ah look, I'll be the first to say that I want to know but really, given my current request, don't feel like you need to."

Rosa raised her hand. "No, it's okay, I want to. The truth of the matter is that the enemy group was there to attack something. When I was young the town I was in was attacked by something similar. Not many of us survived, and it seems that because of it I've tried to figure out a way to stop this from happening to others, or at least help in one way or another. With the situation we were in, I lost control a bit."

Alex was taken aback. She had figured something similar had happened but at the same time the calm that Rosa used to talk about the

situation and her current goal was a bit sad in a way. "So I guess that is what you meant about being similar to Anna? You were both chased out from where you lived, but in your case things are more traumatic, hence you having a worse ending."

Rosa gave a look to Alex, telling her that she had it wrong. "I guess you could see it that way but no, that was not what I was referring to." Seeing as Alex had that look that said 'please tell me more' that she often had, Rosamia continued "My Crusader friend and I were both adopted by a priest named Jonathan. Seeing as we were the only two kids around the same age, we spent a lot of time together. Jonathan was old and retired but he was very wise. Because of this, one day another priest came around to try to convince him to come back. This was during the time the Crusader branch had started and they were looking for older and wiser people to be at the head of the order to lead them."

Rosa readjusted herself in her seat. The next part would be uncomfortable to recall. "The night of the visit is when the town was attacked. While most of them were orcs, there was one person that stood out. A dark cleric."

Alex's mouth went wide open. A dark cleric was only slightly less dangerous than a dragon. They could infuse themselves with the dark power that they tapped into. This would turn them into a large shadow creature about as tall as a house. This also made them near indestructible. If they performed well, once the task was done they would revert back, otherwise they would burn out and die.

"The town was small so while the guards put up a good fight, they lost in the end. The two priests were busy trying to find a way to stop the dark cleric that had transformed. Overall, things

were pretty bleak. Adam, the childhood friend, convinced me to go with him to help out. While we killed an orc, we also made a perfect target for the dark cleric. Something was said between the two priests, and then Jonathan started casting a spell that I had never seen before and probably never will again. The spell summoned a golden avatar that only did one swing. After that everything turned white. When we came to, the visiting priest was covering both of us. The dark cleric and the orcs were dead. As for Jonathan, he was slowly dying. I learned that he had cast a spell named 'Valkyrie'. Basically the spell does the same thing as those enchantments, the only difference is that it slowly drains you after you cast it. Depending on how much life you have left, it could be an hour or at most a day before the end."

Alex had stopped eating midway through the story and was glued to every word that was coming out of Rosa's mouth. "There is no way that I would have guessed that. You're lucky to be alive, really. Who knew a holy spell like that existed."

"Few do, I would guess. After that many years passed, Adam changed because of what happened. He became angrier. When the time came that he could join the Crusaders, he jumped as soon as he could."

"So is that the similar with a bad ending? Still, I would have guessed ... I don't know... The boy, really?"

Rosamia gave a small laugh. "I spent more than ten years with him and we shared a traumatic event. When the fork in the road came up, there is nothing more that I wanted but for him to follow me. In her case, that person did follow her, so yes, because of that I think that she is lucky. Did she have a hard time? I'm sure she did, but I get the feeling that she was not alone through

it all and the same for him. To me that's a pretty big thing."

When put that way, Alex understood her point of view and agreed with it. She herself had been alone during bad moments, so she understood how loneliness could be as hard as dealing with the issue itself.

Soon a key was heard at their door. Mike and Anna entered. Alex removed the leftover meal that was hardly touched so that they could place the items on the table.

"Finding the perfect map took longer than we wanted, sorry about that."

Alex looked at Anna curiously. "Perfect map, eh? Well let's see about that." She unrolled the map and looked at it. Perfect was a big word but this was pretty close. All the detail was there and it had all the northern section of the continent. As long as the portal was in the top part, which it had to be in a way, they should find it without a problem. She looked at the other components. The orb was okay. Then she saw the item that would serve as a direction marker. She looked at both of them and then back at the item. "Ah, did you actually get this from a compass?"

Anna bowed her head and pointed at Mike, "What, too literal?" Alex looked back, "Just a bit. Still, all of this is good. Do you want me to do the casting now?"

They looked at each other. Mike replied for the group. "Sure, why not?"

Alexandria began casting the locator spell. As she finished, the items melded in the orb. You could see the compass arrow now with a blue-green glow around it. It spun around for a bit and then pointed east. Once it stopped, Alex brushed her hand on top of the orb. A floating blue-green semi-transparent map appeared on top of it. A

glowing circle could be seen in the mountain area to the east. "Well, that worked better than I thought. As we get closer the map should be able to tell us more precisely which mountain section we should look at."

Mike studied the floating map. "Hmm, it should take a while to get there. At least five days."

Rosa looked as well. "We could cut that time in half with horses."

"Horses? I always forget about those, why is that?"

Anna held her laughter, while both of the others only looked at her, wondering about the reaction. "It's a personal joke but the quick version was that after we left, I told him to make sure he would have no regrets for leaving. A few hours later this guy looks at me with sad eye and tells me that he's already regretting his action, or should I say his inaction, for not taking two horses before we left. It's only funny now, at the time not so much."

The women gave him an incredulous look, so Mike quickly changed the subject. "That being said, I think I'll go eat and turn in early so that I can get the supplies for the trip. We may as well leave early." Being uncomfortable with how all three ladies were looking at him, Mike excused himself. As he left, they all laughed together.

"Ah, I finally paid him back after all these years. Thanks for participating."

Rosamia stood up and started heading to the door. "Not a problem. Still, getting ready and an early supper sound like a good idea. Alexandria, seeing as you will probably stay here, do you want me to grab you anything?"

"Food when you come back. In the meantime, I'll try to do some spell preparation."

"I guess that leaves me to go help plan out the other things we will need for the trip with the bad

comedian downstairs. See you all tomorrow bright and early then."

As they both left, Alexandria continued to look out the window while the sun started to set. "Yes, things are very different now."



## Chapter 4

The few days of travel went by quickly, but the toll of not knowing what to expect, and that knowing this would probably be the fight of their lives, was starting to get to everyone. Alexandria occupied her time by fiddling with a spell to augment it, and the others looked at her in envy. At this point anything to get their minds off what was coming would be a blessing.

The group finally stopped the next day. The map told them that apparently they were less than half a day's walk from their destination. Rosamia magically tied the horses in a place they could have access to food. If they were not back in within a day the magic would fade and set them loose. They were close enough for the map to set a glow on a specific mountain, meaning that the portal was probably in a cave.

Mike looked at the group. "I don't really know what to expect, but I'm assuming the worst. Alexandria, try not to use too many spells if you can. I'm assuming closing a portal will be impossible if you are too drained."

"I'll try to keep it simple, but if any of us are in danger I'll use anything I can. We can always report back with the information if we can't close the thing on the first attempt."

"I totally agree. Rosamia, can you cast that tracking spell again with more than just goblins?"

Rosa tried to avoid eye contact. "I can cast the spell again but with my limit I can only track one type, goblin or orc. I would need to practice more in order to be able to do that, sorry."

"No worries, one type is better than none, the way I look at it. Go with goblins for now; there is bound to be at least one of those with the outside patrols."

He turned and looked at Anna, who was currently studying the map. She looked up at him. "I'll be lead until we get to the cave, then we can switch. You can stay close to them." He smiled and nodded. Rosamia protected everyone with the anti-missile spell before Anna took the lead.

She was not a fan of taking the lead but she was faster than him and had a better direction sense. Once they got to the cave, then, it will be a different story. She stayed close to be able to see Rosa's signals if her spell detected anything and also for them to pick up her own warnings. Tracks where everywhere, which made them near useless. Still, they did confirm that only ogres, goblins and orc were present. It did not take long for her to spot the first enemy team approaching.

She made the group stop to explore further. It seemed that the group had four orcs and two goblins. She backtracked to where the others were. She made a signal to Mike saying to head to them directly while she ambushed them from the back. She hurried past the incoming group, being careful not to be seen. Mike and the rest were purposefully making a bit more noise to get their attention. She saw him and Rosa charge at the two front goblins. As the orcs prepared to enter the fight, she approached them as quick as she could and stabbed one of them in a vital area. Taking advantage of the confusion of the other orc next to her, she quickly spun around him and did a slash across his back and a stab to the chest as he turned around. Rosa and Mike had finished off the goblins and another orc, leaving only one that she dispatched quickly as he charged at her.

She was about to continue on when she saw Rosa double over and put her hands over her mouth to muffle a scream. Her eyes went wide before she started to regain her composure. After a few quick breaths she looked at all of them. "Sorry about that. I had to turn off the tracking spell, there are too many of them. As we got closer, all their locations rammed into my brain at the same time and it was just too painful."

Anna looked at her and gave her a quick smile. "No worries, we will just have to be more careful." She knew that there was no way Rosa would react that way with unless the pain was really unbearable. The best she could do was to try to make sure Rosa didn't blame herself too much for not being able handle it and for herself to be more alert. Still, she wondered how many was many.

Many turned out to be fifty goblins and thirty orcs, so far. This new particular group was causing them issues. Orcs had scored some lucky blows on Rosa and Mike. While Mike helped Anna get rid of the two ogres, Rosa was busy defending Alex. Anna saw how badly she wanted to jump in with her spell, but Alex held off even when the group got hurt. As Anna slashed away at an orc, she heard something coming their way, reinforcements. So far almost all battles had more enemies show up during the fight. There were so many around that the sound of battle attracted them pretty quickly. As she turned to let the others know, she saw that they were warning her of another group coming their way. "Just perfect." she muttered to herself.

Anna and Mike attacked the last remaining orcs with everything they could. Rosa realized that they were creating openings for her to finish them off. That being done the group repositioned itself with Alex and Rosa in the middle, Mike to meet the group coming from the back and Anna would

handle the front. During the few seconds that they had, Rosa magically healed Mike's wounds. As both waves approached, Anna saw a ball of flame head at her enemies and explode. She heard another explosion from behind. Alex had split her spell again to conserve power and even up the odds. What was left of her group after the spell was one ogre and three orcs. Seeing as the orcs were still disoriented from the blast, she rushed the closest one with her blade and delivered a successful hit to his chest. Pulling out her sword, she slashed the other orc in the face. The blow did not go deep enough to kill but would take him out of the fight.

She saw a large shadow overhead. The ogre had fully recovered and was taking a swing at her. She dodged in the only direction that was opened to her and gave a quick curse. She had missed the blow but had positioned herself in a perfect spot for the orc that was left. He slashed her across her lower back. The wound was not deep but would be fatal soon due to the loss of blood. Still, she had to focus. Getting hit had caused an opening for the orc. With all her strength she hit him with the butt of her hilt to his throat. While the last orc was choking to death, the ogre took an overconfident swing. Anna clumsily dodged it again. She would need healing soon and probably had one strong blow left. As the ogre was about to take a horizontal swing, she quickly closed in on him with an upward thrust. Her blade connected first at the bottom of his skull. A few seconds more and he was down. She turned and fell to her knees.

Rosamia was helping as best as she could. The fireball had a better result on Anna's group than Mike's. Because of that she stayed to help defend Alex and assist him when she could. These battles were very draining and realistically this was just

the start of them. She stabbed the orc in the back that was trying to flank Mike with the help of the two remaining ogres. You could tell he was used to fighting with Anna at his side; he constantly tried to create openings for the other person. Already he was setting up one of them by doing quick slashes to get their attention and then making them move around him. It was a good tactic, assuming your partner had enough experience with the flow of battle. As she gave the ogre a critical blow, she thanked Adam for all those forced practice and sparing sessions. She pulled out her spear and heard Alex yell, "Rosa... Anna..." She turned to Anna that she was finishing her last enemy, and then Rosa's eyes went wide. "I was careless... How could I ..." She quickly disengaged and ran toward her badly bleeding friend. Relief filled her as Rosa realized that she would make it in time. She chanted a holy spell to heal the wound and stop the pain. "There, you should be fine now. The loss of blood will have an effect on you, though. That's something I can't do anything about."

Anna stood up and caught her breath for a few seconds. "You have done more than enough, don't worry about it."

Mike and Alex joined up and, Rosa could tell he was concerned. It was a feeling she knew well. Anna gave an unapproving look at him. "What took you so long? Are you getting slow on me already?"

He gave her a quick smirk. "Slow? I'm not the one that got hit back there."

"That's only because you got help, admit it."

They continued to playfully banter for a bit. Alex joined in, playing the role of the person that would defuse the situation. Rosa looked at them. While the break would be small, it was much needed. What was also needed was a change in tactic, something she needed to provide. Having

the tracking spell turned off really hampered their progress and also made it easier for the enemies to ambush them. She had tried again to cast it with the same result. This time she wondered if a different target may work better.

Convinced, she informed the group. "I would like to try the spell again, but this time I'll try to monitor ogres. With any luck, there should be fewer of them. That's assuming it works at all. Trying an unpractised spell rarely has the desired effect the first time."

Both Mike and Alex tried not to look directly at her, while Anna looked a bit angry. "Look, I told you that we don't blame you at all for not being able to use that spell, so please stop blaming yourself. You are already providing a ton of help, so don't feel that this slow pace is your fault."

Mike put his hand on Anna's shoulder and added to her explanation. "At the same time, we need to destroy as many as we can. Considering their numbers we need to make a dent in them before we reach the target, otherwise too many reinforcements will arrive when we try to make it out of that cave."

Emotional and logical reasoning, these two really played well together. Still, she could not let it go. "Thanks, both of you, but I know I can do more so I want to try. The spell will take a few minutes to cast because of my unfamiliarity, so please, if you could, guard me during that time."

They all responded by forming a triangle guard around her. Alex looked at her with concern. She of all people knew the risk of casting untested spells in these conditions. She did not say anything so Rosa figured she understood that there was no way that she could not give more than her all in this situation. She started her prayer and let the magic take her like it always did.

When she was done, she opened her eyes to see that everyone was looking at her with concern again. The spell, while functional, had drained her more than it should have. She pulled herself up and gave them a reassuring look. "It worked, I can now track the location of the ogres. The range is more limited, but should still give us enough warning time."

Mike nodded. "Change of plans, then. Time to go hunting."

Their approach changed from this point on. Rosa was with Anna in the front and the other two followed a bit closer in the back. She gave Anna the direction. Once spotted, she would go a bit ahead to figure out their position and numbers for the group. Mike then opened the attack, Rosa and Alex attacked a bit later from the sides and Anna came in from the rear. While the battles were still hard, they suffered no more lethal wounds and their pace quickened. They did this for about thirty groups until they finally had thinned down their numbers. They finally approached what looked like a main camp that was guarding the entrance to the cave. She informed them that at least twenty to twenty-five ogres could be picked up by the spell. This made her wonder how many orcs and goblins would be present.

Alexandria was glad they were finally taking a break. They had taken down about forty groups in total. She was very sore all over and she was the one that had minimal participation in those battles. She just could not understand how the others did it. All she wanted to do was use a teleport spell and go to sleep in a nice inn. Unfortunately, that was not possible. Heck, the only reason they had stopped was because they had reached the camp guarding the entrance and they currently had to figure out if they could take it

down. Mike and Anna had gone off on reconnaissance. Since using her spells was still mostly off limits, she figured that would not be the case for the camp.

After a few minutes they returned with concerned looks on their faces. They explained that the camp had about forty goblins, thirty orcs and twenty-five ogres. One third of those numbers were guards and the others were mostly killing time around the camp eating, drinking or sleeping. She could tell that Mike was having issues with this one. He took a deep breath and communicated what he had in mind. "The issue here is that there are too many of them and so few of us. I'm assuming that Alexandria could level the playing field but that would leave her too depleted, so here is what I'm suggesting. Anna and I will cut our way in. You two follow us closely. We will be constantly moving around, otherwise we will make too good of a target for ogres to throw things at us. Alexandria and Rosamia, when one of you sees a large group forming, blast them. The idea is to discourage them from grouping up and attacking us. Let's try to keep them in sizes like the patrols that we attacked. If we get fortunate, maybe we can whittle them down. If things turn bad, then Alexandria can go all out to cover a retreat. It's not the best tactic I'm sure, but given the time we have, I can't think of anything else."

Anna stepped up. "It's not your worst idea neither and I agree on the lack of options."

Rosamia gave a small smile. "I'm in. There is no way I want to leave without at least causing some damage to this."

They looked at her, waiting to see if the approval would be unanimous. "I'm in too, and don't worry about the cover. If we need to run, that should be easier than closing the portal."



They checked their equipment. Rosa reapplied the protection spell and Alex reapplied her instant cast spells, now at two.

Alexandria followed behind them. They charged at their first target to create a point of entry. Without stopping, they continued at their next target. Alex could now see what they were up against. Her eyes went wide and she stopped. She saw a column of fire rise up from the monsters that were charging in her direction and then she heard a yell. "ALEX, keep up!" This caused her to snap out of it. She looked around and only a few seconds had passed, and yet they seem so far. She cursed herself for making a stupid mistake like this. She hurried to catch up to them, at the same time split one of her instant prepared spells and launched it at two groups with mostly goblins. The spell was weaker this way but it's something she could do while running and would still incapacitate the targets.

As she reached them, Rosa was casting another pillar of fire on the train of monsters she had created. Once cast, Rosa took up her spear and defended herself on a few lone goblins that had gotten through. Then Alex realized that they had stopped for a bit due to a large group that had formed up in front. She quickly cast one of the largest fireballs she could spare and threw it at the group. After the large explosion, the two warriors jumped into the now flaming group and killed as many as they could to plow through and keep moving.

Alexandria was still panicking. She did not want to make another mistake but there were so many of them. She was constantly hearing the protective shield defending her from arrows. There were so many screams coming from the monsters. She felt like she needed to get away, to push them

all back and go some safe place as she could do that. She looked at her party members furiously fighting. Rosa was pushing back everyone that got close, she had a few nicks and a lot of rips in her cloths due to the close calls. Still she fought with every ounce she had. The two warriors had suffered some wounds but they both moved around the enemies like this was their personal dance floor, carving down a path for all of them to follow. Taking a quick breath, she realized she needed to stop doubting herself. After all, her friends believed in her and she would not let them down.

A wave was coming at the two in front and at the side. Alex cast a freezing spell and split it again, targeting both groups. It would not freeze them completely but it did stop them from moving for a while. She saw that her friends quickly went in that direction and twisted around them to cut them down from the back. She ignored the archers and trusted in Rosa's spell to cover them. Instead she launched a full fireball at a group of orcs that were mounting a shield defence. From the corner of her eye she saw that an ogre that was about to throw a boulder in their direction. She summoned lighting in her hand and directed it at him, instantly making his body drop on the floor. I can do this, she thought. If she stayed with small spells or kept on splitting them, she should have enough power for later.

A shadow appeared behind her. She only had time to turn her head to see the orc sword slash away at her back. She screamed. The pain and shock made it hard to focus. This was her first big wound. How had Anna continued to fight an ogre with something like this? As she saw the orc's grinning face, he took another swing at her. She extended her arm, about to release her last instant

spell. Suddenly the grinding stopped and the tip of a spear could be seen coming out of his chest. Rosa pulled out the spear, cast a quick spell to close the wound and helped her up. "It will have to do for now. Sorry about that."

Alex kept up the pace as best as she could. The wound had stopped bleeding but it still hurt like nothing else, another thing that her books did not explain. While heroic victories made for great stories, they often left out the pain they had to go through in order to achieve such victories. It made her realize why some people hated to hear about their exploits as they were made to look so easy by trivializing the whole thing.

This frantic pace continued for what felt like hours, but only about thirty minutes had passed. She was exhausted. While she had conserved a lot of power, quickly casting so many spells in a short amount of time could be draining in a different way. Most of the surviving enemies had fled in the forest, probably in search of a few patrol members. Too bad it would take them a long time, considering how many they had gotten before attacking this camp. She looked at everyone and herself. They all had wounds everywhere. Most major ones had been quickly patched up during combat, but they still hurt like heck and they all looked like they had a fight with a blender and lost. Rosa took the time they had to properly heal all major injuries. The next part would be the cave and who knew how many they will find there. She took an empty pouch and filled it with as many small stones as she could find. There were only so many spells that could be used in a cave, after all.

Mike looked at the carnage and the group. The results were truly impressive. Sure, they still had a way to go, but he had only expected to deliver a crippling blow to the camp. Still, there had been

too many close calls for everyone and with a portal he had to expect a possible endless supply of reinforcements.

He walked at the entrance and heard sounds. After looking a bit closer he saw a troop of enemies charging towards the entrance. He quickly turned around and yelled, "Alexandria, fire in the hole. Quick!" She stopped examining the stone she had just cast a spell on and cast a fireball, sending it in the tunnel. An explosion was heard and then screaming. Mike jumped in the cave. Screaming would mean some monsters had survived but they had to be weak and he could not let them regroup.

The cave tunnels were small; they would allow for a maximum of three people side by side. This gave very little room to fight, but also limited the way the enemies could come at them. He slashed and thrust at the enemies still suffering from Alexandria's spell. He ran past a few, fully knowing that Anna, who was now close behind him, would take care of them. The others were catching up as well, which was good as they needed to get to that portal and create a bottle neck long enough for Alexandria to be able to close it.

The line of enemies attacking him seemed endless but he could not think about that. His only thought was making it to the end. During the battle, Anna was able to deliver jabs with her sword around him. Some of these thrusts came very close to him but he had complete trust in her and her skills. This was not the first time they had been in situations like this and had practiced this type of fighting. The unexpected help came from Alexandria. When a large target or someone with a shield showed up she would throw a rock at it. As soon as contact was made the target area was covered in a thin cold sheet of ice. This often caused the target to drop the item they were

holding, giving the perfect opportunity to strike back.

Moments passed and finally they had made it to the portal room. The tunnel had gone well, with only minor cuts suffered. He realized that the portal room would have a different outcome. The room was very large allowing for a big group to form up. The portal itself was a glowing, about ten feet wide, and about a foot from the wall at the end of the room. Already a group was ready for them and more started coming out. He let out a scream to match theirs as he charged at them. He jumped on one target to the other. It did not matter if he scored a fatal blow or not, as long as he scored a hit. He aimed at arms, legs and sides. When they got too close he kicked them away. He suffered some cuts himself, and every time he kept telling himself that he needed to go faster.

Rosa looked at him going from one target to another. She had seen something similar to this before in someone else. Alex looked and wondered how long someone could fight like that. Anna snapped them both out of it. "Don't focus on him for now, he's doing all he can to give you time to close the portal. The longer he lasts, the less he will realize what is going on around him. I'll help him out, you close that portal. Rosa, protect her with everything you have. As soon as she starts, I'm sure she will attract some attention."

Mike did not hear what Anna said, or see that Alexandria was starting a spell. All he knew was that he needed to dodge left and flip his sword in order to stab the one coming at him from the back. He pulled his blade out and parried an attack coming from the front, then kicked one on the side and crouched. He did an upward stab at the next target to his other side. The only other thing he realized was that someone else had joined in his

insane attack. There was only one person that would. He screamed again, and thought, '*Even faster, I need them to only attack me.*'

Alex found a spot so that she could see the portal clearly and the runes around its diameter. The spell used to create the portal was simple but also very powerful. Too powerful, she figured. She called up the first spell that would allow it to link to her magic. When she was linked she could figure out its type. As she deciphered the information, she realized that this was a full-fledged portal. Once cast, it would power itself until closed. How had they managed that? Reopening a closed portal in the tower or linking one portal to another was one thing, but creating a new one was an entirely different thing, and so was closing something like this.

As if sensing her doubt, Rosa parried the blow of an orc and asked in a hurried manner, "Alex, can you close it?"

She blinked at the question. "Ah... I think so. I'm going to try now." The reality is that she had no clue if she could close something like this in the best of situations. "I have to do this." She channelled everything she had in the spell and tried to force it to close. The runes on the portal flickered and a wave of energy was sent back to Alex. She flew off and landed on the ground about a foot from where she was standing. She shook her head and looked up. The portal was still open. She had failed.

Rosa was frantically holding off anyone that tried to reach Alex. She had no clue how long she would last and could not imagine how much time Mike and Anna could hold out. She once again screamed at Alex, not able to take time to face her. "Alex, you need to tell us if we need to run. Now!" She stopped and realized that more reinforcements

were coming but this time from the tunnel. Her eyes went wide. They were trapped. "Anna, Mike, the entrance..."

Anna was at her limit. She knew that Mike had also hit his limit a while ago. So much so that he had not heard Rosa's warning and as soon as he stopped, he would probably just drop. She had no choice but to leave him and try to stop the incoming force.

Left, right, slash, incoming from the back, now the sides; his task was endless. Anna had left for some reason, he had no clue why. He still needed to continue this, even if it was for a few more seconds. So many wounds, so much blood; could he even survive this? Surviving or not does not matter, he thought, what I need to do is stop these monsters and go faster.

Alex stood up. There was no point in trying again because she had even less power now. She knew that normally she could probably do this. She felt she had been close but she needed more power. The question was, where to get it? Her father had told her a while back that there was no limit, that the fatigue you felt, was the limit of your body cutting you off before the power damaged you. Could she remove that limit? Then a thought popped in her head. *'I also had to believe that I had figured it out. It's not so convincing otherwise.'* Could it be that simple? She yelled at Rosa. "I'm going to try one more time. If it fails, all of you run as fast as you can."

She first used an artifact attached to her dagger. Using it would destroy it but it would also amplify her ability to access the source of magic. Next she did a quick spell on herself and said the words, "I can close this portal because there are no physical limits to magic, its supply is endless." Instantly all doubt was erased from her head.

Heck, she did not even understand why she had conserved so much power throughout the day. She would close this thing and then cast a few other spells to get rid of all the monsters and just get out of there. Now for the first task, she reached out again to the portal. This time she also reached out to the source of magic that felt like a current where before it was just trickle. The power grew within her. So much power at her disposal now flowed all across her body. She channelled it again at the portal and commanded it to shutdown. Suddenly all of Alexandria's muscles seized up. She clenched her mouth shut and her eyes went blind due to the massive wave of pain that she was feeling as the energy left her body and directed itself towards the portal. She dropped on the ground, and realized she had seconds left. She looked at the portal. Its runes flashed and then it disappeared. Good, she thought. There were still a lot of enemies. She looked in Anna's direction. "Anna, fire in the hole!" Alex extended her hand with the last instant spell she had and pointed at the tunnel entrance to the room. Then she passed out, never hearing the explosion.

Anna rushed out of the way, getting a few new cuts in the process. Cuts were better than a fireball at full force. As the explosion hit, very few enemies were left standing. She rushed in and killed the ones that remained.

Mike was aware that there were less cuts coming his way and the numbers were thinning. Had she succeeded or had they just run out of monsters on the other end? Whatever the cause, it would soon be over.

Rosamia thrust her spear in an orc's head. The portal had closed; Alex had somehow done it. She ran to her side. Alex was very cold to the touch and her head was sweating profusely. She was out



cold but still alive. Rosa cast a healing spell on her. It seemed to help but she was still out. She used another spell to make Alex light enough in order to put her on her back in order to carry her out. Mike and Anna were finishing off what was left over. They were very worse for wear. She focused the last of her magic on healing them both, but it was nowhere near enough. "I'm sorry, that's all had left."

The bloodied hand of Mike reached out. "It's all right, this is better than nothing. Okay... Just a.... Little bit more. "As he moved to take the lead in the tunnel, Anna stopped him."This time you cover my back." He nodded in agreement.

While carrying Alex, Rosa reached in the pouch with the rocks that Alex had used before. There were a few left and it seemed that she could use them. The three conscious party members slowly made it out of the cave and into the forest. Luckily they met with very few monsters along the way. They finally reached the horses and rode off as far as they could before needing to stop due to exhaustion. They setup a camp and Rosamia took first watch. Both Mike and Anna passed out as soon as they lay down.

Rosa looked at all of them and whispered, "We closed a portal and stopped an invasion, thank you all so much." She sat down, took Alexandria's head and placed it on her lap, and brushed her hair out of the way of her face. Her temperature was more normal now, which was a good sign. "Rest easy for now, but be sure to wake up, you little magic princess, otherwise this victory will not be worth the cost to me." Rosa gave her a smile and then looked up at the night sky to give a silent prayer.

## *Chapter 5*

*T*hey stopped at a town to the south. Rosamia had slowly managed to heal all their wounds but they were still exhausted and Alexandria had yet to wake up after four days. Rosa assured them that all she needed was rest. Somehow she had overdone it and her body and mind were still dealing with the consequences. They had detoured to a small town because of the worry that Alex had of being discovered at Newport. The problem was that if this continued, they may need the help of the mages of Astrum in order to save her life.

Anna and Mike were sitting on a small hill overlooking the town. Anna turned to him. "I hope she makes it."

"So do I. Still, Rosamia is very confident, even if it's taking longer than she originally thought."

Anna gave a small chuckle. "Yeah, and I don't think there is anything she would not do for her if she knew about it. She seems very attached to her. She even gave her the nickname 'magical princess'. If fits her well, mind you."

Mike sat more upright. "I agree. I don't think we have seen anyone as capable as she is with magic." He looked at her and wondered how he should approach what was on his mind. "Speaking of magic, I would like to talk about it with you."

She turned and looked at the horizon, breaking eye contact. "You want to ask Alex about that word in order to use those enchantments, don't you? Alright, let talk about it. Obviously, if we continue like this we need the extra power. The fact that we survived is a miracle. Still, I am worried about you using that enchantment."

"You are worried that there will be a situation, like the one recently, where I will not see a way out and lose control." He stood up and crouched in front of her. "Being alone, you're right. I know that I would do it. But you're with me, and I also know that I will always hear your voice no matter how dark things get. Still, the last thing I ever want to do is force you to do something that you don't want. Yes, more power would be helpful, but if the price is your unhappiness then I don't want to even touch them."

She gave him a half smile. "One nice speech and I take responsibly for the call. Nice position you put yourself in."

He gave a small chuckle at that. "You are right, I didn't even realize it." Saddened about his action, he continued. "There is no real way around this. Yes or no, whatever the consequence, just like two years ago, I will have no regrets. I know that whatever you decide, there is a good reason for it. I trust you more than I do myself. So please know that I would never make you take responsibility for something like this. I want you to be happy and have the ability to do whatever you want to do. Also, I want to be there with you. Being with you makes me a better person."

She reached out to him. "And I know that you would never bring up something like this if you did not think it was necessary. Alright, let's do it. We can ask her a little bit after she wakes up." They stayed there a bit longer after retuning back to the inn.

When they got to the door they heard a familiar voice. "Rosa, you're crushing me right now." They quickly opened the door with big smiles on their faces. Rosa was half on the bed giving Alex the biggest hug she had probably ever received in her life. Rosa composed herself and sat back in her

chair but still kept a big smile on her face and held her hand.

Alexandria, not acting like her usual perky self, looked at everyone and asked the question. "Sooo, how long was out?"

Anna did a quick mental check and responded, "About five days, considering that today is almost done."

Alexandria just blinked at that statement. "Five days. Wow! Well, I guess I should just be thankful I'm alive at all. I have never felt pain like that before, nor do I ever want to experience it again."

"I healed you as much as I could but I felt that rushing it could have a bad effect. I know your first attempt failed, so what did you do the second time that made the difference?"

"My father explained that the limit we casters have is really a defence mechanism so that the magic we channel does not burn us out. After the first attempt I knew I was close but I needed to get over that limit for at least a bit." She pointed at Mike. "Then his explanation when he questioned the orc popped in my head. He needed to believe in his bluff in order to convince himself and in turn the orc. So I used a spell to convince myself that there was no limit. I also used an artifact to help me focus my contact with the source itself. Those two things gave me what I needed." She dropped her head and looked at her trembling hands "Still, a bit more power or a stronger spell and I'm sure that I would not have woken up at all."

Anna looked at Mike using another disapproving stare. "Putting an idea like that in her head and almost getting herself killed for it, how are you going to make it up to her?"

"I ... Ah ... Hmm ..."

Alex gave a laugh and cut him off. "It's all good. If not for that, the portal would still be opened. Even if I don't want to do that again, it was worth it." She looked around her surroundings for the first time. Everything seemed old and not much could be found in the room but the bed, a small table and a few chairs. "Ah, where that heck are we? And where do we go next?"

Rosa finally let go of the hand she was still holding. "We are in a small town about two days south of where the cave was. Considering your privacy, we did not think that Newport would be the best place to return. It was those two that suggested this place, I did not even know it existed. As for where to next we were thinking that we would update the Crusaders on what happened. They have to know that the enemy can now open new portals. I hope that this will make them change their current tactics."

"I would like to take a big detour first, if you all don't mind." Said Mike.

Anna looked at him. "Oh?"

He smirked. "Well, I had plenty of time to think things over and I think I know what their target was. I would like to check it out. Alexandria, does that map still work?"

She reached for her pouch that was lying next to the bed. "It should, but it will only display the map and in a few days it will just stop." She gave the command for the map to pop up. As soon as that happened Mike pointed at the location where the portal was. "Okay, so here is where the portal was. If we go down a bit, here is where the camp was where we learned of the portal. They seem to be going in a southern direction overall. Now, it's just a guess but there is only one target that would warrant such a big force down there." He looked at Anna to finish his hunch.

In disbelief, she answered. "Oh, no way! The Crimsons town?"

Alex looked at the map. "You're kidding. I knew it was around there but it's not like its location is broadcasted to people."

"It's the only thing that makes sense to me, so I would like to check it out." He looked at Anna. "I know that going back there is not something that was in the plans, but, we only need to get close."

She cut him off by raising her hand. "Don't worry. Look, I'll be the first to admit it's not the place that is on my list to visit ever again, but at the same time I would like to make sure she is safe. Also, there is no way that they will let us in anyways, especially with you two with us." She pointed to Alex and Rosa. "I am assuming you are coming, right?"

"Sure."

"Are you kidding? Of course I'm going."

A small smile appeared on Anna's face, "Well Mike, I guess we are taking a detour then. Alex how long until you can travel again?"

Alexandria was unsure how to answer that. "I think I'll be fine sometime around midday tomorrow. Warm food and a bit more rest will go a long way. Still, I think it will be a few days before I'll cast a spell." They all gave her a concerned look. "No worries guys, my magic is fine and I'll cast if I need to. It's just that I want to try not to rely on it as much if I can. To be able to defend myself without it sounds like a good idea."

"If you are willing to use a staff instead of a dagger, I can help you with that."

She looked at Rosa. "A staff, eh? Sure, I can do that. Thanks."

Anna grabbed Mike's hand. "Alright, seeing as we know where we are going, we will get the

supplies ready. Also, we have something to ask you later when you are up for it."

Alexandria waved her hand. "Oh no, none of that. Let me know now and if I can't do it then we can try later."

Anna and Mike both looked at each other. Anna took a deep breath. "We want to know about the magic word to unlock the enchantment."

All smiles were gone and an overall gloomy feeling could be felt from everyone. "Why do you want to know?"

Mike stepped forward a bit, still holding Anna's hand. "There is a good chance that things will get harder from this point on. We barely survived the last encounter. We are not planning on sacrificing our lives here but the extra power would be a big help."

Alexandria looked over at Rosa, who had nothing to say. She looked at Anna, who seemed on board with this idea. "Right, well I don't want to, I really don't. Still, I would be quite the hypocrite lecturing both of you on possibly sacrificing yourselves on a spell considering what I just did." She smiled and forcefully cheered herself up. "Alright, who knows, you two are pretty up there so you'll control it no problem. Plus, I'm curious to see this mythical enchantment that killed dragons. I'll tell you two tomorrow when we are away from this town. Sometimes enchantments have unpredictable results, so it will be safer there than here."

They both gave a quick bow in thanks. "Thanks, Alexandria. Now we will leave you to rest up, plus, as Anna said, we need to resupply."

Once they had gone, Alex looked at Rosa. "So what was up with you? I thought you of all people would discourage them from doing this."

Rosa gave her a half smile and a shrug. "I don't want them to either, but I can see the merit if the time comes. Take my case, I would be dead if he had not done the spell, so it's hard to argue for me as well. I take it that you stalled in order to give them time to change their minds?"

"Yeah, I don't think they will but I figured I would try. Plus, enchantment can be tricky sometimes and this one is really old."

"Well that's tomorrow. In the meantime, shall we eat?"

"Yes, please."

The journey to the Crimsons town was about four days. After a day's journey, Alexandria figured that she could not stall any further.

"Again, take the globe and touch it to your weapon. Once you're ready, say the word 'Devoveo'. The orb will break and the enchantment will take place. You should feel something from the enchantment, but I don't know what, sadly."

Anna and Mike did as she instructed. As they both said the word, the enchantment took place. A few seconds later a wash of energy went over them and for a few seconds their eyes glowed with the color of their respective orbs. Then everything was back to normal. They looked at their weapons, and took a few swings while focusing on them. Nothing abnormal happened.

Anna looked at Alex. "Okay, I'll be the first to ask, how does it work?"

"I have no clue, really. In theory, seeing as it's linked to emotions, I would guess focusing on that emotion should start something up." Mike looked at his sword and a faint red glow appeared. "That's the start of it but it needs way more power than that."

He closed his eyes and focused on the one thing that would make his go over the edge. The



sword glowed with red flames. He opened his eyes, looked at a far off tree and took an empty swing at its direction. The red flame left the sword and hit the tree. A large explosion happened as soon as it connected. When everything cleared, all that was left was a stump. "It's a bit tricky and launching it does cause a drain, as you mentioned, but I think that ..."

He stopped as he saw the sad look in Anna's eye. Her sword glowed in a powerful green. She let out the breath she was holding and at the same time the glow slowly diminished until it was gone. "You're right, but it seems I figured it out as well." Her attitude returned to normal. "The really tricky part will be changing my mental state during battle to handle this."

Alex reached out and gave her a hug. "You have the hardest color, and even if it's enchanted now, you don't have an obligation to use it."

Shortly after they continued on their journey. With the time they had on the road, both of them practiced using their new enchantment in order to be able to properly use it in battle. Meanwhile, Rosa started teaching Alex how to use a staff to defend herself. The trip took a bit longer than planned but they were fast approaching the town.

Alex rode up to Anna. "So while I understand this won't be a good home coming, is there no one that you want to see again?"

She thought about it. "I guess I am curious about one of them, other than that, not... so much... Ah guys, what is that?" She pointed to a few flying small lizard creatures. Alexandria used a bit of magic to get good look. "We need to hurry, it looks like you were right. Those are drakes, the only living relative of the dragons. Ridding them are orcs and it looks like they are attacking something."

They picked up their pace and in a few minutes they would get a good look at the town. Drakes could be seen doing aerial bombardments. The main gate had been busted open and a fleet of creatures could be seen entering the town. Screams could be heard even from their distance and certain areas were on fire. As they rode, Mike could not believe what he was seeing. "Let's destroy the reinforcements at the door first and then re-evaluate. Alexandria, if you can do the honours to start us up."

They dismounted from their untrained combat horses. Alexandria fired her spell that would summon head-sized flaming rocks from the sky and explode on contact. The result of the damage was perfect but it also got a lot of attention from everyone around. Drakes could now be seen trying to turn around and make an attack run, also what was left of the still considerable reinforcements were starting to turn around to deal with what was attacking their backs.

The two casters focused on the drakes. Alex fired lightning bolts at them while Rosa protected them from their fiery blue breath weapons. It was slow going due to the range and the speed of the drakes, but there was enough progress to allow them to move on.

Anna and Mike rushed to in the main group. Some of the orcs had prepared arrows. Not having time to get the protection spell from Rosamia, they had to act first. They both channelled their respective emotions into their blades and swung at the different groups of archers. The red and green blasts helped get the first strike on the archers and also made some of the others around drop their defences momentarily while they tried to understand what had happened. This gave them the opening they needed to dive into the group in

melee range. He pushed though a bit recklessly in order to advance through the crowd, knowing that Anna would have his defence. After a few close calls, he was close enough to realize part of the situation inside.

"Anna, flip with me. You need to get inside as quick as you can." She switched positions with him. What made her a good protector was the ability to move quickly around her target. This was also an ability that could be used to move around in a mob. She focused her energy on parrying blows and making her way deeper, letting him deal with the enemies while guiding him deeper at the same time. They got to the other side and saw the massacre that was happening. A few Crimsons were around, but most of the fighting was done by the villagers. It was a one sided battle. Her blade glowed green and she let its energy destroy a group going on the attack on what looked like an unarmed family. She charged in to protect the villagers, her blade still glowing.

Both casters had done as much as they could against the aerial forces. They marched ahead and realized how deep the others were.

"Why the heck are they that far in?"

"I'm not sure, Alex. Still, we need to take care of another chunk of these reinforcements."

"You take left, I'll take right?"

Rosa nodded in agreement. They both cast their spells at the same time. On the left side a large column of fire erupted from the ground. From the right a fiery explosion charred a good portion of the enemies. Alexandria extended both hands together in an arc in front of the troop in the middle and let loose a lighting blast that jumped from target to target.

Rosa readied her spear. "We should be able to reach them now, let's go."

While a good part of the enemy reinforcements had been destroyed, there were still close to a hundred of them left, plus the drakes in the sky. The two spell casters finally linked up with the two warriors. It's was Alex's first time seeing something like this, and if she could help it, the last time. Some Crimson bodies could be seen lying on the ground. A lot of monsters could also be seen in the same place. What was traumatizing was all the villagers. She saw dead bodies of women and children that had been hacked by swords or burned by the drakes. It was horrible to see all these families dead, and for what? They had to save what was left of them. Even if doing so was the right thing to do, she had to wonder if those that survived could even have a normal life after something like this. This whole scene made her stomach turn. A scream coming from Rosa brought her back to the here and now.

"S..s..stop it, STOP IT NOW..." Rosamia sprang into action like they had never seen her before. She opened a path with her spear by killing the four orcs around her. She stabbed the first one in the chest, pulled out her spear and used that pull out strength to attack the other with the butt of her spear crushing his windpipe. She pivoted around and used the momentum to slash at the heads of the orcs that were charging at her. A group was now forming in front, trying to keep their distance from her spear. She simply casted another pillar of flame around them burning those that were too slow to move away. Archers tried to take her out, and she could have cast a protection spell but she wanted to hurt them all after what they had done. She charged at some of them and impaled them, she then avoided the arrows, turned and cast quick bolts of holy energy that not only shocked the target but also caused some minor burns.

While this was happening, Anna and Mike had been doing their best to help out a merchant that was defending a little girl and boy. Mike took on the attacker role while Anna defended the merchant. "Do you know where others would have tried to find shelter? Is there a place that we can go to create some shelter from this?"

The merchant grabbed the kids and looked at her in shock for a second. Snapping out of it, he replied, "My house is big and near the entrance of the inner doors. We are trying to move everyone there." Anna nodded. The Crimson town was surrounded by a large wall with only one entrance. While the Crimson were very harsh to outsiders, they also realised that they needed normal villagers in order to do the day to day of growing food, making linen and a lot of other basic necessities. While they realised this, it did not mean that they also had to except them and because of that there was another wall section with only one entrance to segregate the normal villagers from the Crimson. A long time ago a relationship of protection was created between the two. It seems the Crimson had forgotten about the promise that their ancestors made to the original villagers.

As the merchant picked up the kids and started heading to the house, Alex came running. "Anna, Mike you have to stop her."

They looked around for Rosamia and saw what was happening. Their nice priestess that tried to mother others had gone berserk. Anna looked back at Alex. "What happened?"

"She just lost it as soon as we saw what happened here. You don't know this but she is a survivor of a similar massacre. It happened when she was very young but... Anyways, I can't seem to stop her, you have to make her stop."

Mike, still fighting, was close enough to hear. "That explains a lot. I'll go get her. Both of you head to the house and we will meet you there." He launched a blast from his sword to make a path and ran to Rosamia.

Anna turned to Alex. "Come on, we need to get these kids to safety."

Hesitantly, Alex followed. "Why did this happen? The Crimsons are the most powerful fighting force in existence. It makes no sense that they would let this happen."

The merchant answered before Anna could. "They are strong, yes, but they are also very closed minded and very selfish. They think they are the best and can't be bothered to take the time to do simple tasks to help out the villagers because that time would be better spent training. That is really what caused this to happen."

Alex was stunned. This was not what she had read or what others mentioned when talking about the Crimsons. "But some of them came to help... right?"

"Sure, some came out. When the battle started we learned that the only reason they had come out was because of the orders of one particular Crimson, her name is Julia. About two years ago we lost the only protector we had and Julia took it upon herself to help out as much as she could. We think she did this probably because she was close to our protector and could not help her out when she needed to. Still, we do appreciate Julia's actions whatever the reason may be."

Alex looked at the merchant, back at Anna and then back to the merchant again. "Wait, wait, wait. This first protector that you had, what happened to her?"

"It looks like she came back when we really needed her and brought some friends." Anna could

not believe how all this had turned out. Simple actions taken way back then turned into this. She put it all out of her mind but found it difficult to ignore the fact that her guardian, Julia, was still probably fighting a one sided battle in there.

When they arrived at the house, she saw two Crimsons defending it. They looked like new recruits, sadly. She turned to the merchant. "Get inside we will deal with the rest. Soon a priestess will be here to help with the wounded. Alex, you are with me at all times now until the others get back. No matter what, do not leave my side."

Alexandria nodded in acknowledgment, figuring Anna was being over protective. Anna turned to the recruits like she was their commanding officer. "Recruits, Julia has sent me to oversee your progress and to take command. You will obey, correct?" Anna was not sure if they would, since she left when she was a recruit and they may not acknowledge her without the standard armor befitting a Crimson. They both saluted. *'Good, this will make things easier'* she thought. "Good, your orders are to guard this place with your life. Another member of my troop will show up soon with an outsider. You are to follow his commands as well, understood?" Again they gave a salute and returned to guard duty defending the house. She turned to Alex. "Alright, now we need to create a buffer between the orcs and the house until the others arrive."

Mike had finally reached Rosamia. While her attacks were deadly and she had killed many foes, there was also no direction to it all and she just followed the flow of the chaos that battle created, which made it hard to get close to her. He launched another energy blast to try to get her attention and the attentions of her targets. While the targets now focused on him, Rosa still ignored

him. He tried to scream at her but still nothing. "And this is what Anna deals with sometimes when I get like this, what a pain I've been." He jumped in and stayed close. The only thing he could do was help her destroy her targets.

The battle was slow going. There were more enemies than anticipated when he decided to split the party and Rosamia was no closer to acknowledging him. Once again, he was in a dance of blades, dogging the left by attacking the right. In this situation one move had to count as two or more, otherwise they would not make it out. He kept the blade glowing to draw more attention. In normal circumstances this would have worked but being near a priestess that was still throwing spells and burning her targets alive, it did very little. She had suffered many minor wounds, and so had he, for that matter. Still, she did not slow down and matching her speed would mean that he would have to up his own aggression, which was not something he could afford. He continued until he finally saw something that would snap her out of it. "Rosamia, a group is heading into a house over there. We need to check it out in case there are villagers in there."

She turned her head and started heading towards the house. Finally, while he realised this would be a low blow, maybe now he could snap her out of it. He kept up and defended her as best he could. The group had made it to the house already and screams could be heard from someone. She launched a small bolt of energy at an orc that was about to strike what seemed like a female civilian. She then stabbed the one next to him, leaving her open for the other orcs in the group. Mike rushed in and slashed first at the stomach and continued his arc to do a piercing attack on the other in the chest.



Once the enemies were down he could see that the female was trying to protect a male that was crouched over from having received a wound to the stomach. He assumed that Rosamia would snap out of it and heal him. Instead she turned and started to leave the house in order to find more targets. "What are you doing!? This person needs help that only you can give him, so help him NOW."

She turned at him with dead eyes and said in a monotone voice, "Saving him only saves one life. Killing them makes it so they never do this again, thereby saving many lives. So what would you have me do?"

"True as that maybe, it is also a very cruel and sad way to look at things. I don't think that the ones that saved your life way back when would want you to act this way after what they did. So I would have you save this man's life and help me escort them to the house where the others are."

Her looked changed. Tears started coming from her eyes. She looked at her bloodied self, shook her head and whispered to herself, "So is this how you felt all those years ago and still to this day?" She walked towards the man that was slowly dying and healed him. "Both of you come with us. We know a place where you can be safe." As they all left the house she looked at Mike. "Thanks for bringing me back from what this nightmare was turning me into."

He gave her a quick smile. "No problem, but if something like this happens again, try to recall that you now have people in your life that are close and would be sad to lose you to madness like that, especially a certain magical princess."

She nodded back to him "I will."

They had finally cleared a perimeter around the house, now the issue was keeping it. Anna had

started to get worried by how long it was taking Mike and Rosa to get back to them, but this was short lived when she saw them coming back with villagers. She looked to her side at Alex. "Look whose back."

Alexandria looked and noticed that they were both alive and also that Rosa seem like her old self. She was so happy that she was not lost to her that she ran up to her and hugged her as strong as she could. "You're back, you're back."

Rosa smiled back at her and returned the hug. "Yes, it looks like I am. Thanks for worrying about me."

Alex broke it off and looked at her. "Well of course I was. We are friends, after all."

Anna helped Mike escort the villagers into the house. "I'm glad you got her back. I guess it was not as simple as you thought?"

"No, not really, but I did manage somehow. Still, I have to say it made me realise how hard you have it when I get like that. I'm sorry that you had to go through that so many times."

In mild shock, Anna stopped for a second and laughed. "Well, it's good that you finally agree with me after all these years. Still, that's how you have always been when things get bad, so I don't really expect that to change."

"I suppose not. So what's the situation?"

"Currently most of the villagers are holed up in the house. We have two Crimson trainees at the door. We setup a zone of defence around the house but more are coming, so it's not like we can just leave. The only good thing about all this is that the drakes are still focused on the inner section." She looked at him with a worried gaze. "Julia is still in there and for some reason she continued things while I was gone. For everything that she did to

me, I know it's stupid to single her out, but I don't want her to die here."

Mike got close to her. "I'll find her, one way or another." He took a step back and smiled as he saw that everyone else was around them. "Alright. Rosamia, you stay here with Anna. Take care of the wounded and keep trying to stop their advance. Alexandria, do you want to go into another warzone with me?"

She nodded, "Of course."

Alex and Mike made it to the inner door that was also destroyed. The scene inside reminded her of that camp near the portal. The drakes were blasting away at whatever Crimson defence was being put up. Orcs and ogres were attacking in large groups, trying to overtake them. This was not a massacre like outside, it was a war between two armies, but the Crimsons were losing. "Okay, Alexandria, do not leave my side unless I tell you to."

Alex was puzzled by this. "Anna told me the same thing before. Is it because you both think that I'm not able to handle this?"

He chuckled. "No, not at all. You have probably have more real experience then most of these people. The reason is because of the outsider rule. The Crimsons may not see you as a friend but as a foe." She did not know what to say to that.

They entered the battle. She focused on the drakes and some larger groups while he provided cover and direction. Eventually they made it to an area where large group of Crimsons were fighting. Mike let out a blast explosion and rushed in weapon still glowing. The group was drawing attention to too many drakes. Alex created a few shields to temporarily protect them. With the added help, the group was able to defend itself and fight off the enemies around them. All the while a

lady with red hair tied in a ponytail was giving orders to the soldiers. As she could afford a few seconds after destroying the current attacking group, the lady approached Mike. "It has been a long time. Thanks for the assist." She looked around and appeared puzzled. As if knowing the reason, Mike said, "She is protecting the villagers and holding off what is left of the reinforcements. She could use help if you can spare it." She seemed happy at first and then disappointed. "Again, I cannot help her. I can't send anyone currently; there are two main issues. The drakes and a group escorted by casters are trying to make it to the Commander's location. Seeing as I'm now the Commander at Arms, I have to deal with this first."

She was right but it was not the decision she wanted to make. "Fine. Alexandria, can you enchant their arrows with the same spell that you used with the rocks?" Catching on, she nodded in approval. "Let my friend here enchant your arrows. They will help give you a major advantage against the drakes. Once you feel that you have the upper hand, send help to Anna. In the meantime, leave the group that is attacking the Commander to us." He could tell that she knew she should not leave a duty like this to someone that had just returned, but in the current situation she also could hardly refuse. She approved the plan and forced the soldiers to let Alex enchant their arrows. While she did this they attacked the ground troops that were now coming back at them. Considering the amount of arrows, she finished her work faster than expected. "Okay, all done. The shields should protect you for only a little while longer so try to make the most of them." The new Commander at Arms thanked her and then focused her attention on making a comeback.

Alex and Mike fell into the same tactic as before as they made their way to the Commander's house. All guards posted to protect him had fallen, some burned and others horribly mangled by something big. Last time he was in this room was the day they had sat down and the Commander had told Anna that it would be best if she left. Now that table was smashed into many pieces, the wall decoration had been burned and the altar at the end was destroyed. Inside the destroyed room, five people that looked like mages were casting a spell on the Commander that was unconscious.

Something else that he had never seen was also in that room. It was bigger than an ogre and more the size of a beast of legend they once called a Minotaur, but unlike a Minotaur, this thing was fully human. Can a human grow that big? It must have been done using magic somehow. Alex looked at him. "I can help defend you against the casters but against five it will be very difficult. I'm not sure how long I can keep it up, so I know I may be asking the impossible, but try to target them first."

He nodded back at her and charged in. The large human turned and started running at him. Three of the casters were starting to cast spells in his direction. 'Tiny' was wielding a big axe and was about to do a vertical hit to cleave him down. No amount of armor would protect him against something like this so as the weapon came close to connecting, he shifted to the right. The axe smashed a section of the floor as it landed. Before he could pull it out, Mike stopped and did a large upward arcing swing, focusing on the weapon's wooden handle, breaking it in half and disarming 'tiny'. He continued with the momentum of his swing to turn around and continue his charge against the enemy mages.

Alex tried to focus on what she needed to do. Countering spells was in theory a simple matter. All you had to do was cast the counter spell and put enough energy behind it that equated to more than the spell you wanted to counter. The part that made it hard was that if you put too much in, you wasted a lot of your own energy. Put too little in and not only did you again waste energy but the original spell would take effect. The other issue was that she had not seen them cast any spells to try to figure out their power and there were five of them. She powered three counter spells and let them fly at the casters. Two had taken effect but the third one still fired off. The mage had cast an ice spell, probably trying to freeze Mike in place. She saw him move away from his target and partially dodge the spell. Unfortunately it seemed that he was unable to control his left arm. Fortunately the spell had also been in range to fully freeze one of the casters. The two still on the Commander stopped and turned their attention to Alex.

His arm was now useless. Still, he figured that he was lucky that it was still attached. 'Tiny' had decided to join the party again. Mike positioned himself near a mage as the giant human tried to swat him. He clumsily dodged again. The mage near him was not as lucky as he got flung into a wall unconscious. As soon as this happened the others quickly moved away from the both of them, not wanting to suffer the same fate. One of them moved too much in the open and was a perfect target for Alexandria, who shot a lighting spell at him. He convulsed for a few seconds and then dropped to the floor. Two casters and one giant pain in the butt; things were looking up. The giant continued to madly swing at him. Mike tried to position himself near another caster. While the

same trick may not work again, at least he would be busy staying away and not casting.

Alex saw that the other enemy mage was now far away from Mike and the Commander. She also noticed that his target was now her. She took a chance again and cast another counter spell at him, but this time with as much power as she would to counter her own. His spell fizzled and this left him stunned, wondering how she was somehow his equal or more powerful. Not having much time, she launched a few quick magic bolts at him. They would only cause physical damage, like being hit by a punch. Still, a few good punches would knock the wind out of you and could cause you to crouch over. As he lay on the floor, she finished him off with a fire spell.

It was all he could do to dodge the giant human and keep close to the mage, but his hard work paid off. After a while the mage was busy trying to dodge the giant and had lost track of how close he actually was to him. Now in reach and defenceless, all it took was a simple piercing attack to put him down. The only enemy left was now 'tiny'. "Alexandria, see to the Commander. I'll distract this thing."

She ran around as far as she could from the giant and made her way to the Commander. He was very old but even she could tell that he was still in good physical shape. She examined his condition. He was currently under a spell that would keep him unconscious. Alex dispelled it and helped him regain consciousness by giving him a few good shakes. He finally awoke. "Who are you and what is going on?"

"I'm a friend of Mike and Anna. We came to help you when we found out that this place maybe attacked. Mike is currently here trying to defeat this monster. Can you move in order to get away?"

He looked around and saw what she had explained. It was indeed Mike, it had been a while. He stood up and followed the young lady out of the room. He was fighting quite well but the giant was too mad and all the cuts did not slow him down. All it would take was one hit on his end to end this fight. As they reached the exit, the young lady yelled at Mike. "We are clear, do your worst."

What the Commander saw next was a blade that started glowing red. "They actually used the enchantments after all."

The lady looked at him. "So you knew what they were and still gave it to them...Why?"

"I did not really want them to use them, but I also wanted them to be able to survive out there on their own. So much of their faith was my fault and this was the only thing I could give them that no one knew I had."

"Odd gift..."

He was only going to get one shot at this so he had to make it good. He put as much rage as he could inside the blade. Its glow was stronger than before but its color remained the same. As the giant lunged at him, he took a step forward and plunged his sword in his chest. As the giant was about to close his hands around him, he let the energy that was building in the sword go. A large explosion happened in the giant humanoid's chest, leaving him with a hole where part of his stomach and lungs should have been. He fell to the ground. The same explosion caused Mike to be blasted to the wall. He felt something break and then dropped to the floor.

Alex came running after him. "Are you okay?"

Exhausted he looked up at her. "I'll need your help to move. I think I have a few broken ribs, plus my arm is still frozen. Until I meet up with Rosamia, I'm essentially out of this fight."



She helped him up and they all walked outside to see what the situation was. Most of the drakes were flying away and while there were still a few pockets of people fighting here and there, essentially it seemed like things had finally turned around. Crimson's were already starting to show up around the Commander to give him added protection.

He looked at Alexandria. "Well, it looks like it will be over soon. Let's try to reach the others." She smiled at him and they started to make their way to the merchant's home.

## *Chapter 6*

*T*hey met the next day at the new Commander at Arms house. Julia had asked the Commander if she could have some time to catch up with old friends. While it would be an inconvenience, considering what had happened the day before, he still approved it. They all sat at one of the few remaining tables. Julia looked at Anna with a smile on her face. "It's been a long time, how have you been?"

"I've been well, considering everything." Anna's face turned serious. "So are you able to talk to us about the details of what happened?"

Julia's face also turned serious, "That's not really what I wanted to talk about, seeing as last night will be my life from now on. Still, you all deserve to know, since that we are probably alive because of you four." She crossed her arms and looked down at the table. "The details are simple. We got attacked during the night by the army. They softened us up with the drakes and magic, and then the ground troops showed up. At this time we lost a bit more than half of all the Crimson and only about one third of the villagers survived. All in all, you could say that the Crimson army of legend has been destroyed."

Alexandria could not help but ask, "That's a horrible outcome. What will you all do now?"

Julia let out a deep breath. "I'm not sure, that depends on a lot of things. I have briefly talked to the Commander but the decision has yet to be made. Plus, there are still the villagers to inform and they too will need to make a decision themselves on what they want to do now. Ideally I want to rebuild. This is my home and giving up on

it feels wrong. At the same time, because we are rebuilding, I want to make changes. I want to remove the inner wall. This separation and being closed off like we were is what brought us this horrible defeat. It will be hard and I'm sure that not everyone will agree, but I think now is the time for the change that could not happen so many years ago." She looked up at both of them. "I would be especially grateful if you two would stay and help me with this."

Alex and Rosa looked in their direction. It was not a surprising request, but would they take it? Anna looked uncomfortable. She was happy that Julia had survived and the change would be good, but still.

"Julia, I...We..." she looked at Mike. He reached out to hold her hand and gave her a small smile. She squeezed his hand, and looked at Alex and Rosa. Then she looked back at the new Commander at Arms. "I'm sorry, but we can't accept. There are still things we need to do. While we agree that the path you plan on taking is the right one, we just can't follow you on it. I'm so sorry, Julia, but..."

Julia raised her open hand and stopped her. "It's all right. Actually I expected as much. Still, I had to ask, even if it was a bit selfish of me."

"There is nothing wrong with wanting your friends to share a new path with you. So now that that's done, shall we deal with the first question and catch up?"

"Yes, let's."

After a while Rosa and Alex left the house to get some air. They were told that everyone was ordered not to attack them on account of them being outsiders, so this allowed for some freedom. Rosamia looked around. Most of the buildings were destroyed and everything was still very damaged.

The bodies had been moved and that's about all that had been done. "She's going to have a lot of work ahead of her in order to rebuild."

Alex nodded in agreement, "Harder still because they don't really have any treaties with other towns or cities."

"Did you think they were going to stay?"

Alex looked up at the sky and exhaled a deep breath. "I hoped they would turn her down but if I was in their place I'm not sure I would have made the same decision. It just occurred to me that they both don't have any place to call home. I'm not sure I would be strong enough to say no if someone offered me a home when I had none."

Rosamia looked at Alex. "I guess, but I'm not so sure that they care about that. I'm pretty sure that after so many years together that they realized that it's okay to have no home as long as they are together."

"Maybe, but how much time before they leave? Hmm, I guess now I'm just being selfish too."

"You heard her inside; there's no harm in wanting your friends to follow you on the same road, right? In any case, let's go back inside."

As they headed in, Rosa whispered to Alex. "Still, if you're able to figure out something, I would be behind you." While the others talked, Alexandria tried to figure out a way to keep going together. In theory, after they reached the Crusader camp, everything would be closed off and everyone would be able to go their separate ways.

The next day the group said their goodbye to Julia and to the villagers. They road slowly back to a small village nearby. Anna looked back at everyone. "I'm sorry that I did not want to ask anyone there for a resupply for our travels. I figured that they needed everything they had. Plus, this place is pretty close. It was also the first stop

when we left two years ago." She turned to Mike. "I wonder if grandma is still there, I'm sure her kids are but..."

"I'm not sure, she was old when we last saw her and her health was not that great. Still, we should stop by. Who knows when we will be back."

Alexandria figured it would be a good time as ever to bring this up. "Speaking of which, what are your plans after we give the information to the Crusaders?"

Mike and Anna looked at her and then each other, not really sure what to answer. He nodded to her like some communication had just occurred. "I guess we are not sure. It all depends on what happens after we tell them the news." Anna turned and looked at Alex. "I'm guessing you have a recommendation?"

For some reason Alex was a bit embarrassed but she continued with what she had started. "I think that we should start a group. I mean, we all work so well together that... Well... I don't want this to just end."

They all laughed a bit, which made her more embarrassed. Before she could try to explain herself, Rosa came to her rescue. "Personally, I think this is a good idea and will join if everyone agrees. All these years I have been looking for a way to change things to make a difference. The big organizations don't seem to be able to get it done for some reason. I'm not saying that we will be able to do what they can't but we have done so much in a short amount of time and I would like to continue doing that with all of you."

Alex was all hyped up after that. "That is exactly what I was thinking. Don't you agree that we should continue doing this?"

Mike scratched his chin for a bit and was in serious thought over the matter. "Well, it's true

that we closed a portal, but because of that you almost died and we now have an enchantment that could kill us if we are not careful. We could go with the Crimson and villagers that we helped save, but really so many did not make it... Hmm..."

Both Alex and Rosa were trying to come up with something when Anna started laughing. "I'm the one that does the teasing normally, when he does it if feels too serious. That being said, if you want, we'll join this group. I think that we all know that we did things we normally could not have done, so yes, we too want to know where we can go with this."

Mike looked back at Alexandria. "Sorry for the bad joke there, still I am wondering if you have a name in mind for this group of yours?"

"I think I have something but I'm not sure you will all like it."

Mike looked worried. "Ah, you're not thinking something like Team Alexandria or the All Magical Girls, because ..."

"No no no, nothing like that. I was just thinking..." She stared at Rosa to see her reaction. "Something like Lights Templar." Rosamia was puzzled, a religious tone to the name was odd for someone that practiced arcane magic. "Let me explain. I figured that when people think of 'light' they think of warmth, helping and guiding. With Crimson, Crusaders and Councils, I figured we needed something strong to match the others. Also, Templar's were said to follow what they believed in above all else, so we work and follow the light that is warm, helping and guiding. Lights Templar."

She wondered if Rosa would approve. "Well, it will have the impact you wanted, that's for sure. Still, I'm okay with it." Alex was less worried. She looked at the other two. Anna seemed concerned

and Mike looked depressed. "Don't you two like it?"

"It's not that I don't like it, but you are creating a big goal for us with this name. It makes me wonder if we can do it justice." Anna shrugged. "Ah well, the best we can do is try, I suppose."

They all looked at Mike, who just stared back. "The only issue I have is who's going to introduce this name of yours to the Crusaders when we get there?" The others wondered about that for a few seconds and then all turned to him with a large smile. "Yeah, I figured as much."

After a quick laugh at his expanse, Rosa wondered out loud, "So while I understand the explanation of the name, have you figured out a creed or something like that?"

Alex seemed disappointed with that question. "I wanted to but I couldn't come up with anything."

"Maybe that's good, it will give each of us the chance to think of something. Let's try for simple ideas and see where it goes. Seeing as you gave it more thought, why don't you start off with the first one, Alex?"

She thought about it was a while. "I don't know, I mean, personally I think 'We should never give up, no matter the odds'. All this time growing up, I have always wanted this but I always wondered if it would ever happen. My options were limited, but I never gave up and now I'm here with all of you. So that's important to me. What about you two?"

Mike shook his head. "No, I don't really need to think about it." He focused on Anna. "I think I would add, 'Follow your heart and your regrets will be few'. For a while now, that's worked out for me."

Anna looked ahead with a smile on her face. "You really should not be the corny one of the group. Still, I can't say that you're wrong. I'm going with that too. Rosa, looks like you're last."

She had a dark look and thought about it for a while. "I think I'll add, 'Fight so others don't have too'. Villagers and other people that want a peacefully life should not have to take up arms in order to protect themselves from monsters that come for them." They all nodded in agreement on that one.

Alex broke the mood with a cheerful shout. "Look out world, the Lights Templar are here. And Mike, good luck with the introduction with the Crusaders."

"Ahhhh, I had forgotten about that." They laugh again, at which time Alex thought, *'I'm finally with people that want me around because of me and not what I represent'*.

Rosa was also having inner thoughts about the recent development. *'Adam, I found another option like I promised. Now I'm coming to save you.'*

They made their way to the small village and were able to resupply as they had hoped. Anna and Mike made a quick stop at the old lady's house to pay their respects. They all joined up for a bite to eat before their long journey ahead. Mike went over the travel plans. "The next stop will be Newport again. The journey should take us a good four to five days. Ideally we can rest up there for a day or two before we travel to the Crusader outpost near the Portal Tower. That should take us about two days from Newport." He looked at Alex. "Will this be a problem for you?"

"Well, I'll still have to stay hidden, but its fine." She gave them a half smile. "I'm pretty sure I can tell you now. The main reason that I'm so secretive is because of who I will be and who my father is. All my life people were around me because of what I could give them and not because of myself. After a while I became a bit more careful." She looked at the two warriors. "This will probably mean nothing



to both of you, but I am Alexandria of Astrum. I'm in line to replace Richard of Astrum, who is the only human on Council."

As Alex predicted, both Anna and Mike did not really know what the news meant. Rosa, on the other hand, was staring with an open mouth.

"Wait, if that is true, what the heck is someone like you doing in a place like this?"

"When I passed the Council test a while back, it was determined that I had the skills to join but lacked 'life experience'. I agreed with the others, so it was decided that unless something happened to a current member and he needed to step down, I was to try to see more of the world and how it works."

Rosa had the same reaction as before. "You already passed the test... Right... Okay... That's just mind boggling. How old are you again? I'm feeling jealous here, like I've been wasting too much time."

Alexandria's mood dropped at that comment. "It's not like that. As soon as I was born it was determined that I would have a shot at being a member. Because of that, I was already singled out from everyone else, which left me with very little to do other than study."

Rosa stood up, grabbed Alex and pulled her close. "It's not like that, I promise. I took a joke too far and for that I apologize." She looked up at Rosamia "I'm okay. It's an old wound, I guess. Sorry about that."

Wanting to break the current emotions with something else, Mike asked, "So why do you need to hide yourself, because someone may attack you due to your position?"

She tried to avoid eye contact, not really sure if she wanted to answer that one. "Ah, you see, in theory I was only allowed out of Astrum for a

period of time. I should have reported back in person a long time ago. It seems that I need a bit of supervision due to what I know of magic and also what I don't know of the world." She looked at the group that were all holding their laughter back and not really doing a good job of it. "Hey, don't laugh."

Mike raised his hand in apology. "Sorry, it's just an odd thing to hear right after the other news. I'm guessing the answer is yes, but I'll ask anyways. Are you okay with the consequences of not reporting back? We could do that after, if you want."

She waved both hands. "Nonono, bad idea. If we do that we will be stuck there for longer than any of you want. I am sending updates to my dad so I'm not totally ignoring them. So yes, let's avoid going there for a while."

"Okay, then. Seeing as that all this has been clarified, let's get going while we still have some daylight left."

The trip was gratefully uneventful. This allowed everyone to take a break and practice more with their new abilities that they had to master. After finding a quick disguise for Alex, they entered Newport and headed to another inn, just in case the people from Blue Fountain Inn would remember them. They stayed for a bit longer than planned. Alexandria figured that now would be a good time to get some components to boost her staff and get other miscellaneous items that could be handy. With Rosamia doing the shopping for those, Mike and Anna once again resupplied for the trip ahead.

Two days had passed in town. The Lights Templar only had a few days journey to the main Crusader outpost near the Portal Tower. As they arrived, they could already see the main outpost building. Rosamia explained that it was an old

cathedral that had been evacuated when the main portal had reopened. Its closeness to the tower made it a dangerous place for simple priests but a great staging area for the Crusaders. Once the decision was made, they had completely taken over the place. The old cathedral itself was very spacious, over eight floors up and very large. It would be cramped but it could nearly fit half of all the Crusaders numbers, if need be. They arrived, tied their horses to the stables and made their way to the main entrance. The place was riddled with tents and makeshift sections to train and spar in. Considering the activity, how close to the front line, and their numbers, this place was very organized and orderly. As they got to the main doors, the two guards stopped them, as expected. "What is your business here?"

As voted, Mike introduced the group. "We are the Lights Templar and we have information on the portal that your general needs to know. With us we have a mage of Astrum and a priestess of the Order that will corroborate our information."

The two guards looked at each other, trying to figure out what to do. One of them pointed at the other, which made him slump down a bit. "Fine, I guess I'll take responsibility this time. Alright, let me escort you to the General's tent."

The guard made his way through many rows of tents. On the way Alex wondered, "So the General is in a command tent?" Seeing as the guard was not too talkative, Rosa answered the question for this as best she could. "From what I heard, the General is very hands-on and will not be shy about joining his troops on the front line. He's very respected because of that. I also heard that he can be blunt so it's safe to expect some interesting comments from him."

As they arrived near a somewhat bigger tent

than the others, they could hear two voices. "So lieutenant, are you sure you want to accept the part you will play in the mission?"

"Yes, Sir. I understand why you picked me for this. As always, I'll do the best I can to accomplish the mission."

As Rosa heard the last voice, she closed her eyes and shook her head. "Oh no, not now of all places." Too late to ask for more details, the guard introduced them. "General, a team of people has news about a portal. They are accompanied by a mage and priest to verify their finding."

The general was a man around his late forties. His hair was gray with some black streaks still present. He wore a full plate as most Crusaders did and had a scabbard next to his chair that held inside a large two handed sword. Across from the table next to him was a young man with unkempt black hair. His armor was of the same style as the others but he wore a half plate. He was equipped with two swords on his belt. What stood out most about him were his dead eyes. "You can go back to your post, thank you. Lieutenant, please stay here for this. I sense that this will be a fun meeting." He stared at the group "So what news do you have for us?"

Mike told of the enemy troops they had fought against, a portal they had found and closed, and also of a town that they had helped defend from the army that had gotten through, purposely omitting that this town was the home base of the Crimson. The General listened to the tale very seriously. The lieutenant, on the other hand, only seemed to be getting madder as the details went on. The General thought about this for a while and made up his mind on something "Good, good. I'm happy to hear that the new portal has been closed. That will be one less to deal with after this one."

Anna was a bit curious by the lack of reaction on the news that there was more than one portal in play. "General, I get the feeling that this news about a new portal is not new to you."

"Yes. Well, it's not common knowledge but we did know about it, actually."

This made Rosa switch her gaze from the lieutenant to the General. "What? You knew about this and did not do anything to help?"

Un-intimidated, the General simply told her, "Look, we only learned about it about a month ago. We are currently running a large operation on this portal that may give us the ability to close it. To focus our attention on what the reports said was a smaller one at this time was not a good decision. It was approved by not only us Crusaders but also the priest Order."

She was still furious and turned her attention to the lieutenant. "Adam, did you know about it and do nothing?"

He simply looked at her with those eyes that now showed anger and fury in them. The General spoke up on his behalf. "Yes, the lieutenant did know about it and also made the right decision. For the past while he has been instrumental in the next plan that we have, so I would rather you not come here and question his work or effort in this war." Alex put her hand on Rosa's back, trying to tell her to calm down a bit.

Mike cut her off before she could continue. "You keep mentioning this plan of your. From what you said, because of it you will be able to close this portal for good? I could see where one would decide to leave the other smaller portal for later if this plan was sure to succeed."

"Essentially, yes. This is what we agreed on. In war things like this happen but we are confident that this plan will succeed." He looked at them one

more time, assessing their armor and weapons. "Seeing as you are competent enough as a group to close a portal, if I can find a team that is willing to partner with non-members, would you mind joining this plan of ours?"

Mike looked around quickly. There were two things that stood out. The first was that Anna seemed uncomfortable about this idea. The second was that the lieutenant was also uncomfortable about it as well. "Sounds interesting, but before I answer I do have another question for you, if I may."

The General seemed disappointed but motioned for Mike to go ahead. "Can you confirm the existence of another small portal? I'm just wondering if the one we closed was the only other one."

The General put both arms on the table and his hands under his chin. He looked at Mike very seriously. "Yes, there is another that opened near a city a few days ride from here." This time it was Mike that was disappointed.

Alex held Rosa's hand. It was being squeezed very tightly and she looked like she was in an inner battle with herself. Anna was pretty sure what everyone was going to do next. She stepped up, "Would it be possible to share the location of this other portal?"

The General looked bored with them. While they were probably pretty strong, they were also very naive. He looked around at a few pieces of paper that were around his desk. He found what he was looking for and tossed it to Anna. "Here is a copy of the letter that got sent to the city in question with the information that we have so they could prepare themselves, anything else?"

Anna understood the General's reaction. She did not agree with it but she understood it,

"Nothing else. With the information we have, we will talk it over and figure out where we are best needed and let you know. Thanks again for your time." Both her and Mike bowed. The General gave a wave of dismissal to everyone.

Rosamia made a beeline to the lieutenant. She grabbed his arm and forced him to give her his attention. "I can't believe it. You knew and did nothing? How could you, after everything that we have been through?" Alex could only stand next to Rosa to try to support her. She realized that this was the boy she had talked to her about and it would not be a happy reunion by the looks of it.

Finally, the man replied, "I've been fighting all this time to protect you and everyone, like I said I would way back then. Yes, we knew about the other portals, but we are now in a position to close this one. There was no way we would jeopardize that." He caught himself and relaxed. His tone went neutral. "You decide to join the fight, finally, as I asked you to so many years ago. You get a good shot in and now you come here belittling our efforts and the work that we have done for many years. So I have to ask, why are you here at all?"

She was on the verge of tears and unrestricted anger at the same time. How could he say something so hurtful to her? God, how she wanted to knock him over. She tried to calm herself. "Look, I came here to inform you Crusaders about the portal. I wanted to inform you about what has happened in recent times in hopes that you would maybe join us in helping others. I see now that over the years you have turned into a giant self-centered idiot blockhead that's only good at following orders from his general."

That made him livid. "I'm a blockhead?!?" The argument continued like this for a while.

Anna looked at Mike that seemed a bit

uncomfortable. "Look, I know that arguments like this aren't things you like to see, but is that really what is bothering you?"

He looked back at her. "I'm not a fan of it but that's not what the issue is. I think that I may understand a part of this mission the General wants us to participate in. The thing is, if I'm right then it will make Rosamia even sadder, I'm sure."

Now she understood. "What's really bothering you is that you need to ask him something important and you can't figure out a way to do that without hurting her. I say ask him. You are not the type to hurt people if you don't have too. She will see that, or she should anyways, and even if she does not then at least try to be there for her after." If he was right about this then she would want to know. If he was wrong there would not be any issues.

He interrupted their arguing and faced Adam. "Sorry, but I have a question. The General's plan, if we join we will be decoys? And from what he told you before we arrived at the tent, you're playing decoy as well, right?" Adam had the perfect face; he could read nothing out of him.

Alex looked at Mike. "Decoys, what do you mean? Why do you think that?"

"I'm not sure what the actual plan is, there is no way for me to know. At the same time, why would the General want strangers in his well-trained coordinated army? It makes little sense unless he just wanted strong fighters to throw at the enemies while the real plan was being done by another group. The issue with this is you need the decoys to last long enough, so you need capable people. When we got here he asked the lieutenant if he was sure he wanted to do a certain role, like he did not want him to do it but did not really have much choice in the matter. So that's why I'm



wondering, in the next mission, is that his role?"

Now everyone was looking at Adam, who again was saying nothing. Rosa was furious. "Adam, answer him NOW. Did you really accept a mission like that? Is that how you plan on keeping your promise to protect me and everyone else, by lasting as long as you can and then probably dying? Well?"

He focused his gaze on her. "I plan on carrying out a mission that will finally close this portal and keep everyone safe from this point on. Whether I return or not means nothing to me as long as everyone else is okay."

Tears were coming out of her eyes. She did not know what to say to him. He thought that his going on a mission like this was what she wanted so he could protect her. What an idiot. Alex was tired of this guy and how he was treating her. "Hey, idiot. You're doing this for nothing. Sure, closing the portal is good and all that, but you realize that there are small ones, too. These small ones are not connected to the large one, they are real portals. In other words, the enemy can open new portals anywhere they want now. Sure, this may stall them for a bit, but in the end they will only come back and this time we will not know from where."

Adam seemed angry but it was hard to tell. "Mage, go home to your floating city and let us fight on our own, like you've always done. Rosa, just go back to where it's safe." With that he had had enough and left them.

Mike turned to Rosa. "I'm sorry, I probably should not have asked, but it was too important in case I was right. Let's go someplace away from this and think things through."

Anna grabbed Rosa by the hand and guided her away. "Hmm, I agree with going someplace else for a bit, but the thinking will have to wait." They

walked about twenty minutes from the Crusader camp in order to be alone for a while. After about one hour, Rosa was locked in her head, not really reacting to the others. Alex was worried about her the whole time. Mike was also worried but knew that they had little time left to figure things out, depending on which option they wanted to take. As for Anna, she was surprised that Mike had not interrupted the silence yet. She figured it was because he did not want to hurt everyone again. Still, silence would also not help anyone.

Giving herself a mental push, she made the first move. "The way I see it, we have two issues. The first is that second small portal, for obvious reasons. As for the second, what do we do about this lieutenant?"

Mike added his opinion. "I think we should go for the small portal. I also think that we can't change their plan and if they succeed, all the better, but we would be of more help at the other portal than this one." He looked at Rosa, who was still ignoring everyone. "I really don't know what to do about Adam. He's a soldier through and through. He's not going to give up just because we said so. Plus, I think there is another issue at hand with him that will not make him back down."

Alexandria looked at Rosa as well. "I'm sorry, but I agree that we should go to the other portal. Please Rosa, say something."

She finally moved her head, looked at everyone and answered with a quiet voice. "Please go on. I agree they will need our help more than the Crusaders, but I just can't leave him behind. I'm mad at what he said and I really can't forgive him right now. I can see forgiving him eventually, though. What I can't see myself forgiving is if I do nothing to help him." She looked at Alex. "I'm sorry, I know you wanted us to stay as a group and

all, but it looks like this is where I have to leave."

Mike shook his head. "Hmm, I don't want to give up on this just yet, sorry. 'Follow your heart and your regrets will be few'. Don't apologize for wanting to do this, Rosamia. At the same time, don't think for a second that we will just let you go with him."

He looked at Anna. She nodded her head slowly from side to side. "You know what they say about splitting the party, right? So why do you keep doing it, especially seeing as you want to keep it together."

He gave her a small smile. "My plans are never the best, really, so what do you expect?" He looked at everyone and explained his bad plan. "Anna and Alexandria, you go to the second portal. Go help that city anyway you can. Rosamia and I will go help Adam. As soon as we are done, we will join you."

Rosamia wanted to turn him down but knew that the help would give them more chances of survival. "Are you sure you want to do this? You really don't need to."

"Consider it done. Now, let's head back and inform the General and Adam. I would rather they agree but at the same time it's a large forest so I don't see how they can stop us."

The General had no issue with the idea as long as Adam was okay with it, which was expected considering their roles in the mission. As for Adam, Rosamia never really gave him a choice in the matter.

That night before everything would start Anna and Mike shared a few words away from everyone. "You better come back to me, you know. I'm not going to forgive you if you die here."

"I'm sure you could find someone to replace me."

"That's not funny and you know it."

"I know, bad jokes, remember? The last thing I want is for you to go and me to stay. At the same time, I think I may be able to help her with him, so I need to try."

"The thing is, that's why I'm uncomfortable about this. He's gone beyond rage for the orcs and their kind, to a level of happily being willing to give his life to stop them. I understand that's why Rosa wants to save him, but it's not going to be easy where he currently is." She looked at him in his eyes. "I just don't want you to join him in order to try to save him."

"No matter how mad or blind I get, I can always hear you, even when you are not around. That will always bring me back." He approached her and they held each other. Feeling her warmth and his cheek to hers, he whispered, "I will always return to you."

She prayed that he would be alright without her to defend him.

## Chapter 7

At the start of the next day Alexandria and Anna made their way to the city of Calculus. From the information the general had given them, the new portal had opened in the nearby mountains. Fortunately, this time around the city had been warned and should have some level of defence ready. Unfortunately, no outside help had been provided. Anna had doubts about how much they could do if a full scale attack occurred, but some help would be better than none. It may also help to convince people that they're not alone.

She looked in Alexandria's direction, who was again taking quick glances at her. It was not her style to be shy about anything so Anna wondered what was going on in that head of hers. "You can just ask, you know. I have very little to hide."

"I'm sorry, I was just thinking silly thoughts. He always listens to you. You could have just told him not to stay there. Again It's silly, considering that what he is trying to do for Rosa."

Anna laughed. "He does not always listen. That would make things simple and at the same time uninteresting, I suppose. We argue like everyone else, it's just that we also trust each other completely. We know that both of us would never do anything intentionally to hurt the other. Still, life tends to throw unintentional curve balls at you and somehow you have to learn how to deal with those. I mean what about you? I know you want to help Rosa more than be with me for this mission."

"I'm forced to agree on that one, but I made up my mind to do what she could not. I figured that I

would try to be Rosa's proxy in order to help that city any way I can. I guess I had it easier in Astrum without realising it. There, all I had to figure out where things that affected only me. Not too many other people came into play."

"That's what you get when you want to be with people, I guess. We try to do our best and hope that everything works out in the end. We can't really do much more than that, but hey, at least you're getting that dose of 'life experience' right?" She gave her a quick cocky smile.

"Yeah, you could say that. Help a friend that really needs you or try to help a city that maybe attacked by an army that could raze it to the ground. Fun life experiences. Still, as much as I hate this choice, it's better than not having any and just being stuck in a library."

"Glad to hear that. Speaking of books, do you know anything about this city?"

Alexandria thought about it for a moment, trying to recall information that was partially gone from her head. "Ah, if I remember correctly, the city main function is mining. They are so close to the mountains that separate this place from the vast desert beyond. After a few years of exploring those mountains, they found lots of different veins for stones, minerals and precious metals. From what I read, most of the city is miner guilds and merchant guilds. There is a lot of traffic to and from the city because of this and while the majority of the people should be stronger than most, they are still not warriors. The city does have its own military to protect itself from normal issues, like most other cities, but I don't remember reading anything special about them. This is all from books and reports, I myself have never been there."

"Hmm, guilds. That could make things interesting. I guess I'll have to bend the truth a bit

in order to be taken seriously."

The trip there would take a few days at this speed, so Anna figured she had time to think of something before they got there. She was also wondering how the others were doing.

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Mike and Rosa had not learned much about the mission details. Their job was to keep the enemy forces occupied for all long as they could. Ideally, they were to try to get as much attention as they could to drive out the enemies. During this time a force of unknown numbers would infiltrate the tower and somehow close the portal. No information was given on how this was supposed to get done.

Teams had been assigned. Most of the groups consisted of about twenty men. Both of them had demanded to be assigned with Adam. There would be no point in trying to protect him and at the same time try to change his view if they were not even close to him. What had not been realised was that Adam did not belong to any team. Due to his speed and effectiveness in battle, his role was to try to thin down the numbers and create some chaos on the enemy lines using guerrilla tactics. While this made some sense to Mike, after spending time with Adam, he figured that this special role was created because of the lieutenant's inability to play well with others. Some other Crusaders had even approached them to change their minds and join their ranks, mentioning that teaming up with him would be an exercise in frustration.

Rosa was with Mike waiting for Adam to return from the final briefing before they departed. Considering the amount of time they have been

together, she was stunned that he had not run away at this point. Look like she had made some good friends in a short time, she would have to pay them back somehow. Adam was returning and she figured that this meant that there was no change in their mission.

Adam stopped in front of them. "The mission objective stands; we will depart in an hour." He turned at Rosa. "I wish you would reconsider. This will be a very hard mission and I don't know if I can protect you all the time."

Rosamia stood up and focused her gaze on Adam. "So that's what I am to you? Something you need to protect all the time because I can't take care of myself? Can't you even get it in your mind that I could possibly be of help to you and that I'm not this defenceless person? Seriously, Adam, don't make me regret what I'm doing today. We will meet back in one hour. During that time I recommend you think about what your teammates can do for you."

As she and Mike left him alone, Adam could only shake his head and whisper to himself. "That's not what I meant, I just don't want you to get hurt again. Why can't you just see that?"

As they walked away, Mike looked in her direction. "You're sure it's okay to leave him right now?"

"Yes, plus I need time to cool off as well. Why can't he get that I want to help him? Why can't he understand that shielding me from the world and all the bad things is not protecting me? Is he even able to understand that? I'm starting to wonder."

"Give him more time. I'm guessing it's been a while since you teamed up like this. Maybe he will realize what you can do now."

"I hope you're right."

The hour passed pretty slowly but finally the



time came. They met up at the at the rendezvous location. Adam's mood seemed to have changed. He was a bit angrier with the situation. "Okay, we are to leave a few minutes before everyone else to give us time to get ahead. Rosa, cast a protection spell on us against projectiles. Yours should last longer than mine. Once done, stay close behind and assist us. During the battle, I'll lead the pace and direction. I'll also updated you two on what is coming using my magical tracking skills. As for you, try to keep up and make yourself useful."

He left heading straight for the forest. Mike could only shake his head. "Yes, I will try not to blow you up as I help her save you from yourself."

Adam moved pretty quickly to get into the area that he was assigned to. He would need to get deeper in but for now getting there quick was the first objective. It seemed that the other two could keep up with his pace. While he knew how Rosa would react, he had no clue on the other one, and that was an issue. He did not think he would run away when things got bad but could he still act when those situations occurred. It seemed a test was in order, and now that they were here, finding a suitable group should be easy enough. Just a few minutes more and his target was found: two ogres, four orcs and six goblins. That should be perfect. He stopped and gave his orders. "Small group ahead, one ogre and four goblins. I'll take the goblins you go for the ogre. Rosa you should back him up. Go." He turned and rushed at the enemy.

Mike tried to match him but Adam seemed to suddenly be moving at an incredible speed, quicker than a human should be able to. Rosamia had told him that Crusaders used magic as well during fights. Most of that magic was self-augmenting, which would allow them to be faster and stronger. This could make it tricky to keep up. As he arrived,

both he and Rosa saw that something with the number given was not quite right. Had he made a mistake? Or did he just want to test him? Whichever it was, it was a reckless thing to do. He looked at Rosamia and then the orcs. She split from him and went at her targets. "Two ogres, fine..."

He sprinted as fast as he could to try to move directly behind them. It would mean that they would try to slam him with their clubs as he charged, but they were slow to react so that gave him the advantage. As predicted, their clubs landed behind him as he ran in between both of them. In passing he slashed at the leg of one of the ogres, spun around and stabbed the other behind the knee. The one he slashed recovered pretty quickly, so he moved to the side of the other ogre, who was now kneeling from the wound and used him as a shield. The kneeling ogre did a wild swing at him to move him away. This only created an opening to his chest that Mike quickly took advantage of. As he looked around, Adam had finished with the goblins. Rosamia only had two orcs left. This had gone well, considering Adam's gamble.

She could not believe that he had lied to them about the numbers. She figured that he had done it to scare them away so he could shield her again. Seeing as he was going to play that way, she cast a tracking spell herself. Having learned from the last time she aimed it at ogres again. There were enough of them to make her want to stop but she would bear it, she needed to. As she was about to dispatch the final orc, she noticed that Adam had jumped in and finished him off. "How could you? That was very stupid of you and you could have..." she stopped. Both of them were reacting to something coming their way. "I can only see four of

them. Are there more? This time give me the real answer."

He stopped for a second. "No, only the four ogres. I'll head out to meet them."

She grabbed him. "No, swap with Mike and then jump in to finish them." Would he listen, she wondered? He stopped and headed to attack the ogre that Mike was dealing with. Annoyed as she was, she was still happy that he had listened. "Mike, aim for my pillar." Knowing where the ogres would appear without seeing them allowed her to cast her pillar ahead of them. It would weaken them all. As the pillar of fire appeared, the ogres shouts could be heard. Soon after, a red energy ball was seen making contact. That explosion had the same effect but only one scream could be heard. Adam, having finished the ogre, magically sped to the other and quickly dispatched him.

They took a few seconds to catch their breath and continued on. While they had won with little issue, it was still a bad start overall.

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Using some magic to speed things up, Alexandria and Anna had finally made it to the city of Calculus. The city had a massive wall that was so high you could only see the tip of a few buildings going over it. There were no guards as they made it to the front gates. As they approached, Anna yelled out, "Is anyone there?" Suddenly, a rectangular opening a bit less than a foot wide opened and part of a face could be seen. "We need to ask you to turn back, we are currently preparing for a massive attack and cannot accept any visitors at this time."

This made sense to Anna. They did not know how long they would be held up inside and

bringing in more people to feed would be an issue. "We are not here as visitors. This is Alexandria of Astrum, a mage of great power. I am Anna of the Crimson and we are part of the group called the Lights Templar. We are here to help you fight."

The guard looked at both of them "Wait there for a while." Alex looked at Anna with a teasing smile "...Of the Crimson?"

"Look, there are only two of us and we needed to sound more important if we want to be let in. I'm pretty sure Julia would be okay with it if she somehow learns of this. My only other choice was using your position with me acting as your bodyguard."

Alex half raised her hands in mock defence. "No arguments from me, I'm just surprised, that's all. Also, I'm not sure if hiding my position will work here if there are other mages or if we meet up with certain merchants in the know. If we get refused, let's use that as a backup plan."

A few minutes later a different face showed up. He looked at them and closed the latch again. This time after a few seconds they heard a mechanism unlock and an inner door opened. What they saw was a tall scruffy man with dark brown hair wearing a half plate with a large sword strapped to his back.

"Let me introduce myself. I'm Kyle, captain of the guards in this city. I was told that you want to join the defence. I have to ask, are you two crazy?"

Neither of them knew how to react to that. Anna shook it off first. "I don't think we are. Our group found another portal and succeeded in closing it. We participated in the cleanup of what came out and also reported to the Crusaders, who told us that there was another portal that opened around here. For other reasons our group had to split, half of us came here to help out and the

other stayed there." She paused for a second and realised that she was not really helping her case at all. "You know now that I say it all, maybe we are a bit crazy after all. Still, we want to help if you will allow it."

Kyle laughed. "After telling me all that of course I'll let you in." As they walked in, both of them wondered how much stone had been mined from the mountains. The entire city was wall-to-wall stone; the only wood found was on the roofs of the houses and other buildings. These people had created nice stone archways with sculpted artwork of beautiful faces, people and even what looked like events that had happened through time. While most people were probably miners and vendors, there was clearly a group of artist in this city as well and it showed everywhere you looked. Anna and Alexandria stopped and gazed for a little while. Alexandria had never seen anything like this. She had used magic to carve out stone shapes but to see all this being done by hand was truly inspiring and wonderful to see.

Kyle gave a small chuckle. "Yeah, it's a nice place here, one more reason why I want to defend it. That being said, I would love to let you sightsee but we have more important things to do for now, follow me."

They marched behind the captain, who led them to a very large tower in the middle of the town. This tower was bustling with many people, most of them guards. The atmosphere was very different than in the Crusaders main camp; here everyone seemed very agitated. As they walked up many stairs, they made it to a circular room. This room had a large table and a very large map of the area. There were a lot of chairs around the table but only two were occupied. As they entered the room, they stood up and the captain made the

introductions. "This is one of our command posts. If you continue up you will be at the top of the tower where there is glass that was enchanted. It allows us to see the enemy army that is currently camping at our doorstep." He stretched out his hand to introduce a long blond-haired woman dressed in priest robes. "As for the people in this room, you have Lady Jessica. She is in charge of the priests here." She smiled and bowed at the two of them. He then waved over to a man with short gray hair that seemed very nervous. "And this is ... Bernard. What's wrong, man? You look so pale all of a sudden."

Bernard was focused on Alex and was muttering to himself. "It can't be... No I must be mistaken... she could not be here... I mean ... It would never be allowed..."

Alexandria shrugged. "Well that lasted all of twenty minutes. Yes, I am her."

Bernard quickly walked around the table and bowed down before Alexandria. Kyle and Jessica looked at each other and wondered what had gotten into him. He was typically very calm.

Kyle asked, "Okay, and she would be? You just told me that you were just another mage of Astrum."

Alexandria exhaled and in a very monotone voice said, "He is referring to the fact that I am Alexandria, future member of the Mage Council of Astrum, they who study, control and so on... Please don't make me say the rest, I'm not a member yet so really I am just a mage at this point."

Anna looked at Kyle and Jessica. It seemed that they knew about this Council more than she did. Both of them stiffened like they were about to salute their superior officer. Bernard finally stood up normally. "You have to allow me to teleport you

back to Astrum. You don't belong here, especially now."

"I will have none of that. The Lights Templar, a group I belong to, has decided to help you out and this is what I will do. Are you refusing my help? Are YOU ordering me back home?"

Anna had never seen Alex like this. She was less of a normal curious girl on an adventure and more like a person of royal standing. She had also backed them into a corner where they could not turn her down.

"So now that we all agree, the captain here will update my friend here on the situation. While you, Bernard, will update me on your plans to defend this place. I would also request that someone be put at the entrance that we came in. Two more people from our group will arrive. His name is Mike and he will be armed as a Crimson. There will be a priestess with him named Rosamia. They are to be escorted here or to join us in battle if that is where we are." She looked at all of them and nodded her head. She hated giving orders like this. "Now that we all understand, let's go to it." She turned to Anna with sad eyes. "Let's meet on the top of the tower when we are done."

Anna gave her an understanding smile. "Sure."

As the two mages left Kyle looked at Jessica and then at Anna. "Look, I hope that you are not offended by this but I hope that the little princess will not cause too many issues, considering the current situation."

Anna understood his position and concern. "It should be fine. It would have been much better if your mage would have said nothing. Then she could have acted normally. Still, don't worry, she won't cause too much of an issue unless you treat her differently or order her to leave. Now, let's go over the current situation."

A few hours later, Alexandria met up with Anna at the top of the tower as promised. The top of the tower was opened with many window arches that allowed them to see the beautiful city and possibly the best sunset a person would ever see. It also allowed them to see the large army that was camping at the back of the city. As mentioned, some of the arches had been enchanted. These provided a close-up of the army. Anna seemed to be trying to figure out something and did not notice Alex. She put her hand on Anna's shoulder to get her attention.

"So, I take it you got the same? There's an army in the back, with two of them for each one of us and we should head to safety and let them deal with it... maybe that last part was just me."

Anna gave her a small smirk. "Something like that. It seems they are ready for them. They have the catapults and many archers that should be able to cut down their number when they do attack. While the orc army has a chance of winning as they are, it will cost them to take this place."

"That's good news, right?"

"Yes, but I'm having, what does Mike call them? A 'gut feeling' about this. We are missing something, I just don't know what. I'm currently trying to puzzle it out like he would."

"Can I help?"

Anna nodded. "Sure, that would be great. Okay, so we know that there is the main portal in the middle. Then they open two smaller portals to each side. In theory, that army that attacked the Crimsones would still be around if we had not closed the portal and helped with the defence."

"Okay, I see where you are going with this. Following that course of action then, if they attacked here and won as well, then even if the Crusaders fail or succeed at closing the main



portal, they would have had to deal with two armies attacking them from both sides. So closely after the main attack, they probably would have failed."

Alex shook her head. "Good plan on them, but we closed the other portal and in theory stopped that army."

Anna jumped in. "Yeah, we did, and yet this army is still here waiting...Why? In theory, their plan has failed. So why take a risk and throw more people this way?"

Anna's eyes lit up. "I think I have it. Their main plan has not really failed, it just hit a snag. Would it be possible to use the main portal and then come here? Or use the portal here and go to the main portal very quickly?"

Alex's eyes went wide. "Ah if both portals on their end are close, yes, you could do that. It would be a strain on the body and you could not use the portal for a while after, but yes, that could work...Wait, if what you are thinking is true then..."

"You got it, the reason they are not attacking is because they are waiting to see how the attack by the Crusaders go. I'm guessing that if it seems like they will win, then more of the numbers here will disappear, only to go and reinforce the defence over there. If the Crusaders lose, and depending on their left over numbers, then the ones that were already there will probably jump over here. Once they get here they will start the attack."

"We need to tell the captain about this. Heck, we need to tell the Crusaders about this. Essentially they can't win, or at least they should not be able to."

"Is that something you can do?"

"No, only if there was another mage there and I would need to know his name. Maybe Jessica

could but their version of the spell is a bit different. We would have to ask her."

"Let's round everyone up and see what can be done."

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Adam's group had been hunting down pockets of enemies deep in their territory for about one hour now. Their teamwork got much better than the first encounter but the trust level was at the same place. They were currently taking a break before aiming for a very large group that was up ahead. Adam looked at Mike and Rosa "This is a large group up ahead. It's safe to expect reinforcements as well. Rosa, when we attack the group, we will be in a clearing. This means that we could be attacked from the sky. Do you have enough stamina left to take care of them?"

"I should be fine, but I wonder how long this is going to go on." Adam turned and looked ahead at the direction of the incoming group. His actions made Rosa wonder if he too was wondering why it was taking so long. So far it was good that they were able to keep him alive, but they had yet to get anywhere to start convincing him to stop taking these insane missions. There was no time to think about that. The break was over and now they were charging at the group in the clearing.

Mike saw Adam rush in ahead of him. He envied his magic ability to track these monsters. It allowed him to know where to charge and move in the best direction before they were even visible. As he got to the clearing, he realised that this was going to be another bad environment for them. So far the pattern of attack had been the same. Adam took the goblins and, due to his speed and strength he was able to dispatch them very quickly. Rosamia assaulted the orcs, killing as

many as she could before Adam helped her finish them off. He had the ogres. His main task was to keep them busy until the rest could join up to finish them off. Most of the time they had the trees to use as cover. This helped avoid attacks from the drakes that sometimes passed above them.

This time was not different. Adam had finished off the goblins and was helping Rosamia with the orcs. There were six ogres in the group so he would have his hands full. Mike focused on quick slashes on legs and arms as he moved from one to the other. The idea in this large of a group was to keep them on him, so defence was better than attack. Adam pointed his sword in the air. This was the signal that drakes would be coming in soon. Rosamia disengaged from the orc and took aim at the skies with a holy arrow that she would shoot with what seemed like an invisible bow. The shot were not strong enough to kill the drakes but would hurt them enough to cause a retreat.

Still dealing with the ogres, Adam shouted that more reinforcements were coming from their side. This, depending on their numbers, meant no help for these six. He switched to focus more on the attack. The switch allowed him a lucky blow to one of his targets that did not expect the change in pattern. This is when he heard Adam yell again, "Mike, a group coming your way." This was not going well at all, he thought. He continued a bit on the ogres to finally see where the new forces would be coming from. He took aim and launched a red energy blast at the unsuspecting group. Not taking any chances, he launched another. Even after two consecutive explosions, more ogres joined the already existing group. As bad as this was, he could see movement up ahead. Something was coming from the north, but what?

"Incoming to the North, what is it?"

Adam looked for a brief second. "It's nothing, ignore it. Rosa, more drakes." She once again focused on the drakes.

Mike knew he had not imagined anything. Heck, the movement was getting closer. Whatever it was, they would find out soon enough. He tried to distance himself from the ogres to get ready for it. Sure enough, as he saw them coming into the clearing, he realised why Adam had missed them. Four mini giants came out. They were the same as the creature that he had fought when he and Alexandria had saved the Crimson Commander. This was probably Adam's first time seeing those, so he would not be able to track them with his magic.

"Those guys are big and very resistant. We need to go full out on them otherwise we may be ineffective against them."

Seeming not to care, Adam finished off the first group of reinforcement and went after the giants. His speed was incredible. Both his swords could barely be seen. Still, the death of thousand cuts would just not come. All he had succeeded in doing was angering them. He continued his attack and still nothing.

Rosa was still dealing with the drakes. This attack was not going in their favour. Her own magic tracking told her that more enemies were coming at them from the sides. She pushed the spell a bit more and saw that even more would be coming shortly after. "Guys, we need to get out. There are too many coming our way."

It was all happening too fast. One hour of hunting them with only a few cut and bruises that were quickly healed had led to this death trap. What Mike could not understand was where all these forces were coming from, they all seemed fresh and there was no way that this many would

not have run into another team after so much time. The only way would be by getting help from the portal, which meant that the General plan was probably not going so well. Adam was so focused on the giants that he not only ignored Rosamia's warnings but his own tracking spell that must be giving him more information than hers. They need to change plans before they got boxed in.

"Adam, Rosamia, retreat back to the forest." He started moving away from the ogres. This allowed Rosa to create a pillar of fire on most of them, slowing some of them down. They both started moving and realized that Adam was still in his spot. More monsters were starting to show up. Rosa charged at them to try to keep their way out open, which would be great if one of their members would consider heading in that direction. Mike ran towards the giants, blade glowing red. As he got close to one he unleashed the energy, this time avoiding the explosion concussion it would create. Luckily it was enough to bring it down. He screamed at Adam, "LEAVE NOW."

"I will not retreat. You take Rosa and leave."

As Mike was about to continue this argument they heard a scream from behind; Rosa had been overwhelmed. Adam disengaged and rushed to her aid. He jumped on the force that was on her. She was bleeding from a large wound on her side. His eyes widened as he saw her lying on the ground. Then they heard large trumpets being blown all across the forest. It was the signal to retreat; the Crusaders plan had failed. How had they failed? How had they miscalculated the enemy forces? He noticed that Rosa was pointing at something. He reacted fast enough to protect himself as much as he could as the large club of the ogre swung at his head.

"Adam, Adam... ADAM..." He could hear her

screaming his name. His head was ringing and he could feel blood from behind his skull. They were about to be surrounded. Rosa was close to him, still bleeding from her injury, and the other was stuck surrounded and probably dead in a little while. They had failed, but he would keep her safe. He cast a quick spell on his sword and planted it on the ground. As he grabbed Rosa and started running away, the sword glowed intensely white. The spell should blind them for a few seconds, enough for them to run away.

Rosa fought back but the wound cause her to be unable to break Adam's hold on her. She yelled at him, "WHAT ARE YOU DOING? Mike is still back there. You can't just leave him like this, I can't leave him like this." She started fighting and managed to push him away. She ran back to her teammate. Adam ran to her, took the pommel of his sword and knocked her over. She collapsed on the ground. "I'm sorry, Rosa, but I'll keep you safe no matter what. It's the only thing I can do now."

Mike was surrounded by enemies with no one around to help and no backup coming. Still, he continued fighting. There was no other option but death and she would not allow him to do that. His sword glowed red throughout the battle. He had noticed that it made it quicker to release a blast of energy if it was always building up like this. Giants and ogres swung at him, orcs and goblins tried to cut him to pieces. So far they were the ones getting the most hits on him. The cuts were harder to avoid than the slow club swings. He had no clue how many he had killed and did not know when it would stop. The only thing he knew was that he could not stop. He poured even more energy and launched three consecutive blasts. If he created an opening, maybe he could escape. As the explosions landed he rushed in, only to be met with more new

enemies.

*'Is death the only escape?' he thought.*

*'No, there has to be a way to get back to her.'*  
Again, more energy was given.

*'I will not give up. I have to see her again.'* He moved as best he could, attacking all in ranged and even those further away. They would not let him go. How many did he have to kill for them to just let go? A lucky swing happened that sent him flying into an orc. As Mike got up, he noticed that one of his eyes was shut. His arm was barely usable and the cuts he has sustained all over had gotten worse.

*'Will I never see her bright green eye again?  
Feel her warmth as I hold her? ... no ... I ... won't...  
let ... them ... win...'*

"DIEEEEEEEEE", he screamed as loud as he could. He poured everything he had into the blade and then his world turned white.

Rosamia woke up from the blow given by Adam. She knew that she was right beside him but she could not look at him. "You went too far this time. I can't forgive you for this one, nor do I want to. I tried to reason with you, I tried to let you know that I did not want to be shielded from all this. I tried to find a way to understand you and to give you back hope." As tears were streaming along her face, she calmly continued talking. "Adam, I'm going back for him even if it's to get his dead body. You will help me. Once we are back at camp I never ..."

They both turned their heads and saw a gigantic explosion. The wave shook everything around. Adam was the first to ask, "What cause something like that, a new enemy weapon?"

Rosa shook her head, "No, something powerful enough to kill dragons." She quickly ran towards the blast.

It took a good fifteen minutes of running to get back to the battle scene. When they arrived the area was burned and the clearing had been replaced by a large crater. No bodies could be found. Only a single person was standing with a sword that glowed bright pink. Bloodied from head to toe, he exhaled one last time and collapsed to the ground.

She rushed to heal him. She poured every ounce she had left. "Please wake up, please wake up." His eyes opened again. She hugged him. "Oh thank God, the last thing I wanted was to tell her how I could not save you."

Adam looked at both of them. "How can you still be alive after that? Is that sword truly that powerful to do all this?"

Mike thanked Rosamia and asked her to help him up. As she helped him carry his weight, he looked at Adam. "I'm alive because I wanted to see Anna again. The thought of not being able to helped me channel my rage against those that would stand in my way. The enchantment allows that raw emotion to be amplified and channelled into this."

"What a fantastic enchantment. If I had it for myself I would be able to finally accomplish what I wanted."

Rosa let out a small whisper. "We are done... I can't do this anymore."

Mike looked at her and turned again to Adam. "Look, I'll try again, one last time. You say that with this power you would be able to do what you set out to do. So I'll ask you, what is it that you want?"

"I want to eradicate these monsters and then everyone else will be safe."

"Everyone? Is that really your target? You left me pretty quick back there when you noticed she



was badly hurt. Don't I fit into everyone?"

Adam looked away, clenching his fists. "From what I see, you told yourself that you would get rid of them all so that she could finally be safe. In trying to protect her from everything, you only pushed her further away. You say that with this power you would finally have what you want. The way I see it, assuming you survive, by the time you get to your victory it will be empty. What would be the point at that moment?"

Rosa urged Mike to walk back with her. "Let's go... please..."

They all walked back. Eventually he was able to walk by himself. Adam followed them from far behind. Mike looked at Rosamia with a sad smile. "I'm sorry. I tried but I think all I did was cause you pain in the end."

She shook her head. "No, we are all alive. The way I see it, this is probably the best realistic outcome that could have happened. I'm just sorry that you had to go through that for nothing."

He looked back at Adam. "I don't know, maybe he will figure it out."

"I hope he does, for his sake. Still, for my own sake I need to figure things out too. I need to stop trying to change him if he does not want to change and also deal with my own demons before I try to help others with theirs."

He smiled at her. "Sound like a good plan."

They arrived at camp, where they learned that the Crusaders had indeed lost the battle. Half their forces had been wiped out. Rosamia and Mike prepared some horses to go meet up with the others. Adam asked them for a few minutes before they left. "I need to stay here and see what the Crusaders will do next. Once I know I'll make a decision to see how I can best go about doing what I really want to do. In the meantime, I want to

apologize to you Rosa for everything that I have done. I hope one day I can make all the effort that you and me have put in be worth something. Until then, please take care."

Rosa gave him a small smile. "That sounds good. Take care of yourself as well."

As they rode off, she wondered what type of people they would both be the next time they met.

## *Chapter 8*

They were seated in the room in the tower discussing the news that they just received. Jessica was able to get word to the Crusaders but by that time they were already losing. They also got news on the number of casualties. It would take a long time for the Crusaders to make another attempt like this. Kyle looked at the map on the table. "It seems that we will be alone on this one after all. Let's go over the plan and see if there is anything we can add."

He pointed to the edges of the walls where two catapults had been placed. "Here we will have guards constantly using the catapults to throw boulders that, from what Bernard has said, will be enchanted to explode. I've asked the men and there is no time to build another one. Anything else that can be added for a large heavy attack?"

Alexandria pointed her finger between the two catapults. "I'll be here, I should be able to launch a number of large spells that will cause a wide area of damage." She looked at Bernard. "I would like it if you could join me. I've taught you a few spells that could help out and at the same time you can help defend me while I focus on the attack."

"It would be an honour. I'll try not to let you down."

Kyle slid his finger across the area on top of the wall between the two catapults. "Here we will have archers. Their first task will be to attack the ground forces as they approach. Once the ground forces get into melee range they are to focus on air attacks and also large groups that are clear. I have

been told that a large portion of their arrows have also been enchanted."

Bernard cleared his throat. "Ah yes, Miss Alexandria showed us an interesting way to use a very common spell. The enchantment will send a cold effect to the area that the arrow hits. The idea is to aim at the drakes so that they momentarily lose control and fall to the ground if aimed around the wing area."

Kyle nodded in approval. "Yes, that should help us a lot against flying creatures. Next we have the ground army. They have been separated into teams. Most will charge in and meet the enemy head on. A portion will stay and guard the rear in case pockets make it through. Priests have been added to each group in order to help with defence and healing. The soldiers have been told to try their best to guard these priests during combat. Most of them are untrained in combat but still want to help." He turned to Jessica and bowed his head. "I can't thank the priests enough for their bravery."

She smiled back at him. "No need. This is our home too and we wish to defend it as much as we can. Still, a group of priest will be staying inside to act as a medical area for any that would make it there."

He raised his head and looked at everyone. "That's what we have so far. Anything anyone wants to add?"

Anna looked at Alex and then to Kyle. "I was planning to defend my friend here but in her position I think I will be of little help. Would it be possible if I joined your team, captain?"

"You do know that I plan on being in the front with my men, right?"

"That's what I figured, yes."

"Well, if you are sure, then of course you are

welcome to join."

"Good. Also, if the others from our team come, please let them in and escort them to Alexandria."

"You think they survived?"

She tilted her head a bit and closed her eyes.

"I know they survived. I also know that the first thing he will do is rush to my side. If we are together we should be able to act as a group with just ourselves."

Kyle was a bit sceptical but did not push it. "A guard has been posted there with those instructions, you should not have to worry."

Later that day Alex met up with Anna on top of the tower. She looked through the enchanted glass. "Looks like you figured it out. Their numbers are growing and only when things had been decided at the main portal."

"Meaning that we can't afford to fail here. If this place falls, we will all be in big trouble."

Alex bowed her head staring at the ground.

"I'm sorry that I can't join you. I wanted to be by your side as well during this but..."

Anna put her hand on Alex's shoulder and gave her a small smile. "You put yourself in the best possible place. Don't save anything and do as much damage as you can. I plan on doing the same, so don't worry about me."

Alex reached for a pouch that she had and gave it to Anna. "The rocks inside are the same as the arrows but they should pack a bigger punch. If I'm right, they should freeze the target and affect those around it, but it will not last long."

Anna took the bag and placed it on her belt.

"Thanks."

The next day the time had finally come, the army was marching forward. Anna had told Alexandria that she would keep the sword energy glowing for the duration of the fight. This should

make it easier to spot her during the fight and also maybe help communicate in a fashion. As promised, Anna was with Kyle's group. Jessica was the priest assigned to them. She figured that the pair up was no coincidence. Jessica cast the protection spell against missiles on most of them in the front, which should make surviving the opening charge a lot easier.

As the battle started, Anna noticed that most of the forces that were moving were mostly comprised of goblins and some orcs. She could also see that a fair number of the enemy stayed behind and seemed like they would not participate in the battle. This worried her. She figured that maybe they wanted to first test their defences, but at the same time that was a lot of troops to commit for just a test. Did they have that many in reserve or was the reason as simple as poor planning? The sky suddenly turned dark and the catapults started launching. These questions would have to wait.

The catapults constantly launched rocks that would explode when they came in contact with the ground. The effect was extremely effective. Alexandria had convinced Bernard to open with a volley of small flaming meteors from the sky. The spell was very effective as it too cause explosions as it landed, but was very costly to cast and also could only be used at this precise time due to the friendly fire problems. Once cast, she would switch to lightning barrages as he would cast defensive spells against anything that was thrown in their direction.

From the ground this opening looked like ragnarok had just started in front of them. The explosion for the catapult and meteors made the ground shake and bodies fly. If that was not enough and if someone survived, they would have

to deal with the constant stream of arrows coming their way. Anna knew that nothing was guaranteed during a battle but this was certainly looking good for them. She took out her sword, let some of her emotions power it's green glow and charged with the group.

As they got close she let fly two energy orbs on each side of a group of enemies and charged in the front. The idea was to attract attention and let the captain's group be her backup from the rear. She utilised her speed to move between enemies and perform quick strikes to as many targets as she could, gaining their attention and creating opening for the others in the group to finish them off. This process was dangerous for her but also good to minimize the targets that Jessica would have to focus on for healing purposes.

While this went on, the first surprise of the battle occurred, the drakes had finally shown up in a brilliant manoeuvre. The sky was still black from Alex's constant lighting barrage. The drakes had been ordered to fly over the clouds, essentially making them invisible. Once they got beyond the first line of defence, they flew downwards and used their fiery breath to attack the archers and rear guards. Then they swept up and repeated the process. Alexandria had to stop her spell and clear the sky to be able to deal with the attacks. This allowed for the enemy ground forces to rally and move forward.

The ground defenders had a harder time at this point. There was little support from the rear and still a lot of them to deal with. Anna changed her tactic and went more on the attack, killing her own targets and sometime blasting the rear enemy support. Kyle utilized this momentum and led his groups to push where the rear enemy support had been damaged before the enemy had time to

reinforce. Eventually the middle group was able to halt the enemy advance. While they had good news, the group to their left flank was about to get overrun.

Kyle yelled at his men, "We need to provide backup to the left flank NOW." While his requests made sense, there was still a group of monsters between them and the left group. What they needed was another round of bombardment in that section.

Anna turned to Kyle. "Give me a boost." He looked at her puzzled, wondering what this would accomplish. While some of his men rallied around him for defence, he kneeled and joined his hands together to provide a step. Anna ran at him, used the makeshift step and jumped as high as she could.

While she only had a few seconds, the extra boost allowed her to swing over most enemies. Thankfully, no ogres were present to block her line of sight. She had time to send two energy explosions over where the left flank was. This gave them a few seconds. As she landed back on the ground, Kyle glanced her way. "Nice move but it's not going to be enough."

"I did not think that it would. Still, I am hoping that she understood the message." Kyle looked back to where Alexandria was located on top of the wall. He saw four fireballs heading in the direction behind the enemy attacking the left side. The support attack was unexpected by the monsters, which gave them little time to manoeuvre out of the fireballs way. The effect had created the bombardment that the captain had requested. At this point the left over soldiers were able to hold out until the ordered reinforcement got to their positions safely.

The drake attacks had thinned down and the



rear wall support had slowly returned to help the front line. As they once again regained control of the battle, horns could be heard from the enemy rear side. They were retreating back; they had had enough for today. The captain ordered his men not to pursue and to fall back as well. This would give them time to properly regroup, repair any damaged equipment and prepare for the next wave. This had only been round one, it seemed.

Later that day Alexandria was going over the map with Bernard to try to figure out a better way to support the front line without getting in the way like the last time. It's at that point that the captain came in with a few extra guests. Alexandria turned to see that both Rosamia and Mike had finally made it. She stood up and ran towards them, grabbing both of them in a hug. "You're back, you're back!"

Rosamia, looking very tired, put her hand on Alex's head. "Yes, we are. From what the captain told us it's been interesting here too."

Still feeling guilty over being part of the cause for the rear guard's damage, she broke her gaze and looked at the floor. "Yeah, you could say that." After a few seconds she turned back to face them. "I'm guessing that while the Crusader's plan did not work out that your mission to save him did?"

Rosamia nodded with a big smile on her face. "Well he is alive anyways." She turned to Mike. "Mind you, there were complications."

He looked around and did not see her. "By the way Alexandria, where is Anna?"

She pointed up. "She is on top of the tower looking at what we will be facing tomorrow. It's not encouraging." He nodded back in thanks and walked up to see her.

Alex looked at Rosa. "What happened?"

The top of the tower had arches that allowed

for a constant breeze. "High in the sky with a nice cool wind, of course you would be here."

She turned and smiled back at him. "You would love it too if it was not for the current view."

"True." As he approached her, his mood darkened. Realizing this, her look changed to concern.

"Stop thinking about it and just say it. Trying to spin it around is not really going to make it better to hear."

"The battle was hard. We were losing and Rosamia got hit and fell. As soon as that happened, Adam took her and ran."

She cut him off. "What, he left you there? If I ever see that guy again I will have to deck him a good one for that. Wait, if the numbers were so bad and you were alone, how did you...? Ah, no..." She turned away from him.

Even if she had figured it out, he continued. "I was badly hurt after a little while of fighting solo against so many. I was thinking of how I may never see you again and without noticing the enchantment color turned pink. It was still not white, mind you, but a bit more and it probably would have been. I just lost sight when that thought popped in my head... I'm sorry."

She turned and grabbed his shirt near his neck. God, she wanted to hit him hard for his stupidity. "Yeah, I know you're sorry, but if you would have had a bit more strength in that last blow, how would that had helped you to see me again?" She looked away, furious. "So the one thing that was supposed to save us, you, from the enchantment, is in fact the thing that will probably end up killing you. Fantastic." She turned again and looked at the enemy army. "Normally I would say, 'Let's go talk to Alex and get rid of these things' and I'm sure that you would agree with me,

but knowing what is at stake right now, there is no way that will happen."

He reached out and wrapped his arms around her. "You're right, again, I'm so sorry."

She exhaled loudly on purpose. "I know. You are still alive and here so I'll focus on that. Plus, there is that to deal with."

"From what the captain told us, it seems that this attack will be different from the last one."

"Yes, I think this time they will attack with everything they have. If I'm right they want this place destroyed in order to move and also defeat the already wounded Crusaders. Sure they won't have the others to back them up from the right side because of what happen with the Crimsons, but the same would hold for the Crusaders as well."

"Oh, I agree. They will send everything they can to destroy this place. Even if they will not be able to march right away, I would think that it will still take them less time to muster new forces than it will to rebuild a defence on this side. On the good side of things, if this attack fails, I think the two will be on equal footing. Their numbers lost will be very high, plus both new portals will be closed and this place will still be standing. By the time they are ready, the Crusaders should be able to rebuild their defence. The right side of the map will need more patrolling but things should go back to normal."

Anna shook her head. "All this death just to go back to normal and only to have it probably happen again. I'm not sure how much of a silver lining that really is in the end. Well, it's better than being conquered and all the more reason to make sure that all those deaths don't go in vain. Still, it is disappointing that another way can't be found."

The defence plan had changed since the last

attack. After some disagreements with the captain, it was decided that the Lights Templar would be the tip of the middle defence force. The soldiers would defend each side and follow the Lights Templar forward movements. The theory with this was that it should create a wedge to help split the advancing enemy army in two and force them more on the sides. For the sides, the soldiers were ordered not to advance but act as a defensive shield. Each side had would be provided with more priests to help with the healing. The main offensive to the sides would be the catapults and a group of mages. They wouldn't have to worry about friendly fire and in theory the catapults wouldn't have to be moved as much to aim for specific sections, making it able to fire more often. Archers could still be found on the top of the wall with a smaller but present rear guard in case things slipped through.

Anna looked around, this battle had a real final feel to it. The end of this fight would probably determine if they could keep their way of life or be conquered. You could tell by the general morale that everyone realised this as well. They would give it their all and so would the enemy. This time the group had a larger overall number, plus they mostly consisted of orcs, not goblins. You could also see many ogres and some giants. The vanguard was Mike and Anna with Rosamia behind them providing personal magical and extra physical support. Alexandria had once again needed to stay behind to help with the side bombardments.

As the enemy started to move, she looked at Mike and then at Rosa. "Well, here we go. We leave our back to you." Rosa acknowledged them and started casting some protective spells around them. They drew their swords and rushed in to

meet the enemy with a trail of red and green on both sides.

Rosamia looked at both of them. With the combination of the enchantments, their skills and the fact that they worked perfectly together, they seemed to be able to achieve the goal of moving forward. She had seen them fight already but this was a sight to see. They both parried each other when needed and attacked for the other when the situation allowed. After a while a giant came in. Mike provided the distraction while Anna hit it point blank to instantly kill it. When the next one came they flipped roles. Truly the best example of two people fighting as one Rosa had ever seen.

The plan was working. Due to their numbers, the wedge created less manoeuvring options for the enemies. This was then abused by the constant stream of spells from the mages and boulders from the catapults. The only two questions left were, would they last and would there be a surprise from the enemy?

After about fifteen minutes of this constant fighting, you could see that another wedge was being created, but this time on the enemy's side. Something was coming their way. It was human looking and walked at a normal pace, wearing simple dark and red robes. As it got close, enough of the monsters around them stop advancing and created an empty circle in the middle of a battlefield containing the vanguards and the new threat.

Anna and Mike both stopped and went into a defensive position, trying to figure out what this new person was all about. Rosamia, on the other hand, knew exactly what this person was. "No... This is impossible, why here of all places?"

Anna looked back. Rosa had tears on her face. "What is it? Rosa, talk to us."

She looked back at both of them with a look of fear and sadness. "It's a dark cleric, an agent of the dark lord. They are nearly impossible to defeat."

The dark figure spoke. "I would say it's more like we are impossible to defeat. As for your other question, it seems that you don't understand the importance of this place to us and to our mission. This is why I am here now, to tip back the scale in our favour. You should be honoured, this spell has not been used for over twenty years." As he stopped talking, a dark mist rose from the ground and enveloped him. After a few second the spell had finished and there stood what looked like a thirty-foot shadow creature with arms and glowing red misty eyes. A mouth suddenly appeared on what would be its face. "HAHAHa! Ah, the power you now face."

Alexandria was in the back on the left side, when she saw the dark figure rise. Her eyes went wide. "A dark cleric!" Her books had mentioned them and their shadow form that provided them with unlimited power from their lord. She had also heard it from Rosamia. Instantly, she stopped. "Oh no Rosamia... Nonono..." She checked that she had her instant reserve spells ready, now up to three. She ordered the priest that was close to cast a deflection on her and then she cast a flying spell on herself to reach her friends. She had to get there fast.

Mike looked at Rosamia. "You said it's near impossible to kill. Can we pull off the near?"

Rosa closed her eye and took a deep breath. "Yes, there is a spell. It will take some time to cast. I need both of you to keep its attention while I perform it. Keep in mind that any damage you do will have little or no effect on him." They both nodded and jumped in. She looked at them. They took her warning to heart and attacked it with

everything they had. So many red and green blasts headed at the shadow and all it did was laugh. As the fight went on it grew stronger, so much that just being around it was causing them damage. Mike poured more power and even managed to turn the enchantment pink again. As the blast was heading to the figure it seemed to stagger a bit. Its eyes glowed bright red and even more dark smoke rose from the ground and merged with the cleric, making him even stronger.

Rosa cried some more; it was useless. She had hoped that they would have been able to beat it with the enchantment being as old as it was. She looked up at the sky. "I'm so so sorry, everyone."

She closed her eyes. The spell was easy for her to recall because she saw it every time she went to sleep. The words were spoken and the energy was committed, there was no turning back now. A light pillar formed around Rosamia's feet. The pillar rose about forty feet high. Her body started to float to the middle of the pillar. She heard someone screaming her name and she looked back. Alexandria was heading in her direction, blasting everything in her way, desperately trying to reach her. Rosa smiled back at her. "Of course you would figure out what I'm doing. No words can help for the pain I'm about to cause you... I am so sorry." More tears came out and that was the last that she felt. Her body was engulfed by the light. In its place a forty foot humanoid female stood clad in glowing bright yellow armor. In her hand she held a massive spear that she was pointing at the shadow figure of the dark cleric.

Alexandria shouted, "MOOOOVE! The Valkyrie is about to att..." She was cut off as the Valkyrie planted her spear near the cleric. As soon as it hit the ground a massive dome of light was created, blinding everyone. Alexandria could not see a

thing. Then a massive wave hit her and sent her flying a few feet. A few minutes later her vision started to clear. She could see that the dome had created a massive crater and destroyed every monster and the cleric. Somehow the spell had not harmed anyone else. She could see that Anna and Mike were also recovering. Then she saw the body of Rosa laying on the ground where she had been standing a few moments ago.

She ran towards her. She had told her that the spell did not destroy the caster right away so she could still be alive. As she got to her, Alex dropped to her knees. It was easy to see her friend, her very first friend, was really dying.

"Oh why, why did you do that? Remember, we don't give up, no matter what..."

Rosa looked at her, unable to lift her head. "I could not let him kill them." Tears were streaming down her face. "Please, Alex. Hate me, curse me, but keep smiling and keep enjoying life like you are now. Don't let my actions ruin you like it did me and Adam." As her eyes closed and her head tilted to the side, a last whisper could be heard "I'm ... so ... sorry."

Alex was in tears and in shock. The rest of the monsters had recovered and had started advancing again. The soldiers had created a shield around her to keep them at bay. Mike and Anna had resumed attacking them but had stopped advancing. Mike screamed at Alex. "Alexandria, you need to snap out of this."

Alexandria took her hand and brushed the hair off her friend's face. "How does one snap out of something like this? How can I stop this from happening? How..." Then she saw a sword coming at her from an orc that had broken through. Time slowed for her, the orc and everyone else were all moving so slowly. She looked at it with her tear-



filled eyes. "Why, why, why... WHY?" She launched one of her instant fireball spells at it. At this range the orc was incinerated. She stood up and looked around. After a few seconds she advanced and went passed the soldiers. She reached the point where Anna and Mike both were. She took the bag on Anna's belt that she had given her. She took a handful of rocks and whispered something at them, and then threw them at the enemy. As soon as they landed a giant block of ice had formed. "I suggest you all move back. It's about to get very unsafe around here for everyone." She whispered a command to her staff. The orb on top of it glowed and its color dimmed.

She looked at the sky. It was dark and large rocks were once again falling all around her and exploding. Massive lightning bolts made contact with the ground and flowed forward, frying everything that they touched. She stomped her foot on the ground. Giant quakes formed everywhere in the enemy lines. Orcs, ogres and goblins were dying by the second.

Mike could not believe the damage she was causing. "This is not going to end well." He turned to Anna and the captain that were close. "Captain, our group needs to retreat. Sure, she is targeting the enemy right now but currently I think that we are just fortunate that the spells have not affected us. Anna, see if you can stop her. I'll go see to Rosamia." Anna carefully left to try to stop Alex. Mike moved back to where Rosamia's body still was. Jessica was kneeling next to her. "Is there anything that can be done?"

She shook her head "The spell she cast seems to be drawing her life away at an incredible rate. There is nothing I can do for her. Maybe I can slow the process but..."

"Do it. Maybe we can think of something

afterward."

Jessica did as she was asked. "The spell is a stasis spell. By itself it will last for a week or until the target in stasis perishes. I still don't know how well it will do against this effect."

Mike picked up Rosamia and started moving back to the city. "I understand."

Alex was still going on a magic rampage as Anna approached her. "Alex, please stop this and fall back."

"They took her from me so I will TAKE THEM!"

"This will do nothing. Please come back with me. We will see if we can save her. The thing is that we can't do that without you. Only you seem to know what she cast and how it's affecting her. Is your decision to stay here and kill these monsters to get some empty revenge or help us save her? Which one is more important Alexandria?"

Alex clenched her teeth together, completely frustrated by what she had just heard. A few seconds later she said, "FINE, I'll stop. But before I do that, here is a final present to all of you." The sky turned pitch black and a large boulder slowly started to drop. By its angle it would drop far into the enemy line, but at its size everyone wondered on the radius of the explosion it would cause.

Anna screamed, "Fall back NOW."

As all soldiers, Anna and Alex moved backward. The rock that seemed to be the size of a small mountain landed and exploded. The result was a large column of fire that vaporised everything that it touched. Alex had properly calculated it; most friendly only felt a large push from the shockwave that it created. Most wondered about their state if they had stayed where they were.

Shortly after, a horn was sounded from the enemy camp. Kyle looked back at the others. "It

seems like they have had enough for today and I'm not one to argue that idea." He sounded the signal to retreat as well.

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Back at the Crusader encampment the lieutenants and the general were having a meeting to go over what was left of their forces and what they would need to continue the defence. It was then that a messenger came in. "General, urgent message from a priest in Calculus. It seems that a dark cleric has shown up in the front lines."

As the General was about to ask a question, he noticed that Adam had stood up and seemed to be about to leave. "Lieutenant, where do you think you are going? You have not been dismissed."

Adam tuned and bowed down at the General. "I'm sorry, but it's a dark cleric. I have to go there now."

"Do you have a plan to defeat something that can't be killed? Going there will mean your death, you are not allowed to do that at this time."

Adam paused. He agreed that the General was right. There was nothing he could think of doing to help against such a foe. Even if he agreed with that logic, all he could hear was that man's voice asking him if what he was doing was really helping what he wanted. "Curse him..."

He stood up again and looked at the General. "I'm sorry, General, I have to go."

"While you are an outstanding warrior, I cannot ignore the rules if you leave. This will be your only warning."

"Thank you, General, for everything." He turned and left.

"Ah you un-grateful little... You're all dismissed. It seems I need to go report something."

Adam took the fastest horse he knew and boosted his speed as much as he could. "Please don't let me be too late."

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Anna was with Alex looking over Rosa, who was now lying on a bed. The stasis spell had worked but from what Alex had figured out it was very temporary. The Valkyrie spell was still draining her life force away. She guessed that maybe she had a day at most. Anna looked at Alex. "Is there anything that can be done?"

She was still looking at her friend. "The truth is that I don't know. There may be something I can find but I can't stay here." She turned to face Anna. "I need the knowledge of the Council of Astrum. I need to take her back with me." She started crying again. Anna reached out and wrapped her arms around her to pull her close. "I don't want to leave you guys to the rest of this, but you're right that I maybe the only one that can help her. How can I choose her over the consequences of losing here?"

"Don't think about that now." Alex looked up at her, eyes full of tears. "Let us deal with them, just focus on saving our friend, okay? I'll tell the others."

Alex lowered her head. "Thank you. This was so much more than I bargained for..." She took out something from her pockets and gave it to Anna. It looked like a small brooch with a symbol on it. The symbol looked like a capital 'T' with lines dropping downwards both on the top and bottom on the left side of it. Alex explained, "I'll teleport to Newport and from there I'll head to Astrum. I'll probably not be able to leave there. Once you are both done here, go to Newport and present this symbol to the

guards. Explain that I have summoned you. He will let you go up but you will then be escorted to a holding room. I'm not sure what will happen next but at least you will be in the city at that point." She gave Anna another hug. "Please stay alive while I'm gone."

As she let go, she grabbed Rosa and started casting the teleport spell. Anna looked at her and said, "Don't worry. Find a way to save our friend that did something very stupid and then we will come to you and save you from your city." Alex gave Anna a small smile and then she disappeared with Rosa.

Anna walked up to the top of the tower where Mike was. He looked back at her. "I'm sorry you had to be there alone with her but the captain and I needed to go over what was happening."

She raised her hand to stop him. "It's okay, it was probably best that way anyways. She has gone back to Astrum with Rosa to see if she can save her there. We are to meet her there once we are done here." She shook her head. "This turned very ugly very quickly. I'm not sure how she will handle it if it does not work out."

Mike approached her and held her in his arms. "The captain and I agree that the current situation is simple. It seems that the enemy is preparing his last card. We deal with that and then we head over there for as long as it takes."

Anna rested her head on his shoulder. Small tears escaped from her eyes, "Thanks for being the strong one this time."

"You have done the same to me many times over." He kissed her forehead. "We will come out of this somehow."

She closed her eyes. "I hope so."

## *Chapter 9*

Alexandria was able to sneak back into Astrum and put Rosamia in her room. The next challenge would be to go to the Council library and see if there was anything there that could help her. While she had access to all these places, she still had to try to avoid everyone. She had not reported in for some time now and there would be many questions that would take too much time to go through. There were two things on her side. The first was that rarely was there anyone there and the other was the current events. Normally she would not know about this but with the Crimsons being out of commission, the Crusaders currently regrouping and a battle taking place that could decide great change, the Council had to be preoccupied. Sure they had not directly participated, but they could not ignore what was happening.

She cast a few spells on herself to make her invisible, silent and undetectable. The time it took to get from her place to the library was pretty quick normally, but in order to avoid everyone she still lost close to one hour. She entered the Council library and went to the section on soul spell manipulation. As she had figured, the section was small compared to others. This helped her to go through most of the books but also gave her less options as well. She dropped her spells, since they would drop anyways due to her interacting with something else, and started the research.

Another hour had passed and she still found nothing. Then she heard someone coming. The person was an elf dressed in Council clothes. He

had long straight silver hair. While it had been unfortunate that she had been found, at least it was someone she knew well. The elf in question was named Lithius. He was a close friend of her father's. A long time ago her father had helped him with a personal matter and they had become friends afterwards. He walked up to her. "Ah, Alexandria we were wondering when you would come back."

She bowed at him out of respect. "I only came back today." She had learned that lying to an elf was a really bad idea and was near impossible when they knew the person well. She would have to try to keep her answers as truthful as she could without telling him what she was actually trying to do.

"Your father updated us on your progress. It was very daring overall for a first adventure. I assume that I can inform the others that you will meet us to deliver a full report soon?"

There was no way she could do that. Eventually, but not now. While he was a friend, he would not allow delays. She had to think of something. "You don't have to trouble yourself with that. I was planning to set up a meeting myself. Before I do that, there is something I need to research in order to give a proper report."

He looked at her curiously, "Oh? In the soul section?"

"Ah, yes. There are two matters I need to look at. The first being, when I drew more power to close the portal, and also I want to try to confirm something that happened during the recent fight with the dark cleric." Mostly all was true, but would it be enough to satisfy him?

"I just came out of a meeting with the Council about this news of a dark cleric. If you found something new about them, this would be

interesting news indeed." He stared in her eyes for a while, trying to look for something. "Well, time is of the essence, it seems. I will leave you to your research. You need to compile your report." He turned and left.

Alex exhaled a large breath that she had been holding. "God, I can't believe that worked. Still, it's only a matter of time before someone else finds me. I have to hurry." She went back to the books in front of her.

A few hours went by and so far she had found a spell that could work if her understanding of Valkyrie was correct. She figured that the Valkyrie spell would take the caster's life force and generate an equivalent amount of power that was then channelled into the figure that would appear. Once done, the spell would take its payment from the caster. Seeing as the payment was all the caster's life force that was calculated at the start of the spell, there was no way to normally survive. But what would happen if life force was then transferred to the caster as it was being depleted? The theory that she had was that once the price was paid, the new excess life force would be left alone. The issue was that there was no way for her to verify this and this spell transfer could only be cast once in the life of the caster due to the permanent effects that it had while it took place.

She had little time left. She had estimated that Rosa would last until the end of the day but that estimation could be way off. This was the only solution she had found. Preparations would need to be made so she figured that working on those while she thought more about it would be less of a waste of time. She cast the invisibility spell on herself again and left the library.

Lithius had left Alexandria but he was still not satisfied with the encounter. He figured that going



to his friend, her father, would help him to understand his nagging feeling. He figured that he could find Richard in his office at the school. He had mentioned looking at some papers after the meeting. The office looked small from the massive amount of bookshelves that lined all the walls. There were more stacks on the floor. Besides bookshelves, the only other furniture was a large wooden desk with three large chairs placed on each side.

Lithius sat at one of the free chairs across from Richard. This human was well into adulthood. His hair was brown with streaks of white with a nicely trimmed beard. He wore the same Council member clothing as the rest of them. As Lithius sat down, Richard put down the papers that he was looking at. "You look as if you are trying to find the answer to some question. Has the news from the Council troubled you so much?"

"The reappearance of those clerics is troublesome. The last we saw them was twenty years ago. He was defeated but also took with him one of the few people that knew how to stop them. In the end this was probably their goal all along. One wonders how this new one will be stopped." He looked at Richard and changed his sombre mood to a curious look. "But the reason I am here is to inform you that Alexandria is back. It seems that she arrived today."

This surprised Richard. From the last communication he had gotten, he had the distinct impression that his little girl would not be returning for a while. Not that he approved, but there was very little he could do about it. "That's news to me. I wonder why she has not stopped by."

"She is currently going over some fact for her report to the Council." Hearing this, Richard started laughing. "Hahaha! Oh, my good friend, it

seems that she has finally managed to figure out how to lie to you."

Lithius turned serious. "I assure you she was not lying."

Serious now, Richard stopped laughing. "You are talking about my Alexandria, right?" Lithius nodded. "What section of the library was she in?"

"The soul section."

Richard slouched in his chair and crossed his arms. In his head he went through the events that she had told him. He was happy that she had finally found people that she could be with. It's the main reason he had not recalled her, especially after that portal incident. The last she had told him, she was going to this city that would next be attacked. He knew that she would avoid this place after having been trapped here for so long, so why come back all of a sudden? He stood up. "Lithius, we need to find her. I think I know what she is up to. I'll fill you in on the way to the library."

Alexandria had finally prepared everything. She had converted one of the spare rooms into a place where the casting could take place. While everything had been done pretty quickly, too much time had been used up. She had miscalculated the speed at which Rosa's life force was being taken. After recalculating, she now had around thirty minutes at most. If that was not enough, she also felt a tracking spell being cast on her. Someone was trying to find her, and quick. With everything going on, she focused on the task at hand. She had modified the runes used for the spell to transfer only a certain amount. There was no sense in repeating the same mistake. In theory, if her calculation was right, it should give Rosa about fifteen years. She paused for a second. Fifteen years, would it be too much lost on her end or too little gained for Rosa? "No", she said aloud. "This is not

a question I can debate with myself. I'm not even sure there is a right answer." Now resolute in her decision, she started the ritual.

After the first part of the spell was completed, she felt a large pain inside of her. It was something she could tolerate now because of that horrible experience closing the portal, but it would take all her focus to complete the spell. She assumed that now she had passed the point where she would be unable to cast this spell ever again, so failure was not an option.

They had finally been able to find her exact location. Happy as Richard was about that, he also feared that the reason she had stopped interfering with the spell was because she was busy casting another. They were one door away from confirming his theory.

As Richard opened the door, he saw his daughter in the process of casting a complex spell. Runes were laying around a table. On this table an unconscious female human was laying immobile. "Is she casting what I think she is?"

Lithius looked at the ruins. "Yes, it seems she is casting an old version of the soul transfer spell. It is modified, mind you."

Richard was about to lose it. He knew his daughter was rash but to do something so reckless unthinkable. He looked at his friend. "I'll stop the casting, you stop her. There is no way I'm going to allow my child to do something like this."

"I understand. However if we cancel it at this stage, the spell will not take affect but the limitation of never being able to cast it again will. I'm assuming you are okay with this?"

As Richard started casting a counter spell, he responded, "In reality it's my perfect outcome."

She could feel the amount of life force being accumulated to transfer. By her calculation it

would almost be over. Then she felt something. The flow was stopping and then reversing. Figuring what was happening, she turned and shouted, "NO, don't..." A blast hit her and she felt like all her strength was leaving her. She also felt the accumulated life force go back into her. She fell to her knees. She would soon pass out. "I could have ... Saved her from the Valkyrie effect... I don't ... Want her to die..." Her world went dark as she collapsed on the floor.

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Everyone was on edge back at Calculus. While the enemy had regrouped, they had not attacked again. Their numbers had dwindled considerably. At this stage the estimates were pretty much one for one but because they were defending the city, they had the advantage. Mike and Anna were at their familiar spot on top of the command tower, wondering what the next move was going to be. He brooded over what had happened yesterday. Combined with the wait, Anna was at her limit. "Maybe we could rush them?" He seemed to be thinking of the possibility.

"I was only kidding, you know." He looked at her with a stunned stare. "Oh, ah... yeah, sure."

She looked straight at him. "You know you have to get over it. It's not your fault. None of us knew what that spell would do. I hope Alex can help her, but in the end there is nothing we can do but try to help with this fight."

He shifted his gaze at the sky. "I know, I just wish there was another way or at least a different consequence. It was her choice, and she knew what would happen...Still."

"What choice did she make?" They turned to see Adam accompanied by Kyle and Jessica walk up the final steps to the top of the tower.

Mike stood up to greet Adam. "I did not think that we would meet again so quickly. It's nice that you are here to help." He starred at Mike in anger, assuming he was toying with him.

Anna got close to Mike. "I think that you are misunderstanding why he is here."

He nodded. "So it seems. I take it that you have heard of the dark cleric?"

Adam was growling a bit. "Yes, I have. I got here as quickly as I could. Now stop acting stupid and tell me what I want to know, NOW."

As furious as she was with him, she still understood where he was coming from and held back on wanting to put him in his place. The news he was about to hear would not be pleasant for him. Mike looked down. "Rosamia cast a spell called Valkyrie to stop the cleric. The spell..."

Adam shouted, "I know the spell and what it does. None of you stopped her?"

He had no answer for him. Anna looked at both of them. "Alexandria is back in Astrum, she thinks she can save her and I believe in her."

Adam looked at this woman. She seemed angry towards him. He figured that it was probably because he had run off on her partner during that fight. He shook his head. It really did not matter to him anymore, none of it did. "So all these years she tries to change my destructive ways and she turns around and does this. What am I supposed to do now?" He dropped his head low and tried to see if something inside of himself would give him an answer.

Anna gave an annoyed look to Mike and then switched to Adam. "She would want you to keep living and not follow in her footsteps. Now I hope

that you realise the pain you would have caused her if something would have happened through the years of your reckless fighting. Not so easy to live with those feeling, right?" Mike was stunned with Anna. She was being very tactful considering the situation. He also realised that she was sending him a message.

Adam looked at her with eyes that showed he had nothing left in him. "Yeah, thanks for pointing it out."

Anna rubbed her forehead in frustration. "Look, yes I'm pissed at you, but the reason it seems I'm being inconsiderate is because this is the only way you seem to understand anything. I don't agree with what she did but at the same time she was not going around looking for a fight that she would need to sacrifice herself for, which is the difference between what you were doing and what she did. As for what you should do, have faith in our teammate that is trying to save her life. Until I know that she has failed from her own lips, I'll keep having faith that she will return to us."

"Hmm, Astrum you said. It will take a while to get there and there is no real way to get in to that city. Is that why you are still here?"

Mike figured that he was not going to like the answer again but still he let him know, "No, we are still here to help them defend this place. Considering the result of losing here, we had to stay. Plus, there was not much we could do to help Alexandria. When we are done I was told that she gave us something that would let us into Astrum. How things go from there is uncertain but at least we will be in the city. I would be happy if you joined us. Your strength would be a big help. Even if you refuse to help, stay here and once we are done we will still gladly allow you to join in on the invitation to the city that we have."

"How charitable..."

Anna looked at the sky in resignation. She really did not like this person. As she was about to answer him, she was interrupted by Kyle. "Sorry to break this up but they are ready." They all looked at the enchanted window and saw that the army was once again moving and at the front of it was another cleric.

Kyle was scratching his head. "So how are we going to stop it this time?"

Anna looked at Mike. "I guess we will figure out a way."

He nodded in agreement "Yes, we will find a way." Mike looked at what was coming at them. If not for the cleric, this would be manageable. How much time before more of them came out of that portal? "Captain, can I suggest a change in tactic?"

Kyle rubbed his chin. "I think I already know what you will be saying. I'll let the mages know. We will try to keep them off your backs as you deal with it." Mike smiled back at Kyle. It seemed that he had come to the same conclusion. He and Jessica went to inform the troops.

Anna shook her head. "I was only joking when I said it, you know." She turned to Adam. "Well, looks like we are doing this. Are you going to stay and watch or join us?"

"I'll join."

"You will?"

"There is not much I can do against the cleric, but I'll help keep them off you two while you deal with it. In the end I don't have much choice. To get back to Rosa, I need you alive."

"Hmm...Well thanks for the help anyways."

The plan was for the two to play the role of vanguard until they got to the cleric. Once there, Kyle and his troops would take over and try to continue to move forward until they got to the

portal where the mages could finally try to shut it down. Adam would stay with Anna and Mike to play interference with anyone trying to get in the way for their fight with the cleric.

As the two charged in to start a path, the cleric channelled the power of his dark lord and transformed into a large shadow creature. His eyes were directed at the two. "So you managed to kill one of my brothers. We believed that we had killed the last person that knew that spell so long ago. That was an unfortunate mistake on our part. Still I'm confident that she was the last one, now to get rid of you two and those troublesome enchantments." As he finished he drew more power into himself and charged forward, killing anything that got in his way.

Anna gave a quick glance at Mike. "So what is our plan?"

"The enchantments are our only hope, I think, so hit him with everything we have as often as we can."

"Not much of a plan there."

"Not enough options at this time." The shadow was going to be on them in a few seconds. "Let's do it so that he can't focus on both of us at the same time." Kyle was ordering his troops to push back the enemy forces to try to give them room. Adam was also doing his best to create a space for them.

Anna and Mike tried to flank the cleric. At this size and range thankfully they did not have to get too close to him in order to send a full charge blast. It also occurred to them that while seemingly invulnerable, in this large shadow form they did not cast any spells. It made them wonder if that was a limitation. The fight went on as the previous one. They would avoid as much as they could and try to get some hits in. While succeeding in hitting it was fairly easy, the only thing that occurred was



that more shadow would be drawn from deep in the Earth and add itself to the giant shadow creature in front of them. All the while it's only attack was trying to swat at them with its giant hands.

Minutes had passed and while they had been fortunate in missing all its attacks, their own had proven useless. Mike charged up the enchantment once more. After having busted the first limit it seemed easier to do so again now, his sword now glowed pink. He charged in close and slashed his sword first to the left a few seconds after then to the right in an 'x' pattern, launching two point blank blasts in close succession. Not staying long enough to see the result, he backed away to a safer location.

A large amount of shadow was then dawn and added. His eyes glowed furiously red. "So this is the best that you can do? In the end there really was nothing to worry about. Now, if you don't mind, I need to kill all of you in order to secure this location. Seeing as I've wasted enough time already, I'll have to speed things up." He focused on his hand and a large amount of shadow started to build up. When it seemed that it had reached the desired amount, he waved the hand in Anna's direction.

Unable to dodge the dark cloud, Anna took her blade and put as much power as she could to try to cut through it with the enchantment energy. As she realised that her efforts did very little, she felt a large pain across her entire body.

"ARRRRRRRGGGGGG..." She screamed as loud as she could, then collapsed on the ground.

"ANNA...!" Mike rushed to her. As he got to her, he noticed that blood was coming out of her mouth, ears and eyes. He grabbed her head with one hand and put the other around her stomach.

She was not breathing or reacting to anything. He just froze as what his brain was telling him sunk in.

The cleric looked at all of it. "Yesssss, this is excellent. Pretty soon we will control everything and those that don't listen, well I think you now understand your situation."

She was dead. Her eyes had rolled over and she had no sign of life. Tears were pouring from his eyes, first Rosa and now her. He looked at his sword and then reached out for hers. "Hold on, for just a little while. As I promised, I will always return to you, where ever you are."

He knew that this is not what she would want him to do, but this time he did not care. All that was on his mind is that this would be it. There would be no tomorrow where he would wake up next to her, no more teasing, no more laughing, no more nothing. As he stood up and turned he saw what had done this to her. His rage built up like never before, his sword flashed red to pink in a few seconds. If he was able to end this, then the army would probably be able to close the portal and then everyone would have a chance. Anna's sword glowed green. While she was far way, he would try to protect the last member of their group. If not stopped here, she would return and try to destroy him and probably get herself killed as well in the process. He would not let that happen. He would protect her where he had failed Anna, green turned to light green.

The cleric was still not impressed. "So you think this will be enough?"

"No, actually I don't." He focused everything he had by remembering the last four years. More tears fell, and he looked up to focus his gaze on the shadow's glowing red eyes. "But I'm guessing this will." Still looking, he let go of everything. This was

going be it for him but he was okay with that. There was nothing left anyways. Both swords turned white.

Adam had finally thinned down the monsters around. He had to admit that Kyle was a fantastic leader in the field. He had managed to help him and also advance. As Adam took in the new situation, he heard Anna scream. He rushed to the location of the sound and, realised that the cleric had stopped moving as well. As he got close to both of them, he saw her lying on the ground with Mike holding both swords, now glowing pure white. The cleric was focused on the glow. Not really understanding what was going on, he went to Anna's body. There was no way that he could save her with the level of injuries that she had. Plus, Crusaders never got to train in the high level healing spells, only the entry level ones that would help patch up minor wounds. Not wanting to do the same mistake as the last time and give up on someone, he reached down and put one hand on her chest and the other on her head. He started casting healing spells at both places, once, twice, three times and still no improvement. Four, five, six times, he would continue until he was empty. That's what Rosa would want him to do.

After even more minor healing, she started coughing. Realising that she might live, he continued to heal her until he was totally empty. While she could not move, she was at least conscious and more importantly, alive.

Anna heard Adam say, "We are even now." She had been hit by the dark cloud and then nothing. She figured that Adam had healed her, as the pain all around her body was now registering she also figured that Crusader healing needed a lot of improvement. As she turned her head, her eyes

went wide as the white glow coming from both swords was hard to miss.

She reached out to Adam. "Get me to him now."

"I can't heal you more and your wounds will reopen..."

She let him go. He did not understand, just like they had not understood what Rosamia was doing when they let her go through with her plan. She twisted her body and felt an enormous amount of pain. She fought to stay conscious. She heard Adam tell her that she was insane and then he reached out to help her.

They got close to Mike, only a few feet away. He was totally lost in his own head and was ignoring everything around him. She hoped that what he had told her would be right; no matter what, he would be able to hear her.

"Never give up, remember? You need to always fight, no matter what. More importantly, I will NEVER forgive you for this. Are you okay with that?"

He saw nothing but the shadow in front of him, and then he heard her voice. She was dead but he still heard her voice. He turned his head slightly and saw her, alive. He figured Adam had done something, a miracle really. She had told him not to do this but after going so far could he even think about stopping? He let go of his doubt. "I will always return to you, wherever you are." He let out a large scream and then the swords turned to light green and pink.

The cleric's eyes glowed, "Hahaha! I was wondering if you were going to use that. I was curious to see if it would have been enough, but in this state you have no chance." He raised his hand to collect some energy. As soon as his hand had moved, Adam picked up Anna and ran in the

opposite direction. The action of picking her up had cause great pain and she was about to go lose consciousness. "...I'll keep fighting, so you better too..." she then passed out. He had no clue why she had been so insistent in doing this but he hoped that it was worth it. Now he needed to find a priest. The time he had given her would not last long.

Mike rushed at the cleric's shadow form. At his size he assumed that he would be harder to hit if he was closer, like trying to swat a bee zooming around you. As the cleric had finished gathering his energy, he tried to aim at him. The second trick was anticipating where the cleric thought he would move and go in a different direction. The wave missed him, now to continue like this while going on the offensive. Fighting with two swords was different for him but something he had practiced. Anna's sword was single edge, which would cause issues with his double edge, assuming he was fighting a regular foe. He knew that everything would hinge on the enchantments, so the different sword type mattered less.

As close as he was, he unleashed blast after blast, constantly cycling emotions of trying to protect Anna and get his revenge on the one that had almost killed her. He slashed at the cleric's form and let loose the energy, every time at point blank range. Pink energy followed by light green bombarded the dark form. Once the damage was done, shadow energy would be drawn and merge with the section that got hit. It was like fighting a large dark giant made of mud that would replenish itself with new mud when a chunk got removed.

The cleric was starting to get annoyed with this bee that was constantly buzzing around him and stinging him. He would never run out of energy to recharge himself but it was still

annoying. He tried to grab him while with his other hand he built up a blast. When ready he would try in engulf his target, but for some reason he was always able to avoid it. This made him madder. Tired of this game, he stopped and built up some energy. "Try to dodge this, annoying pest."

Mike realised that he had better move and quick. A sphere of darkness was forming around the cleric. Seeing as the sphere was building quicker than he could outrun it, he took a chance on using the only thing around him as makeshift cover, the bodies of all the fallen foes. As the sphere enveloped everything around him, it seemed like his gamble paid off. The shadow energy was pushed all around like a wave. As soon as this wave hit the bodies, it flowed over it. Some of its power passed through and hit him. The pain was agonizing and he was only hit in small places. How had Anna survived a full hit, he wondered? As the wave passed, he lifted himself up. His sides and part of his back had been hit. This would slow him down considerably.

He once again moved as quickly as he could and launched another assault.

"How are you surviving? This is infuriating." The cleric channelled even more power into him and grew bigger. Knowing that he was reaching his limit, Mike got close and did multiple energy strikes. One, two, three, four and five hits aimed at the same spot. A large amount of energy was again automatically channelled from the Earth. Having only to take a few seconds to recover, a large hand reached out to him.

The hand was slowly burning him. He hacked at the hands to try to free himself but again it had little effect. He was being raised near to the cleric's head. "Now it's finally over." The hand started to squeeze him. "ARRrrrg... I can't give up." He had

only moments until he would get completely squished. He focused his emotions and let loose two attacks. Their aim was right to one of his glowing red eyes. They connected and finally the cleric reacted.

"ARRRRRgggg, you actually hurt me. This is it, I am done with you. I will channel so much energy that it will not only vaporize you but everything around me." Mike dropped to ground and saw tones of energy flowing and merging with the already large body. As he looked he realised something unexpected was happening. A white line was forming on his dark body. It was like a rupture on a dark canvas and behind it a glowing light.

Not knowing what was happening, Mike stood up and performed what would be his final hits. With a scream he let loose another five hits on the white rupture. Like before, shadow energy tried to fill the hole that had been created but this time more cracks showed up, but they were bigger. Big enough to trigger more power being called to heal the damage, which again created more and bigger ruptures around his shadow form.

"What is happening to me?" By instinct the cleric tried to channel more energy to heal the damage this caused. This only made things worse. Soon enough most of his body had turned more glowing white than dark. "What... Is happening... to... "

At this point his whole body was a giant white glowing beacon. Mike ran as fast and as far as he could. After a few more minutes what was the shadow cleric was engulfed in a white light that pulsed a few time and then let loose a large explosion. This explosion sent Mike flying a few feet.

After blanking out for a few minutes, he rolled over and sat himself up. Everything in a sixty foot

radius had been disintegrated. No remains of the cleric could be found. Exhausted and badly hurt, he stood up and slowly marched back to the rear guard where Adam, and more importantly, Anna, was waiting.

As he got close, Adam just looked at him. "Let me be the first to congratulate you on being the first person ever to kill a dark cleric and survive."

"I'm happy I made the history books. Now can you lead me to her?" Adam escorted Mike in the back row where priests were still casting healing spells on her. As he got close he realised that she was still unconscious. He moved her long brown hair from her face and gently brushed her cheek. "Thanks to you, I made it somehow." He then dropped to the ground. Some priests had stopped their treatment on Anna and started to move to him. He looked at them and gave them a warm smile "Thank you so much for keeping her alive." He turned to Adam. "And you, if there is anything I can ever do, just let me know and it's yours."

He smirked at him. "It's alright, consider it payback for leaving you behind. Plus, as you would say, 'It's what she would have wanted me to do'."

"That I do understand. Now if you don't mind, I think I will pass out as well. I am too drained to even lift my sword."

"You used too much energy and like any caster your stamina is now completely drained. At this point we have done all we can anyways. It will be up to the captain and his troops to finish things off."

Mike nodded in agreement. He reached out for her hand and held it as he closed his eyes and let his mind drift off.



## *Chapter 10*

*I*t took about two days for them to recover. During that time they had learned that the captain had been able to close the portal. There had been many losses but there were still enough men to keep the city defence going for the time being. That night a celebration was held by the merchants to thank the soldiers for their brave work. The city was bustling with songs, dance and people generally having as much fun as they could after surviving near destruction.

Not one for parties, Mike was on top of the tower watching it all. The tower had been reverted back to its original function that was mostly used for meeting and trade agreements. The enchantments had been removed and everything had turned back to what this city considered normal. He looked at it all from below. This place allowed him the quiet he liked and also a nice view of what was happening around him.

They had tried to get a magical communication with Astrum to get an update on Rosamia's situation. For all three times that they tried, they got nothing back. They had agreed that they would leave for Newport in the morning to head to Astrum and see what was happening themselves. The preparations had all been made. All that was left was to wait until tomorrow. Because of this, they had separated to enjoy the festivities in their own way. Anna had gone with Jessica to see the city and enjoy the fun atmosphere. The two had become friends while she had spent many hours treating her from her wounds. Mike had no clue where Adam was but was sure that he would show

up at the appointed time. He figured that Adam would want to spend some time figuring things out on his own. The truth of it is that he wanted to do the same thing himself. A lot had happened in the last few days.

"See, I told you that you would like it here too."

He turned around to see Anna with a basket with food and drinks. She unrolled a large piece of cloth on the floor and took out what she had brought with her. Looking at the food made him realise that he had not eaten yet. He sat down with her.

"I figured that you were with Jessica?"

"I was, but then Kyle showed up and, well, it was just not the same after that. So I used you as an excuse and left them together. I figured you would be here. I know how you are not a fan of these things."

He took a piece of bread. "There are some things I wanted to think about." This got her curious.

"Oh?"

"Well, we still don't know the status of Rosamia. Both of us almost did not make it. It makes you wonder if this is how we should continue."

"Nice relaxing house, not having to see monsters every day that are trying to kill you and not having to deal with events that would change the whole continent would sound really nice... for a while." She gave him a small grin. "The truth of it is that both of us would go mad after a while of that. You would get tired of not being able to use your sword and I would get cabin fever because I would be stuck in the same place for too long. It's who we are." She reached out for his hand. "You are going down the same road Adam did, you think that dropping these things and doing everything safe will help and shield us from... well the last few

days, really. But these things can happen no matter what we do, just look at Rosamia's story to see a perfect example of that. One day you are enjoying your little town and then a dark cleric shows up. Was she not safer? And yet these things still happen. There is no way to tell. The best that we can do is be as prepared as we can and try to deal with what comes up. So after that, let me ask you; what do you want to do?"

He stared at the horizon. "I know that what we did made a difference, and I'm not going to lie, that feels great. But I also don't want what happen to Rosamia to happen again and I don't want you to die."

A small smile appeared on her face. "Well I still believe that she is safe and that Alex found a way. I'll keep believing that until I see otherwise. As for my case, I want to live as well but we can't stop these things from happening. The best that we can do is learn from them and try to be better for the next time. Not doing anything because of fear of the consequences that failure may bring is not really living anyways. Well, not the way I see it."

She looked back and saw that he was staring at her with a nice smile on his face. She smiled back at him. "What, you don't agree?"

He shook his head. "It's not that. I just figured out what I wanted. Let's continue this adventure and see where it leads." He looked in her sparkling green eyes that were always so full of life. "Also there is something else that I figured out. I'm sure I have not said it before and I don't know why, just being stupid I guess, but I want you to know how much I love you. I was attracted to you ever since I first asked you to spar, way back when, during training and now I can't see how I could live without you in my life. No matter what happens, I want to be there for you and I want you to be there

for me."

"I have known that for a long time and it was confirmed when you left with me. Still, four years to say it? How can you be so sure of yourself during battle and so slow with your heart?"

Still looking at her, he shrugged. "That's easy. The heart hurts more so it's defended more."

She thought about that for a few seconds, all the while realizing that he was still waiting for her to say something back. She gave him one of her half smiles. "What, I wait four year and you need an answer now?" That comment made them both laugh. When the laughter died down she reached out for touch his face. "I love you too and I want to be by your side and you by mine. I would never want to change that." He reached out to her and kissed her. When it was over she smirked at him again, "Another thing that you have waited too long for."

He responded with a small chuckle and then stood up and grabbed her hand. "Shall we go?" She looked at him in amused puzzlement. "The party will still be going for a while, let's go and have fun in the city that we helped save."

She stood up and wrapped herself around his arm. "Sounds like a great plan."

The next day all three met up and said their goodbyes to Kyle and Jessica. The trip would take them longer than expected. Adam could only magically speed up his own horse so there was no point and also he had requested that they go around the Crusader main camp. No details were specified and none were asked. After their last fight, both of them could agree that he was rough around the edges but was also someone they could now trust. They just hoped that there would be good news when they got to Astrum.

Traveling to Newport took a total of five days.

They used this time to learn each other's skill level in case something would happen. As it turns they were at the same level overall. Adam would take the advantage when he used his own magic to personally boost himself up, whereas Anna and Mike could in theory use the enchantment to close the gap. The sparing also help confirm that both of them were back at one hundred percent.

As they got to Newport they stabled their horses and walked to the portal in the middle of the town. Anna took out the brooch that Alex had given her, and looked at Adam. "Ah, do you know how this goes?"

He shrugged. "Not really, all I know is that you are supposed to show them proof that they should let you use the thing otherwise you are not going through." She gave the brooch to Mike. "Well, you're up."

He looked at her, "Again?"

"It's alright, I have your back. Plus, you are better at the mind games."

As the three approached, the guard blocked their path. "This is where we ask you to turn back, the portal of Astrum is not of for the likes of you."

Mike showed them the brooch "We are the Lights Templar and this was given to us by Alexandria. She has requested our presence in the city. Will you let us through?"

The guards looked puzzled. He figured that they really did not let people go up often. "Why would the lady summon people like you?"

Ignoring the insult, he told them "It is not my job to question the lady or her demands. Will you prevent us from using the portal because of this? Or should she be contacted to clear this up?"

The guard looked at the brooch again. "No need, the brooch alone would be good. It's just odd. Typically a formal invitation and seal would be

presented, due to these odd circumstances I hope you don't mind if we contact the guards above to let them know of the situation before you go through?"

"Sure, we understand."

After a quick communication was sent the three were allowed to walk into the portal. Anna poked Mike as they walked in. "See, you handled that better than I would have."

They were greeted on the other side by a lot of guards. While they did not have their weapons pointed at them, they did block their way. "Hold, you will stay here until a representative can escort you." At this point there was no reason to argue so the three stood there and waited. As they looked around they could tell that Astrum was like no other city that they had ever seen. The portal was located near the edge of the floating city, which was surrounded by large towers, each having a radiant ball of energy floating on top of it. The city itself housed a lot of elegant towers that reached high up. Most towers had mid and top sections that would go outside like an elegantly constructed balcony. Large buildings could be found around them, they could see lots of people coming in and out more often holding books. The area was also covered in beautifully cut vibrantly green grass. Stone paths could be found to walk from one section to the other. Overall, Anna and Mike were impressed with what they saw but at the same time felt a bit uncomfortable. The city was perfectly clean and orderly, a bit too orderly.

Eventually an elf with long straight silver hair came in their direction. He was wearing robes like many others and leather shoulders that seemed to imply a certain rank. As he approached the guards, they bowed down to him. "We have been expecting you. Welcome to Astrum. My name is

Lithius and I am part of the Council that rules this city. Now, I'm sure you have many questions but before we go over those, would you kindly follow me to my home?"

As they agreed and followed Lithius, they noticed that a few guards were still following them. Along the way Lithius explained the area. "This city was built using magic and is constantly maintained by it. The pillars you see around the city are there to protect us from unwanted guests. The purpose of the large building that we just passed is for meeting and schooling. A large library of books there can also be found. Here and there you will find large towers, they are mostly used for recreational purposes. Shops can be found and on certain levels stages have been setup for performers or anyone else that may want to display their skill. Everywhere else you will find dwellings where most of us call their homes. Here you will find mine."

The house in front of them looked like a mini tower that was about three levels, counting what looked like an observatory section on the top. As they stepped in they saw that the bottom floor was split into three different sections. To the left was a kitchen. No ovens could be found but there were food supplies and plates. To the right were stairs that lead to the second floor and a small table with a few chairs. In front was a large window area with large upholstered chairs. Standing there was a person dressed in priest's robes with blond shoulder length hair and a large smile on her face.

Adam rushed to her and held her tightly.

"Rosa, you're alive."

"Yes, yes I am."

"I'm so happy that you're alive and well, Rosa." Anna poked Mike. "See? I told you she would find a way. You have to believe more. Still, I will admit

that this is going better than Alex warned me about. The way she talked, you would have guessed that we would be in a holding cell or something."

Lithius gave a small chuckle. "After talking with Miss Rosamia for a while, it seems that Miss Alexandria may have embellished certain things. Still, while you are welcomed at my home right now, you cannot leave the house without me or someone I designate as an escort. Guests of your kind are rare, so I hope you understand."

"It's alright. I'm sorry I brought it up, really. By the way, where is Alexandria? I would have guessed that she would have been here as well."

As soon as she asked, both Lithius and Rosa's moods turned sombre. This only made Anna and Mike worry. "What happened?"

Lithius pointed at the chairs. "Please, if you would all sit down as I tell you what happened."

"As you know, Miss Alexandria came back to try to save Miss Rosamia. It seems that she found that the Valkyrie will only deplete the caster of his life force at the time of casting. If life force is transferred before the original amount is depleted, then the caster can survive." Mike held Anna's hand. This happy reunion was going in a bad direction.

"It seems that Alexandria was preparing to transfer a part of her own life force. This process was forcefully stopped by her father and myself. For personal reasons her father, Richard, decided to complete the spell and save Rosamia. Unfortunately, Richard did not have enough to spare so I too had to add in. For myself the loss was very minor, especially with the amount we elves already have."

At that point Rosamia continued. "As for Richard, he was not so lucky. While he is still alive,



it's estimated that he will only live for maybe about year or two." She slouched down and looked at the floor. "Because of my stupid, stupid action, the father of one of my few friends had to sacrifice himself. Ever since I woke up I have not seen Alex at all. I've been told that she has locked herself in her house after learning what happened." She started to cry a bit. Adam looked at her in a confused state, not really knowing what to do. "At the same time I have no clue what I could say to her or if she ever wanted to see me again. I don't even know how I can ever repay Richard or Lithius for what they did and the cost they paid."

The elf looked at all of them. While he understood their feelings, he did not share them. "As I have told you again and again, Miss Rosamia, you are not responsible for the decisions made by us. They are our consequence to bear as they were our actions, not yours. Again, you were responsible for creating the series of events, not how we reacted to them. Even so, if you still feel the need to repay us, then live your life as you were. From my understanding, you were following a good path."

Rosa looked at everyone around her and took a moment to think of the words she had just heard. "I suppose that you are right and I will do as you wish. Still, I will try harder to make sure that your decision was a correct one."

"Humans are so stubborn. Still, that's fine with me." He switched his focus to Mike. "Now, I know that you would like to try to help your other teammate but there is something that I would like you to do before."

"What is it that we can help you with?"

"I would like it if you could join me at the Council meeting. They have been preparing while we are here and should be ready now. We would

appreciate all the details you can give us about your fight with the dark cleric."

Rosa was stunned at that statement. "Wait a minute, there was another? And you fought it?"

Adam cut in. "Not only did he fight it, he actually killed it and survived."

Rosa stared at Mike "How? No one has ever done that."

"Look, I understand that what I did was pretty special but at the same time the only reason I'm alive was luck more than anything."

Lithius looked confused by that statement. "Luck, you say? I'm not so convinced and the rest of the Council shares the same feeling. Will you join us?"

"Of course we will, but afterward would it be possible if we try to speak with Alexandria?"

Lithius stood up. "Excellent follow me then. As for your request, if things go as planned she should be at the meeting as well. If things don't work out, then yes, we will allow you to talk to her." Mike was not too keen on the choice of words but at the same time did not see a need to argue the point.

In another house a young lady was still curled up in her bed. Alex had stopped crying about what happened for a few days now. She just felt dead at this point. After she had woken up she was overjoyed that her theory had been right, but when she learned how it had been done, her mood had changed drastically. She had met up with her father after he had recovered from the effects. Yes, he was still alive, but all his color had vanished and he was so weak and frail. He could not really leave his house for long and casting even a simple spell weakened him considerably. He had given too much and now he had very little left. Her friend was alive and she had kept her promise to find a

way to save her but she could not find it in herself to accept the cost.

Suddenly she felt one of her spells break down. She had cast many wards in order for no one to be able to reach her. There were few that could do as this person was doing and very soon this person would be at her door. As the final ward broke, the door opened and a very old elf stepped in. His hair was long and white. Not only did he wear Council clothing, his markings showed that he had the highest rank among them. She was a bit surprised. Why would he be at her home? She sat up on her bed. "Solonar why are you here?"

Solarar took the chair that was near the desk and sat down. "We are about to meet with the group that you traveled with at a meeting. I would like you to join."

Alex's shoulders slumped. "I'm not sure I would be any help."

"So it seems, but still, one of them killed a dark cleric in his shadow form and survived so we would like to hear about the events."

Alex raised her hands in the air. "I already told you all about how Rosamia did what she did, there is nothing else to tell."

A small smirk appeared on his face. "The one we are talking about is not Miss Rosamia but the male warrior in the group."

This got Alex's attention. "Wait, there was another and he..." She stopped herself, she could not get involved again. If she did, next time who close to her would be the one to pay the price? This time it was Solarar that slumped his shoulders. "I must say that I am disappointed. I would have hoped that this news would have helped you convince yourself just a little to change the state that you are currently in. It seems I was wrong."

He stood up and made his way to the door.

"One last chance, I suppose. As Council leader I order you to show up at the meeting. Once we know all the details of what happened, you will be given a duty to perform as a Council representative. If you fail to show up, we will have to terminate your position that you worked so hard to get all these years." He turned to look at her reaction. She still seemed unmoved. He thought to add one more comment before leaving. This comment would hurt but going one way or the other made little difference as long as there was movement. "Your father gave up most of his life force to save your friend and yourself. After his sacrifice, here you are alone, not with your friend or your father, letting this time that was magically given to you waste away. I find your path very disappointing." He left and closed the door behind him.

Alex clenched her fists as hard as she could, tears were once again flowing down her face. After a while she let out a large scream. "AHHHHHRRR ...YOU DARN ELF!"

The group was guided into the meeting room. The room itself was empty; there were no windows or any furniture of any sort. At each corner were stone shaped people holding shields and in the middle a half glowing sphere could be seen. The sphere was about five feet in diameter and came about three feet up from the floor. It was the only thing in the room providing any type of light. The four were told to stand near the sphere in the middle. Standing around them were different elves wearing the same type of cloths as Lithius.

For a while only silent mumbling could be heard from the elves, then a few minutes later an older elf stepped into the room from the door on the other side. He walked until he reached the opposite side of the half sphere and turned

backwards. "You may as well take your soon to be new position." A blond haired human lady walked up next to the old elf, she kept her gaze focused on the sphere.

Rosamia whispered Alexandria's name as she saw her take her position. When she heard her name, she looked up for a few seconds and forced a quick smile at them, then refocused her gaze at the sphere.

The old elf started talking. "Welcome guests to the Astrum Council meeting room. My name is Solanar and I am the head for the Council. I'm glad that you agreed to meet us as we would like to know more of what transpired at the city of Calculus during the last encounter. Before you start I would like to explain the use the sphere in the middle. If there is something you would like to show us to make the explanation clearer, simply picture the image of it in your head and touch the sphere." As Solanar did just that a picture of Astrum showed up in the sphere for everyone to see. "We encourage you to use the sphere, there could be something that you saw that will mean something else to us when we see it. I now leave the floor to you." He took a few steps back and waited.

Mike looked at his friends. "Since I was the only one at the final moments, I guess I'll go." He took a few steps forward and started explaining what had happened.

Alex finally got the missing pieces of what had happened after she had left, including Adam arriving, the second dark cleric, Anna almost dying, the swords turning white only the have their effects cancelled. It was all so much. How had they all been able to move forward after such events? Adam, being the most impressive. He had no way of knowing or believing that Rosa would be alive

and yet he had found the mental strength to participate in the fight and save Anna, who in turn saved Mike. If he would have acted like she had, then what would have happened? As Mike explained his fight with the shadow version of the cleric, her thoughts focused back to his story. As he finished mumbling could be heard from all Council members.

Solanar was intrigued by this development. "Interesting, Mike can you once again show us these 'cracks' that you saw forming on the shadow's form?" As the imaged appeared again, the other Council members jumped in with a few ideas on what these things were. They quickly agreed that they represented the form breaking apart. What they had real issues with was what had caused it. In the past, during the war of dragons, these beings had faced a multitude of attacks and yet results like this case had never occurred. They eventually agreed that while the attacks were a factor in what had happened, they could not be the real cause of it. There was a missing piece.

Solanar took a step forward to better look at the image being displayed. "Yes, that has to be it." He turned to Alexandria. "I know what caused this and you should be able to figure it out as you have recently experienced something similar." The Council members looked at Alex. She herself was very frustrated. The fact that the old elf had figured it out was one thing, but that he had figured it out with some information that she supposedly should have was another. She went through the events that had occurred and the only one that had anything to do with overloading was Rosa and the Valkyrie spell. As she thought about it more, that had not been the only occurrence. She turned at him. "You are referring to when I channelled more magic than I should have when I closed the first

portal." He responded with a wide grin, so she continued. "Okay fine, the events are similar, but you're implying that the reason why this occurred is because the cleric's body could not handle the power and it started to self-destruct. It can't be that easy."

Lithius took a step forward. "I have to agree with Alexandria. If the amount of damage caused here would be enough for them to overload then this would happen in the past."

Solanar took a lecturing pose. "Ah, but the situations cannot be so simply compared. During that time the main weapon was not the cleric but the dragons. Was enough power even given to them to be able to overload or was it just enough to constantly regenerate? At the time there was also more of them, which would cause the source to be even more split." He looked at all the members. "It is that simple, at least now. Given that there are probably less of them around and also that they are the main enemy, now they probably have access to more power than their predecessors. While they have more power, now they have a weakness." While most of the Council were mulling over this idea, Adam started to realize that the Council only saw the cleric as the enemy. This realization bugged him enough to step up as well.

"I'm getting the impression that you think that the enemies are the clerics. While I agree that they are powerful, are the orcs not the ones we should focus on?"

Lithius was the one that answered his question. "While you are correct that the orcs cannot be ignored due to their numbers, they are also not the main driving force. It is inconceivable to think that the cleric would let themselves be ordered around by such creatures. Still, an arrangement or common goal must have been

agreed on. Once this is removed, the war could easily end."

"I suppose, but how much time do you think we all have to figure out what this link is? Just recently, they almost won this war."

Solanar moved back to his normal position. "You are correct, the time to figure out that answer has probably passed and we should focus on a new target or at least buy ourselves more time." He looked at Mike. "Your group so far has been able to close, or help close, all new portals. There is still one left." He moved his hand towards Alex. "If you agree to help close it, a now official member of the Council would join you and at the same time officially represent us." Alex just looked at him in shocked confusion, thinking that the old elf had finally lost it.

Adam was more verbal than her. "Why do you think that these people can do what the whole Crusader army could not? Your proposal makes no sense."

Solanar ignored him and still looked at Mike. Mike took Anna's hand and after a quick glance they both nodded in agreement. Alex's mouth was now open in disbelief.

Once again, Adam voiced his reaction. "WHAT?!" Turning to Mike, he said, "You were there. We could not even get close to that tower and there were two divisions of Crusaders attacking it. Sure, both of you together would make a difference, but not that much."

Mike smirked. "As Solanar just said, the situations are not so easily comparable. The army that the Crusaders attacked is also the army that bolstered the forces at Calculus. That army has been destroyed. There is a good chance that the tower only has a defensive guard and nothing else at this time. I would be willing to bet that if the



Crusaders attacked now with the forces they had, they would have a victory. The issue would be convincing them. That would take weeks and by then a new force of orcs could be ready. So in a way we have to go now, otherwise we lose our chance."

He turned to Solanar. "There is one thing I would like to clarify." He pointed to himself and Anna. "We have agreed to your request, not the others, and also we will only allow Alexandria to accompany us if she wants to come, not because you ordered her too."

Solanar crossed his arms. "You understand why I made the request and know that time is of the essence and what is at stake. I cannot force you to go or to accept the help I give you. So take the time to figure things out and go as soon as you can." He turned around and started to leave the meeting room. "Humans, they always complicate things." Shortly after only the group and Lithius was left.

They all left to Lithius house, Alex included. Going over, she was trying to decide what she was going to do. The Council had strongly recommended that she join them but she was also given a choice. All the way over there she kept noticing that Rosamia was constantly glancing at her, which made sense considering that she had avoided her ever since she had woken up. It's not that she was mad at her or anything, just that things were different now and she did not know what to make of that at this time.

Lithius invited them in his house and served them some tea. The living room seemed a bit cramped but it would be more than okay to figure things out. Alex was annoyed with herself. Here she was with her friends and yet she was totally uncomfortable. Unable to just sit and wait, she

started things off. "Okay, I get why striking now is a good idea, but why would you want to risk your lives again so quickly after the last battle?"

Both warriors looked at each other. Anna was a bit disappointed. "So that's how you want to start things off, fine... We both share the idea that this is what we do and we want to do it together. Our life will be dangerous but look at the good that we can cause because of it. At the same time, would we be safer in a village? Villages get attacked." That last comment left a sore spot with Rosa and Adam but still they said nothing.

"Hmm, okay, both of you have trained all your lives so I can see where you are coming from." She turned to the other side of the group, "But what about you two? It seems that you have finally found each other. Where do you go now?"

"I will follow Rosamia. I can't go back the Crusaders. Essentially I left my post during a time of war. I don't think that they will hunt me down for my crime but at the same time showing up there would not be a good idea."

Rosamia took his hand "I'm sorry."

He shrugged. "The worst part about all this is that it bugs me very little. I spent years there and now that I can't go back I don't seem to feel anything because of it. More and more I'm realizing that I was not really living over there. I made no attachments, had very few goals and never thought about what I would do after. So at this point I'm a bit lost in my next step."

Rosamia gave him a smile and turned her gaze to Alex. "I will be following them to the portal."

Alex could only shake her head. "I know you don't understand my reasoning, but I have to do this. I have the power to help and now I feel even more compelled to do this. Yes, both of us could leave and use this second chance go somewhere

and find a home, and see where things go from there. While this appeals to me a lot, I also know that I would not be truly happy knowing that people would still be fighting and that I could do something to help." Before continuing, she got a very serious look on her face. "Don't get me wrong, we are coming back. I'm not going over there recklessly. So now all that's left is figuring out if you will follow us."

Alexandria was confused. In her head she kept going over ideas, *'Was it all for nothing? No, but is jumping into another fight the right thing to do? Have we not done enough? Will something like that happen again?'* There were too many questions leading to no answers.

Then she felt someone wrap her arms around her. While in her confused state, Anna had gotten up and was telling her something. "You will not find a reason or an answer to all this. It's not that simple. Do what you feel is the right things to do. That is where you will have the most success and the most power. I'm not saying to ignore consequences, but don't stop acting and moving forward because you fear the outcomes that may happen. If you do then you will be on the wrong path."

Tears started coming down from her eyes. "I understand, but what if I mess up again and..."

Rosamia stood up and joined in on the now group hug. "Then we will be there to help you out, just like you will be there for us."

Lithius was looking at the exchange with a smile on his face, *'Richard it seems that you were right and your gamble is paying off.'*

Having agreed to go with them, Alexandria paid her father a visit before leaving. While he was better than the last time she had seen him, he still looked very weak. But as he looked at her still

sitting on a chair, he had a nice warm smile on his face. She sat next to him. "I take it that you got the news on everything?"

"Yes, I did, and I agree with everyone's conclusions and choices... even yours."

"I'll go with them but part of me will still feel like I should stay here with you, especially now."

He nodded. "Yes, well, I will not say that a part of me does not wish for the same thing. Still, you need to do this. I think that in the future they will need you as much as you will need them, so yes, follow them and write your own personal adventure. You will not be able to do that staying here." She stood and reached out to hug her father. He welcomed her. "Now now, I'll make sure to still be here when you return, so don't worry. No matter what happens when you are out there, remember that I am and will always be proud of you." She put a bit more strength in her arms to show the love and other emotions that she was feeling but could not put into words.

## Chapter 11

The Council and the Lights Templar agreed not to close the portal but to disrupt it. Alexandria would never have the power by herself to be able to close a portal that size but she could make it inoperable for a while. During this time the orc army would have no reinforcements. The left over Crusaders, accompanied by a force from Astrum, would then be able to overtake the Portal Tower and finally close the last portal. This was assuming that the Crusaders would agree with this plan. That was the first thing that they needed to do before heading to the tower.

Getting to the camp was no problem but once they got near, Adam stopped their progress. "Look, I will follow you to the tower but I wonder if it would be better for me to stay out of sight for a while. I'm pretty sure my presence alone will cause issues."

The group looked at Mike, assuming he would make the call. He looked around. Clearly Rosamia was not keen on the idea of him staying back. He was also not very interested in the idea. He agreed that his presence would cause an issue but if he stayed back he could get captured or something else could happen. Adam was also now the unofficial new member of the group and it would not sit right with him to have the new member stay behind. "I understand why your suggestion makes sense but I think that you should stay with us. You are a part of this team now and leaving you behind for reasons like that feels wrong. We will just have to deal with what happens because of it when the time comes." A quick smile from Anna

confirmed that she had also not been keen on the idea.

Adam figured he would keep following, he was surprised that the more difficult path was taken. In situations like this the easier path would have made sense. His feelings of belonging should not have been a consideration. Still, he had to admit, it was a nice change of pace.

The group entered the camp and stabled their horses. Surprisingly, no one stopped them. Not wanting to take unnecessary risks, the group created a circle around Adam; Rosa and Alex to his side, Anna in the back and Mike in the front. They made their way to the General's tent, which was still in the same position. Two guards were in front and were about to stop them but the General waved them in closer. So far everything was going perfectly.

The General crossed his arms as they got closer. "I must say I am surprised that you are all still alive, not only that but you managed to help close the other portal." He looked at all of them a bit more closely. While they all seemed wearier than their first meeting, they also seemed to have the same level of determination, which he had to admire. He also noticed something else. "I see that you found the deserter and decided to bring him back so he can be punished for his crimes." As he finished, the group instantly tensed up.

Mike realized that the guards were not rushing in right away, so he relaxed his position a bit. "No, he is part of our group now and will help us in our next task. I would hope that you could ignore the issue of desertion for now."

"It's not really an option. Yes, his skills would be better suited than whatever the inquiry will decide for him, I'm sure, but even so we can't make exceptions. He will have to come with us." Adam

was worried that there would be no way to escape this without a fight. He figured that he would try to convince the general to let him escort them to the tower and then he would give himself up.

As he was about to speak, Rosamia took a step to get closer to the general. "I will not let you take him, I don't care about your rules or what the high priest will think of me for disobeying after I stop you."

The General was now annoyed with then. He stood up and was about to order his men to arrest all of them but then the younger one stared at him with a look of annoyance herself. Her posture had also changed to that of someone expressing great confidence, "Enough of this, General. This man is under the Council of Astrum's protection for now. He is helping us with a mission to close this final portal. As much as you have your orders to take him in, you cannot go against the Council commands so easily." She took out the same brooch that she had given to Anna and showed it to the General.

"It's hard to believe that someone like you is a member of the Council." Now he was starting to get angry. "So why stop here then? Make it good."

Trying not to be fazed by the General's mood, Alex explained the situation and their plans to disrupt the portal and hopefully shut it down. She then explained the part that they would like the Crusaders to play and hoped that he would accept.

As he understood the situation and what they wanted from him, the General had to laugh. "Oh, this is rich. So you want us to march in there after being defeated to provide backup to you five, because you five will be able to do what we could not for the last few years." He closed his eyes and raised his hand. "And the best part, you ask for this right before pulling rank on me in order to

protect your new friend here. I acknowledge your courage and loyalty but you need a lot of work in the diplomacy department. I have to decline. "

Alex was surprised by his response. Sure, she expected him to not like the idea and even be insulted by it but in the end she figured that his desire to finish this war would win out over whatever stupid emotion or reasoning was causing him to disagree with them.

As she was about to use her position again to force the issue, Mike's hand reached out to grab her wrist as if to tell her to stop. "General, we are not saying that we will be able to do what your people have bravely tried to do. If we did we would not be here asking for your help. We are saying that we few have the best chance of making it to the top and disrupting the portal. Unfortunately, that's all we can do. Doing just that will only give everyone a short break until everything goes back to the way it was. Your people are the only ones capable of finishing things off as we open the way. All that being said, do you still refuse to help?"

"Using pretty words to change someone's view on the same situation... You should have opened with that. Still, if we fight and fail there will be no more defence. You would want me to risk that for this plan?"

"In a way, yes, but at the same time, not really. You will only attack if we succeed in our mission and if the Council's forces are with you. You are correct in the risk involved, but if those two events happen, I am confident that a large defence would no longer be needed."

The General sat back down and crossed his arms. He really did not want to give into them. Heck, he wanted to send them to the brig and let them all rot there for a bit for what they had just done. Still, he did not want to let this chance go.



"Fine, I'll ready the troops and we will help with your plan, but only if you succeed and if the extra manpower shows up." A smirk appeared on his face. "When this is all done, I will also want the traitor to give himself up. If all these condition are met, I will agree."

Adam looked at the general. "Fine, I agree. Once we get back from the tower I will willingly turn myself in."

The General smiled. "Then we have a deal. I will start getting the troops ready."

As they left the General's tent, Mike asked Adam, "Why did you agree to that?"

"It was the quickest way and I did leave my post against orders, so why should I escape the consequence?"

Mike looked at Rosamia, who now had a worried look on her face. "Hmm, true, but still, you may have wanted to take in consideration the feelings of those close to you before you made that decision"

"I'm not sure you are one to talk about that."

Mike shrugged. "You are probably right, but still."

"It's done now anyways. Let's focus on the route that we will take to get to the Portal Tower. I'm sure the General won't mind if we use the maps in the mission briefing room."

After a while of studying the maps and the enemy locations finding the proper path had been pretty easy. Now they just had to hope that the enemy troops were as weak as they thought they were.

They left a few hours after the path was finalised. Alex had prepared her assortment of instant spells, which was now at five. She figured that this would probably be the maximum she could push that spell too. Rosamia enchanted all of

them with the standard protective barrier that would help against range items. Adam would take the lead, followed by Anna and Mike, with Alex and Rosa in the rear.

Adam was able to guide the group using his magical tracking ability in order to avoid most early enemy patrols. Normally doing something like this would be a bad idea, eventually when they did hit something there was a good chance that those missed patrols would be the first to reinforce the main unit, but as was agreed earlier, no matter how many groups they killed on their way, there would be more. Also, they would get swarmed pretty quickly if they took too long. They had to get to the tower as quickly as they could. This time the large area would work against them and the close quarters of the tower should be more in their favour.

The group eventually made it to a dense patrol zone. Luckily most of troops were orcs and ogres. Overall they made quick work of them with very little damage sustained on their side. Even so, Adam could tell that the others around them were starting to converge on their location. Speed had to be their main weapon here.

A few more groups later, they finally arrived at the tower. This had gone better than Adam had expected, but their first big problem had arrived. He turned and informed the group, "The main door to the tower is just ahead but it's heavily guarded by a large number of enemies. By my estimation we could defeat them, but it would cost us a lot in time and energy."

Mike looked at Alexandria and Adam. "Is there any other way in, magical or physical?" Adam did not know of any other entrance so Alex started casting a scanning spell to see if there was another option. The process took longer than she had

hoped. The issue was that there was so little of anything alive in this section of the forest to use. Eventually she did find something. "A squirrel on the other side found something that maybe we can use. I'll lead the way there."

As they moved, Adam had to question Alex. "Do you always use animals when scanning? Would there not be a quicker and better way?"

"Sure there is, many of them actually, but most, if not all, of the others create an interesting beacon on the person casting the spell. This means that if something is paying just a small level of attention, they would have detected it fast. Looking through animal eyes, ears and also their memories may not be the best way, but it is the least detectable. Sadly, it does have some reliability issues sometimes."

As they got to the location the only thing they found was more brick and no entrance of any kind. Anna touched the wall in front of them. "Is this one of those 'reliability issues' you talked about?"

Alexandria looked puzzled "It really should not be."

Adam gazed at a section of the wall near where they were. "We need to take cover, now. Something is coming from that wall." They took cover. Rosa got close and whispered, "But your tracking ability should not be able to reach inside, how can you know?"

He shook his head. "I have no clue, but I'm not about to start to doubt something that I have relied on for so long."

After a few seconds, part of the wall disappeared and a metal gate emerged. Shortly after, the mechanism for the gate moved and the bars raised upwards. Alex nodded her head back and forth. "Okay, sure, now we understand why his tracking could see them because there was no

wall there. But how come I could not see that the wall was fake? What kind of magic is used in this tower?" Having no answers for her, the group instead looked at what was coming out of the newly opened door. Two giants walk out and a dark cleric.

Adam gave a low sigh. "I'm not really sure what is better, the army in front for the door or the unit that is an army himself."

Anna turned to him. "From what you told us, I'm getting the feeling that this is better overall. Still, we need to focus everything on the cleric and dispatch those giants quickly."

"Adam and I will take care of the giants, you guys throw everything you have at the cleric." They looked at Rosa, happy that the sight of one of them did not send her off anymore.

Mike, realising her peace of mind, confirmed her plan. "Alright then, we will leave them to you." They all got up and charged ahead.

As soon as they appeared the cleric summoned his shadow form. Adam aimed in the direction of one of the giants. "What are you planning on using against them?"

"I was thinking a holy spear spell should do it."

"That spell requires you to be very close to them."

She gave him a quick look. "Then just make sure to get all their attention on you."

Mike suggested that Alexandria aim her spells at the same spot that they would attack in hopes that it would make him summon more power in order to regenerate a larger section of damage. While the plan seemed to be working, it was still very slow going. Alexandria saw a brilliant flash of yellow light come from the corner of her eye. She saw Rosamia standing point blank near a giant

with her spear aimed at his gut. The spear was glowing bright yellow and a few seconds later it let out a massive burst of light. Once her eyes readjusted, she saw that a good section of the giant was now missing. The spell was a build-up type that allowed for a close range massive damage delivery. This gave her an idea.

She asked Mike and Anna to attack around the same zone. Essentially they would create an opening and she would throw a fist-sized ball in it. The summoned shadow would then close the wound with the ball still inside. The cleric laughed at their efforts. "This has been tried before and the results will be the same again."

Alex was ignoring him and tried to focus on her timing. What she was doing was tricky and she had to hope that the magic of the shadow would not overpower her own quicker than she had calculated. Rosa and Adam joined in as well, having finished the giants as promised. The time had arrived for her to see if her plan had paid off.

She yelled at everyone, "Move away from his base now!" As they got out of the way, a large explosion occurred from the inside of the base of the cleric. This resulted in a large section of his side going missing in one move. This missing section caused the cleric to topple over on the ground. He used his hand to lift himself up, his glowing flaming eye burning at Alex, who had just insulted his majestic form. "You will pay for this... insult."

Now that he was closer, Mike and Anna took aim at his left eye and slashed away. From the right Rosamia launched a holy spear spell. While close, she was too far to cause the full effect of the spell but it would still work. As both of his eyes got jabbed in by powerful magic, the cleric roared in anger. "This is it, time to kill you miserable ants." A

large build-up of shadow was fuelling him from the ground to heal his first wound and make it so he could stand. He focused more energy and a sphere started to form around him.

Mike yelled, "We need cover, quick."

"Get behind me now." Rosa channeled as much energy as she could in front of her to create a magical shield strong enough to part the shadow energy that would be coming at them. Mike had showed them at the Council meeting that he was able to block out the energy that acted like a wave of water coming over him. As the energy was released and hit her shield, it created a bubble around them where she could safely protect them from the effect. Once the wave passed, shadow energy was once again drawn from the Earth. The cleric was now even more enraged that his attack had done nothing. The Lights Templar on the other hand were very happy. As they looked at the creature in front of them, small white cracks in the darkness had started appearing.

More spells were directed at the cracks, which made them become larger and larger. Soon enough the cleric would overload. The group quickly made their way into the tower, hoping the old magic would help shield them. As the cleric exploded, the tower shook but no other damage could be seen or felt from the inside. They closed the mechanism that dropped the metal bars in the door. As soon as they were closed an illusion of brick came to view, blocking the way and making the wall look whole once again.

The room they entered was not a room at all but a long staircase leading upwards. Once the fake wall had showed up again, there was very little light. Alexandria cast a light spell on her staff, allowing all of them too see in front of them for a short distance. She gave a small chuckle as they

started climbing up the long flights of stairs. "Well, at least the tactic against those dark clerics seems to work, so there is some good news. Plus, we may get lucky and these stairs will lead us right to the top."

Mike smiled. "I'm thinking that the tactic will work for a while as well, it's not like there are a lot of people to report back to them about how we are doing it. So yes, good news there. On the other matter, I don't think that will happen."

"And why not?"

Anna smiled at her question, "Because there is only so much luck he is willing to believe in."

"Anna, right, I already feel like we are already pushing it."

Adam was a bit annoyed. "You may want to keep quit, there is no way to tell how thick these walls are and it would be better for them to still think that we are outside." Now Alex was a bit frustrated as well. While she understood his reasoning, she also felt like he blamed her for all the noise. She had no clue what Rosa saw in him.

They continued to climb for a very long time. So far no doors had been found, no other source of light and no noise could be heard. Rosa broke the silence that Adam had been enjoying. "Alex, is it possible that these stairs will never end?"

She thought about it for a little while. "In theory that is something that can be done, but I would not see the point in this case. I'm more worried that we just can't see the doors like the one at the start. Illusions like that should not be an issue for me but here it seems that it is. I was going to ask if..." Adam turned and shushed at her.

"Hey, I was answering her question you..." She felt Anna's hand on her shoulder. "What looks like a door was found. Can you turn off the light? I'm sure that's what he wanted to tell you." Alex

cancelled her spell. Adam could still feel her eyes glaring at him but he cared very little. The thing in front of him was in fact a door. The stairs had stopped so there was little choice in where they could go. He found the latch to open the door and looked back. "Do we have a plan?"

After a few seconds they got into position. Adam opened the door. Instantly Alex threw a fireball inside and Adam rushed in. As soon as the door opened his tracking spell informed him of the enemies' location. This enabled him to avoid the two guards that swung at him from each side of the door. As they turned to take another swing, Mike and Anna plunged their swords in the monsters' backs and continued forward.

Alexandria was last to go in. She looked around. The room was nearly as big as the full diameter of the tower. It seems that this place held book cases, sadly everything had been pretty much destroyed. The place had also been converted into a staging area with lots of run-down tables and chairs all around. Another staircase was on the other side. Rosamia backed up Adam as they fought a large group of burned orcs. Anna and Mike went on the offensive against some ogres. In the back she could see that some of the enemies were recuperating from her initial blast but there was still time for one quick spell before they would cause issues. She calculated the range and radius quickly and let an ice spell loose. The spell landed in the back and froze all that were getting up. It also hindered some of the ogres that were still fighting. The lack of manoeuvring would now make it easy for them.

She turned just in time to see some reinforcements coming down from the stairs. Rosamia greeted them with a pillar of fire, to which she added a very small fireball. While the first few



where dispatched, more came down. Adam and Anna met them head-on with Mike in the rear. With the staircase now full, there was little for Alex and Rosa to do.

Anna joined with Adam to help go through the enemy lines. They had to make it to the next level quickly. While it was true that they could hold this position for a while without immediate danger, all it took was one messenger to inform a few more groups and all that would change. Both of them seemed to understand this. They fought recklessly but made it through to the other level just in time to see an orc leaving the floor and going up. She launched a blast of energy from her sword, which knocked him out permanently.

There were fewer enemies in this room than the last but they still had to try to block off both exits while fighting. Adam and Mike had finished the enemies around them during this time. Anna headed to the other staircase. Mike, Adam and Rosa went in the middle and Alex guarded the rear.

Once it was all over, Rosamia healed their wounds. Alex looked around again. "You know, it's a shame that all these books got destroyed. I'm sure there was a lot of knowledge that could be used in them."

Anna looked around. She picked up a book that was half destroyed and seemed like it had been stepped on a few too many times. "I think that considering how long they've occupied this place, you will be disappointed a lot for the next few floors."

Mike joined the conversation, "About those next few floors. Adam and Alexandria, could you take lead?"

They both looked at him. "How is that going to work?"

"Alexandria I guessing that you can go

invisible, correct?" She nodded in acknowledgment. "Good. Adam, I want you to let her know what your spells see as we go up. Ideally, I would like Alexandria to go ahead of us cloaked in order to block off the other way. As we fight, let her know if there is movement on the next floor. If that happens again, go up ahead and Adam and Rosa will join up to help. Anna and I will take care of the rear. "

He saw their looks and understood that they did not really agree with the plan. "Look, I know that this is not the best way to go about it. We cannot let them send messages to the other floors to alert them. If that happens it will make it all the harder to get through. Physically this will not be easy but I'm hoping that once in a while a few floors will allow us to take a moment to catch our breath."

Anna turned to them. "Alright then, if everyone is ready, let's do this." Alex and Adam took point, with Rosa in the middle and Anna and Mike in the rear.

Mike gave her a quick smile as a thank you. She turned to him. "We have each other's backs, right? Plus, it's not your worst plan."

As it turned out, the plan was a good one overall. Many floors were cleared without any incident of enemies running away to get more help. Unfortunately, most floors had been occupied, which made for a very exhausting climb. Near the end, all of them were fighting with some sort of wound. Large ones had been healed but minor ones would have to wait until later to conserve magic. Still, the time had come, the final floor was just above them.

Alex sat on one of the left over chairs while they all took a moment to catch their breath. "You know, I'm not so sure that we could have made it

to the top had we taken that normal entrance."

Rosa took another chair and sat next to her. "I think you are right on that one. I know that I would have been depleted a while ago." She noticed that Alex was not paying attention. "What's wrong?"

Alexandria pointed at Adam, "Seems mister grumpy is acting up a bit." They all turned to Adam, who looked like he was focusing on something.

He opened his eyes "I'm focusing. I've been picking up movements from the lower floors for a while. I'm guessing they know something is wrong now and they are slowly coming our way."

Anna was puzzled. "Ignoring the fact that we maybe flanked soon, what do you mean by 'for a while'?"

"It's been off and on for the last few floors, so still pretty recent."

She rubbed her forehead with a few of her fingers. "Next time, please share that information."

Mike stood up. "Well breaks over, time to go finish this while we still can."

Adam was already at the base of the stairs, trying to see if he could hear anything. "There are people chanting. Not sure what. I'm only picking up four humans."

Rosamia got up and dragged Alex with her. "I guess we will be going first then, chanting could mean mages and we can defend against their attacks."

Alex grumbled. "Break, what break? Thanks for the news, grumpy. Does anyone realise how much energy casting invisibility that often uses up?" She stretched out a bit and psyched herself up. "Alright, last floor. Let's do this."

Mike turned to Anna. "I think now would be a bad time to tell her that we also need to find a way

out of here, so it's not really over after this."

She pushed him ahead. "Yeah, now would be a bad time."

The top was a circular room with a bigger diameter than the others. The ceiling was very high and large open arches lined the walls. This made the room very cold, especially considering how high they were. In the middle the large portal could be seen. Around it three mages were chanting and the other was at the end of the room looking outside.

Rosamia and Alexandria were the first to step on the final floor of the tower. The mages turned and started casting spells. They aimed their hands at the two intruders and their companions that were coming up. Three fireballs were launched in their direction. Rosa erected a shield to protect them and Alex used a counter spell. One of the attacks fizzled and the two others connected with Rosa's shield. As the shield protected them from the fire and some of the effect of the explosion, Rosa had to grind her teeth together to try to hold the shield up. "They are very, very powerful."

Adam sprang into action and aimed for a mage closest to him. The mage tried to erect a physical barrier to block him but was not quick enough compared to Adam's magically enhanced speed. His two swords flash quickly. One slashed the mage's mid-section and the other stabbed him in the chest. Two more to go, he thought to himself.

Anna and Mike rushed to the lone figure at the end of the room, ignoring the mages. As they got close, their suspicion proved true as the figure changed into a familiar shadow figure. "So, you are the pests that have succeeded in killing our kind. I would like to know how you managed this."

Anna charged in with her sword glowing bright green and launched a series of attacks. Mike followed right behind her with another series of

pink flashing combos.

"You two disappoint me." The cleric launched a series of quick burst attacks, flinging bits of shadow energy everywhere. While Anna was able to dodge them, Mike was not so fortunate. A piece landed on his left arm, causing a large amount of pain. While this attack was not as dangerous as the normal wave that they used, it still would cause his arm to be useless until it could get healed. He hoped that the others would be able to deal with the mages quickly.

Seeing this new attack, Adam ordered Rosa to go help Mike and Anna while they dealt with the mages. Alex cast a spell on the furthest target and Adam aimed for the closest again. He channelled more magic to his legs and tried the same attack. This mage was a bit quicker and materialized a shield around only his mid-section. Adam wondered if a partial shield made him be able to cast the spell in time. Not being able to attack his original point, he aimed for the leg and arm and only connected with the leg. This one would be trouble.

Alex had very little time and energy to deal with this powerful mage in front of her. She needed to conserve everything she had for the portal and the cleric. The target would probably be able to counter most of her spells so her options were to go bigger or to create a distraction. She used a spell that gathered a lot of her energy. The mage, as expected, poured what he figured to be enough to power a counter spell. As Alex launched her spell, only a minor blast could be seen going to the mage. Most of energy collected flowed back into her. The mage cursed himself for not realizing the bluff. As the counter spell was taking effect, she launched two of her instant fireball spells that she had prepared. Their strength was half of what she

could normally do but there was no way that the mage could counter both right after channelling so much energy. As they landed, he fell to the ground.

Alex looked to see the other mage lunching a lightning bolt at Adam. The spell partially connected but so did his swords. As the mage finally fell, Adam kneeled on the ground. She started walking towards him as he waved at her, signalling that he would be alright. Still concerned but believing in his judgment, she turned to help face the dark cleric.

Rosamia had healed Mike's arm and things had gotten better from there, but still this was a hard fight. Unlike the other one that they faced outside, this one was not as quick to draw more energy. He instead used what he had in a creative manner. First was the multiple small energy projectiles that he had used earlier and it looked like he was oozing shadow on the ground. While it did not seem to hurt, it did hamper movement by quite a lot, which required them to be healed a lot more than normal. Now they could be defeated without having to use a sacrificial spell. Rosa found a lot of strength in that, enough to last this fight.

The tar was causing Mike no end of trouble. Anna seemed to be handling it better than he did, but it still slowed them down. At this point he wondered if they were being drained more quickly than him reaching overload status. Something big needed to be done and it could not come from Alexandria. Even he could tell that she was running dangerously low. He made a signal to Anna and, she joined up with him.

"One single point, for as long as we can hold." She nodded and started. He continued right behind her. "Rosamia, try to do the best that you can to block the larger sections."

She did not understand what he was talking about but realized it pretty quickly. They were making small movements around each other to alternate attacks on the same point on the target. Each blast created a bigger and bigger hole in his shadow form. It also made them easy targets. The cleric poured shadow down on them. She tried to shield them as much as she could but there was no way to block all of it. Still, she continued to channel more energy to her shield as they continued to fight.

All in all, Mike did not need Anna to tell him that this was a stupid plan. Still, it would cause the cleric to heal this massive wound contently, draw more energy to heal Alexandria blows and even more energy to attack them. The only thing that he wondered was who was going to give out first.

"That is enough." A large wave of shadow pushed them all away. "I've been trying to conserve drawing on our lord's power to not abuse it, but now your attacks are insulting it." The cleric finally let loose and a large bubble of shadow that wrapped itself around him, healing all the damage that had been caused and giving him an excess of power. As the bubble collapsed, his figure grew. His eyes glowed a darker red and shadow leaked all around him. As the cleric was about to destroy them, he realised that these pesky maggots all had smiles on their faces. He looked at this dark figure and realised white cracks had formed around him. He understood what was happening. "No..."

Alexandria launched the rest of her instant spells at the target. The cleric tried to shield himself from the blows and then more white cracks appeared. He realized that using energy to shield or to regenerate was killing him the same way. Already more energy was being called forth to try to

heal the white cracks that could not be healed.

Anna pointed her sword at him. "Now you understand how we killed the others and how you will soon join them." She launched a blast of light green energy at the target. As it landed, and then healed, the overload process started.

Rosa got in front of all of them as the cleric turned white. "One last shield, everyone." They gathered behind her as close as they could to minimize the zone that she had to protect. The cleric exploded and sent a wave of energy around him. This wave hit Rosa's shield hard. She extended both her hands and poured everything that she had into it. It was like trying to hold a bolder that was slowly moving down hill.

"...Just a little more... I can do this..."

As the energy dissipated she fell forward. The wall she was pushing against had suddenly disappeared. She looked around. While everyone was hurt and drained, they were all still alive and the last portal was right in front of them.

Alex walked around the portal. Now that she was up close to it, she could study it's make up a bit more. She realised it was the same as the smaller version, which was expected. She also realised something else that troubled her. "Look, I'm not sure how to tell you this but..."

Adam stood near the stairs going downwards. "I hope the next words are not, 'I can't disrupt the portal after all' because there are creatures coming our way. We don't have much time."

"No it's not that, I can disrupt it all right. It's just that from what I understand and from what the mages were doing, it seems that the portal was opened from our side first, not theirs."

Rosa looked at her, confused. "But, that's not possible. Who would be stupid enough to open a portal and keep it open long enough for them to



take control of it?"

Alexandria shrugged. "I have no clue. All I know for sure is that this side opened first."

Knowing how close the enemy was making Adam impatient. "Fine, fine it's an interesting discovery but a mystery for later. Let's give the signal and disrupt the thing while we still can."

"Alright, I'll do it..." She turned around and fired the magical signal that would alert the Crusader and Council forces. As she turned to cast the disrupting spell, Anna stopped her. She saw that Anna had a look in her eye. It felt like sadness mixed in with hope and purpose. "There is something I need to do before you cast the spell."

Mike's head dropped. He had seen that look before and knew what was happening. "You plan on going to the other side before she disrupts it, right?"

Anna turned and gave him a small smile. "Something is calling me for some reason and I don't know why but intuition is telling me that I should listen."

Mike took his sword and readied it as he walked close to her. "Should I go first then?"

Adam was lost. "Why would you follow her? Going there is madness. All that you will find there is an endless supply of enemies."

Anna looked at him. "Maybe, and if that is the case then we promise you that we will hold them off as long as we can. At the same time, I don't think that's what we will find. In any case, we don't have much time." She turned and they started to walk in the direction of the portal.

Rosamia raised her hand. "Wait... I'm going too. I want to face what caused all this destruction and death head on and hopefully put a stop to it." She turned to Alex. "Closing this portal will help but could they not just open new smaller ones?"

She faced Adam. "As for you, did you not promise to hand yourself in after this was done? Is that where you think you will do the most good?" She made her way to the others. "Anna's right, we need to do this."

Adam walked to the group next to Mike. Mike turned and with a smile on his face whispered, "But why are you following her? It's madness..."

Adam did not even turn. "... Just shut up"

Mike faced Alexandria. "Once we are through disrupt the portal, I'm sure you will be able to escape on your own back to Astrum more easily than with us." Anna gave her a warm smile. "Don't worry, we will meet again. I'm sure of it."

Alexandria looked at her friend. There were about to make a stupid decision but she felt that they were doing it for the right reasons.

"Wait..." The group stopped and noticed that she was handling a glowing ball of light and whispering words into it. The words coming from her mouth were magical in nature but also not a part of a spell. As each word left her mouth the ball glowed more. When she stopped, she took the ball and threw it to the wind and yelled her father's name. As if hearing a command trigger, the ball jerked and flew in a directed path.

Alex ran to her friends. "I'm coming too. I can easily disrupt this thing on the other side and have the same effect as doing it here."

Mike and Anna took each other hands, nodded to each other and jumped in. Rosamia and Alex went in next. Adam took one final look around. "I can't believe I'm doing this." He turned and jumped in.

## *Chapter 12*

Adam stepped on the other side of the portal. He was faced with Alexandria standing right in front of him. "So what were you doing that caused you to warp slower than all of us?"

Adam felt a bit embarrassed and he knew that she was enjoying getting one on him this time, but then something else struck him, "Wait, why aren't we surrounded by enemies right now?"

Alex pointed to where the others were. The room was the exact same as the top of the tower on the other side, and again the walls were lined with open arches. Adam joined them while Alex cast the disruption spell. As he looked outside he realized why everyone else was just standing there.

It was true that the floor was empty, which was a pleasant but odd occurrence, but it seemed like the outside was filled with enemies. The base of the tower had a gigantic base camp two, if not three, times the size of the Crusader camp and there was no way of knowing if there was any of them in the tower itself. As Alex joined up with them she asked the group, "So I'm hoping that the first thing we do here is not go against that right away."

Anna looked back at her, "No, obviously not. Is there a way that you can get us out of here?"

Alexandria took a deep breath and proceeded to look around the tower. Once she got to the left she pointed outside. "Well, the best I can do is float us all down there in that area of the mountains." Everyone joined her to see the location she was talking about. Half the base of the tower was connected to a mountain valley. Midway down was

a section of a mountain that was flat and connected to what seemed like a crack in the mountain, hopefully a cave. Mike looked from the section where she wanted to take them and to the army at the base. They were high enough that they should not be spotted. The only thing they will have to worry about was someone going on the top floor and then looking down. "Sounds like a great place to start, Alexandria."

She turned to all of them and one by one casted the floating spell. "This is how the spell works. Just drop down and as you start to fall the spell will automatically kick in. As you are going down, just think of where you want to move. Keep in mind that you will not be able to move up. You will constantly be going down until both your feet touch the ground... or at least a surface like the ground." One by one each member jumped out and aimed for the spot that had been designated.

As they landed, they saw that the opening was in fact a small cave. There would not be too much room but it would do perfectly for the rest of the day and a good part of the night.

The fight in the tower had left everyone drained and also everyone was still hurting from minor wounds. All of them just sat on the floor in the little cave and leaned against the wall. Everyone was silent for a while, mostly still processing what had happened and the big unknown that they all now had to deal with. Rosamia broke the silence. "Guys, we did it. I mean, assuming the General and the Council do their parts, all portals will be closed. Sure, they will probably open new ones eventually, but that should give us time, plus the big one will be out of commission." She looked at Adam with a large smile. "After so many years we are finally here Adam, we made it."

Even Adam was smiling at that one. "You're right. It did not go like I figured it would but you are right." He looked at the two Crimsons. "Now the only question is where do we go from here?"

Mike looked at Anna, who looked a bit uncomfortable trying to answer that question. He grabbed her hand and answered for her. "Well, right now we rest up. During the night we will try to go down and get away from the main camp. From there we explore. We know so little of this land and everything so finding a town would be a good thing. Once we have more information then we can figure out the next move."

Rosamia looked at Alex. "I can cast the spell to understand their language. Are you able to make it permanent?"

Alex was already taking out her bedroll from her backpack. "Sure, but right now I really need to rest. I'm so depleted right now that if you can let me sleep as long as possible, that would be great."

Adam turned to Rosa. "You should do the same. There is no way that you are not exhausted too after all those shields." She nodded in agreement, suddenly realizing how depleted she really was.

"I'll do the same too. Wake me up when it will be my turn to keep watch." Anna decided that she would take the first watch so Mike did the same as the others.

Many hours had passed since Anna had woke him up. It was very dark. He could still see the fires from the camp and hear a lot of noise. He looked around at this new land and wondered what the proper next steps would be. Eventually he was surprised to find Anna had joined him. "Thanks for earlier. I was not sure what to answer Adam on the spot like that."

They took a seat next to each other on the flat

surface outside the cave. "I must admit that I really did not expect them to follow like that. Alex has sacrificed a lot by coming here. The same holds true for Rosa and Adam in a way. I just hope that when it's all said and done that it's worth it for them."

He wrapped his arms around her and gave her a small kiss on her cheek. "I'm sure it will be okay. We have to find out why this is all happening. We did not really talk about it but Alexandria mentioned that the portal had been opened from our side. We need to find something on that and I don't think we will get any answers on our side. Right now let's focus on doing what we can to get prepared."

"You have a list already?"

"Well, getting away would be a good idea. Rosamia mentioned something about being able to understand their language all the time. We need to find a way to find food; our rations will last a few days but another source needs to be found. We will also need to figure out a way to find a town and some way to cloak ourselves, so yeah, there are a few things. The idea is to keep everyone busy with tasks that bring us closer to the main goal. As long as there is progress we should be on the right path."

"Hmm, I'm not sure how everyone would appreciate your way of putting it, but if nothing is mentioned about it I don't think anyone will object. I wonder what drew me here and what it will mean for all of us when we find it."

"Meh, in my case I don't care where we are as long as we are together. Even if you try to run to another place using an old portal, I'll follow." He gave her a warm smile. "You're stuck with me now, there are no other options."

She gave him a small chuckle. "I'm okay with

that." She turned her head towards the cave. "I take it you will let them all sleep for a while longer?"

"Yes. The next few days will be very hard, plus, considering what we just survived, I want them to get as much rest as possible. I get the feeling that things are about to get interesting very soon so let's maximize the time we do have."

She wrapped her arms around him. "I guess we should do the same while we can."

It was a few hours before dawn when they woke everyone up, so they still had the darkness on their side for their escape. Before going down, they applied the language spell on everyone and then another float spell to get down without drawing too much attention or noise. Finally on the ground, they started marching in a north-west direction. When they were on the top of the tower, they had noticed that the mountain range created a line to the west. To the north they saw a forest and further then that a body of water could be seen. It would make sense to have a village around those parts and if not, then at least they would have a good chance to find some wild life to help with the food supply.

It took a few days walk to reach the forest. By then all their wounds had been healed and everyone was back at full strength for casting purposes. The thing becoming a problem was food. While they entered the forest, Adam started poking fun at Alex. "So can you not magically create food for us to eat?"

She looked at him like it was a foolish thing to ask. "No, how would that work? I could magically prepare food but I need the base ingredients first. Imagine if we could. No more hunger for anyone."

"And you would not need to worry as much about securing the food supply chains when an

army marches. Oh well, I had to ask."

"World hunger versus food supply chains. Your brain works in a specific way alright."

Anna stopped for a second. "The topic of food and magic made me think of something, Alex, could you use your tracking spell that uses animals here?"

Alex thought about it for a second. "Ok, you want me to use the tracking spell to make contact with the animals nearby so that we can hunt for food? I'm not sure how sporting that is, but I'm also not going to argue with it."

She gave her that half smile of hers. "No, I'm sure it's not, but, there are few options where we are. Can you also see if they know if there is a town nearby?"

"What would all of you have done if I would have stayed in the other side?" Alexandria closed her eyes and started casting. After a little while she pointed in a direction. "If we continue there it seems like there are a few... I guess something that looks like wild boars." She continued the spell for a while longer. "I don't know about a town but there is something more to the north that can be found where a lot of orcs seem to live. Maybe we can find information on the area there."

Mike thought that all this was great news. "Excellent, let's go for the boars and then see about those orcs. Also, Alexandria, we will have to rely heavily on you for a while. I don't see us being able to just walk and ask them for information. I'm thinking that you may have to use your invisibility again, unless a better way can be found."

Alex gave an unconcerned wave. "No worries, and as for the invisibility, I have a better option. I was thinking an illusion spell. I could mask us all to look like orcs. There are limitations to the spell but I think that it will work out okay."



After some quick hunting and more walking, the group made it close to the town that Alex had found. Not to take any chances, she cast the illusion spell right away. "Now, this spell will make us look like male orc warriors. It's the only thing I know very well so it helps the illusion. For the illusion not to break, don't make large sudden movements like pulling out in a charge attack or something. Also, try not to touch things. If someone touches you they will feel what you really are. Depending on how they react, that too could break the spell." Having understood the rules, the group made their way in.

What they saw was unexpected. This was not a town, at best it could be described as a small farming village. The houses looked like they were primarily made of clay and some wood for support and the roof. The roads were just flattened ground. Orcs were using what looked like a wild cow to move large cargo, primarily food supplies. At the edge of village they were ploughing fields and in the village itself were mostly female orcs washing and taking care of the young ones. Some elders were smoking odd pipes.

As they walked through the village, they were greeted with large smiles and thank you as they passed by. Overall it was an odd experience. Still, this meant that the illusion was successful. Now too try to find a way to casually approach one of them and ask questions. Alex saw that they were reaching the end of the village. "So how are we going to do this?"

"We act normally." Anna looked around and started going in another direction. She stopped in front of children that were play fighting and joined them. Alex was a bit nervous about it. "Ah, what is she doing? Sure they are young and may not realise it but there is a good chance the spell could

fail that way."

Mike chuckled. "I'm sure she just has faith in your magic, that's all. But more importantly, she just gave me an opening."

Mike approached the old lady that was watching the children. "Sorry to butt in like this. We have been on the road for a while and my partner must be missing his family. I'll tell him to stop if you want." The old lady just smiled at him. "Oh, don't worry about that. No need to be so formal with us. You are helping to protect us all. If a little break in our village will help you, then please, by all means."

"Thanks. If you don't mind helping, can I ask a few questions?"

The old lady was a bit surprised. He took it as a sign that he was acting out of character and had to be more careful. "Oh? I'm not sure what I would be able to tell any of you, but sure."

"We are scouts trying to get information from the area, so we would like to know if there have been any attacks around here or in any places nearby."

"We have been avoiding the forest due to the giant raids. As you know, ever since the war with the humans they have been bolder in their attacks. They don't just protect their mountain territory anymore but the area around it. I guess just as long as they don't attack villages we will be fine. As for the others, there have been no human raids around here for some time now, and we have you to thank for that."

The words of 'human' and 'raid' made Mike want to ask another question, but there was no way that he could figure out how to ask it without raising more suspicion. He thanked her for her help and called over his 'partner' to stop playing with the kids and join up with the others.

As they continued walking, Adam looked at both of them. "I really don't know how you two did that. I'm still trying to fight the urge to take my sword and attack them, and yet here you are playing with kids and having a nice chit-chat with them. I just don't get how you can be like that with the enemy."

Anna was a furious. "First off, they are not the enemy. The enemy are the ones attacking, killing and invading. These are just people trying to live their lives in a peaceful manner. Second, if you do take up your weapons against them, I will stop you and I will hurt you." She looked at Rosa. "Please explain to your friend why he is an idiot."

Adam was getting angry. Why was he being threatened? He was about to lash out but then he saw Rosa and she looked very sad. "Adam, if you do what you just described, then you become exactly what we are fighting; a group of armoured and trained soldiers raiding a defenceless village that would have no chance to fight back. Does that sound familiar and is that what you would really want to become? I'm wondering, the same as you, and even I can't put it all behind like they are, but I can't agree with what you just said nor would I even want to think it."

Before he could answer her back, they felt a large tremor. Screams were heard from the direction that they had first entered the village. They ran towards the commotion. As they got close they saw and heard what the problem was. "The giants, they are attacking... run!" Orcs were fleeing everywhere and the giants were hard to miss.

They all stood motionless for a bit. They had thought that they had seen giants on the other side but they were wrong. In front of them stood two real giants, they were about twenty-five to thirty feet tall. If they jumped they could maybe reach

their knees but that in itself would be a big stretch. The giants were causing random destruction and at the same time hurting a lot of villagers.

Rosa looked at the two Crimsons, who seemed to be preparing themselves to charge into a fight. "I think your illusion spell is about to drop." Mike turned his head back. "We will take the one to the left, you go for the one on the right. We need to stop them. As soon as we do, run to the forest for cover. I don't think the villagers will hunt us down but we still need to run." After that they both charged in, swords blazing and the illusion spell dropping. Adam was just confused. "Why are we helping them?" He did not get an answer but he did notice that Rosa and Alex were heading to the giant to the right. All the training he got screamed at him to help the giants, still, there was no way he was going to let Rosa get hurt. Adam charged in as well.

The giant paid them no attention. In his eyes they were attacking him with needles. Anna looked back to Mike. "Give me a boost." He ran ahead, then went on his knee and cupped his hands together. She used that to give her more height. Now able to reach the left giant's knee, she planted her sword in and let go of its energy point blank. A broken knee cap got the giant's attention and also forced him to drop crouched on the ground, unable to hold himself up anymore.

Rosamia saw what they had done and motioned to Alex give her a boost as well. Alex summoned a gust of wind that propelled Rosa near the left knee. As she was flying she powered a holy spear spell and let it loose point blank. This giant also fell into a crouched position. Adam, not wanting to be outdone, used his magic to jump high enough to reach the now crouching giant's back. He stabbed in both swords and let gravity

pull him down, causing two large wounds all along the giant's back. The giant arched back as he shouted in pain. As soon as Adam landed, he ran to the other foot and aimed at the Achilles tendon and slashed away. During this time Alex had been powering up a fireball spell that now seemed three times her normal size. She figured that it should be enough power to blow up a house, which should cause enough damage. She threw it at the head of the giant, who tried to block it by raising his hands to cover his face. The impact of the spell caused his hands and part of his face to burn up. It also caused him to fall down on the ground. Adam quickly charged at the now accessible giant's throat and preformed a quick succession of deep slashes.

As he jumped out of the way, confident that this giant would not survive the next few minutes, he turned to see that the others had finished with their targets. He noticed two large holes caused by explosions in the stomach area and also in the head. A crowd had formed around them. Most were taking the time to help the wounded but some stood there and watched and wondered what they would do next. Mike singled for them to retreat in the forest.

They ran for a while until Adam could verify that there were no pursuers. As they started walking towards the mountains again, he wondered what the next step would be. "So did we learn anything for all that?"

"When I talked to the old lady she mentioned that these giants have only recently started attacking like this. She also mentioned that there had been no human attacks in a long time."

"Human attacks?" Rosamia was curious about this one. "There should not have been any attacks, to my knowledge we should be the first human

group to make it here."

"I have the same information from the Council but this would explain why the portal was opened by us not them. Maybe we did open it first and then sent raiding parties through it."

"Only to lose control of it and then hide the fact that we were responsible for all this after all from everyone?" Everyone was quite after Rosa's statement. They did not really know how to tell her that this was probably what had happened.

Adam turned to face Rosa. "Look, it's possible. The Crusaders have in the past done things and not reported them for the 'greater good'. I'm sure the same thing can be said for the Crimsons and the Councils. Most of the time these things are necessary but sometimes they cause more issues than the problems they were supposed to stop."

Rosa mulled over this information. Sure, she already knew that organizations did things they were not supposed to, but something on this scale and to be able to hide it from everyone, it seemed too farfetched. She turned to Anna and Mike. "So, is it because you think that we are to blame that you were able to interact with them so easily?"

"Not the reason at all, actually." Anna did not face her when she answered but Rosa could tell there was hint of sadness there.

Adam was not satisfied by this answer. "That's not good enough, Anna. I want to know how you can just forget about all the crimes that they did. I would also like to know where we are going."

Mike answered Adam in a harsh manner. "We are going to find that small group of giants and destroy them." Adam just stopped walking. "Oh no no no. Heck no. Why are we doing that? Why are we helping them? Should we not be helping the giants? Seems we have a common enemy."

Anna and Mike also stopped. Anna was

shaking her head. "That way does not work, Adam. Yes, we came here to learn more, but our group goal still stands. I want to stop these giants. They are doing a bad thing and they need to pay for those actions. Not all giants, just those. Same thing with the orcs. Yes, I know we have all killed many of them. But how many of them did we kill that were living in a village or not part of an attack force? Should they all pay because of that?"

"But will they not keep attacking us? Should we not defend ourselves any way we can?"

Mike continued for Anna. "Sure, we should defend ourselves, but there has to be a line. A large number of orcs attack us and do horrible things. We need to stop those orcs and those orcs only. By your logic we should get rid of all of them and never have to deal with the issue again. Which would work, but where does it stop? First the orcs, then the giants if they come for us and then who... ourselves?"

Anna looked at Mike. "There are groups of humans that cause us harm. You have raiders that attack travelers and shipping lanes. You have mages that do evil things because they want more power. The dark clerics are human as well. Following your way of thinking, at what point do we deem the human race as our enemy? In every race there are groups that will do bad things and those, and only those, need to be stopped. Blaming a whole race or group for the actions that are not their own does not work in the end."

This time it was Adam that mulled over the information. "I think that you are oversimplifying it a bit."

"True, maybe we are, but I would rather believe in this oversimplified reasoning and believe that one day they will understand and change than just outright getting rid of them before they have

the option of changing."

"I guess that you are planning on making them understand by the combination of many little actions, helping them in the village and saving some of their people and so on." Alexandria moved next to Anna and Mike and looked at Adam and Rosa. "Look, I can understand why you both have so much hatred for this race, considering what they did to both of you, but I don't have that. It was never a thought in my head to destroy all of them, just to stop them. So because of that I'll choose to follow their plan."

Rosa was really torn. She could not forgive them but did she have so much hate in her heart to want them all dead like Adam was suggesting. She did not feel like she did, but at the same time there was no way that she could forgive them yet. She turned to Adam. "Look, I know you are not going to like this but..."

He cut her off. "I thought that you would have been my one ally in this."

"I am, but I agree with their logic, simple or not. I know I still want them to pay for what they did and I know I can't forgive them. Still, I will go and slay those giants for them in hopes that one day things may change. I keep looking for a different way because the current one is too flawed. In order to do that, I need to do this, even if I don't like it. Otherwise I'm just helping the same old system. Will you still follow us even if you don't agree?"

Adam felt defeated. "Against my better judgment, I will follow you, and I'll fight and do whatever. My hope is that I may be able to convince you otherwise eventually. I'll go scout ahead. Finding giants can't be that hard, can it?"

It took them a good day and a half to find the giant camp, not because it was hard to find, but



because of the ground that giants could cover compared to them. They wondered if it would only take them half a day to get from the camp to the village, which would have explained why they would not have seen the other two that had attacked ahead of time.

The giants had made a temporary camp at the base of the mountain. The group climbed the side of it and got as close as they could without being spotted. There were four giants in all. There was also caged livestock and captured orcs positioned at each end of the camp. Adam figured he would ask, even if he knew the answer. "So I take it that we are to save those orcs from those giants, correct?"

Mike just gave him quick smile. "We will need to split up to grab their attention quick enough. Adam and I will target one of them in the back. Rosamia, you are with Anna for the ones in front and Alexandria, you have the other one in the back. Ideally we should meet up and finish the last one in front, who is already away from the targets we are trying to save. Sound good?"

They all agreed with the plan and everyone got into position. Adam wanted to attack his target from the back and told everyone to wait until he made the first move. He positioned himself so that he would be able to attack the back of the giant's neck. He magically powered his legs to make the jump and sliced away with two consecutive hits. He stabbed his two swords at the base of the neck and used gravity to once again create two large cuts going from the neck to the bottom of the giant's back. The giant roared in anger.

Alexandria opened by calling lightning from the sky. She would generate six bolts from the spell. She guided the bolts to aim for the other giant's face once, twice, three times. Surprisingly,

the giant was still alive and cradling his face in his palms. Once, twice and another for a third was directed in the back of the head. The giant fell with his head still smoking. She was not sure he was dead or not but it would take a while until he came back up.

Mike charged up and aimed an energy charge at the throat of the screaming giant that Adam had attacked. The giant started choking but was still alive. Adam, having now landed on the ground, aimed at the left tendon with a quick five strike, making sure that movement would come at a cost. Mike had now arrived in close range and stabbed his sword in the other foot and let lose enough energy to blow a chunk of it. This caused the giant to fall forward on all fours. Adam climbed up on the giant's back and made his way to the back of the head. As he got close he slashed more pieces away. The giant twisted his body and tried to swat Adam away with his left hand. Mike took this time to aim another point blank energy blast on the right hand that was now keeping the giant balanced. When the explosion hit, the giant fell face forward on the ground. Both Adam and Mike took to the head and dispatched the giant shortly after.

The two ladies each took a knee and jumped down to attack it. Rosa launched a holy spear and broke the knee cap, while Anna blew a chunk of the knee away. As they landed on the ground they both got fortunate and the giant fell backwards on his butt. He tried to get back up using his hands, now on the ground. The two aimed at the wrists, using the same type of attacks. This causes the giant to completely drop on the ground. They moved around the giant's movements to reach the head. With creatures as big as these, there would be no glancing blow. As they reached their target,

the giant received two large explosions on both the left and right side of his head. He dropped to the ground but this time stayed still. Only one was left.

The last giant had seen three of his hunting partners drop in a matter of seconds by what were essentially giant bees to them. What was particularly confusing was that these were not orcs but humans. This did not make any sense and was contrary to the information that they had. He had to report this back, considering the plans that were being made.

As Alex was preparing her next spell on the last remaining giant, a large hand whooshed by. She was thrown away and her spell cancelled. The other raced to catch up. It turned and ran passed mountains like a human would climb a ladder. It was quickly out of range of both Mike and Anna as they were more preoccupied by not getting stepped on and Rosamia had no long range spell that would make any type of damage on something that large. The giant had escaped and there was nothing to be done about it.

As they recovered, they made their way to the orcs held in the cages. All of them seemed to be villagers. As they broke the locks, none of them moved out of their cages. Being near humans or giants made them equally afraid.

Anna turned around. "Let's go. There is no need to stay here. I'm sure they will make it back to their village once we are gone." Just a few steps after leaving, near the entrance of the giant camp, a large force of orcs were waiting for them. They held their swords and bows at the ready. Adam just stood in front, ready to charge in. "Well, I hope that your theory holds because I think that in a few seconds we maybe undoing any good that we tried to do with those giants."

Anna and Mike just looked at each other. They

both knew that Adam was right but they also knew that there was no way that what little action they had done would cause a huge difference. Still, they had not attacked. Maybe there was hope after all.

## Chapter 13

Everyone was at the ready, the group in front of them totalled about sixty orcs. Most of them seemed like seasoned warriors. They could fight their way through but doing that would undo every action they had taken so far. Mike and Anna gave each other a small nod. They relaxed their stance and sheathed their swords. The rest of the groups looked at them, questioning their actions. Mike turned a bit and whispered, "We are not letting ourselves get captured. If things go wrong, we escape." Not taking the time to see if everyone agreed, he turned back to see an orc move away from the group in their direction.

This orc was different than the others. His armor was the same but there were no decorations on it to try to intimidate his foe while fighting like the others did. Everything was there for a reason. Like their armor, it seemed to allow for movement over protection. His weapon was another matter. He wielded a large double axe. The flat of the axe had many notches, possibly for all the enemies he had killed. It also had a large spike on its tip. In order to properly wield a weapon like this, the person needed to be quite strong. As he reached the half-way point, he stopped and planted the tip of the axe on the ground in a perfect position to show his kill number.

"Before I kill you, I want to know why you stopped those giants in the village."

Mike secretly thanked Rosamia and Alexandria for the language spell. "We are the Lights Templar. We came here to find answers, not to kill innocent beings or let them get killed by an invading

enemy."

The orc was staring at him for a while and shook his head. He shouted in anger at them, "What stupidities are you saying? You are the invading army."

Anna took a step forward. "No, we are not. As he said, we are here for answers. We want to know why we are being invaded to see if there is a different way than constantly trying to kill each other."

Her comments seemed to have angered him more. "You speak as if you are the victims in this war. We have been fighting your kind for ten years now, most of which was on this land. During the recent year we have gain the upper hand and are now able to stop your attacks. This is lunacy." He turned around and his men readied themselves.

Mike reached out with an open hand. "Wait, ten years? That makes no sense. Are you saying that there is a human force on this side? If so, let us know where and we will help you fight them."

His last comment got the attention of everyone, both orcs and his own group members. Anna understood his words but she had to wonder about the risks involved. "On our side we know of no army that attacked you, let alone reached this place. Again, we are here for answers, whatever they maybe. If you can help us, we will return the favour and stop this invading force." As if on cue, she turned and pointed backwards. The captured orcs, having heard one of their own, came out to see what was happening. Once they saw a group of orcs they started marching out in their direction. As they passed the Lights Templar, they made no moves against them, nor did any members of the group. "Again, we are not here to invade but to find out what is going on."

The orc stopped and asked, "And why should I

trust the enemy after so much has happened?"

As Anna was about to answer, Rosamia cut her off. "Because otherwise nothing will ever change and we both know where things are currently heading. We owe it to everyone, on both sides, to find a better way." While she believed in what she was saying, she still had difficulty figuring out how she had said it. Still, this was a chance for change and the possibility of finding a different path to the current one, so she had to follow it. As most of her comrades gave her a small smile in agreement, she wondered if the orc would also agree.

The orc seemed to be thinking about it for a while before making up his mind. He moved back in their direction, but this time got much closer. "I will lead you to this human outpost and once we get there you will keep your word and destroy them. I'm still thinking that this is a trap so I will be taking insurances to keep my men safe and also to make sure you don't double cross us."

Mike wondered about these insurances. "We will do as we said, but what insurances are you planning on taking? There are things we will not allow. We are not your prisoners, we are to temporarily fight with you in order to learn what is truly going on."

"Oh, I understand that perfectly. Our first precaution will be to escort you to this place taking the long way. We will avoid any villages, towns or cities. I don't want you to know about our man power available or our resources. You will also eat what we give you, and not be allowed to leave our sight. Once we get there you will know about the other precautions."

This all made sense to him, but he was a bit worried about those last conditions. So far everything seemed reasonable. "We accept these

terms. By the way, if the journey there will be as long as you say, what should we call you?"

"No need to get that friendly. Let's just get this started."

True to his word, he escorted them on a very uncomfortable journey, but they had learned a few things. The orc that had talked to them was named G'arekk. He was one of the main chiefs. While all the others dealt with the ongoing attacks, he was in charge of defence. There used to be more but the attacks had been dying down and they had recently decided to go on the attack to press their advantage. Their meals were given, which looked like slimy goo that also had some pieces of meat in it. It was explained that it was a sort of porridge that they often eat. It tasted as bad as it looked, but the raw materials were there which allowed Alexandria to magically transform it into something a bit more edible.

Every night during their travels there was a rotating shift of at least ten orcs keeping watch over them at all times. These few days had been very trying on Adam. He had had very little sleep as well. During this night he sat on a large rock looking in the other direction, trying not to face his keepers. A while later Rosa came to join him.

"I see that you can't sleep as well."

She sat next to him. "I must admit that the company that we are keeping is causing me troubles."

Adam shook his head. "This is what I don't get. We can probably find this human outpost. From there we can get our answers that it seems we all want and be done with this. Why allow this 'help' of theirs?"

Rosa looked up at the sky. "You raise a good point and it would make things easier for us. Still, Anna and Mike seem convinced that we need to do



it this way."

"Yeah, yeah but does that mean that we blindly follow? Last I checked I'm not in an army anymore so I don't need to do that. I still can't believe you said that a few days back. Have their ideas convinced you that much that you can now forget?"

She looked at him with sad eyes. "I wish I could forget. It would make this easier, but I can't. So for now I bottle it in. You know as well where this ongoing war is leading us. As much as I hate to say it, this seems like a chance at a different ending for us. So that means that we need to bottle things up for a while. If that gives us peace, even for a little while, don't you think it's worth the cost?"

"So you think it's all going to work out that way?"

"I can hope."

As they talked, Alexandria joined them "So this is where you guys are. I was wondering when I turned and both of you were gone."

Adam gave a small chuckle. "Well, it's not like our guardians will let us go far. What are your thoughts on this situation?"

Alexandria was a bit stunned that he had bothered to ask. Adam cared mostly about Rosa's and his own opinion most of the time. "Well, I understand that this needs to be done, but I'm not sure how much I agree with killing our own people. I'm having a hard time with that one. I mean sure, let's punish them if we need to, but I still think that we should hear them out before we attack them. I'm pretty sure that we will not be given this chance and I wonder how this will all turn out."

"I'm curious about that too. If we do this and we're found back home, then we will be branded and possibly killed for betrayal. Is that worth

getting this so called answer?"

Rosa stood up. "I know that it will sound like I'm repeating myself and not really making much logical sense, but I will believe in those two for now. So far they have done nothing that would make us go against our own wills. When that time comes, I'll see how I'll act. In the meantime, I don't want to start questioning people I now call friends when there is no reason for it."

Adam raised both hands. "Fine, I get it, I'll drop the matter. I can't disagree with you, it's just I'm not a big fan of the situation and that's hard for me to deal with." He turned to Alexandria. "Since you seem to know everything about magic, I have to ask. Would it be possible for me to use their sword enchantments if I wielded one of their blades? I've seen him use hers so they can't be linked to the wielder like I thought they were."

Alex wondered about the motive for this question. "Ignoring the reason behind a question like that, I'll still tell that you would not be able to use it." Adam seemed disappointed. "The reason is that I've recently learned that magic that like that leaves a scar on you when you use it. This scar is distinct to the spell. Currently we all have a type of scar on us, except for you that is. The reason he was able to use her blade is because the enchantment is the same for both blades. There is a bit of a twist but the end effect is the same. This was probably a precaution taken so that these types of spell would not be abused, and in their case, to make sure that someone did not use the wielder's enchantment on them."

For the first time it seemed that she had his complete attention, so because of that she continued. "In theory, there is a way around this, but again, you don't meet the requirements. A spell could be done to temporarily hijack the

enchantment into thinking that you are a valid wielder. The issue is that you would need to be able to cast arcane spells and be able to maintain it. So essentially, they are of no use to you."

Adam stood up and stretched. "Well, that's just fantastic. Still, thanks for letting me know. If you will excuse me, I'm going to try to get some sleep, seeing as you two can keep watch."

As he left, Alex looked at Rosa. "So, I have to ask. Do you think he was planning something?"

Rosa wondered for a bit and shook her head. "No, I don't think so. I think that this is something else that he is having a hard time with. The things that we are going against, dark clerics and giants, I think he is thinking that he is a bit outmatched with his current weapons. I can see why it would bother him after so many years of training and being at the level that he is. So no, I don't think he was planning anything." She looked at her and gave her a small mischievous grin. "So did you tell him the truth?"

Alex was a bit defensive. "Of course I did. There was no reason to lie. Currently the only other person that could use their blades is me and that would do very little good. Still, if an upgrade is what he wants, I can give him that. It would not be an enchantment like theirs, but it would give him an edge. I would have to be back in Astrum to do it though. The components are not something I keep on me."

Rosa smiled. "I'll let him know, and thanks. I know he seems to annoy you a lot."

She shrugged. "He's important to you, so whatever. He's not a bad guy, I just wish he would stop picking on me like I'm a child."

"The way you two interact reminds me a lot of siblings"

"Oh god, don't say stuff like that. That gives

me the same taste in my mouth as that porridge they try to feed us."

Rosa had to laugh. It felt good to laugh a bit considering the last few days. They continued to talk like that for a while until dawn came and they decided to try to switch with Anna to keep watch so they could try to get a few more hours of sleep in.

All in all it took them four days to get to their destination. The outpost had four towers as lookouts, one main building in the in the back, and a few minor little houses. Surrounding it was a wall with only one door in the front. It was a good defensible outpost but it was also old and poorly kept up. Mike could not understand why this place was still standing considering the numbers of the orcs. "I take it there is more to this than it looks?"

G'arekk stared at the complex. "Many groups have been killed trying to take this place. The soldiers are heartless, they never tire and they seem endless. I can't wait to see how you fair." He faced Mike. "Now for the final insurance, two of you will stay behind."

They all faced him, wondering if he was joking. Adam shook his head in disbelief. "Okay, so we need to destroy this place that your groups could not with only three of us. This makes sense to you?"

G'arekk just laughed. "What makes sense to me is that I did not escort you all the way here so that you could rejoin your friends and strengthen this position. If you do actually attack, then I'll be in a better position to believe your story and will not outright kill the two left alive after the three failed. That is how I see my situation."

Adam was furious. Mike put his hand on his shoulder, trying to tell him to calm down. He looked at his teammates. He knew who he wanted

to take but he also knew who he needed to take with him. He gave an apologetic look to Anna, who in turn did not seem happy about it but did not raise any issues. Then he looked at G'arekk. "Anna and Rosamia will stay behind with you. As I said at the start of this, they are not your hostages. The rest of us will go in and see what this is all about."

G'arekk waved him off. "Fine fine..."

Rosa got close to Anna. "So I understand why you two split, but would it not be better for me to go with them instead of Alex or Adam?"

"That would make more sense, yes, but do you think Adam would take it if he had to stay with them and you go fight some unknown force? As for Alex, if there is anything odd happening over there, she is the best person to figure it out."

While Rosamia understood, it still felt like the wrong decision. "And we are to just wait until they come back?"

Anna gave a small smirk. "We are not their prisoners. If things seem to be getting out of hand, get ready. I did not drag you all here just to see you all killed because some idiot does not see that we actually want to help him."

Alex cast an illusion to help them get closer so that the guards would not see them right away. The issue was that the spell should have failed by now. "Guys, can we stop for a bit? My spells are great but they are not that great. Those guards should have seen us by now. Something has got to be wrong." Not wanting to stop in the middle of the field, but understanding the concern she had, they stopped and let Alexandria examine the situation.

Alex cast some minor detection spells to try not to alert anyone that may have put up some defences. The results she got back were nothing. There were no traces of anything arcane but she was sure that something was happening here. She

looked at Adam and wondered, then cast another type of detection spell and this one yielded results. "A lot of holy magic is being used here, not arcane."

Adam was stunned. "What do you mean holy magic? What type? Wait, even better question, how can you detect holy magic?"

Alex looked around and tried to think of a way to explain it but gave up. "Look, let's just say that there are ways for arcane to detect holy and some spell details, it's not knowledge that is tossed around but it's there." She was satisfied with that answer and changed the subject a bit. "Okay, now that I know the type, give me a bit more time to figure the spell used. There is a possibility that this spell may alert them so be ready."

Having to drop the matter, Adam looked more closely at the guards. They were all wearing the same full plate but he could not figure out where it came from or who it was supposed to represent. Mike also took a closer look. The guards were not normal, they did not move and those on patrol did so in a precise manner with exactly the same amount of steps and movements back and forth. It was almost not human. "Are these things zombies or something like that?"

Alex, having finished her spell, looked at both of them. "How did you...? Oh never mind, not really, no. These things are different. The details of the spell are not exact for me but they are more like puppets than zombies. Zombies react on their own, these things will only react when they are given an order or if a certain condition happens. The orc was right, they will never stop and they will never tire. The real reason this place is still standing is probably the force controlling them more than anything."

"So if I understand correctly, the spell will keep us covered until we get close to them and

only then will they react. I'm also guessing that these things are not alive anymore, right?"

She nodded. "They are basically preserved bodies, nothing more."

"Okay, so if you don't mind, let's use a bit more magic to sneak in and get a better understanding what is inside this thing. From what it seems, the guards are not reacting to us so far, so let's not lose that right away."

The three moved as close to the outer wall as possible. Alexandria then used a levitation spell to help them get on top of the wall. Seeing as the guards never deviated from their patrol patterns, it was easy to find a good spot where they would not bump into anyone. They noticed a few more guards around but overall the numbers ranged in the thirties. Nothing that small should have stopped the orcs. The real target was probably the lone figure in the middle. He was sitting on the ground. He looked like he was meditating. Around him was a rune pattern that had a slight pulsing glow to it. Once again both looked at Alex.

"You guys need to spend more time with books."

Adam shrugged. "I was busy learning how to use these." He pointed to his swords.

Mike just shook his head "We had none of those books."

Alex let out a small sigh and started studying the pattern. "It seems that it's a spell shield, not a strong one but enough to block at least one range spell. It should be no issue to you guys. I am picking up a lot of energy coming from the main building. I'm not sure what is going on there."

Taking in all the information, Mike discussed the basic plan. "Let's glide down then. I'll hit the target in the middle and you two head to that building and figure out what is going on. Before

you head there, Alexandria, can you blow the main doors open? It could get handy for a potential escape route if things get bad. Let's ignore the guards unless they are in our way. I think they are mostly there for decoration to force the human issue with the orcs at this point."

Everyone agreed with the plan. Alexandria let loose a large fireball spell that blew the front doors open as soon as they touched down on the ground. Mike charged at the figure in the middle, which was now getting up. "Humans... here? Interesting, I guess we were right." His form exploded in a dark shape that grew close to the size of those giants. The dark cleric was visible for all to see.

A little bit away from the outpost the orcs, Anna and Rosamia saw the dark figure. Anna looked at G'arekk. "If that is a human outpost that keeps attacking your people, I think you need to have a chat with your friends." The orc let out a small growl.

Rosamia looked nervously at Anna. "Should we stay here?" Anna looked at the dark figure "For now."

Back in the outpost, Alex and Adam were making a beeline to the building, dispatching guards as they got in their way. "Should we not help him?"

He slashed away at another guard. "No, we keep to our orders for now. Information about this place is more important than a fight with a dark cleric."

Mike had wished for a dark cleric that was more like the first one that they had faced, essentially one that wasted a lot of energy really quickly. While he was fortunate that he was not like the other that they had faced on the top of the tower, this was still different. Every time he got hit his shadow regeneration would act the same. What



was different was that his attacks were more focused and because of that used up a lot less energy. Compared to him, the cleric would last longer in terms of energy. A new strategy was needed, at least until the others got back to him. A plan occurred to him and there was no better time to try it out in practice. He focused the same level of energy as before but instead of pushing it all out in one swing, he tried to let the energy flow out as the blade as it hit the target and then cut off the flow as the swing neared the end of the arc. The result of the damage was considerably lessened but so was the energy cost. A negative was that the energy released was no longer ranged and would only affect what it touched. As an unexpected bonus, this way there was no recharge time needed. This allowed him to use combo manoeuvres that he had practiced all of his lifetime. All things considered, this would be his best bet in order to last a much longer time. Still, he hoped that the others would make it back quickly.

They finally made it to the double doors to the building and even Adam stopped for a few seconds. "Even I can sense the magic behind those doors. What the heck do you think they are doing?"

Alex just shook her head. "I have no clue, I don't know this one at all. I'm hoping that I'll have an idea when we get in." Even Adam had to admit to himself that he did make of a lot of jabs at Alex, but he knew that she was probably the most knowledgeable person he trusted on the topic of magic. "Alright then, I'll go in first, but I'll go slowly. This will give you a few seconds to give me instructions on what I should focus on." Alex nodded in approval.

He opened one of the doors. What he saw was a very large room with just a few torches to provide

minimal lighting. In the room five clerics could be found all around this large slab of stone in the middle of the room. On the stone a girl, probably in her late teens, was unconscious with shadow energy being poured into her by the clerics. He did not need Alexandria to tell him what he needed to do. He magically charged at the first target and sliced his abdomen with one sword and stabbed him in the chest with the other. Not knowing if he would make it in time, he channelled some magic in his arm as he turned and threw his sword at the chest of another target.

As Adam charged in, Alexandria had a little clue as to what was happening, but there was very little time to think about that now. She used two of her five instant spell on the other clerics. They died instantly. Adam had taken two out, leaving only one, who was now transforming. She heard Adam say, "We need to get out now. This place offers very little room to move in with him there."

She agreed but she also wanted to do something else. "You grab the girl and I'll distract him." She then started launching a volley of spells at the creature. Adam wanted to question her command but now was not the time. He rushed over and grabbed the girl and exited out of the building. Shortly after, Alexandria followed out. She was holding her arm and seemed to be in a lot of pain. He placed the girl on the ground next to the wall and rushed back to help Alex.

From afar all could see another large shadow had appeared on the battlefield. Anna singled Rosa that the time had come. As they raced to the outpost, two orcs tried to stop them. Anna used her sword, still in its scabbard, and stabbed one of the orcs in the mid-section. Rosa did the same things but with the butt of her spear. As G'arekk watched his men double over and the two females

run to the aid of their comrades, he had to wonder what was really going on. Could the dark clerics have traitors? Or was it something else? It seemed that he too was now looking for answers.

Mike was thanking his lucky stars that the clerics were not interested in working together. It made splitting them up easier and it also meant that they had a small chance of surviving this. Adam, on the other hand, was not feeling as fortunate. Their cleric was extremely aggressive. While he was able to dodge his attacks with the help of his magic, Alex was not so fortunate. He healed her as much as he could but because of his limited healing abilities he knew that there was no way that she was not in great pain. She continued to attack her target as furiously as she could. This little mage was growing up really fast and really hard with this group.

This type of attack and healing went on for a while, until he realised that Alex was getting to her limit due to the wounds that his healing would not allow him to fix. A quick glance to the other side and Mike was having a similar issue. As he started focusing on another healing spell on Alexandria, he noticed that a stronger one had just been cast on her. As he turned his head he saw Rosa and Anna. Rosa went to heal Mike and Anna stayed by his side. "Who is she?" She pointed to the mysterious girl still lying on the ground. "No clue. Alex told me to save her, they were doing something to her is all I know."

She only took a few seconds and then yelled out orders "Rosa, you stay with her and try to backup Mike. The rest of us are on him." Adam hated this scenario, his skill had always been about attack. Playing defence was not anywhere near his main strength.

Rosa took the time to cast a quick spell on the

girl. This would allow her to carry her without having to worry about the extra weight. Unfortunately there was still the issue of having to hold her, which would essentially prevent her from attacking as well. She healed Alexandria with a more powerful spell and then left both of them in Adam's hands and headed to Mike.

Alex was extremely thankful for the healing spells. Now that the searing pain was gone, she could focus on casting better spells. Seeing as Anna was around, they did the same as the last time and used delayed fireball spells in the opening that Anna's attacks would create. It was a tricky manoeuvre that was made harder due to the attacks that this cleric was doing. Large waves, cones, pulses, tiny pellets, and everything was being thrown at them. The only benefit was that this cleric was consuming energy so quickly that there was no way that he would last long.

Adam was having a hard time with his role. He swore that Anna was purposefully attracting the attention of the cleric so that he would focus his attacks more on her. While she was probably the best female fighter he had ever seen, there were still limits and she would be reaching hers very soon. He knew this because he was nearing his limit of magical energy. Pretty soon he would be tapped out.

Every action Anna was taking was hurting her. She of all people knew how much damage and pain only one of these main attacks would have if you were hit by it directly. Still, she somehow knew that they would pull through, only a few more hits.

Alex was once again in too much pain from the glancing blows that she had gotten from the shadow energy. This was just too much. She focused all her efforts on a single spell, a single spell cast as often as she could afford. She

launched a fireball spell, followed by the two instant spells, giving her time to cast another and finished off with her last instant spell she had prepared. The five spells connected and then finally, as the last one got healed, a white crack could be seen on the shadow.

Mike was once again feeling pretty lucky. Rosa was able to keep him going and the others seemed to be nearing the end of their fight. The only bad part about all this was that his target seemed no were near of reaching his limit, but then something unexpected happened and his target stopped attacking.

The cleric was focused on what was happening. This was the first time he had seen glowing white cracks. Could this be a result of the fact that this was a new recruit? The cracks grew larger and larger, pretty soon they covered his whole body. The humans fighting him were all running away and then suddenly he exploded in a large white light. The explosion caused him some pain but it was quickly healed away. How had they done this? He realised that the warrior he had been fighting was now releasing more powerful attacks. Again, this would be healed automatically. As more energy was drawn to heal him, he realized what was going on and wondered how much time he had left. The others had to be warned. Why had he not told them about this clear weakness? He moved towards the doors that had been destroyed to see a group of orcs just standing there. Why had they not attacked the humans? He let loose a large pulse of shadow energy to push and potentially kill all it would hit. This should give him time to get a good start on his escape.

As the pulse released, Rosa created a shield around the group in order to block its effects. The orcs were not so fortunate. As the cleric ran off, a

large group of the orcs had been killed or badly hurt by the effects. In order to keep the small trust that they potentially had between them, she stabilized the orcs that she could. More healing would be needed later but at least a few more would survive.

Mike looked at the horizon where the cleric was heading. While he and the group had survived, in a way they had lost this fight. The next clerics would now be that much harder to kill and he was to blame for it. He went to G'arekk, who was still alive, fortunately. "We now have another piece of the puzzle, but what do you plan on doing now that we both see the picture it's starting to create?"

"My plan is to escort you to one of our camps. There you will stay while I go to the old citadel where these clerics have created a home for themselves and get some answers. Once I return, we will talk about the next steps."

In his mind Mike thought that the orc was delusional if he assumed that he would get the right answer by just going to the source and asking them and then letting him go once he found out. He still agreed with his plan and mentioned that he would inform the rest of his group and leave when they were ready. Currently he was betting that all of his teammates were running very low on magical energy. This would give them the time to recuperate and once rested they would talk about their next steps.

He joined back with the rest of the group, who were all around the new girl that had been saved. Now that he had time to look at her, he realised that she was probably a few years younger than Alexandria. Her hair was also blond and a bit longer than shoulder length. She seemed very malnourished and was also not responsive to anything. "So any clues as to what happened to

her or who she is?"

Alexandria turned to him. "I have no clue who she is or how she got here. I think they were trying to convert her to a dark cleric, or should I say force her to convert and join them." Rosamia was puzzled and looked at Adam to confirm. "We were always told that dark clerics were willing people that joined. This is the first I hear of one being corrupted."

Alex was just as confused. "I know, that is what I read too, but the spell they were doing looked a lot like something else that is used to bend someone's mind. The real issue right now is that she had a lot of energy in her that needs to be cleansed." Alex turned to Rosa. "Can you help her with that? My spells are getting lots of confusing information on her. Plus, there is something else that tells me that I want to save her."

Rosa looked at the girl for a little while. "I can remove it but it will take a while seeing as I will be the only one doing it. She will have to stay with us for a few days at least."

Mike stepped in. "Well, that should not be a problem considering what the orcs want us to do. Plus, it's not like we can just leave her here."

A while after the groups left with the orcs carrying their wounded and them carrying this mysterious new girl. As Anna got close to him, he asked her, "Your thoughts on all this?"

She looked at him, holding back a fake laugh. "I need to think about all this before we talk about that. Currently I think you are right and we should rest up, see who this girl really is and then figure out what we want to do next. We need to try to figure out what it means if the clerics are really behind all this."

Mike let out a sigh. "This is only going to get more complicated from this point on."

She reached for his hand gave him a small smile. "We don't have the full answer now but don't worry, we will figure it out together. It's what we do."

He reached over and gave her a small kiss. "You are right, all in due time I guess."



## Chapter 14

The trip took two days. The camp was more like a mini-outpost. Two small wooden towers helped with lookout and logs had been placed at an angle all around the camp in order to discourage rushing charges from an enemy. The place also housed a lot of orcs. Every now and then groups would leave on what seemed like long patrols and eventually others would return. Supplies also came and went from this camp. G'arekk had introduced them to the leader of the camp, and also his close friend by the look of it. His name was K'azugg. K'azugg had agreed, against his will, to let the Lights Templar on the outskirts of the camp. This allowed the group some privacy where they could talk but measures had been implemented so that yet again they would be constantly watched. Still, proper food was supplied and a stream of water was close by. This allowed them the time they needed to recuperate and figure out their next step.

It also allowed Rosa to help out the new girl that they had rescued. After a day of treatment she had regained consciousness. Her name was Iris. She had been captured by the cleric from her home. Alexandria had been right and they were trying to make her join them. After a while they tried other means to force her to join. Little detail was given, which was expected. Mike had been surprised that she had been able to tell them that much after going through such an experience. At night Alexandria always slept by her side and would hold her in her arms. She had mentioned that Iris slept very little but this way when she woke up from her nightmares she would not wake

up alone. Alexandria hoped that it provided some level of mental comfort.

Mike rejoined the group that was now sitting on logs for makeshift chairs. Adam was next to Rosamia, who was still eating. Anna was idly chatting with them. Alexandria and Iris were not present. He sat next to Anna who then turned to him to give him some good news, "Seems that Iris's treatments are all done now."

Rosamia put down her now empty plate. "Yes, all the corruption has finally been removed. In theory, that part of the damage is all gone. Also, in a day or two I will have recovered and will be ready for what we are going to do next."

Adam aimed his gaze at the fire. "So what are we doing next? I understand why we are playing the good puppy for the orcs for now but is that what we are planning on continuing to do?"

Anna was now used to Adam's blunt comments and a small half smile appeared on her face. "No, that's not the plan. Currently the idea would be to head to this citadel that G'arekk was talking about. No matter what, those clerics need to be stopped. As for the orcs, we don't really know anything about them at this point. Are they true enemies or have they just been used? So yes, we are still going to play good puppy, as you put it."

"I figured as much, and yeah, the citadel should be our main target. So do we leave after Rosa is okay?"

Mike threw another log in the fire. "That would have been the plan but there is something else that we need to take care of first. We can't bring Iris with us and there is no way we can leave her here. Alexandria has become attached to her and it seems that this is the case with Iris as well. We could leave them both here, I think we all know she would be able to protect her. The real issue is

that I don't think it would be wise to go to this citadel without her. I was hoping to talk to her to see how she wanted to approach this issue."

As if on cue, Alex and Iris had returned and joined the others around the campfire. Iris was looking much better than before. Alex had fixed up her clothes and she now had the freedom to bathe herself. She was still looking very thin and had very little sparkle in her eyes. This was the other type of damage that Rosamia had mentioned. As they sat next to each other, Alex looked at Mike. "I overheard something about needing to talk to me about something?"

This was not going to be easy with Iris around but it had to be done. He glanced at Anna, who nodded in approval and then was cut off by Alex herself. "You all want to go to the citadel in order to try to destroy the dark clerics, right?" As she said those words, Iris turned and grabbed Alex's arm. She reached out to her to try to calm her down. "But there is no way that we can go there with Iris, and there is no way that I would agree that we should even think about doing that." Iris let go of Alex and stood up. It seemed like she was fighting something inside of herself.

Rosa reached out. "It's all right. She is right, we are not going to even ask you to do that, you don't have to worry about it."

Iris looked at the ground. "I know that but I also know that you need to go and stop them. I just ... I ... don't want you to ... leave m..." She then turned around and ran away. As Alex was standing, Adam stopped her. "Don't worry, I'll go. You need to figure this out and I can keep her safe." A bit surprised at the offer, she sat back down and Adam went off in the direction that Iris had gone.

He followed her to the stream where she was

sitting on the ground. He moved closer to her. "I'm not really good with feelings at all and I really don't know what they did to you or what is going through your head right now, but if you want I can tell you a story that may help, if you are interested." Her eyes showed anger, pain and sadness. He had a lot of experience in that. She did not say anything so he assumed that she was interested.

He told her about that night when he and Rosa were still kids and a dark cleric had come to their small town. He told her how nervous and scared he really was but kept it hidden inside so that he could help Rosa. He liked the action of helping others close to him, so because of that, he foolishly convinced her to follow him to try to help his foster parent. He told her how good he felt after having stopped one of the orcs that was also attacking, he then mentioned about how stupid he had been when all he had done was to create another target for the dark cleric and because of this his foster parent had sacrificed himself in order to stop him and save them. He continued to talk about the anger that he had felt about being helpless and not wanting to ever be in that position again. Having followed that path, it had forced him to leave the one person he should not have and because he was not there she then turned around and followed the same path as their foster dad.

He then moved on to having spent time with a know-it-all mage, two warriors that thought they could solve the world's problems and the person he should not have left. The good they did, or tried to do, made him less angry all the time and for the first time actually felt like he had people he could depend on.

Having probably talked more than he ever had, he stood up. "Look, take what you can from this

but know for sure that even if we are separated from this point on, you are not alone anymore. Somehow you are part of the group and this group does not let go of its members."

As he left her alone to process everything, he heard a small "thanks" coming from her lips. A small smile appeared on his face. It had been a while since helping others had felt good again.

Back at the camp fire, Rosa had moved next to Alex. "Don't worry, she's in good hands."

She gave her a weak small smile. "I know but I'm still worried. I'm sorry that I've been acting so differently because of her, but there is something about her that tells me I have to help her somehow. I wish I understood it myself."

Anna gave a small chuckle. "It's all right, she is part of the family now, so don't worry, you are not alone."

"Thanks."

"No problem. On another topic, we still we need to figure out a way to keep her safe and also we need to target that citadel. I would rather not split up but so far it seems like the only option available."

"There may be another way. It's a bit of a long shot and it's a big detour that could cost us a lot of time, especially seeing as we are not exactly sure where this citadel is."

Anna and Mike looked at each other, curious at what Alexandria thought they would not approve. "Try us out. What is the plan?"

"In theory, we could send her through the portal and from there to Astrum."

Mike was really confused now. "Wait, what? I thought that portal would be closed by now. What part are we missing?"

She tried to not to make eye contact. "Well, you know that magic ball that I sent before we all

went through? That had information that was to reach my father. Obviously I updated him on what we were doing and I also told him to try to leave the portal open. Now it should be in a constant state of being disrupted because someone on the other side should be casting the spell once the previous one finished, but I should be able to get around that."

Alex looked at everyone. "Look, I know that I should have had more faith, but I figured that having a backup plan like this would be worthwhile for us. Plus, the risk was low. There is no way that there is not a large amount of people on the other side and the orcs have a pretty big weakness. None of them can use magic, it seems. The only way that portal would be active again is if a mage or maybe cleric went there himself to fix the issue. If that happens, then they would probably just shut it down from our side. Of course that could mean that when we go there we have a closed portal on our hands, but I don't think that will be the case."

Mike was pleasantly surprised by this news. "If the portal is still open then that's fantastic news that resolves everything. So we will wait until Rosamia is fully rested, then head to the portal, ask for assistance from the Council to protect Iris, and then try to find that citadel." He wondered for a bit. "You know, while we are at it, let's ask the Council for another favour. Maybe they can help us with a few horses to save on the travel time."

Anna let a small laugh escape because of his last comment. "So you finally think about those horses, after all this time."

He shrugged. "It was an important crossroad in my life and there was a lot to think about, plus you forgot about them too."

She gave him a mischievous look. "I guess I'm

not as focused on comfort as you are."

Rosamia interrupted their banter. "I find it fascinating that you two can do that in these types of situations."

They smiled at each other and Anna answered Rosa. "I don't know, it's how we are. In any case, now we have a plan. I would like to add that we should try to wait till G'arekk comes back. We have to wait a bit anyways and if we are lucky he may be of help somehow."

Mike did not think that the orc would help them but if there was something in it for them, then there could be a way. Plus, it would be easier to pass through that army at the base of the tower with his help.

Alexandria was currently very happy with the way things were going. Soon she could talk to her father and make sure Iris was taken care of until things were finished here. All she needed to do was wait a few days.

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G'arekk had finally made it to the citadel. He hated coming here. The citadel itself was a long tower that had been created a long time ago by one of the dark clerics of the time. He once asked why the orcs of the time had allowed something like this to happen. He had been told that the tower had just simply appeared during the night, meaning the things had been completely created by magic. He was also told that they had tried to take it down but realized that it was also protected by strong magic, something the orcs had issues with. In the end an understanding was created between the orcs and the clerics. They would leave them alone if they left them alone. This treaty lasted for so long that over time the orcs just forgot about it. It was

like the section of the land just did not exist anymore. The place had only come back in the recent years when the humans had started attacking and the clerics had come to help them.

While he started climbing the many steps that greeted him in order to get to the top floor, he wondered how they had never questioned this whole thing. Remembering the devastation that had been caused in the first wave and the many towns that had been destroyed simultaneously, the orcs had been left with little options. Magic had been something that their ancestors had battled against but no information had survived on how they had done it. They were managing now for sure but at the time, the clerics were a god send. He would be hard pressed to imagine that there would be any orcs left if not for their help. This made the situation harder to understand. If they were truly behind all this, why go through all this trouble for so many years? What frustrated him more was wondering if all these years they had been duped. And why there were still so many steps.

The climbing went on for many more minutes. When he finally arrived he was also more and more worried about what he was about to do. Normally there were few people around but there would still be some guards or an odd shadow creature or two. While going up he had seen no one. It was like the place was deserted, but at the same time inside he knew that there were things around that he just could not see. As he arrived at the large double doors, he cursed himself for being a fool and only bringing a few orcs with him and leaving them outside at the bottom of the citadel. As he opened the door, he figured that it was all too late to think about these things now.

The room he entered was very large. He figured that it was built that way in case they needed to



fight in their shadow form. This is one of the few rooms he had ever seen where such a thing would be possible and still have room to spare. Large arches lined the front and side of the top floor. He wondered how the clerics dealt with the constant wind. Lighting was also very sparse. Thankfully it was sunset so there were very few shadows around the room. In the room only one more person could be found, the head cleric. He was a very old human man with a long white beard. G'arekk had only seen him once besides this time. Even now he showed great strength and his eyes burned with strong passion like no one else he had seen before.

"Why have you come here, G'arekk?"

He was not sure how he felt that he remembered his name. "I am here to inform you that the last human outpost has been destroyed."

"Oh, and how was this brilliant feat accomplished? What final strategy won out in the end?"

They were both trying to get the other to tip their hand, "A combined effort with an attack group from the front line." He figured omitting which front line force the help came from would be in his best interest.

"I see. I must admit that I am surprised, the front line forces have just suffered a crushing defeat. I supposed that this minor victory on the home front must be helping morale." He turned around and looked at the horizon. "Still, I don't see why you came all the way here for this news. I ask again, G'arekk, why have you come here?"

"Dark clerics were found at the outpost. I'm here to ask if it's possible that some of your men have defected."

The head cleric faced him once more. "Yes, there are some of our men that have defected."

G'arekk was thrilled to hear the news. This

meant that this whole thing had not all been for nothing and that they had not just been manipulated. He felt a large weight had been lifted. "I know this is a sad thing but part of me is happy to hear this news, I was very worried."

"Oh, you have nothing to worry about anymore. Plans have been made to get rid of these pests."

Suddenly he was worried again. "Only one cleric escaped from the outpost. Are there more?"

"I think you misunderstand. The pests I'm referring too are the orcs."

G'arekk was speechless.

"I see that you are starting to understand. Your troops have allied with the humans and have attacked us. For that a price will be paid. Our numbers have dwindled a lot these last few weeks. Plus, there is the issue of the constant defeats, the losses of the portals, and so much more. At this time I am thinking that the investment made in your race for all these years has not really paid off. I plan to fix this problem for good."

He was scrambling. "You can't possibly mean what I think you are saying."

"You are a slow one. Yes, I mean to finish off your race and replace you with a stronger, more powerful army to send on the other side. I had wished that you could have worked together but the giants that agreed to my terms would hear nothing about that. Their first attack should start very soon from what I understand."

G'arekk was furious. He had to warn his people. He turned around to see that the door somehow had been shut and was apparently sealed. He hated magic. That was the only door and there was no real other place, except maybe one more. He rushed to one of the open arches.

"And where do you think you are going? There

is no way for you to survive that fall."

He knew that but he also knew that a message of sorts needed to be sent. He just hoped that someone would see it. He jumped out and screamed as hard as he could all the way down the citadel. He prayed that his few men were still alive and that they would hear him. His death would have to be enough for them to understand. It was his last prayer before he fell on the ground and everything went dark.

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More than two days had passed and still no word arrived from G'arekk or any other orc. It had been decided that they would visit K'azugg at the camp to see if any information could be gained. Depending on the outcome, they would leave for the portal. The idea would be to escape if things did not go their way so because of that only Anna, Mike and Alex would head to the camp. A short teleport spell had been prepared by Alex in order to move them back to their camp, where Adam, Rosa and Iris would be waiting. The only thing needed would be to finish the incantation and they would disappear, that and make sure that she cast no other spell in the meantime, otherwise the readied teleport spell would be cancelled out.

They made their way to the camp and were instantly stopped by the guards. Mike mentioned that they needed to talk to K'azugg. After some convincing they were escorted to his tent. This was their first time in the small outpost. From the inside they could confirm that this place was more of a pit stop to rest for a bit and continue on afterwards. There were a few tents that were set in permanently but the majority were quickly setup. K'azugg, the leader of the outpost, was in one of

the few permanent dwellings. The size was big enough to have a cot, a table and a few chairs. As they came in the camp the leader was pacing back and forth. He was agitated.

"What do you humans want? Not enough food?"

Mike figured that this would not go as well as they had hoped. "We were wondering if news had arrived from G'arekk. We assumed that he would have been back by now."

The leader walked right up to Mike's face. "And why should I tell you anything?"

This dance was becoming old very quickly. "We are only here to confirm what was found at the 'human' outpost and then, once that is done, we will be on our way and hopefully you will never see us again."

"You assume that we would let you go alive. Why would we do that?"

Now he was getting angry. "So far we have helped your kind and have not asked for much. Ideally we would like to keep helping because so far it's been somewhat mutually beneficial. Attack us and we will retaliate. So far we have killed dark clerics, giants and orcs. With your full numbers, sure maybe you could stop us, but I know it would not be worth the cost in lives."

The leader was even more enraged now. Just as he was about to yell at Mike again, a guard came in. "I have urgent news."

The leader focused his gaze, already full of fury, on the guard "What... is... this... news?"

Hesitating for a bit, the guard continued to talk. "A large force of giants has been spotted walking along the mountain line. They seem to be headed to the main garrison in the front lines at the base of the portal tower."

K'azugg's emotions quickly changed from

anger to concern. "Why would they attack us now after so many years?" As he asked the question to no one in particular, a few more guards entered the tent, accompanied by a wounded orc. K'azugg seemed to recognize him and went to him right away. "What happened? Where is G'arekk?"

The orc was able to talk but he could tell that he was forcing himself. "G'arekk was seen jumping out of the top of the citadel. He did not survive the fall. As we investigated his body we were attacked by shadow creatures. I was the only one that survived to make it here."

"G'arekk... dead... no... That can't be."

As K'azugg was going over the news in his head, Mike and the others looked at each other with very concerned looks. Both pieces of news combined fit an interesting story that would read poorly for the orcs and their group that was trying to make it back to the portal.

Anna turned to K'azugg. "Look, I know now is not really the time to ask, but what are you planning on doing? You have an attack force of giants heading to the main orc forces and it seems confirmed that the dark clerics are not on your side anymore."

Coming back from the shock, the leader thought about it for a few minutes. He was only in charge of a small outpost after all and there was little that could be done. "I will gather a force and send them to the main camp. They should know by now but this will make sure that they do. If the fight has already started then it will provide a small extra force that may help morale a bit during the attack. For now the cleric will have to be ignored." He then stopped his explanation, "Wait, why am I telling you this? You have the news that you wanted. Just leave us be. I will let you leave alive in return for the help that was given."

Considering his position, Anna wondered how true his intentions were. "Well, if you want we can help you again. We are heading for the tower as well. We could help your troops get there faster with magic and also help out with the attack. We do ask that we be able to use the portal after everything is finished."

K'azugg was confused. "The portal has been unusable for a while now, but even so, why would I agree to this? You will make it there and then somehow get the portal working and then ask for reinforcements from your side to finish us off."

It seemed to Mike that this leader was at least cautious. "We could do that but the reality of the situation is that we need the portal to send someone back. Once that is done we plan on going to this citadel to get rid of those dark clerics. Now help us with this and then we will leave, close the portal for good and hopefully never see each other's race ever again, if that is what you want. Does this sound good to you?"

"You make it sound so simple, considering how many times our ancestors have tried to take over that citadel." He did not have much time to think things through. It sounded like a good deal but the past haunted him. "Again, we are attacked by an outside force and we must turn to another for help. I wonder how long it will take this time for you to go against your word."

Mike did not really understand the history behind his comment but assumed that he accepted the offer. He turned to Alex. "What do you need in order to get us and a large force there faster?"

"Well in theory all we need is a few of those cargo caravans that they use to move the food supplies around. Rosa, Adam and I can take turns magically enhancing the beasts that are pulling them. It will not be as fast as horses but it should

be faster than walking full speed."

"Sounds good." He turned back to K'azugg. "If you can get those ready, we will go get the rest of our party and then leave as soon as we can." They did not wait for his response and left the camp.

"I wonder how Adam will like the fact that he will once again be helping the orcs."

Anna wondered about Alex's comment as well. "I think that he will enjoy it as much as the orcs, truthfully."

"You're probably right. Still, there was some good news in there. It looks like my dad was able to keep the portal open after all."

Mike looked back. "You are right. Now all we need to do is kill a large giant attack group, hope that the orcs don't try to stop us after and then figure out how to get rid of clerics that have made a home for themselves for many years."

Anna just shook her head. "You had to spoil the moment."

Mike felt ashamed. "You are right. Sorry about that. Of course you all realize what needs to be done. I'm just overly concerned on how we will manage it all, I guess."

"One step at a time and one piece at a time, sometimes looking at the big picture can distract you so much that even the obvious becomes hard. Also, who knows, maybe we will get good news between now and then that will help us out."

He smiled back at her. "I hope you're right, and thanks. Now I guess the first thing will be Adam, right? Any of you want to let him know?"

They both had large smiles on their faces "Right..."

The vote was two against one.

## *Chapter 15*

Overall this had been a miserable trip for Adam. It started with helping orcs in their village, then saving some when they were captured, to then being used by them only to end up spending a few days with a large group to once again help them. The Crusader in him was screaming for him to act. He had kept his sanity by remembering that he would soon get his vengeance on the clerics once and for all. There was also the human life they had saved and over the few days they had all gotten attached to Iris for different reasons. For him it was because she reminded him of himself when he was her age. During the last few days she had become less afraid and the nightmares had lessened a bit, which allowed for her eyes to start shining again with some passion. It was passion that seemed fuelled by determination and vengeance, emotions he knew really well. Putting those thoughts aside, Adam focused on his own strength. Looking at the grim and worried faces of the two leaders in their group made him only wonder about the scope of what was coming next.

Overall the trip had gone well. A group of about fifty orcs had been formed and the preparations for their travel vehicle had gone smoothly. During the journey the casters took turns reapplying the magical spell that would speed up the very odd-looking creatures that looked like a cross between a cow and bull. This way would make sure that they would still be in good form when they got to their destination. What Mike thought was worrisome was that it still took a long time to get there, and depending on the giants'



advance, there was a good chance that they would not make it in time before the battle started. He just hoped that they would at least make it in time to make a difference.

A short few minutes later and they finally saw their destination. What they saw was discouraging. Over the distance they could see that the battle had already started. They counted about thirty giants, but not the type that they had already fought against. These were armed with large swords the length of a tree and their vital spots where also armored. This made the arrows useless and left them with mostly close range options. Every swing a giant made, orcs could be seen flying in the air and then landing on the ground on more orcs. On top of the giants, two dark clerics could be seen. At this point there were few questions left, the clerics had joined up with the giants and were getting rid of the orcs.

While things looked very grim, there was still hope. The orcs were successful in taking down giants. The losses were heavy but they had the numbers to back them up. The real issue was the clerics. There was nothing that they could do against them. Still, the orcs rallied, did not let panic set in and formed groups in order to strengthen their defences.

The Lights Templar' targets were clear, but they also had to remember that helping the orcs was in reality their secondary mission at this location.

Mike looked at K'azugg. "We will take care of the clerics. It would be helpful if you could pass the word around so that the orcs don't attack us. When one of those start glowing white they are to get away from it as soon as you can."

He moved to Adam and Alexandria. "Adam, you are to escort Alexandria and Iris to the portal.

Make sure she gets to the other side. Once everything is done then it's your call to join up with the rest of us or strike at the giants in your location."

"The rest of us will target the clerics one at a time." He looked at Anna. "Do you mind taking point on this one?" Her natural speed and agility over him would allow her a better chance of dodging the attacks and also help Rosamia conserve magical power.

"I'm okay with that, just make sure to keep up." He gave her a quick smile as acknowledgment.

It only took a few more minutes and they arrived at the battle scene. Morale seemed to increase a bit when they realised that help had arrived. The orc probably assumed that more help could possibly come later. The group of orcs split from the Lights Templar and went on a coordinated attack on the giants. As they got off, the Lights Templar also split, with Anna's team in the direction of the closest cleric and Adam's to the tower entrance.

While the group Adam was around was vastly different than he was used to, the scene and the chaos and order of the battle field was very familiar. For better or worse, Adam was at home here. He shouted at Alex and Iris. "Iris, no matter what, stay close to Alex. Alex, try to stay close. Don't start casting unless you need to or if there is a perfect opening. We want to draw as little attention to you two as possible." Not waiting for them to answer, he made his way to his mission location. The giants were causing such an issue that humans going around the orcs did not cause too much of a problem. Wild swings were taken here and there but they could be easily avoided or parried. After all, in terms of importance, a few humans did not score very high against a giant

swinging around a metal tree-sized weapon. The random arrows could also be ignored due to the defence of the protective magic around them.

As he made his way, Adam realised that these giants also had large boots. This made their previous tactic less effective. He had little time to think of a new strategy as a giant was blocking their path. "Alex, prepare a spell at that giant when the right time comes. In the meantime, can you give me a boost in the direction of his left shoulder?"

Alexandria sent Adam flying in the direction that he had asked. As he had gambled, the giant would not care for something like him being flung in his direction. That would change soon. As he got close he planted both his swords in the giant's left shoulder and got as much footing as her could, then slashed at the left leather strap holding his armor. The giant felt the scratch and tried to reach him with his left hand to swat him away. Adam turned, jumped and using his swords landed on the right side. The giant lifted his right shoulder and tilted his head to try to pin Adam between them. Adam had a small smirk on his face; it was perfect reaction for his next move. He jumped down and aimed his swords at the right armor straps now exposed due to his arm being lifted up. As he sliced and with now both straps of the chest piece cut the armor fell to the ground. As he himself landed on the ground, he turned his head to see a very pissed off giant with both hands grasping his large sword overhead, about to swing at him. The blow itself could probably be avoided but some damage would be taken due to the force of the blow itself as it connected with the ground. That was if the blow occurred. As the giant prepared his swing, lightning bolts raced from the sky to his chest in the general location of his heart.

This caused the giant to kneel down on the ground, with the armor removed it also created a large bull's-eye for all the arrows that the orcs had ready.

Adam did not wait to see if the giant would recuperate. He singled the others to continue following him. They were almost at the door now.

There were two things that worked in Anna's team's favour. The first being that if the cleric knew about the weakness, it would still be impossible for him to conserve energy in such a large scale battle. The other was that a giant shadow spewing death to all it touched was a much bigger concern for the orcs around them than a few humans attacking the shadow.

The plan was that Anna would launch an attack, creating a target. Normally with Alexandria around a delayed fire spell would then be used. Seeing as this could not be done, Mike followed with an enchantment energy blast for himself in the same location while the original was still being healed. This pattern continued for a while, causing as much damage as they could with the power available. The cleric eventually became aware of the strategy and started focusing his attacks on Mike. At this point the team flipped leaders. Mike was the one that coordinated the attack and Anna followed suit. At a certain point during the fight it became impossible for the two to link up due to the cleric's shadow attacks. Rosamia then took over as being point by using her holy spear attack. Seeing as this attack took longer to charge up, it was a little bit slower going, but a massive amount of energy was still being used to heal so they were in the right track.

Eventually the cleric's focus was only on them and the orcs had been ignored. Not wasting this opening, they formed a group and equipped their

bows. Normal weapons against the cleric protected by his shadow energy would not cause much damage, but given a certain amount of blows, the automatic regeneration ability would still activate. A few volleys of arrows got thrown at the target. Luckily the group was protected as well with magic by stray arrows, not that the orcs knew that or seem to care. The cleric turned and faced the group of archers that had formed and poured a wave of shadow their way. Knowing there was no way to run, the orcs simply reloaded their bows with another arrow and let their weapons fly. Rosamia quickly stopped her attack and conjured a physical shield in front of them to help them out. There was no way that she could protect all of them but some would be better than none. The cleric took the shield as a challenge and directed more power to try to break it, as if to say that a little priest shield could not match the power that they had access too. Rosa continued to keep the shield active as much as she could, not to prove that she could stand his attack but to keep him busy.

Anna and Mike linked up and hacked away at the creature. One launched a blast, the other followed, and while that was happening the first one charged up to continue the strike. This double combo continued for six consecutive hits before the cleric stopped attacking Rosa's shield and switched targets, but by then it was already too late, his form was starting to overload and crumble. After a few more attacks the groups yelled at everyone to get away as they too started running. A few listened as the large form turned pure white, others continued their attacks only to be incinerated by the explosion caused by the overload. This left one more to go. The group made their way to their next target.

Finally Adam's group had made it inside. When they entered they were greeted by many orcs, most of which were ready to charge at them. Adam got in a defensive position. "I'll hold them off, you go on ahead." Iris looked nervously at Alex. "Yeah, like I'm going to allow that."

She slowly walked in front of Adam and opened her arms wide. "We mean no harm. We came with a group lead by K'azugg in one of your outposts to help out. Currently part of our team is attacking the clerics that have turned against you. In order to help out we need to get to the top of the tower. Will you let us pass?"

Adam was baffled. "And why do you think that will work?"

The orcs laid down their weapons, Adam could not believe it. "What?!"

Alexandria let out a sigh. "You have been fighting for far too long. Look around you, but this time don't look with the eyes of a Crusader."

Adam, confused, looked around. He saw many orcs holding weapons and then he saw more orcs on the ground, wounded and many trying to help those wounded. The tower was being used as a first aid station. Of course they would have attacked when they saw him come in. He lowered his own swords. "I ... did not realise."

She put her hand on his hand, still holding one of his swords. "It's alright, you realise it now, right? Just try to remember next time." She gave him a smile. "Now, let's go. If this tower is anything like the other, there are a lot of steps to climb."

The three made their way up as fast as they could. They realised that there were many floors occupied like the first one. When this was over there would be more casualties than they cared to count. They needed to hurry. Adam grabbed Iris and both he and Alexandria used magic to speed

up the process. It still took a few minutes but they finally made it to the top. The place looked just like they had last saw it a few weeks ago. They quickly looked outside to see how things were going. They realised that one cleric was gone and that the other was being attacked by lights of light green and pink. That meant that they were all still alive and fighting, but the good news ended there. The giants were still going strong and orcs were having issues keeping up.

Alex marched to the portal and started casting a spell that would remove the disruption. The spell was more complex than the disruption itself but was fairly quick seeing as no one on the other side was working against her. Once the spell was finished the portal glowed again with its normal brilliance. Adam looked at Alex, "So what now? We go through and explain the situation to whoever is on the other side?"

"No, if you do that you will not be able to come back. The journey back and forth so quickly could have harmful permanent effects on your body. It's why only certain orcs were able to be used as reinforcements after the Crusader tower attack when we were trying to defend Calculus." She started casting another spell. "No, what we need is to reach out to someone that I'm sure is listening." After a few moments a blue floating transparent head appeared. It reminded Adam of the same spell that was used in Council room at Astrum to show the details in your head.

Almost in tears, Alex smiled at the face in front of her. "Daddy, I can't thank you enough for putting up with my foolish request."

The face smiled back. "You know that I would do anything for you." Richard's face turned more serious. "What have you learned?"

Alex gave him as much information as quickly

as she could, detailing the giants, the clerics and their actions, the current situation and lastly, everything about Iris.

"Our next step is to attack the citadel and bring down the dark cleric, but we need you to take care of Iris here for us in the meantime." Alex moved closer to Iris. "This is my dad. He will take good care of you until we come back, and we will come back."

Iris smiled back. "I know we are family now, and while we maybe apart for a while, we will always be together." She turned to Adam "Right?"

He smiled and nodded back in acknowledgment.

"Don't worry, you can send her over. Lithius is currently on the other side of the portal now with a few other friends. They will make sure that she gets here very quickly."

Alex gave a large hug to Iris. "I'll see very soon. Take care of dad while I'm away if you can."

She nodded back waved at Adam. "I'll be waiting for all of you to come back." Then she walked in the portal.

Alex looked at her father's head. She missed him a lot. "Once she is okay, please disrupt the portal again. The clerics are acting very openly now so I'm not sure what they will try." She tried so hard not to cry and to look as brave as she could. "I'm going to go now, I have to help my friends and then I promise that we will go and end this war, daddy. Please wait for me, okay?"

Richard closed his eyes and smiled. "Always know that I will be proud of you and I will not stop you in the task you and your friend have taken. Still, there is no need for you to do this alone anymore. Wait a while longer, preparations have already been made. Be safe and come back as soon as you can." His head disappeared after his last



comment.

Adam and Alex looked at each other. "Any clues on what that meant?" She looked at him with wide eyes. "Not at all." They only waited a few minutes and then the question was answered. From the portal came a few mages, most of which she did not recognize, but there was one among them that gave her a large smile. "Lithius, what is going on?"

As he and the mages moved away, more people came through. This time it was a large group of warriors with red capes on their back. One of them waved at Alex. "It's been a while." Alex was surprised to see Julia, with a group of Crimsons no less. "What are you doing here, again what is going on?"

Lithius started to explain. "When you sent the message, both your father and I tried to figure out the next things that could happen and see if there was anything that we could do to prepare for it. We were sure that eventually help would be needed so we formed a group of mages that were willing to help out."

Julia stepped in. "While we were rebuilding, we were approached by your father and shortly after an alliance was built. We would help out for certain missions and in return Astrum would help us rebuild. Now that the old ways are gone, it's something that I was glad to accept."

Alex was amazed. This was truly great news and welcomed help. As she looked around at the mages present, she realized why she did not know most of them. "I take it the Council did not really approve this action?"

Lithius tilted his head. "They did not go against the idea. In theory they are still debating what should be done and no consensus has been found so far. Still, you should not worry. Everyone

knows what is being done." He looked around and marched to get a better view of what was happening outside "So how can we help?"

Alex was stunned that she was suddenly given command. She took a few seconds to think it over. "Adam, you take the Crimson and stop as many giants as you can. We will stay here and provide backup from above." Everyone nodded and moved out or got into position.

As the last cleric exploded around them, the three had to admit that dealing with the giants would be very taxing. Mike looked at the top of the tower. "I wonder if they made it."

Anna looked at him. "Of course they did, but I wish they would hurry up and help us." As if on cue the sky darkened and large clouds formed, blacking out the whole battle field. Lightning started raining down and targeting the giants. Due to their location, the group of mages could not effectively pinpoint where on the giant the lightning would hit. In most cases, as the lightning got close it arched and hit the giant's blades, forcing them to drop their weapons. Unarmed, the giants would be easier to deal with.

As they picked their targets, they noticed a force coming out of the tower. Mike and Anna were pleasantly shocked to see Adam leading a group of Crimson and Julia leading another. With the mages providing support for, the Crimson, Lights Templar, and the orcs, the giant attacking army was quickly defeated. Once the enemy was defeated, all that was left was the uneasy tension between the humans and orcs.

## *Chapter 16*

*A*t this point, seeing as no one was making the first move, a temporary cease fire was called. The humans there had no intention of attacking them and the orcs had had enough battle for one day. The humans retreated to the top of the tower until things could get figured out. Mike was desperately hoping that K'azugg was still alive somewhere and was still on their side.

The mood had changed considerably once they all got to the top. It had felt like a long time since they had been able to talk to others besides their own group. It was a very welcomed and refreshing surprise for most. Anna went straight to Julia and gave her a strong hug. "I can't believe that you are here."

"That makes two of us, but the help given from Astrum really helped us rebuild. When the request came in, how could we refuse? Heck, even news of a small group with two Crimson's fighting hoards of enemies with their magic swords reached us. The Commander was very pleased that his gift was being used in such a way. I was also pleased that in the end it turned out that you helped us after all. Our name is once again talked about by the people in a good light. Considering everything, you two have done great things."

Anna stepped back and reached out to grab Mike's hand. "Well, a lot has changed." She gave him a warm smile and turned to Julia again. "And while I did not approve of the old man's gift, I have to admit that we would not have been able to accomplish all that we have done without it, so I supposed that we will have to stop by at one point

to thank him personally." Julia agreed that things had changed and she understood Anna's hidden message. She was thrilled for her.

Adam and Rosamia really did not have anyone from their respective fields there, which made them wonder why priests and Crusaders had also not been invited to this force. Adam walked to Lithius, seeing as he would probably know more about this.

"The idea at the start was to ask the Crusaders and not the Crimson, but at the time we assumed that this force would probably be used against the orcs, but there was also the small chance that it would also be needed to fight with them. I must say that I did not believe that this would be the case but had no real arguments against the possibility. That was the main reason why Crusaders were not included. A force that has been fighting them for so long would have made things even more difficult than they already are."

They both thought about it for a while and had to agree with the decision. There was also no way that they could ask the priests to join up without the Crusaders. Still, more healers than just the two would have been very welcomed, especially with the next target, which made them wonder how long they would need to stay here and also if the orcs would let them through.

After a while a small group of orcs made their way up. Thankfully K'azugg was among them with three other large orcs. The other orcs did not seem pleased at all. "I have talked with the others and they have agreed to let this cease fire continue, assuming that your plans are still the same. If not, then you will be forced to leave now."

Anna was not too impressed with his comment. "You know that most of us shouldn't use the portal, but that does not matter. Our target is still the same and the deal still stands." She looked

around her to all the new additions, "Even if we are now a bit more than we were before."

"Yes, that fact made things harder. Because of that you are to be moved to another location until things are figured out for the citadel attack. It's making a lot of us uneasy having you here next to the portal where you can call more of your 'friends'. If you agree, we would like it if you would go back to the outpost with me. The leaders have agreed that I would be your guardian until all this is over." The orcs behind him could be heard grumbling something. This plan wasn't something that they all liked.

Alexandria walked in front. "If us at the outpost will make things easier for everyone, there is now a way that we can be there in a few minutes. Assuming that everyone agrees, the camp that we used had been marked as a teleportation location. It will only last a few more days but we have ample time to warp everyone there and some of your group as well."

K'azugg turned around and silently talked with the other leaders. It did not seem like a pleasant conversation, which made everyone wonder how long this truce would be able to last. After some stomping and a bit of shouting, he turned to them to explain what had been agreed. "My group that accompanied you will go with you. If we can't all be teleported at once then it will be required that humans and orcs be grouped together to make sure that nothing else happens."

The plan was explained to the humans that had no access to a language spell. Shortly after more orcs showed up and the circle of mages began their work of teleporting everyone to the small camp once again.

It had taken a bit of time to settle everyone in the small camp but after a day things had settled

down very nicely. K'azugg had convinced them they he would deal with the scouting of the citadel in order for them to get the information they needed for the attack. They figured that there were other personal matters that he wanted to deal with at the site, so the Lights Templar left the task to him and his team. This allowed them some time to prepare and take a final rest before everything started.

Rosamia and Adam spent their time together. Adam seemed a bit more relaxed now that it was not just the little group constantly surrounded by orcs. "So Adam, once this is done and the portal is closed, what do you want to do next?"

"Seems I was never really good at figuring out my own path since day one, plus my options are still limited. Assuming that I don't get carried off to a cell when we get back, I think this time I'll follow your lead." He looked at her wondering. "That's going to be okay, right?"

She laughed. "I'm sure we can figure out something to get you out of that Crusader issue. As for following my lead, there is nothing more that I would like. I've been trying to get you to do that for so many years."

"Yeah, well, I was blinded by something else at the time and, well, I just could not see that. I'll be better now, I swear."

She reached out to him. "I know, and I'm so happy for it."

Alexandria had spent most of her time coaching the mages that had joined them. Most of them were full of ambition and courage but were really inexperienced. She taught them some pointers and also some spells that would be more useful during combat. It was funny to think that a while ago she was just like them, trying to find the hideout of bandits that were attacking caravans. A lot of good and bad things had happened since

then. All these events had helped her grow and understand things better now. She would like to be able to undo the sacrifice that her father had made. That was probably her only regret at this point but she had grown enough to realize that there is nothing that can be done and that she should try to enjoy the time left. Soon everything would be done and she would be able to go back and do just that.

Anna was sitting by the stream of water. Mike joined, sitting next to her. "Normally it would be me sitting by my lonesome thinking about things. What's up?"

She gave him one of her half smiles. "I guess I'm just wondering like everyone what's going to happen next. Plus, you're right, why aren't you agonizing about the citadel?"

"Well, there is not much that I can agonize about until K'azugg gets back. Don't worry, I'm sure I'll go back to my old self as soon as I get the news. As for the future, I thought that was already figured out."

"Well, we agreed to travel and keep helping when we could, but with everything going on I'm wondering if that is the best thing we should do. That's what I want to do..."

Mike thought about it as well for a while and then a large smile appeared on his face. "I've been with you for long time now and there are two things that you have taught me that I will never forget. The first is that a person should never give up, even if the entire world is on their shoulders pushing them down, they have to figure out a way to push back. As long as they try, then they are bound to be on the right path. Second is that people should follow what they want to do, even if they are standing alone following the path that they know is right. It's the only place that they can

be at their best."

She laughed a bit "'Never give up', 'Follow your heart'... Sounds more like a certain creed that was agreed by a small group a while back."

"Agreed, that is pretty much what we thought of as a group back then. Still, you have had held those ideas in you for a while now and I'm thankful that you took the time to teach them to me. As for your thoughts on the future, I would like to add something for you to think about." He took her hands and on his knees faced her. "I have always loved you, in the past, present and in the future as well. I am a better person with you in my life and there is nothing more than I want than to be there for you as well. Anna, when this is over and we are back, will you marry me?"

She got close to him, so close that her forehead and his were touching. Silently she whispered, "That's something I don't need to think about. Of course I will." She kissed him. Afterwards they tried to spend as much time away from everyone as they could to have some time alone together not thinking about what was to come.

Over the next few days the orc population had grown considerably at the outpost. A while after K'azugg's group had returned and it seemed that the news was very grim. The Lights Templar, Julia of the Crimson, Lithius of Astrum, K'azugg, and a few other leaders of the orcs were all present in his command tent. Lithius had taken out a small orb and explained that it was the same kind as the one in the Council room, where thoughts could be visualized for others to see. The orb was given to K'azugg while he explained the situation.

"The clerics are backed in a corner inside that citadel and they seem to know it. The citadel itself is guarded by thousands of orcs that have been



killed over the years. They seem to be used as tools to be commanded by the clerics as the human bodies were at that outpost that you destroyed. There are also three dark clerics outside. One is patrolling the left of the tower, the other the right and the last is protecting the middle where the only door in to the citadel can be found. There is no way for us to get inside, but it's safe to say that you will find more controlled bodies and possibly beasts that are made of shadows.

Mike looked at the image displayed by the sphere. "Three clerics will leave us pretty worn out if we need to face them all."

Julia, now able to understand the language as the rest, was curious about those clerics. "Can we not just split our forces and attack each one?"

Adam happily answered that one. "Sure, but normal weapons don't do much against those. They need to be hit with enough power to make them use more power to regenerate. This causes them to eventually burn up their actual bodies. Normal weapons will hurt them but the time it will take to cause an overload, well, I don't see how anyone could survive that long."

Julia seemed unfazed by his comments and pointed to Alexandria. "Simple problem; she enchants our weapons like she did our arrows when we got attacked."

There was a small silence between the members of the group after that comment. Alex looked a bit dumbfounded. "I ... guess that would work... ah, there would be little variety on the enchantment and it would still be a long fight but with some other mages backing you up..."

Adam just stared at her with his open mouth. "Wait, now just wait a minute here. You mean to tell me that all this time I could have helped in the attacks?"

Alex just looked at him in the best 'I'm so sorry' look she could muster. Adam could not believe this at all. He not so secretly bottled up his emotions on the matter before letting out a small whisper of a comment. "Hack mage..."

Alex gave him a furious look and turned back to Julia. "So again to confirm, that's something that we can actually do."

K'azugg started to wonder how they had lost to these people. Were his people just cursed? Still, the clerics had killed his friend and had tried to destroy all of his comrades at arms. He would not let only outsiders deal with this issue. "We will require these enchantments as well. A large group of warriors has formed and we demand to have a part in this attack."

Anna nodded. "Of course, these people have toyed with all of you for so long now. Just let us know and we will help anyone that wants to join." She looked at Mike, who was nodding his head after having seen all the pieces that he could see.

"This will make things much better overall. Julia, your team will take on the cleric to the right. K'azugg will go for the left and we will take on the middle." He looked at Lithius "Ideally it would be good to split the mage forces so that all teams can have support. Can that be coordinated?" Lithius nodded in approval. "Good, once we take down the middle we will head in ahead of everyone. I'm not sure how much effort those puppets will take to neutralize but with those numbers they need to be taken care of all the same. That will be the orcs and Crimson's group's next priority after the clerics. Once that is done and if we are not finished, let those that are able join us. Chances are that we will need your help anyways if that situation happens."

All parties agreed to the plan after a few minor

modifications. The preparations took a few more days, and then a few more to actually move the small army to the citadel. The time had finally come and while finally standing in front of their last target they all realized that they would have their work cut out for them. While they had spent the time planning and mobilizing, the army of controlled dead orcs had grown. It had to be assumed that after so many years the materials needed would not be in short supply. Giants had also been added to the mix of mindless weapons at the clerics disposals. Still, this did not change the overall plan. Everyone got into position and the final battle began.

Only three mages were assigned to the Lights Templar group, two of which would help Adam clear the field around them of magically controlled puppets. As was expected, the reaction time of those enemies was very slow. The dangerous part was their numbers. The last of the mages had been hand-picked by Alexandria. She had determined that he would be the only one with enough skill to pull off the timed fire blast tactic that had been used in the past against the clerics. At this time Rosamia provided cover and healing while, Anna and Mike hacked away at the cleric with both Alex and the mage delivering that extra little package with each of their blows. Eventually the cleric felt both of his sides explode at once. While this would be healed, this repeated combo should ensure a quick victory.

Julia had split her group into two. Half of them were on the cleric and the other on the so called puppets. She took her spear, now enchanted with fire magic, and delivered a series of blows at her target. Soon after more Crimson's joined in and started hacking at the target. It was soon realised that Adam had been correct; normal weapons

would be nearly ineffective against such creatures. Even with the enchantments it would take a fair amount of time. Luckily this had been planned for. Due to their lower numbers than the orc allies, extra mages had been given to help with the attack for her group. Lithius was also present but his role had turned into a defensive one, creating shields to protect the mages that were getting more attention than Crimsons. Julia pressed the attack. She would not allow the Crimsons to be ignored.

K'azugg's forces far outnumbered the other two teams. They would have vengeance one way or the other. He led the attack against the cleric for his side. After the first few blows actually dealt damage to the thing, his spirit rose. The other orcs joined in as well and had similar reactions. While this power was borrowed for now, it was still power that they could control and direct. This fight would be liberating for them. Finally they could do what their ancestors could not and take back their land for themselves once and for all. The mages associated with them were also helping but if it would be up to him, at this time, he would prefer to simply dismiss them. Their help would make things go faster but in the back of his head he figured that vengeance should not be rushed, and he wanted this to last.

The Lights Templar rushed to the doors of the citadel as their cleric was about to explode. The explosion itself created a nice hole where the animated orc once used to be. They took one last look around and wished the other good luck and entered the tower.

Inside the rooms was barren, once people had living here but now everything was covered in spider webs and most furniture had given away to rot. Stairs went up and down. Their target was above so up they went. There was a bit of extra

worry added as they climbed to the next level when the conditions of the inside of the citadel did not match what information had been given but there was nothing to be done about that.

The second floor furniture was similar to the first. Unlike the first, this one was occupied by a large amount of animated puppets. Mike and Anna started conserving power and relied more on their sword skills than the enchantments. Alexandria stopped casting altogether and attacked with her staff. After a few floors this pattern repeated itself on every floor. Adam had taken the lead and looked back. "So this is becoming a nice familiar pattern."

Rosa took out a target close to her. "Just like another certain tower that we had to climb only a little while ago."

Alexandria had stopped attacking targets on her own and was now assisting the others due to her lack of melee experience. "You know, personally I would love it if I never have to lay siege to another tower again. If this thing was not magical in nature I would have voted to just blow it up."

The climb continued for another few floors until a new target materialized. In front of them there were three creatures about the size of lions all enveloped in what looked like flaming shadow. These creatures had to be the shadow pets that the orcs had told them about. Adam, Anna and Mike charged in, each picking their own targets. As Adam's swords were about to reach the target, instead of hitting something hard they just continued on like nothing was there. He flowed through with another combo only to have the same result. He looked at the others and even with their enchantments the results were the same. Creatures that they could not hit but could probably hit them would not be so easy to deal

with. Alexandria launched a quick spell to verify if her magic would have any effect. The spell just passed through like their weapons. Alexandria turned to Rosamia. "Holy magic is our last option. Fire away."

Rosamia started casting but she had decided to go with something different than an attack spell. Once finished, she directed it to the creatures. Instantly their flames died down and their size decreased. "Try attacking now."

Adam jumped on the target again but this time his sword connected. A large piercing shriek came from the creature. The others joined in and dispatched the creatures. Before they continued to climb, Alex asked what spell she had used.

"I used a cleansing spell. These creatures reminded me of the same type of corruption that was found in Iris but as a physical manifestation. I would assume that getting hit by them repetitively would not harm you physically but attack and destroy your inner being."

"So I guess the cleansing weakened them enough to turn into actual targets. Interesting..."

As the climb continued and nothing new came around, the group assumed that there was probably an illusion that was cast on the inside of the tower to make it look like it was inhabited. This would help manipulate the orcs into thinking this was in fact a home base for the clerics, which added concern to everyone. Alex could not help but wonder out loud what was on everyone's mind. "So you think this really will be the last place? Or will he have to go hunting for other towers that clerics are using?"

No one wanted to answer her question. Mike beheaded his target. "If there is another tower then we will just have to deal with it. Currently we are in this one and we need to focus all we can on this

one. If there truly is a head cleric on top of this thing, killing him will deal a large blow no matter how you look at it. So for now let not worry about future battles."

The answer wasn't as encouraging as she had hoped but it did make sense, so for now she would have to accept it.

Floor after floor and finally they had reached their final stair case, this next one lead to two large double doors. Before taking their final climb they stopped to catch their breath and heal minor injuries. After a little while Adam walked to the stairs going down and focused his magical tracking. A certain look appeared on his face. Alex pointed at him. "Oh, no no no, I remember that. You did something similar when you told us that troops were coming up from below in the Portal Tower."

Rosa looked at him. "Are you sure it's not the orcs from outside? They could be finished by now and are coming up to help us out."

He simply shook his head. "No, it's not them, I'm sure. At this point I'm thinking they are coming from the stairs that lead down. Maybe we should have explored a bit before going up."

Mike was disappointed that he had not thought of it. "Too late now, plus, for all we know there could be a near endless supply down there. Adam, can you cover our backs while we deal with what is in front?"

He looked back at him and did not want to tell him the details of the numbers that he was getting from the spell. "Sure, I'll hold them at the entrance of the doors while you people do your thing."

The group made their way to the doors and opened them. The room was as described and in the middle stood a lone old human figure. It turned and started talking. "I never imagined that a group

such as yours would manifest. I have spent years cultivating this hatred between the two races and here you five are undoing all of it. I will personally take a lot of pleasure in killing all of you."

Anna took a defensive stance "Why do all this? All the death and this grand war, what are you getting out of it?"

"I'm getting freedom. Once I reach my goal I can finally be free. I have lived for many more years than any of you can imagine. All the while not able to follow my own path and I am SICK OF IT." He took a moment to regain some composure and continued. "So I came up with this plan and found some beings that wanted what I wanted. They became my clerics and when we were ready we started this beautiful play where we would use the orcs and humans as little pawns for my own selfish reasons."

Mike stood near Anna, ready to charge. "How is all this quest of power or perverse enjoyment going to lead you to freedom?"

The old man thought about it for a few seconds. "I supposed that from your point of view this would seem like perverse enjoyment, but what you fail to see is that to me you are all toys. Toys, that I am tired of playing with. What do you do with your toys when you are done with them? You discard them, you get rid of them. I'm merely doing the same thing. It's just that for me my toys are a bit noisier than yours when you get rid of them."

Suddenly a large fireball was directed at the old man. "I'm sorry but he's lost it. We are living beings, all of us, and he's lost touch with reality."

As the fireball was about to connect and explode, the old man put up his hand and with a wave made it disappear like it had never been cast. The group looked at Alexandria and then back at the old man that was just laughing it off.



Alexandria had read about people that could use both holy and arcane magic. This must be what this person was, how else could he have used a counter spell like that?

"Ah little child, let me show you true power and then you will all understand."

Shadows began to rise around him. Mike got ready. "Alright here comes his shadow form, get ready everyone." The transformation took a lot longer and a lot of shadow was being summoned. The form was already as tall as a giant and still continued to rise. After a while it became so large that it reached the ceiling. The form kneeled down and put its hands on the ground and still continued to grow. Adam was just looking back, ready to meet the puppets that would soon reach them. "What the heck is going on with that thing?"

All they could do is fall back near the door as the being continued to grow. The ceiling was now collapsing and falling down on the floor. The being's neck grew longer and shadowy things started growing from its back. Alexandria's eyes went wide. "Impossible..."

From the ground all the clerics had been destroyed and the groups were now finishing up with the leftovers and preparing to go up the citadel. Then the sky turned dark and an army of more controlled bodies started spewing out of the front doors of the citadel. As the groups got formed up to meet them, they started realising that a large force was coming from all sides. Not only that but these forces seemed to have orcs, giants and wild animals. In a short while they would be surrounded. Lithius looked above and tried to see what was going on. His eyes went wide as well. "We were all fools..."

Soon after, a large roar could be heard all around. Julia looked up to see a giant dark blue

flying lizard above. "What is that thing?"

Lithius could not take his eyes off it. "That is an old enemy to all of us, older than the oldest of elves. That is a dragon, something that should not exist in this time."

"Can they fight something like that?"

Lithius looked at her, "Highly improbable."

As the Lights Templar got on their feet, they looked to see that the whole place had been destroyed. The only thing left was a giant floor and stairs that would soon give access to another type of enemy. Next to them the dragon landed on the floor, rocking the tower just a bit. Adam got ready to face his own enemies. At the start of this he figured that he would have the hardest time due to the number but, now he was not sure about anything.

"See what you are truly up against? But before this fight starts, let's bring out a final player. The dragon looked at the floor and large runes started appearing all around it. Alex looked nervously around. The runes were appearing everywhere. Whatever spell was about to be cast from it, there would be no escape. The spell finished and the runes glowed.

"Ah, now the protection spell that I have been working on for so many years can be activated. Your spells should be very limited from this point on."

Alex tested his comment by launching a fire spell, but nothing came. She looked at Rosa, who just shook her head. The dragon laughed.

"Powerless, truly powerless..."

Mike looked at Anna, who nodded back, and they gave power to the enchantment. Their swords blazed with light green and pink flame. They swung at the dragon and realized that the energy fizzled as soon as it left the sword.

"Don't you think I would have made sure that the 'dragon killer' enchantment would be especially blocked by this protective shield?"

Mike looked at the flames of his sword. A smile appeared on his face. "True, but the enchantment is still active and I can still feel its power.

Alexandria, try to take out the shield. Rosamia, do what you can to keep us alive. Adam, make sure to take care of anything incoming." He looked at Anna, who had her sword blazing as well. "Anna you're with me." They both charged at the dragon.

The dragon wondered how stupid these two were. There was nothing they could do. He stood there as they readied to strike. As the sword came down he felt pain. He looked and they had managed to hurt him. It took a few seconds to understand but then he realized what the problem was and then started his own attacks.

Alexandria could not understand. The runes stopped all magic and yet the enchantments seemed to be working. How was that possible? She looked at Adam and he had started fighting against the hoard of enemies. At the speed that he was using his swords it seemed that his magic was also unaffected. She then looked at her arm and the spells were all still there, ready to be used. She decided to try something stupid and cast a spell that would require delivery by touch on the floor. A part of the floor exploded.

"Everyone, the runes aren't affecting magic that affects yourself or that is delivered with direct contact. I'll try to nullify it but at least this is something we can work with."

Rosa cast a few physical protective shields on herself and got closer. From what Alex had said, she could still administer healing, she just had to touch her targets.

"Clever girl, I will give you that, but if you

think that someone like you has the power to stop this spell, well, you are as delusional as you thought I was. Still..." He drew a large breath. Alex's eyes went wide again as a large pillar of fire was heading her way from the dragon's mouth. Rosa stepped in between her and the incoming pillar of fire and used a protection spell on herself. She closed her eyes and focused as much energy as she could. As the fire hit her it split on both sides, missing Alexandria.

"I wonder if you can do that again." As he prepared another he felt more pain at his feet, this time worse than before.

If they could not launch the energy, then all they had to do was release it point blank like the giants. One took the left foot and the other the right. They had to keep moving as the dragon tried to stomp them. After a few hits the dragon flapped one of his giant wings in Anna's direction, which sent her flying until some debris stopped her cracking a few bones at the same time. Mike took his sword and stabbed at the dragon's underbelly and let loses as much energy as he could muster. The dragon tilted his head and roared at his new target and then tried to eat him up in one bite.

Rosamia got close to Anna and healed her wounds. As soon as she could, Anna charged back in and stabbed him in his large neck while he was trying to eat away at Mike. This back and forth continued for a while. Every time he would knock one of them down, Rosa would bring them back up.

Mike and Anna continued to dance around the dragon, mentally focusing on what needed to be done.

*'I need more power to destroy this thing. I have to get more power.'*

*'I need to protect everyone from this thing. I just*

*need a bit more strength.'*

They met up around his underside again and screamed with all they had and let go of everything they could. The dragon roared and again sent them flying to have Rosa run to their side once more.

Alex was looking at everyone. Adam was about to lose control and soon would be overrun by the enemy. Mike and Anna had done more than could be expected and as much as the dragon was bleeding in many different places, it amounted to scratches only. She needed to get this shield down. She knew how but the dragon had been right, she did not have the power needed to shut it down. She could try to go beyond the limits again like the portal but she did not think that even that would work. She needed another plan and soon. She saw the dragon fly again and tilt his head below.

"This is no longer amusing. Time to see if I understood your priest's limits correctly." He prepared another breath weapon attack directed at Mike, Anna and Rosamia that were pinned down due to the force of the wind created by his wings. "I promise to keep you both safe." As the cone of fire rained down on them, Rosa stood and stretched her arms to try to cover the both of them with her shield.

As the fire burned around them, Mike looked at Anna. "We have maybe one more move."

She looked at him. "I suppose you're right. Do you think they will understand?"

"No, but is there another choice?"

"No, I suppose not. Still, we do this together like we said we would."

"Of course. Now, when the shield drops."

They reached out and took each other's hands. At that time the cone of fire finished and Rosa dropped on the floor, cradling her burned hands.

"Your healer is now useless. Now what will you

do?"

The both stood up but were still unable to move. They closed their eyes and let everything go. Still holding hands, both swords glowed white.

"Oh yes, now this is what I have been waiting for. My shield and magic versus our most hated weapon. Sacrifice your lives to me now."

Alex was panicking. "I have to do something, I have to do something. I can't let this happen again, can I? This time I'm here, I could stop them." She then closed her eyes. "I stop them and then what? No, I need to do the only thing I can do. They are counting on me. I need to give them the chance to..." and then the idea came to her. "Please tell me that my stupidity will not cost me my friends' lives." She summoned everything she had.

Adam had lost control and figured it made no difference anymore if he took the time to look back to see how things were going. Alex was just standing focusing on something, Rosa was on the floor staring at the white light that glowed from both their swords. He then realised the situation. "Fine, I'll make sure that you're both not interrupted then. I was fun while it lasted and thanks for everything." He once again charged at his endless enemies.

Blood was coming out of Alex's nose. This would be a one shot thing but she knew that this would work. This would give them the opening they needed. She was finally ready.

"Hey, you said that I did not have the power to do this, well guess what? I am Alexandria of Astrum, member of the Council and daughter to Richard the first human on the Council and just as importantly I am also a member of the Lights Templar, a group for whom nothing is impossible."

The dragon took his eyes off Anna and Mike and looked at Alex, who then dropped and let her

hands touch the floor. A massive amount of magic energy was sent from her to the floor. This energy traced all the runes. The floor glowed a light blue color for a few seconds and then the protection shield dropped.

"How? No living being alone could have done something like this."

She did not have the energy left to look up. Blood was still pouring from her nose and her whole body was in pain. "You're right, but I never needed to shut it down completely. All I needed was to give them an opening. I'm sorry it took so long for me to see that."

Mike and Anna smiled and held their free hands together even tighter and in a final swing let the energy from the enchantment go in the direction of the dragon above them.

The dragon turned back to realise two glowing white globes were coming at him. It was too late as they connected and ripped him apart. He could only think that finally he was free from his cursed destiny. The globes both exploded and obliterated his chest. The dragon started to fall to the ground behind the citadel. As he crashed down the ground shook. The shadow energy that he had used was now oozing back to the ground, leaving behind large bones and a few rotten pieces of flesh. The creatures that had been controlled all dropped to the ground as well, as lifeless as they had been before the magic took them over.

On the top of the citadel, Adam was the first to stand. He made his way to Alex first and healed her enough to be able to walk again. They made their way to Rosa, who was on her knees in front of the two Crimsons on the ground, still holding each other's hands. Adam let Alex go and took hold of Rosa's burned hands and healed them. As he stood back up, she looked at him, tears coming from her

eyes. He tilted his head, not able to stand seeing her in so much pain. As Alex reached out to Rosa, he leaned in front of Anna and brushed her hair away from her face. "I'm sorry that I can't save you like the last time." As his hand left her cheek he stopped and looked more closely. He instantly took both his hands and wrapped them around their hands, which were still together.

Rosa and Alex looked at him. "What are you doing?"

He ignored them in case he was wrong and started to cast a healing spell, and then another and another until finally they both opened their eyes and started to breathe again. He turned backwards, "Looks like they are alive after all."

As the two started breathing normally again, they looked at each other and smiled. Anna then looked at the Adam standing in front of them and the other two with their eyes wide open, "Looks like they figured it out."

Alex was thrilled but did not understand at all. The color had been white, no one should survive that. "How did you... do that?"

It took all of Mike's energy to just sit. "A while back Anna asked me for more details about when the swords first turned white."

She then continued for him. "The idea was to figure out his mental state so as to not have it happen again, to both of us."

He jumped in. "That was the idea, but then as I went over the details and answered her questions, we started to wonder."

"Is there a way to get so close to that emotion you get when you realise that it's all going to be over and still stay connected to life?"

"What you saw was not the enchantment at its full power. If you looked closely in the center of the white glow, you could see a small trace of pink."



"And light green. There was no way to know if it was going to work but there were few options left."

Alex just shook her head. "Unbelievable. And when you let the power go, the shock sent to your body was so much that you collapsed and if Adam had not healed you then in a short while you would have been dead."

Mike smiled and looked at Adam. "Looks like you saved us both once again. We owe you another."

"Hmm, you both just killed a dragon. The way I see, it I think I just paid you both back."

Mike tried to stand but realized that he could not. "Oh forget that, let's just wait here until everyone else comes and gets us." He once again reached for Anna's hand and dropped back on the floor.

Alex looked at everyone. "This means that it's finally over, right? I mean the war and everything."

Adam sat down next to Rosa. "I guess so. We can now go back and the portal will be closed and there is no way for them to open it again. So yeah, looks like it's all done." He looked at Rosa. "I guess in the end you did find another way after all."

Rosa smiled. "If only you would have listened to me back then."

As they continued the back and forth, Mike turned his head and looked at Anna. They both smiled at each other and then looked up at the nice sky that was once again a peaceful blue with a nice cool breeze blowing at both of them. This, and the both of them together, was their reward for everything. This was their little paradise.

## *Epilogue*

### **Iris's journal**

Six months have passed since the citadel and everyone is back safely. Surprisingly enough, K'azugg asked that we only temporarily seal the portal off for a period of time and open it again once thoughts of war or vengeance died down a bit. This surprised everyone and the decision was secretly agreed. In the end it has still not been figured out how or by who the original portal got opened but for now there are other things to focus on.

It was also agreed that Adam would not be incarcerated for leaving his post during war times. It was not an easy thing to do but the man has connections now. Currently Rosamia and Lithius are debating with the Crusaders a valid punishment. It seems like it's going to take a while. In the meantime, both of them are living here in Astrum, partly because they have nowhere else to go and also because the Council is still asking them questions on the details with the dragon and everything they saw over on the other side. That's another thing that will take a while, it seems.

Anna and Mike got married pretty much as soon as everyone recovered. It was a nice ceremony with only a few select friends. Alexandria mentioned something about having prepared special rings for both of them. She has refused to tell me what she has done to them and when I asked them about it, they too refused to tell me... what could it possibly be?

They were also asked what they were going to do next. They just looked to the sky and said 'Wherever the wind and our hearts take us.' Like that's an answer to a question! Still, I'm very happy for both of them.

I'm currently living with Alex and her father. Alex is extremely busy these days due to her taking over for her dad at the Council and the school. She also takes time to relax here and there. I asked her where she gets all her determination for it all. She told me, 'After everything that was done to get here, I'll make sure that I do everything in my power to make it last. In order to do that I need to be in the right position if the time comes. We may not be in a group together all the time anymore but we are still all fighting in our own way.'

I have to admire her for that. I have to admire all of them, actually.

As for me, after a while it was discovered why I was targeted by the clerics. It seems that I am one of the few people born with the ability to cast both holy and arcane magic. It's assumed that the clerics wanted someone that could use the dark energy given by the dragon, and at the same time use arcane spells. All in all I understand the how special that is odds wise, but I don't really understand why that makes me so special, or at least special enough to kill my real parents only to get to me.

I still can't forget or even get over how I feel when I think about what happened during that night when they came. But at least now I've come to the realisation that my parents would be happy with where I am now, the new family I'm with and also all the new options I have available to me.

I'm currently spending a lot of time with Adam, seeing as he is stuck here at the moment. He's helping me a lot to sort through these feeling

and also he's teaching me how to use his combat style and magic. Alexandria, or big sis as I sometimes catch myself calling her, is also personally teaching me how to use arcane magic. I don't want to tell her this but holy magic is way easier to use than arcane. I hope she never reads this or I'll never hear the end of it.

Recently both Mike and Anna stopped by, only to tell us that they would be going on a long journey for a while. Recently they have been visiting everyone to let them know and also to give me a message from the Crimson saying that I had an open invitation from their Commander at Arms to join them if I want to for training purposes.

I still have much to learn here but I will take them up on the offer. I've recently figured out what I want to do. I want to become a Lights Templar as well. I want to fight as hard as they do, help others that are being ignored and do what feels right in my heart of hearts.

They did not have to do anything that they did, and in the end they did not really get much out of it for all the effort they put in, but ask any of them and they would all say that they would do it again, maybe a bit differently, but mostly the same overall.

So in the end I want to be like them and if I can I want them to be proud of me. I owe them everything and I don't want to let them down, even if I know that they would be okay with anything I ended up doing.

Still, the world needs more of them around and one day I know I'll get there.