

# **Lights Templar**

## **Book II**



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**by**  
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scanned,  
or distributed in any printed or electronic form without  
permission.

Dedicated to my parents  
for all the encouragement given to  
continue.

Also forever and always Anna.



## *Prologue*

### **Iris's Journal**

*I*t's been one year and a half since my last entry and a lot of things have changed. The biggest change being that Richard is no longer with us anymore. His passing happened about seven months ago. I did not get to spend that much time with him but I had enough time to realise that he was a kind man who accepted me into his home when I had none and for that I will be forever grateful. Ever since then Alexandria has been extremely busy. She is now a full-time member of the Council and also has all the tasks that Richard had before, and while I was still in Astrum she somehow found the time to train me. She also found the time to create small pendants for all of us that allows us to communicate over long distances. Most of us have them with the exception of two members. I still don't know how she does it all.

Adam, in the end, did manage not to get incarcerated for what he did and is still a member of the Crusaders. His current duty, and this has been his only duty since he returned, is guarding the portal that is now 'closed'. He practically lives in that tower now, only to leave to escort certain people who go to check up on him and the portal from time to time. My opinion on this is that while he escaped actual jail really he just ended up in a

different type of jail. I can't understand how he manages. Every time I ask him I only get the same answer, "It's my current duty. Until things change there is no point in doing or saying anything."

Rosamia visits him as often as she can I was told but she is very busy as well these days. After the events, she managed to get pretty high up in the priest Order. She said that it's because this way they could keep an eye on her and also potentially probe her for information on the Council of Astrum; the Order and the Council don't communicate too well. I would rather believe that she got there because of what she did and because they value the person she is and her opinions. In the end, the reasons why were unimportant to her, the way she looks at it now is that she is in a position to influence large changes or at a minimum be more aware of what is happening. Still, while she is now in a great position if something happens, she is having a lot of issues with the priests and priestesses of the Order and she is often away from Adam. I hope that in the end all this work will be worth it for her.

This leaves only the other two members, Anna and Mike. So far, both of them have been gone since they mentioned that they would be going on a long journey. They don't have the communication pendant that Alex created so really short of using magical location spells we don't know anything. I asked Alex about it and she keeps saying that it's fine, there is nothing going on and they are not really needed so there is no need to do that. I would normally agree with her but I don't know, the current situation just feels wrong. With them gone, it feels like there is a void and what held us together is no longer there. I know that I've been told that we will always be together from this point on, even if we are far apart, but somehow I can't



shake this feeling that I'm losing my family... again.

This is why I'm currently training with Julia at the still being rebuilt Crimson town. I want to learn what they learned as much as I can so that maybe I can take their place in the group in their absence. I mean I understand that now their priorities could have changed. Seeing as they are married, they may want a different life now and so be it if that is the case. Still, without them, it seems that the group has no mission or goal for some reason and because of that I feel that it's driving us all apart.

Once I finish my training, I should be able to fill in that spot and give everyone something to make them band together again. Once we have a direction and are together again I'm sure they will realise how things are wrong right now. Alex, Adam and Rosa all took the time to teach me and while they are all telling me that things are okay, I don't think that is the case. I think that they are all in pain right now and I want to fix that, plus this way I get to have my new family back together again and there is nothing more that I want right now.



## *Chapter 1*

The known world is currently split into three parts. The first to the far west is the landmass that belongs to the orcs. This landmass is divided into three sections, the top being fertile lands. Most of their food supplies come from this section and it is also the most defended section. The middle is where the patches of forest and small lakes can be found. Their main cities are located in this section and the bottom is where the large dense forests are located and below that are the tall mountains currently occupied by the giants race and other dangerous creatures.

The middle second section is called the great desert. Before the war of the dragons, it was said that a large war between large magical creatures took place there. The result of this war created the vast desert. The weather conditions there are unnatural, which makes it impossible to cross by normal means and near impossible with the use of magic. No living creature lives in this desert nor can any plant life be found.

The last section to the east is where the humans and some elves live. This mass of land is divided into two sections by a large river that connects to the ocean. The top is mostly focused on fishing and forestry, while the bottom is where the more fertile lands can be found. The major cities are located around the river with ferries that connect them in order to move people and supplies between the two sections. Currently, Anna and Mike are traveling in the lower section where the farmlands can be found.

Mike looked at Anna as their horses slowly

followed the path. "I guess those people were right about that tower being impregnable. It's a shame. I really assumed that it would have been the same as all the others."

Anna gave a small laugh, "You can't always be right with those assumptions of yours, you know. Plus, there is a reason why all adventurers and thieves are still trying to find their way to the top and have yet to make it after all those years."

"Yeah, I know, but I was still curious. I mean it looks like there is something glowing at the top of it. Again it reminds me of the portal towers and I was wondering if that light might be another portal."

Anna shrugged at his comment. "If it is and something came out then they never set foot outside of that tower. Let's just forget about it for now. The only way around that puzzle would be with the help of some probably very powerful casters, and while we do know some of those I don't think they have time for something like this."

He took a deep breath, "You're right. Okay, so where to next? Helping more workers or exploring?"

She looked up at the sky for a bit and thought about it. "Hmm, not sure really. This road should lead us to the next village let's just... take it from..." she stopped talking and focused her eyes on what was in front of her in the distance. She could not make it out perfectly but it seemed like it was a man and a woman standing and waiting in the middle of the road. Her expression changed to concern as she looked at Mike who had also noticed them. "I guess we see what they are about first... I've got a bad feeling about this one, not sure why."

As they got closer, she could see them a bit more clearly. They were both middle-aged with

brown hair, hers was very long and his was clean cut. They wore no weapons that she could see and were dressed in regular yet very old type clothes, also they were waving at her. When they got closer, they both dismounted and slowly walked the rest of the way. During that time, she could not shake the feeling that these people were familiar to her somehow. Her eyes went wide and she whispered, "Mom... Dad? But how?"

After hearing this Mike's focus was constantly shifting from her and then to them. Mom gave a hug to Anna as she got closer.

Anna was so confused, *'How can this be, both of them are gone from this world. Mom from a sickness, and a few years later dad from an accident where he worked. Also they look just like I remember them, this make no sense at all.'* She broke the hug and looked at both of her 'parents'. "How?"

Her dad looked at her with a warm smile. "It's us, pumpkin." Anna could only shake her head after hearing that nickname, Mike silently voiced it looking at her with a big grin on his face.

The father chuckled a bit and continued, "We came back to be a part of your life again." Her mom continued, "We also got told about what's happened to you and what you have done. We are so proud of you and so grateful that we can express that to you like this."

This was all so surreal to her, they talked like them and looked like them. She tried to calm herself as much as she could, she also noticed that Mike was right next to her. While he probably did this to show support, at this time it helped more to provide a dose of familiarity and a link to the present moment, which was great considering that her past was just in front of her. She gathered her thoughts. "Thanks, that does mean a lot but...

there are so many questions. The main one being how can you be here?"

Dad rubbed his chin for a while trying to figure out where to start. "I'll try and explain it as best as I can. Recently an old power came back. When he did he asked us if we wanted to come back as well, after a bit of back and forth we accepted and here we are."

Mike was extremely sceptical especially after that over-simplified explanation but stayed silent and let Anna take the lead considering how close to home this issue was. From her point of view she figured that the best thing for her to do was to just go along with it and see where it led. "Still so many questions, how long are you here for, why only you two?"

Dad was a bit saddened by her questions. "I'm getting the feeling that this occasion is a happier moment for us than it is for you. I'm sorry if that's the case."

Anna glanced over at Mike and then back at her folks. "It's not that, it's just right now I'm not sure how I should be feeling at all. I'm still very confused about this whole situation. Let's do this again but this time in a more normal fashion." She grabbed Mike's hand. "This person here is Mike the person I married, Mike I would like for you to meet my parents. This is David, my dad and Claire, my mom."

Mike extended his other hand to greet them, "Hi, nice to meet you."

David reached out for it. "We have also heard about you, thanks for taking care of our little pumpkin."

Mike let out a small laugh, "I see it as the other way around myself." As he was about to drop the conversation there he felt a squeeze on his hand that Anna was still holding. *'Maybe a level of*

*detachment is needed in this situation after all,'* he thought. "What do you all say we start heading to the nearby village and continue talking along the way."

Claire gave a look to David and smiled back, "Sounds like a great idea." As they started to walk he figured he would ask the simple yet interesting question, "Now that you have found your daughter and we are all together, what are your next steps?"

Claire gave a serious look at David. She took a deep breath, "Well, we would love it if we could find a place that would be near to you two and continue this new life of ours. But there is something we need to talk about first."

Anna thought that there was more than one thing they needed to go over but simply answered, "Oh, what's that?"

Claire looked at her grown daughter and smiled, "Something big is coming to this world, a large change for the better of everyone. The power that gave us this second chance asked us to confirm that you two would not interfere with it. It was very specific that this applied to both of you."

Both Anna and Mike stopped walking, she gave him a concerned look and then back to her parents, "What do you mean by that, what change?"

David tried to answer the questions. "Currently, we are back and we are the same way that we were before we left. The other thing is that we will not age, get sick or even get physically hurt anymore. To keep this new way of life the only thing we need to do is believe in this returned power."

Claire continued for David, "This new way of life is currently being offered to everyone and that is the change I was talking about."

"Okay, but when you mean everyone do you

mean, everyone that is no longer here or everyone everyone? Like let's say that I join you in this new type of life, all I would have to do is believe?"

Claire gave her a big smile. "Everyone means everyone, including both of you not just the people that have passed away. As for joining this new way of life, for those who have already passed, yes, all they need to do is start believing when the option is given to them." Claire then turned to David to let him finish the explanation. "For people like you there is an extra step that is needed to be done. Keep in mind you don't need to do it if you don't want to but need to if you wish to live like we do... Basically, you need to pass from this world and accept the offer when it is given."

Anna stared at her parents, "You're joking right? Essentially, you are telling us that we need to die in order to get this new life you're talking about and all this is a *good* thing?"

David cut her off, "Pumpkin, realise this is your choice. You don't have to do this and no one will force you to. You can simply live your life normally and when your natural end comes then you will have the option to come back. There is no harm there."

Mike was not so sure on that, "You say that there is no harm but at the same time how do you expect people to just live normally when the offer of no more pain, sickness and whatever else is just an action away. Also, you keep saying to take the option when it is given, is there a possibility that the option is not given? At that point, would you not just stay dead? No, I see tons of issues with what is being said here."

Anna nodded at what he was saying, "On top of that, in our case we have this 'don't intervene' clause. Why is that? Even more proof that there is something wrong with this. Otherwise, why would



it matter?"

Both David and Claire were disappointed by what they were hearing. David cleared his throat and thought about how to proceed. "It was asked that you give this a chance, keep in mind what happened the last time both of you intervened. This ability you have has this power concerned, that's all."

Claire continued on, "He figured that by sending us to you we could answer your questions and ease your concerns. At the same time, it gives us a chance to be together and once done you both will be able to let go of this responsibility you feel you have to help out the way you do and enjoy yourselves." She stopped for a second to look at David and with a quick nod she added, "Please think about it. An extra condition for us to come back was that you agreed. If not, then we will be forced to go back and I would hate for that to happen. There is nothing more that I would like but to catch up and get to know who you are now."

Tears fell from Anna's eyes. Essentially, the decision was to accept something she did not think was right or see her parents taken away from her again. As a friend once told her this is not the type of 'life experience' she wanted to deal with. She looked at Mike who simply gave her a small sad half smile. There was no way that he would make the decision for her, and as much as she hated this, she would not want him to. But it did tell her that he would support her in whatever she chose.

Still with small tears flowing out of her eyes she grabbed both her parents' hands. "I ... am ... so sorry... I just can't ignore..." Now she was fully crying so much that her parents seemed blurry. Still holding their hands she started to feel it, both their hands felt very dry and started to crack. She could also feel them cooling down at a rapid pace.

In a few moments it felt like she was holding hard sand in her hands. She managed the courage to look up and see their faces freeze. As a last action, they both smiled at her, in a way telling her that they were okay with her decision. A few seconds later, both bodies fell to the ground, transformed into a heap of dark sand.

She looked down, and then at her hands and then knelt on the ground and cried. Mike rushed to hold her; he held her as tight as he could. He wanted to say something but did not know what, so he stayed like that hoping that at least his feelings would get to her.

They both stayed like that for long while, until Anna brushed her tears away and turned to face him. Still with her eyes closed, trying to regain control, she said, "We need to contact her, she needs to know and we have to head back. If it's true and this will happen everywhere then..."

He put his forehead against hers and whispered, "It's all right, we will get everyone together and show whoever was responsible for this that they were right in being concerned about us, but before any of that let's finish things here." She briefly nodded in approval.

They took the time to bury what was left of her parents near a large tree with some stones that would be used as a marker. They prayed for their souls to be safe and then rode off as fast as the horses allowed to the next destination she had given them.

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At the Portal Tower, Adam was watching Lithius going over the portal to make sure that no one was tampering with it. This was something that was done at pretty regular intervals. Everyone had been told that the portal was now closed and that the

war had ended with them as the victors. Part of that was true and only a few select groups knew about the deception so far: the Council of Astrum, the main priest Order and Julia of the Crimsons were the few who knew. The idea of leaving it opened did not sit well with him; he realised that the orcs would probably not attack again but he also wanted that peace of mind. As Lithius finished his inspection, he figured that today would yet again not be the day he would get that. He stood up from his chair and got close to him. "So I take it all is still good?"

"Yes, it would seem so."

"Remind me again why we need to keep this open?"

Lithius gave a small smile. This was not the first time he had asked that question during the last year. "As I have said many times: in case we need it in the future."

They started their long way down the tower, now made a bit shorter with some magical changes to certain secret passageways. "I know, but don't you think that it could also bring us another disaster as well? There is just no way to know and I think that we should just not take any chances."

Lithius thought about it for a little while. "Are you sure that's the reason or is it just that once closed then they would have no excuse to leave you here all the time?"

Adam had to admit that leaving this place would be nice and could not completely disagree. "Sure, maybe... Still, another reason to close it would be in case the secret comes out. I would think that if that happened things would go bad pretty quickly."

As they finally got near the entrance to the tower, Lithius thought that Adam may have a point with that last comment. Still, it would have to be

discussed with the rest of the Council for anything to be done. As he was about to cast a teleport spell that would bring him back to Newport he noticed four human Crusaders coming their way. "Have they decided to finally relieve you?"

Adam shook his head, "No I don't see that happening, plus there is something odd about these guys." Lithius cast a quick detection spell. "It seems that they are brimming with magic, typically not a good sign."

Adam had to agree, "You see what you can do about that, while I go say hello." He marched to meet them and as he got closer started to wave to welcome them. They took out their swords. Instantly Adam rushed in at them. The two in front of him matched his charge and the two others circled around in order to flank him from the side. Four against one were bad odds in anything, he had to do something unexpected to break the formation and give time for Lithius. Adam decided to bull rush the one on the right who was in front of him. This sent them both on the ground. He assumed that the others would form up and try and attack him from his back. Going with that assumption Adam flipped forward and picked up the Crusader he had rushed and threw him at his oncoming companions. This manoeuvre caused the thrown Crusader to land on top of another taking them both to the ground in a tangled mess of full plate armour. At least now, the odds would be two against one for a while.

"Last warning, let's talk this over." The two simply charged at him. Adam took out his blades. "Well I tried, now she will not blame me." He dodged the first attack and parried the other, with his free blade he slashed at the knee of the soldier. He then spun around again to avoid another attack from the other soldier. Adam took the pommel of

his sword and smashed it in the soldier's face, breaking many teeth in the process. Two down and two more to go.

The other soldiers had finally gotten up and were now in full rage over the insult that had just occurred. They magically sped themselves up and charged at Adam. He did the same but used his speed to avoid the attack and slash at the ribs of one of the soldiers. Adam turned around and went in a defensive position. "Enough! Before this gets messier, stand down."

The soldiers just laughed at the comment. "You have no idea what you are dealing with do you?" They all stood and went back into formation. Adam noticed that the leg was now healed, the teeth had grown back and that the wound to the soldier's side was also healing. Adam shouted at Lithius, "What is going on here?"

Lithius got closer to Adam, "It seems that the magic around them is akin to what one would use to make an undead, but for some reason I can't dispel it."

Adam kept his eyes on the four Crusaders in front of him. "Okay, then let's try a banish spell, that should do the trick." He took his blade and planted it in the ground, this sent a shock of magic at the Crusaders who just stood there and simply brushed off the effects like nothing had happened. "I thought you said they were undead?"

One of the soldiers answered for Lithius, "We are not undead we simply live once again. He asked us if we wanted to be a part of his army in order to help his generous goal. When we came back, we saw that we were better than before and with his blessing did not need to fear death anymore."

Another soldier continued, "Currently, he has no immediate use for us so we have decided to

come here in order to show the world the truth about this portal. This thing was the cause of our death in the first place, so it should be us that should be in control of it... the ones who sacrificed everything they had."

Adam was now very worried about the implications of what they were saying, not only that but once again he was stuck going against enemies that he had a very unfair advantage against. As he cursed his luck, he turned to Lithius who was now powering a large fire spell. As he saw that he was about to throw it he moved out of the way. As the fireball connected with the soldiers, a large explosion occurred. When the smoke cleared, nothing was left.

Adam looked at Lithius, "Given what they said do you think they will come back?"

"Yes, I do in fact but it will take a lot of time... or it should. You need to warn your people, I'll do the same. This place needs to be reinforced and quickly but first I'll go disrupt the portal just in case something unexpected happens."

"Agreed."

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Iris was just stepping out of the group training session at the Crimson town. It had already been three months since she first got here after accepting Julia's invitation. So far, she has learned a great deal but at the same time, she was a bit disappointed.

A lot had changed since the night the attack took place. The biggest change was the destruction of the middle wall and also the new living quarters arrangement. Currently, most experienced Crimson were housed at the entrance of the town, in the middle you had the villagers and at the end you had the trainees and the elite guards. The idea

behind this is that an invading force would instantly be met with experienced fighters, which should give enough time for the villagers to fall back. Also during that time, the elite guards would be better able to coordinate the trainees if needed.

While Iris agreed with these new changes, it was also the indirect cause of her disappointment. These changes were not accepted by all. Many Crimson's had left, saying this would serve as the beginning of the end for them. The idea of accepting help from Astrum also did not sit well with these people. Eventually, this caused them to leave to go God knows where. This also caused a decline in the experienced Crimson fighters present in the town, and if you added the ones lost after the attack there were very few of those left in the town itself. This caused Iris to have fewer people that she could spare against at full power that could provide a good challenge.

As she saw Julia going towards the mess hall, she put those selfish thoughts away and ran to join up with her. Julia noticed her and stopped until she got close. "Battle practice is done I take it?"

"Yes, it just did, then I saw you heading in and figured I would join you. If you don't mind."

Julia gave her a quick smile, "No problems on my end, but I was planning on having just a quick bite so the company will be brief."

Iris nodded, "That's all right." They both took a quick salad, bread and water and sat down at an empty table. Iris looked at Julia, "So, I take it that you are busy?"

Julia let out a deep breath, "Yes, the Commander's health is still good but even he thinks that a replacement candidate should be picked soon. That is looking like an impossible task at this time."

Iris thought about it for a while, "I can see

where that would be an issue considering who is left." She looked at Julia like the perfect plan had just been figured out. "Why don't you become the candidate? You are the main contact with Astrum and have the legacy training and knowledge of the Crimsons. Plus, you are probably one of the best fighters here."

Julia laughed at that one, "I don't think that's such a good idea, just look how things are now. I'm pretty sure that me being in charge would only result in alienating more of the originals causing even more to leave. Something we really can't afford right now." She let out a deep sigh, "No, what we need is someone who was here originally, who is totally on board with how things are going and also has the skills and knowledge to do the job. The issue is that both of us can't think of anyone who could fill those shoes. Well, besides me and that opens up a different can of worms."

Iris had to admit that after living here for a little while she could not think of anyone else as well. "I'm sorry that I can't help out it seems."

Julia gave her a quick wave, "It's all good, it's not your issue to deal with anyways." She paused for a bit and gave her a bit of a teasing smile, "Still, I'm surprised that you have held out for so long without asking."

Iris gave her a puzzled look. "What do you mean?"

Julia shrugged, "Oh I just assumed that you wanted to ask me when we could have another sparring match. I guess I was wrong."

Iris gave her a sheepish smile, "I'm that obvious?"

Julia smiled, "For certain things, yes. Tell you what, set everything up for tomorrow morning and I'll make sure to be there."

Iris gave her a wide grin. "Oh thank you, thank



you so much. I'll make sure everything is ready."

Julia stood up, having finished her meal. "See you then."

After she left Iris finished her meal as quickly as she could and rushed to the outdoor training grounds to make sure she could use it for that time. She would not miss this chance.

The next morning arrived and Iris could not be more excited. She had once battled Julia and lost, still it had been close. She knew that today would be the day. Word had gone around about the fight and a few villagers and Crimsons were present. Iris got into position as she saw Julia approach the training grounds.

Julia was equipped with the standard Crimson half plate and red cape. Her weapon of choice was a short spear with a modified shaft to be able to block incoming blows without it breaking easily. Iris was also equipped with the standard armour but had made some colour modifications. Instead of red for the cape, she favoured royal blue, the shirt and pants were white and light blue compared to the brown and green. Essentially, she favoured the same colours as Rosamia. Her weapons were two long swords like Adam's and if needed, magic that was always associated to Alexandria. While this made her stand out in a town of red capes, she saw it as properly representing the people she cared about. She nodded to Julia, "This time will be different."

Julia just smiled and went in a defensive position. As the match was about to start a large voice could be heard coming from the entrance. Julia let her guard down and looked ahead with a grim face.

Ignoring the fact that the match seemed to be cancelled, Iris moved close to Julia and looked in the same direction. She saw fifteen Crimsons all

armed, with nasty looks on their faces. There was one who stood out more, his armour was more elaborate with slightly decorated shoulder guards. She turned to Julia, "Who the heck is that?"

Julia did not take her eyes off him. "He is the ex-Commander at Arms. He was quite the piece of work who took enjoyment in tormenting Anna... He also died during the attack two years back."

Iris was stunned at that answer. She had heard about him and was glad that she would never meet him. So much for that! "How's that possible?"

Julia just nodded her head, "I don't know, you will need to figure that out while I occupy him."

Iris' eyes went wide for a bit, the time she had impatiently waited for was here, no matter what she could not fail.

As the ex-Commander at Arms stepped in the training circle Julia pointed her spear at him, "Nice trick you learned there, especially since the last time I saw your body. What is all this about?"

He had a huge grin on his face as his soldiers formed a semi-circle around him. "I was given a very interesting offer, when I told him that I would fix the mess you were causing, this force practically begged me to take it." His smile dropped and he became dead serious, "I am here to destroy you and this farce you are creating. Once that is done I will restore the Crimsons to what they were before and now not only will we have our true strength back but we will finally be truly unbeatable."

It was sad to say but Julia really did not miss the ex-Commander at Arms. "Fine, I accept your challenge. Let's you and me finish this." If this fight had occurred back then, she probably would have lost but she had gained strength in the last years and how much experience can someone who was

dead gain? As he charged at her with his two-handed sword, she figured she was about to find out the hard way.

The fight had started and Iris had cast every detection spell that Alex had shown her and they all gave her the same information of a modified version of a raise spell. What bugged her was the modification, and the type of power used to make it. It was very familiar to her but she could not place it, and she was also running out of time.

Julia supposed that to the inexperienced, the fight looked pretty equal. Sadly, she had to admit that she did not have the upper hand. The ex-Commander at Arms was brutally fast with that sword of his, he was also a very capable fighter and always stayed very close to her. This prevented her from using her short spear, as it normally would be intended. A change of tactic would be needed and quickly. She blocked a sword blow and pulled the butt of her spear down to jab his foot that had to have moved in front of him in order to do the swing in the first place. He countered with a vertical swing that she avoided, and once again jabbed at the other foot that once again needed to move forward to perform the sword swing.

"Impressive Julia, I never expected you to last this long. I will at least give you that before I kill you." Somehow, his swings got faster; it took all of Julia's concentration just to block or avoid. At this rate she would not make it, already non-lethal cuts were showing up everywhere on her body. How could he possibly be that fast with a weapon like that? She thought of one move that may work. She created an opening for him. She had heard that the he could never resist those, and as expected, he took it. His slash pierced her armour on her side and created a nasty wound. That was the reason why he always still attacked even if it was a feint

because somehow he was always able to manage a hit. Still it looked like she had calculated the length of his sword properly and backed away enough so that the wound would only be lethal in a little while and not immediately. She used the little time she had left due to the wound and his position and jabbed as hard as she could in the back of one of his knees, shattering it.

"*Arrrgh!* You little..." His next swing was very predictable, so she painfully twisted around him and jabbed him with the tip of her spear below the neckline. He fell on the ground.

Julia went on one knee and held a hand against her now lethal wound. She saw that Iris was coming in her direction, so that was good but those other soldiers were still just standing there. She was missing something.

Iris cast a healing spell on Julia, who looked at her and asked, "So were you able to figure it out?"

She nodded, "Not really. There is something familiar about it that I should know but can't recall and I'm sure that's the key to it." Her face showed a lot of frustration. "I'm sorry that I was of no help after all." Julia then stood and pointed at the body on the ground. "Seems you may have a second chance to help out after all."

Laughter could be heard from the ex-Commander at Arms. The wound on the back of his neck was healing up and his knee also seemed okay again. "I guess you misunderstood the part when I said unbeatable."

The instant she saw him heal Iris figured out what was so familiar about that power. She thought back to what spell Rosamia had used and prayed that she was right as she stood between Julia and this brute. "I don't know what you were promised but you were a fool to take it." She pointed her hand at him and cast the cleansing

spell. As the spell hit he briefly dropped to one knee and shook his head as if he had lost all balance. He looked up at Iris, "So an outsider witch is what I will face next? I'm not sure what you did but you will fail as well."

She turned and touched Julia's spear and enchanted it with a fire spell. "No I just balanced the scales, your opponent is still the same."

He stood up and laughed. "This is how far we have fallen." He then yelled as loud as he could, "Everyone! *This* is the path you are being led to, borrowed power. Stand up and fight with me and I'll lead you to become true Crimson." As soon as he was done, chaos ensued and an all out attack started.

Julia was livid, this was not how it was going to end. She looked at Iris, "Go take care of them." She then turned and yelled at everyone, "The ex-Commander at Arms is a hypocrite. He's telling you about this true Crimson path... LIES. You all saw for yourself how he stood up from a lethal wound that I gave to him. How else could he do so without outsider help himself? This is the way we need to go to survive; at least I'm not lying to you about it. Now do your duties by defending the villagers and then get rid of these fools once and for all."

The speech had some of the desired effect as most Crimson's fell into place. Still it was easy to see that not all of them did. It was also obvious that the ex-Commander at Arms was very angry at her as he charged at her at full speed. Once again, he decided to use the same tactic of staying close. This time it was not to his advantage, the fire enchantment affected the whole spear. While it caused no harm to Julia, it was still able to burn him when he got too close. Also, it seemed that he was not healing anymore, probably due to the effect of Iris' other spell. This fight would go very

differently than the first

Iris had many problems with the task given; first she had never really had the chance to fight multiple attackers at once so inexperience would be a problem. The second was that with all the chaos now it was hard to tell the Crimson apart, more importantly the ones that she needed to cast the cleansing spell on in order to break their link. Before moving in, she enchanted both her blades with an ice spell. She preferred fire but seeing as she could not be one hundred per cent sure of her target she figured that a cold splash may change their minds. The other modification was the cleansing spell. There were two ways she had learned it. The first was targeted and the other was in a pulse with her at the centre. Targeted was the preferred method due to it wasting less power to cast and also wasting less power again when it hit a target that it could not affect. Still there was no real other way in this case. Having made up her mind she charged into the first group

This group was going after the new recruits she practiced with, which made her think that the people attacking them would be her targets. Whether there were reborn Crimson in that group was something that she could not tell. As she got close, she let go a cleansing pulse and two of the three attackers reacted. She first aimed for what looked like the non-reborn attacker, just as she got in range she magically sped up like Adam had shown her and dodged the attack. While keeping her momentum she turned and delivered a few quick slashes with both her blades to his back. The power behind them was very weak due to his armour and also her pulling back a bit. Still, the two hits made him scream and drop to the ground. The freezing enchantments were very strong and right now it should feel like his insides just got hit

with a small blizzard.

As she looked around to see where the other two were, she realised that inexperience had just cost her. The two had moved around her in a flanking position and were too close for her to dodge any attacks. She said a small curse and blocked the one that she figured would cause the most harm while the other simply slashed away at her side where she was least armoured. While she held one attacker with the parry the other was quickly turning around and coming back for another attack. Having no time she pushed both blades that were locked with his closer and released the enchantments on the target. He instantly froze in place, letting her be able to dodge the one coming from behind.

Now back on familiar one on one territory there was no longer anything to worry about. The reborn target had missed and was preparing to shift to the right where Iris had moved in order to dodge the blow; with his position his only strike available was a horizontal one. Being able to read the attack before it was executed gave Iris enough time to move away and get behind her target. This time as she stabbed both swords in his back she used all the force she had. Once pierced and having been cut off from the power he dropped on the ground. A few seconds later, his body turned to dark sand and then quickly after into a large pile of sand. As she took the few seconds to heal her wound, she looked in Julia's direction. Seems the fight was going well.

He had suffered many burn marks and lots of pierces on different parts of his body. She had only gotten a few minor cuts. Whatever spell Iris had done on him had weakened him considerably. She stepped back as the ex-Commander at Arms looked like he was executing his final attack. His

reach was remarkable but nowhere near her short spear, she deflected his blow and then stabbed forward right in his chest.

As he dropped to the ground he started to chuckle a bit, "I will be back, again and again..." after that his body also turned hard and then dropped in a large pile of sand. She looked at the waste in front of her, "Sad part is that I believe you." She looked around. Iris was attacking another group and reinforcements had come in during the fight led by the Commander himself. She charged in to help Iris and everyone else.

It took very little time after to dispatch the other reborn Crimsons and when the Commander showed up there were fewer Crimsons willing to jump ship and help the others. When the battle stopped, Iris joined Julia who was already giving more orders. "Time to help the wounded, move the minor wounded to the garrison for first aid and point out the critical ones." As Iris got close, Julia said, "If you don't mind using your healing on the ones that need it most it would be greatly appreciated."

Iris just shrugged, "You don't even need to ask. Afterward, if you have time I would like you to join me. I need to contact the others and let them know."

Julia nodded in agreement, "Yes, that will need to be done as well and as quickly as possible, I have a feeling this is not a local event." As Iris left, Julia looked around her and wondered what this attack had cost her as she once again started to fix the broken pieces.



## *Chapter 2*

Rosamia was sitting in one of the chairs in her private living quarters in one of the main churches of the Order. She looked around at her large bed, large wardrobe, a nice circular table and a few chairs all made of rich heavy wood with some carving done by very talented artists. Considering that she was an orphan from a little no-name village this was all a bit much. Most other priests and priestesses shared rooms and they were more normally furnished. The reason she had been assigned this place was because she had made it into the priest High Order. Essentially, there were three main priest order groups, while these groups reported to the head priest they essentially controlled everything that had to do with the Order, including the Crusader branch.

It had been about one year since she had joined this prestigious group and it was quite the experience so far. She now had a better understanding of Alexandria's overall life and had to wonder how she had dealt with all of it while growing up. Now she had to pay a lot more attention to people's motivations having already been burned many times by nice smiles and what seemed like good intentions. She had made real contacts but they were fewer than she would have liked.

She checked the time, and decided to leave her room to head to what was going to be a very hard and important meeting for her. Today was the day the High Order would be meeting. Meetings like these occurred only once every month and the topics of discussion would already be planned out.

For her there were two things of interest, the first being about those undeads showing up at random locations. Adam had quickly mentioned something about it but he had left out a lot of details, mostly because he did not have that much information. She hoped that more information would be available.

The other topic is what she was more worried about and also what she had invested a lot of her time in. Essentially, it was a proposal to help out certain families that had been hit hard due to the war. Many Crusaders had died during those years and they left a lot of families behind with very little help in order to survive now that they were gone. The plan was to take some of the available funds and help those people get back on their feet.

Just getting the information on those families had been interesting, so much so that in the end she had to rely on the help of a certain 'magical princess' she knew in Astrum and not the Order itself. On top of that, she had to battle it out with almost every other priest and priestess to convince them that this was something that was needed. The way they saw it, their loved ones had served the Order and were now with the lord of light who would surely bless these families for what they deserved. While she agreed with that she also knew that this fishing family needed help after losing all the males to the war. Same thing for the farming community to the south that needed extra help with escorts, manual labour and many other things. Today would be the day where the final decision on this would be made. As she arrived, Rosamia prepared herself as much as she could for what could be as hard as a battle with a dragon, and while she had already done that she still wondered what would be easier.

The meeting room as very elaborate with its

size and furniture. Large, very decorated chairs were found with a table so large and heavy that magic would be the only way it could be moved. You also had initiates serving tea for the members, most of them being kids from wealthy or important families. As she sat at her designated chair she had to wonder if this type of surrounding was even needed or if it caused more different issues.

The meeting had started in its typical fashion, a short prayer followed by a quick recap of the past meeting and the agenda for the current one.

A priest by the name of Rob started the first topic, "We have received many reports of people returning who have already departed this world. The reports state that these undead are not your typical version as they seem to retain the knowledge they had when they were alive."

One of the older priests cut in, his name was Joseph. Rosamia was not a big fan of his as he often kept to the status quo, never really adjusting to the issue at hand. "I still don't understand why this news even made it to us. These issues are probably the work of a mage causing a ruckus in the surrounding area. Just send the Crusaders to deal with him and be done with this."

A priestess named Catherine added, "While I agree that the Crusaders should be sent out, mind you I approve that this news made it to us. Information such as this can be important, I just wish that it got to us resolved." Catherine always wanted to know everything no matter how trivial or important it was. The danger that Rosamia had learned was what she did with that knowledge afterwards.

Most of the others seemed to agree with the solution of using the Crusaders for this. For herself, Rosa did not completely agree and figured that getting more information could be useful

before sending the troops in blind but at the same time, they were trained and would probably launch an investigation themselves before moving out. As she got ready for the next topic, a small glow appeared around her neck and her eyes went wide.

The communication orbs that Alexandria had created worked in a similar way as the orbs used in the Council meeting. The face of the person contacting and his close surroundings would appear in a large translucent blue light. It was a great communication tool that lacked one thing and that was an off function. Still Rosamia was also to blame for having forgotten about it.

"Rosa, this is urgent, I need to talk to you, something big maybe happening." Iris' face with Julia in the background suddenly showed up in midair hovering in front of Rosa during the meeting. Rosa could only bow her head and close her eyes slightly, nodding while every other member gave her glaring looks.

Catherine, curious as ever even while being insulted by the intrusion, spoke up, "Please child, do go on with this important news of yours." Rosa could only look at Iris and give her a weak half smile. Iris now realizing what was happening gave a quick look of apology to Rosa and then cleared her throat and continued in a more formal manner. It would seem that Alex had shown her a few more things than just things related to magic, which would come in handy now.

"I sincerely apologize for this intrusion during an official priest High Order meeting. I can only hope that this information I bring about the recent attacks of people coming back to life make up for the insult that I have caused today."

Joseph was not too impressed and merely waved his hand. "Child, the matter has already been decided. The Crusaders will be sent after this

rogue mage who is causing these issues with his undeads. I don't see what news you could possibly add that would change anything."

Not being able to see, due to him not being close enough to Rosa but able to hear, Iris answered his comment. "Respectfully, I am glad that the Crusaders will get involved but what we are dealing with is not a mage or undead. The people coming back to life are just that – coming back to full life with all their memories, emotions and wills. They are in full control over what they are doing it seems. On top of this, they also have the magical ability of regeneration, if cut the wound will simply heal itself in a little time. No simple mage could cast a spell like what was used."

As Iris stopped for a few seconds, Catherine interjected, "About the mage, how would you know this?"

Iris' eyes could be seen to look around but again she could only hear the question. "During the encounter I was able to use detection magic to understand some of the magical identifier of the spell used on the reborn. Because of my unique situation, I was able to tell that the spell was a modified version of a raise spell but with dark energy used to modify and power it. Once this was realised I used a cleansing spell to sever the link from the energy to the reborn person. While this person lost its extra power of regeneration they were still very much alive and just like us still bleeding if hurt."

Rosa frowned as Iris finished talking. Someone being able to use dark energy on this scale was bad news no matter how you looked at it. The other issue was that too much detail had been given to Catherine who had a bit of a smile on her face like someone had just given her a nice treat.

The person not smiling mind you was Joseph who once again chimed in, "You have spun a great tale, child, but why should we believe you? First, you mention detection spells then talk about using holy magic. This is all fantasy and is something that has already wasted too much of our time."

Rosamia was not impressed and it seemed that Iris shared the sentiment as her tone changed to something with more authority. "I will let you know that I have been trained using the arcane arts by none other than Alexandria and Lithius of Astrum. Not one but two current Council members."

While Iris could not see it, the old priest's whole face had tightened at the mention of the Council. Before Iris continued Rosamia jumped in, no reason she should let her fight alone. "As for her holy training, while not officially recognized by the Order she has been trained by myself and also Lieutenant Adam of the Crimson. I assure you that she has the training and power to do what she has mentioned and that her findings should be treated as fact not fiction."

You could tell Joseph was still very annoyed but there would be no getting around that at this point. "Fine, is this all you have to report, child, because if so I think it high time you stop with this interruption of yours. There are many important things to discuss."

Iris was looking at Rosa for a sign, Rosa just nodded in approval. With this, Iris bowed her head and looked at Rosamia one last time. "Rosa, I told her about this too. She told me to wait here for them, not sure how she knew they would show up without using magic. Anyways, once we meet up we are all heading to Astrum to go over this. Again, sorry about this." And with that the Order members were once again glaring at Rosamia who

simply looked up at Iris with a smile. "So Alex knew all along. That explains a lot, anyways it's all right Iris, don't worry and see you then." Iris had a puzzled look on her face but knew that this was not the place to ask and terminated the communication.

Catherine started things up. "Interesting person you have there, trained in both holy and arcane magic. While I question why you did not bring her into the Order, I also wonder how much you believe in what she said and also how much you think we should act based on those same words."

Rosa figured that this is when the battle began. At least Iris would not be present for this. "Iris has a very specific goal in mind and the Order is not a part of it. As for her words, I believe her as much as if I had seen it with my own eyes. That being said, I also believe that there is more to this than what she has already discovered and think that we should look into it in more detail."

Joseph was rubbing his long white beard. "I agree with Rosamia's decision on not bringing this girl into the Order." This was not exactly what Rosa had said but his comment still surprised her nonetheless.

"I mean, she has admitted it herself that she has been in contact with dark energy, which was probably caused by her meddling with the arcane side. That being said, I think that we should build a group of specific Crusaders and confirm for ourselves what she has mentioned. I think that it would be prudent action on our parts to confirm this for ourselves considering the tainted source."

Rosamia was about to step in after that comment but was cut off by Catherine. "Yes, I also second the creation of this group, and seeing as Rosamia was good enough to vouch for the

importance of this task, I think that the extra funds should be spent on those resources. Once we have our answers then at our next meeting we will decide on the best steps to take." Everyone at the meeting seemed to agree with this but one and this one was also currently wishing that she had her spear with her at this time.

Ignoring these urges, she took a brief moment to calm herself a bit. "I disagree. First, there are enough funds to do both. There is no reason that those families should continue to suffer because a new potential threat has appeared. Second, considering the information and the multitude of reports that you have received you can't possibly think that you can wait on this until next month to make a decision on this!" She took a few seconds after this to look at Joseph giving him a look that she had seen many times in Adam before he was about to strike at his target. "Also Iris is a very kind person who is more pure than many people at this very church, and I dare anyone to question this ever again."

Joseph gave her a look of nonchalance, "Young lady, when was the last time that you were in charge of the treasury? I understand your willingness to help everyone in need but this organization also needs to be able to survive as well. If we are no longer here then who will be able to help the people we are already helping? As for acting quickly, we simply cannot commit as quickly as you may want. The Crusader branch is large and so is the Order. We cannot just change what is currently going on simply because something new came along. Doing so may cause even more issues due to the work currently being done. You are new at this and are still used to this small group mentality, given time you will understand the big picture as we see it."



Rosamia closed her eyes and laughed to herself. Funds! They had more funds in the furniture here alone to feed a few families let alone what was in the treasury. All that work... sure, eventually she may be able to get everyone to agree but by that time it would be too late. As for the small group mentality, that accomplished results, here it felt like she fought just as hard if not harder and accomplished less. She looked around the room. It looked like these people genuinely felt like what they were doing was the right thing. That all this was actually helping as much as it could.

This time, her internal laughter could actually be heard by the others. Rosamia stood up, "I have just come to the realisation that I have been a fool. For a long part of my life, I was looking for something different and finally I had found it, and what did I do? I let it go and fell into the same trap that I tried to avoid for so long." She bowed and then looked at everyone. "I, Rosamia, self terminate my position as a priestess of the Order. While you look at the big picture, I'll go help save the world, a family in need or a simple child looking for food. Doing even just that, I feel that I will accomplish more than being here trying to change something that does not want to change."

As she heard some of the priests and priestesses complain and object to some of her comments she just ignored them and reached for her pendant. "Adam, are you there?" Suddenly Adam's face appeared in blue in front of her. He did not say a word and simply looked at her and gave a quick chuckle and smiled at her. She smiled back, "You knew all along right? So why didn't you stop me?"

He looked confused, "And when was I ever been able to do that? So now that you see it for yourself, where to?"

She just shook her head. "Astrum, where else?" He nodded his head and terminated the communication.

She left, disappointed in herself for not realising sooner what she had just realised. As she left to go to her room to get her personal belongings she could still hear the priests and priestesses arguing about her; she ignored them still.

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After concluding her communication with Rosamia, Iris turned to Julia. "I don't think I did her any favours there, I hope she will be okay considering the issue I caused."

Julia just gave her a small shrug. "I'm sure she'll be fine, I mean you are talking about a person who faced a dragon and won, and also from what I hear, came back from the dead. I think she will be okay somehow." She started to leave the room, "Now come with me to pick the horses and start the preparation for this trip to Astrum."

As they made their way to the stable, Iris turned to her. "So two horses will be okay?"

Julia shook her head. "Nope, we need four. When they arrive I'm guessing they will need to change horses. If we can, let's try and get fast ones even if they are not combat trained."

Iris wondered about the two missing members. She wanted them to show up for sure but wondered how everyone was so confident that they would. In her mind, a lot can happen in a year and a bit. She herself had gone through a massive change. Who's to say that the same thing had not happened to them?

After a while, they found the horses and were about to go over the supplies they would need when two new horses with familiar riders showed

up. Iris looked at both of them, they looked pretty much the same as the last time she had seen them. The only thing she could see was that they looked very tired, probably due to riding.

They both smiled and dismounted. Anna spread her arms and went to Julia. "It's been so long, how have you been?"

As they caught up, Mike reached out his hand to Iris and at the same time looked at her very closely. "You have changed quite a bit since last time, have you been practicing all this time?"

She took his hand and shook it, "Yes, I have actually. So far, I've trained with everyone and learned everything I could in the time I had. It's been pretty busy."

He gave her a quick smile, "I bet it has." He looked around for a bit and then focused on her, "I'm guessing we are to all meet in Astrum? Do you know if the others will be there and when do we plan on leaving?"

She smiled back, "Everyone should be there, as for leaving, there are still preparations to go over. We will probably leave around sun-up tomorrow at the latest. There should be enough time for you to stretch yourself for a while and rest up." She paused for a second as if she was unsure if she wanted to continue but did anyway. "Or there would be enough time to do something different."

Curious, he asked, "What do you mean by that?"

*'Well it's now or never,'* she thought. "I would like to challenge the strongest of you two to a one on one duel." She paused for a bit and continued, "I want to see where I stand after everything, so I want to try myself out against you. I know that you just came from a long ride and that may not be too sporting of me but this could also be the only time,

so I figured I would ask anyways."

Both Julia and Anna seemed to have overheard her request and turned around. Julia looked a bit disappointed and Anna seemed puzzled. Before Julia stepped in he answered her, "Well, you are right on all counts really and I would like to add that if you plan on joining us I would be interested in knowing what you are capable of now. So, that being said, if you are okay with me as your opponent then sure I'll accept."

Iris' eyes went wide and a big smile appeared on her face. "I'll make sure that the training grounds are ready. Can we meet there in about one hour?"

He smiled, "Sure, sounds good." As she left, Julia got closer to him. "You did not have to do that." He just shrugged, "Meh, I was serious about wanting to know where she stands so why not. Still how could she not know where she stands? There should be no issue finding a proper opponent for her here."

Julia was not sure what to say. "In theory no, but in practice, yes. For pure swordplay no problem but Iris is way more than just swordplay and that's where the opponents start falling short. I try to be there for her but I'm not always available, so when a chance comes up she will typically take it."

Anna thought about it for a bit. "So really in a way she is looking for someone she can use all her abilities against." She reached out to grab Mike's hand, "Well, looks like you're about to have tons of fun."

He looked at her, "Just consider yourself lucky, for a while there she was asking to challenge you. The reason that it's me is that she made the wrong assumption."

She gave him one of her half smiles. "It will be

fine, plus I get the feeling that we will learn more this way."

Julia was a bit confused. "What do you mean, she made the wrong assumption?"

Anna turned and answered, "In theory, she asked for the strongest of the two, these days in a one on one environment I seem to be the winner."

This time, it was Julia's eyes that went wide with a big smile on her face. "And I still remember you being at the bottom of the rankings." She turned to Mike, "So how does it make you feel?"

Mike had a light smile on his face, "Julia, are you implying that I'm secretly annoyed that I'm no longer number one?" After he let it sit for a bit and made Julia a bit uncomfortable, he just waved his hand and made the best impression of Anna's half smile. "Don't worry, I'm not, not at all actually. Still while I'm very happy for her, I will admit that I'm a bit worried that I'm slipping a bit but I'm trying not to let that concern me."

Anna just gave a small laugh, "Still bad with your jokes." While he just shrugged, Julia let out a small breath. "I was wondering if I stepped on a land mine or something with my teasing. I mean considering the type of people here I could see a lot of them holding some level of anger if something like that happened to them." Mike could see her point with that but still it really did not matter to him.

Anna grabbed Julia, "All right, enough of this, let's go somewhere while we still have time before the match."

Julia gave a quick chuckle. "Sure! Where to? Someplace to grab a quick bite to eat before the match?" Mike followed them from behind as they all started to leave. "Let's do that after, it would be nice to take our time and maybe we can all eat together after the match."

Anna looked back, "Great plan, so in the meantime," she turned and looked at Julia, "why don't you show us this new town that you helped rebuild?"

Julia smiled, "It would be my pleasure, but first let me grab someone to supply us for our trip and then I'll give you the grand tour."

They were given the grand tour and even had time to stop by the Commander's to quickly catch up. Anna felt relieved over the whole thing. Before, this would have been a very uncomfortable place but now, with the way things were, it actually felt like coming back home, which was a very odd but pleasant feeling. She gave Julia a warm smile, she had worked very hard to transform this place.

As they made their way to the training grounds, the Commander and a few guards accompanied them. He was curious about the match and considering what had happened the last time thought that it could be a prudent thing to do.

As they all approached, Iris was already waiting in her position in the circle. With both the Commander and Commander at Arms present, the match was drawing the attention of a lot of people as well. Anna and the commanders took a front row seat as Mike got into position.

He drew his sword and looked at Iris, "So, you said full out, right? Anything goes? Are you sure?"

She had a very determined look on her face. "Yes, that's what I need at this time." Mike was not so sure that was the case but nodded his approval and got ready.

Iris knew that this would probably be the hardest fight that she had ever had, because of that she figured she would start off strong. She started to charge at him with her twin blades and to throw him off balance by magically speeding up

midway. As she got close, she swung her first blade diagonally at his side and he blocked it. She twisted a bit and continued the move and with a pierce attacked with her other blade and ... He just stepped away. This had her mildly confused. She figured that he would have handled those attacks but not that easily. She took a few steps back and attacked again but with a different pattern.

Anna smirked as she saw the second attack, "Hmm, that's not going to work Iris, or should I say Adam."

Puzzled Julia asked her, "What do you mean by that?"

"She has learned her attack patterns very well from Adam, the Crusader you met during that last battle. She is attacking just like he is, both me and Mike have sparred with him a lot of times so I don't really see her catching him off guard with those attacks."

The Commander nodded, "I see, so this will be a good test to see how well she can adapt to a foe that knows her attacks. Then this training will be worthwhile for her." Julia was not so sure that Iris was going to see it that way but kept quiet about it.

Mike had dodged and or blocked every attack so far. He hoped that she would realise that she needed to change during the fight and come up with something new. He was still very impressed that she had come this far but the issue here is she was also a carbon copy of Adam. The time had come to put her off balance and see how she reacted; it would be important considering what their next mission would be.

As her sword came in on a high vertical angle, he blocked it with his sword, because she could strike with her other he twisted his blade and aimed it at her and plunged it at her causing large sparks as his sword trailed on hers. Surprised, she

backed away and stopped her second attack in order to dodge the hit coming at her. As she moved away, he came at her with a vertical swing that she blocked with both swords to be able to pin it so that the same move could not be done again. She was surprised as he continued with his momentum of the swing and tried to tackle her. This forced her to move back again on the defensive.

Julia gave a quick chuckle, "Oh, she is not going to like that! She will think that he's toying with her."

Iris was starting to get really ticked off. First, none of her attacks had even come close to landing even while magically sped up. It was like he knew every single attack she was about to make before she made it. Now that he was finally fighting back, it seems that he was just pushing her around. *'What the heck is up with this? Fine,'* she thought, *'let's up it and see how he reacts.'* Magical flames danced around both her blades, "Try avoiding these."

Anna focused on the fight a bit more now, "Hum, I guess Adam must have loved that when she first did that trick. Still, that will be tricky to deal with."

As she attacked him, Mike tested to see how close he could get without getting burned too badly. Turned out it was not that bad, if you were farther than about fifteen centimetres from the flame the burn would only ruin your clothes. Still, it was not something he could go against for too long, so he tried to keep her off balance again with a lot of minor attacks. Minor but very quick and also aimed at places not normally targeted for fatal damage.

Iris still could not understand what was going on. For a while, things were going good with the enchantments. She had scored a few hits and a lot



of minor burn damage but then it was like something happened and once again she was on the defensive. Also, his attacks confused her just enough that she needed to take extra time to see where he was going in order to avoid or block, which caused her own attacks to slow down generally.

Julia got a serious look on her face, "I've only known her for a few months, but I've met a lot of other fighters like her. Unlike her, she has a lot of power to back her up. I'm thinking this will get ugly very soon."

Iris needed him to get away from her, she needed something in order to get her focus back. She backed away for a few steps and swung both swords at the air in front of Mike. Mike's eyes went wide, this was a move he was very familiar with. It was Anna's and his when they threw a magical blast from their enchanted sword at their targets. Having no way to dodge something like that, he powered up his enchantment and swung back.

The fire enchantment could be seen leaving her swords and traveling in his direction, it was stopped with another red orb of energy from his sword. The results created an explosion that blanketed the surrounding environment with a cloud of sand from the course itself.

As the dust cleared, both fighters could be seen in their starting positions. The difference this time was that Mike's sword was now glowing red. Iris had a small prideful smile, now he was finally getting serious and using all his power too. "Finally, now we can start the real fight." She then re-enchanted her sword with fire.

He nodded at her, "Sorry to say, this is where we end this fight."

Iris did not believe him. Okay sure he was better than she was, she hated to say it but it was

true. Still, there was no way that he could just end it like that. She magically charged at him and then she saw that he was going to try and send a blast her way. She quickly stopped and threw a shield by guessing how much power it would need considering the blade was still only red. When he swung the blade she froze for a second, he was not aiming at her but at the ground. After the explosion, another large cloud of sand blocked her vision. There was no way that she could see him but the same should hold true for him, so she went in a defensive position only to feel the tip of a blade in the side of her neck. "How?"

As the sand cleared, everyone could see that Mike had his blade right at her neck while she was still in her defensive position. Mike dropped his sword and pointed at her blades, "Your fire enchantment gave away your position even with the cloud of sand, plus the training grounds have no obstacles and you went in a defensive position so getting around you was fairly easy at that point."

As the match was over people were starting to clear out and go back to what needed to get done. The Commander approached both. "Excellent match! You two should stop by more often and help out with training. I'm sure your presence would be appreciated by others as well." He quickly looked at Julia and then turned to Iris, "I hope that you are able to understand from this experience and grow from it. You truly have a lot of potential in you; it would be a shame for you not to realise it."

She bowed to him. "I plan to learn as much as I can. Thank you." As he left to go back to his own duties, she turned to Mike. "How were you able to figure out all my moves?"

He gave her a quick smile. He was right, she

had not figured it out during the battle. "The issue with your moves is that they are not your moves." Iris was still confused.

As Anna, with Julia, approached her, she explained in more detail. "Because you are using the same exact moves as the person you learned them from it becomes easy for us to see what you are about to do before you do it."

Mike nodded in agreement, "At the start I realised that and figured I would give you time to figure it out and adapt. While the fire on the blades proved interesting you were still using the same types of attacks as he did. At first I needed to figure out the range of the enchantment and then I started attacking you."

Iris was recalling the fight and now understood his actions more clearly. "So you were learning my capabilities during the fight. I thought that you were toying with me."

Mike chuckled, "I realised that you thought that when you then used our move, which in turn gave me the idea to defeat you, especially when you reapplied your enchantments."

Iris' shoulders hunched a bit, it felt like the match had been all too easy for him. Anna saw her reaction and got close to her and put both hands on her shoulders and gave her a nice friendly smile. "You have nothing to be disappointed about whatsoever. You did great there, and I'm not just saying that. Think about where you are now considering that about a year and a half ago you had never even held a sword."

Iris looked in her eyes, it was true they did seem to sparkle a bit and she was a very warm person. She then looked at Mike who also had a big smile on his face, like he too believed and agreed with what she had said. Iris lowered her gaze and returned the smile, silently saying that

she understood what they were trying to tell her.

Julia chimed in, "Shall we go to this supper then, together?"

Mike turned, "Yes please, I'm really hungry now."

"The supplies should be ready after that, but do you want to stay and leave at first daybreak?"

Anna disagreed with that idea, "I wish we could, but I think we should eat and then leave as soon as we can. With any luck we can make it to the first village and then take a rest there."

Mike nodded in agreement, "Seeing as we will probably be the last ones to get there that is probably the best way to go. I'm sure the horses that you picked are quick but it's too bad that we can't magically speed them all up."

Iris jumped in at that comment, "Ah there would have been no way before but now, after seeing how useful the spell was before, there is a way to do that. It was something that both Rosamia and I figured out while I was training with her. In theory, I should be able to enchant all four horses but the spell will not last as long as the original. Plus, I will need to wait in order to cast it again seeing as multiple use of the spell on the same target will potentially harm it if used too quickly."

Both Anna and Mike looked at each other and then at Iris, "That will be perfect. Thanks, Iris."

Now the plan was set they made their way to the mess hall. On the way, Iris thought about her situation. It seems that they accepted her just like all the others. Not that she really thought they would not but still it was nice to have the confirmation of it. The other thing she had confirmed was not as pleasant a feeling. She had not realised how far she was to go in trying to replace them if they left again. Still, even if there

was a long path ahead she would walk it and now she was finally with them, there was no way that she would leave them and lose this time that she had been given to learn from her last two saviours of the group.

## *Chapter 3*

Adam and Rosamia both sat on a bench near the main entrance portal of Astrum. The weather was magically controlled so it was a nice clear midday, as it typically always was around here. Both of them had been waiting there for a short time but due to the silence, it felt like it had been a long time. Adam was not sure how to approach this at all, it was not something he had trained for. Problem was that he knew that he was going to be the only one to bring it up and it needed to be discussed. He looked at Rosamia, who was deep in thought, waiting like he was. "So how are you feeling?"

She turned to him, blinked and seemed back to her regular self, "I'm fine."

Adam was not convinced but unlike the others knew how stubborn she could be if she really wanted to, but she also knew how blunt he could be, which made for some interesting moments between the two of them. He let out a quick breath that felt like he was holding in for a while. "Fine, so you are okay with not being in the Order anymore? I mean you can still do holy magic but essentially you are not a part of them anymore and you are fine with that?"

He noticed that her smile seemed a bit forced, but she answered him anyway, "Of course, I mean even you agreed with it during that communication, that this is the right thing for me."

Adam was really not good at this, "Yeah, look I figured that you would just go back to being a normal priestess. You kinda took it a bit further than that." She turned her head and looked at the

ground, her shoulders were starting to slump as well. Adam's eyes went wide, he looked around to see if there was anyone else around who could take over. There was no escape and he knew that he had gone a bit too far. "Wait, wait... it will be fine... It's all right."

She gave him a quick chuckle, "I'm not that fragile, you know." She turned her head and gave him a small smile, "Otherwise, there is no way that we would be together."

He smirked, "Yeah, yeah, sure... Still, even I'm concerned and I'm sure that the others will be even more."

She looked up at the sky, "I know, but I'm not sure what to say. I mean now that's it done and I sit and think about it the only thing that I can hear is what you said way back when you felt very little after leaving the Crusaders. I wanted to become a priestess to help people and looking back on this past year it feels like I was doing everything but that." She turned to look at him, "So you ask me how I feel about it? I feel angry and disappointed for potentially losing something for something I thought I wanted. I know I can't get that time back and that makes me even more angry because I'm not even supposed to have had that time in the first place and here I was wasting it." Her smile disappeared, "So you're right, I'm not fine at all but I can't afford to waste even more time. At this time, the only thing I can do is just do what I can and hope that's enough." Adam reached out to hold her hand, and just shook his head a bit. He really was not good at this. As he cursed his inadequacies the guards around the portal started to move, seems that someone was coming through.

Anna, Julia, Iris and Mike stepped out of the portal. As the guards realised who they were they went back to their position. Rosa let go of his hand

and stood with a big smile with arms open welcoming them. Adam just shook his head in a bit of disbelief and stood up.

Anna accepted the hug, "Rosa it's been a long time, hope you're doing well."

Rosa smiled at her, "Well, as good as can be expected considering what is happening."

Anna nodded her head approving of that comment. Iris stepped near Adam. "So you freed yourself of that prison did you?"

He shook his head, "Well you know, I heard that you needed help again and being the nice guy that I am..."

Iris squinted at him as Mike cut her off. "So Adam, where are the others?"

Ignoring Iris' angry glare after having pressed one of her buttons – something he did on occasion to harden her up – Adam answered him. "They are all waiting on us in a special meeting room in the school. It seems that they figured out about when you would show up and the Council did not want to waste too much time with this issue. That being said, we are here to escort you right away."

Anna broke off the hug, "Well, so much for that reunion. Still, it's hard to argue with them on that point." She smiled at him, "Lead the way if you please." Adam and Rosa took the lead with Iris and Julia in the middle leaving the two in the rear.

Anna whispered to Mike, "Something is wrong with Adam." He look at her curiously, "By your standards something is always wrong with Adam."

"I mean more so than usual, so I have to figure that something is actually wrong with Rosa."

Mike thought about it for a bit, "It's possible." He looked at her curiously, "Something to keep in mind for later I take it? It may also come up during the meeting."

She took his hand as they got close to the



school, "I guess..."

As they arrived in the meeting room, they noticed that everyone was already there. As the new arrivals seated themselves, Rosamia looked around. All members of the Council were present around a large table that had a half sphere in the middle of it. In front of everyone was the same half sphere, just a much smaller version of it. That was pretty much it, the chairs and tables were normal and there were no extravagances as everything was just there for practicality. This felt very different for Rosa considering where she had been only a little while ago.

As everyone was seated Solanar started things up, "We appreciate that everyone showed up for this, so far we have heard of many things about what is currently happening. We thought it best that we go over everything first hand and take our next move from there." He pointed to the half sphere, "As you go over your findings don't hesitate to touch these spheres, they will broadcast an image from your mind to the centre one just like the one used in the past."

Lithius and Adam went first, followed by Julia and Iris, ending with Rosa's accounting of what the Order was planning on doing. It was a lot of information to go over and at the same time, so much was missing. Solanar thought about it, "So to review, a force using dark energy is bringing back people who have died, recently or a long time ago, and is giving them new powers in order to better their new lives. These powers are constantly fuelled by the dark energy and if this link is broken by a holy cleansing spell, they lose these powers and go to the same level as a regular living being. At this time, it's unknown if those powers will return after some time but it's probably best to assume that it will." He looked at everyone, "Is

anything missing?"

Anna thought about how to approach the information she was about to share with everyone. Mike reached out to her putting his hand over hers. She gave him a small smile before she addressed everyone. "There is a large part missing, these reborns also have a way for normal people to join their new way of living. Essentially, if anyone so desires to live forever, be free of diseases and be free of physical pain all they need to do is accept this person's offer and it shall be done. The catch is that you need to be dead in order to get the offer in the first place, so someone living would first need to..." She paused for a little while. "Anyway, I think you all know what would need to be done." Seeing as she did not want to continue this explanation Mike jumped in, "The other issue is that this person can, if he so desires, pull the plug on a reborn and they just turn into a pile of sand in a few seconds. Also, this deal given may not be a guarantee. We personally think that it's a promise that the offer will be given but that this promise may not be kept."

Lithius was curious about this news, "There is a great deal of worry with what you have just said, there are also a great deal of questions. How did you get to know all this?"

Anna and Mike both looked at each other, neither of them wanting to answer that question at this time for different reasons but did not see too many options around it. As Anna was about to start she was cut off by Alexandria. "Those details are not important for this issue and will just waste valuable time." Lithius looked at Alex. She knew that he was looking to see if she was lying. The thing is that she knew everything that had happened as they had contacted her, she was the one who had told them to go to the Crimson town

afterwards to meet up with the others and then come over here so that the matter could be discussed in more detail. The thing was that those details would only help to hurt Anna and do nothing about information that was really needed, so in her own way she was not lying.

Anna gave Alex a small nod of appreciation, Alex gave her a small smile and then looked around to confirm that no one was about to challenge her comment. When that was confirmed, she continued, "So, now what? I mean I'm not going to say that I speak for all of humanity and so forth but I know full well how many would jump at an offer like that if it was presented to them. I mean is immortality not one of the big ones that most people go for? Especially with immortality as it's promised." She looked at Rosamia, "Knowing this do you think that the Order would change its mind on its current plan of action?"

Rosa thought about it for a while and then shook her head, "No, I don't think they would. They would still request that this news be confirmed by one of their own to ensure they are not being tricked into doing something they should not do. Now if this news came from someone inside, then yes I know that they would act differently."

Solanar turned to everyone, "That does cause a problem." He stopped for a few seconds before continuing, "I agree with Alexandria that if word does get around and the promise of immortality is promised to everyone then a lot of people will be convinced to take it. This creates a real doomsday scenario for everyone. If this person making this happen suddenly decided to change his mind and destroy the spell that is doing all this, do they all die? Or, do they revert back to normal beings? It's safe to assume the worst case given the new

information that was given. These bodies are magically created, otherwise they would not turn to sand when they are defeated, so once the spell is destroyed..." He paused once more for a while, "I think that the next step would be to get information on this person who is causing this and stop him. Considering that he seems to have so much control over the dark energy he should be a considerable person to deal with so we need to be prepared."

All Council members seemed to agree with this decision. Rosa on the other hand was feeling a bit disappointed. While she agreed with what Solanar was saying she could not help but think that this would do nothing to help everyone in the short term. In a way, the Council had made a very similar decision to that of the Order.

As the meeting seemed to end, Anna stood up to stop everyone. "I don't think we're done here." As everyone took their seats again, Solanar motioned for her to continue.

"Sure we need to know more about this person but we also need to do something about the people now. The war left a really big scar on people and it's nowhere near close to being healed. We need to do something about that as well, otherwise this person is just going to take advantage of this."

As she sat back down Lithius asked her, "I'm sure we all don't disagree with you but what course of action would you suggest?"

Anna thought about it for a while and then looked at Mike. He silently turned to her and whispered, "You are not being fair with this one." She smiled at him, "I know but we need to do something and also look at Rosa, Iris and also Adam and Alex. They are all thinking like I am, I can tell." She squeezed his hand that was still holding hers, "We need to do something." He shook

his head and looked around and saw what she was talking about. During this time, he had thought of something for them to do but now he had to figure out if it would make sense if it was blown up. He checked again and figured that the Council members were getting impatient with him, he thought that he may as well take a stab at it and see where it rolls. "I think that we should send small teams to all villages, towns and cities. That way we can match them at their own game."

Solanar was puzzled, "Are you planning a propaganda attack?"

Mike shook his head, "No, not at all, I think we both know it would be a waste of time. In theory if they were saying that they offered this new type of life and never proved it then sure, that would probably be the best way. The thing is that they are actually doing it, they are going to convince people by action. So we need to respond with action as well."

This time it was Lithius who jumped in, "What type of action are you talking about?"

He looked at Rosamia, then at Anna and then lowered his head and looked at the small half sphere in front of him. "Look, a lot of people are in a bad spot right now and someone is going around telling them that they can resolve most of their problems. Live forever and stay fit, who would not want to jump on that especially if they had problems with their current life? Thing is that most of those times those problems are not as big as they think they are. Heck, often it can be trivial. But, for the person experiencing it, to them, it can make them feel like their lives are crumbling. So what's an extra step? To them I say that we help them. We can't help everyone, nor should we think that we could, but we can show them that we too are doing something to help. Give them hope that

there is another way and that this way does not require the payoff of the other guy."

He looked up at everyone and continued, "We also need these teams for something else. Most of these reborns are non-violent it seems, otherwise we would probably be hearing about attacks from everywhere, but some are. So these teams are also there to potentially stop these people, any way they can."

He could tell that the group he belonged to really liked his simple idea, the Council on the other hand he was not so sure about. Solanar commented first and looked at Rosamia and Adam, "This idea will require a lot of support from the priests or Crusaders, is that something that can be done?"

Adam looked at Rosa as she closed her eyes in frustration. After a while, she opened them again and addressed everyone on the situation.

"Normally, maybe yes that could be arranged but you will have to find another person to ask." She took a few seconds and continued, "I'm no longer a part of the Order you see... I'm sorry."

Iris was shocked and the first to ask, "Wait, that's not because of what I did during that meeting right?"

Rosa shook her head, "No, it has nothing to do with that, it's more of a personal reason but now because of it I can't do what is required."

Alex then cut in and pointed to Adam, "So if you are not a part of the Order, are you still a part of the Crusaders?"

He thought about it for a while, "I'm not sure that I am. Heck, I'm not sure I was ever since that desertion. I see it as they put me in that tower and wrote me off due to what happened."

Solanar looked at Mike, "Without the Order what you mentioned will be impossible."

Mike cut him off before he could continue, "Maybe, but there might be another way. It's a bit far but we do know of another priestess who may be willing to help out with this issue."

Anna looked at him with a smile, "Jessica."

Rosa thought about it, "Head priestess Jessica at Calculus does have a lot of priests and priestesses under her direction. I would love to go over and ask her for her assistance, considering everything and also this would give me a chance to thank her properly for what she did to help me."

Julia then added, "I'll go with you, once I know how many priests she can spare, assuming she accepts, I can add in some Crimson protection for the groups. I'm thinking four members for each group will be enough for what you want to do and the Crimsones can act as a replacement for the Crusaders." She turned to Lithius, "We also already have Crimsones in different cities and large towns now, so if there would be a way to send a communication to them they could act as information gatherers until the rest of the group arrives."

Lithius nodded at her, "That could be useful in different ways as well. We will send a mage to their locations, that way they can help with the communications and also help each group be able to deal with all issues they may encounter."

Anna smiled at Julia, "Thanks again, once again we are using your hard work. I hope you don't mind."

She smiled at her, "Not at all, actually I see it as we are helping each other."

Anna turned to Mike, they both nodded at each other and then she turned to Rosa, "Rosa, we leave it in your hands."

This statement had everyone puzzled and the first to ask the question was Alexandria, "Wait a

second, what will you two be doing in the meantime?"

"There is a place that we all forgot about that needs to be checked out."

Adam shook his head, "What place would that be?"

"The other side of course, the orcs..."

Adam continued, "What other side? What's an orc?"

As he received a jab in his side from Rosa, Mike explained the reasoning. "Last time we ignored the other side it almost cost us, let's not do that again. Plus, if this is happening everywhere then it could be happening there as well, and they have no magic to help them out against the reborns if they are in fact there. I think that it's worth sending a small team to figure that out, and sending people who are already known by them would be a good idea."

Iris was looking at them, there was no way that she would let them go that quickly after they had come back. "Fine then, if you are going, then I'm coming with you. I can help with both holy and arcane. Unless you plan on blasting every single one of them one at a time you will need me."

It was hard for them to disagree. Mike looked at her, "If you are sure about this then by all means you are more than welcome to join." Iris simply nodded in approval, she did not want to go to the other side considering what had happened to her but if this was the only way then she would take it.

Alexandria just smiled, "And I will also..." She stopped as all other Council members looked at her trying to send her a private message with their looks. Her shoulders slumped a bit and then she continued, "be joining you at the portal in order to remove the disruption and at the same time teach



Iris on how to remove it and put it back." She looked back at the Council members; they approved of her statement.

With that, Solanar concluded the meeting and told everyone to get some rest in Astrum for the rest of the day while others prepared everything for their trips. There was a lot of work to be done and the main part of it would start tomorrow morning.

During that night, Iris figured that she would drop by at home. She was still living with Alexandria. Alex had decided to keep her house and not take the more spacious one that belonged to her late father. She had moved every personal belonging and books she thought important into this very small house. The rest had been magically repurposed, there was little waste in this city. As she looked around, she realised that there was also little space left. She managed to get to her room to drop off her gear only to find more stacks of books. It was not as bad as everywhere else but even her room had not been safe. Her eyes widened as she saw a special stack of books on her desk with a note that mentioned to read them when she had the chance. "Sorry Sis, but I don't see that happening anytime soon." As she left her room, she made her way to the house balcony where Alex currently was and also the only place where one could sit and not bump into another stack of books.

Iris sat next to her, "I don't think in all the time I have known you that you have ever been this quiet. It has me very worried."

Alex smiled, "There is a lot going on that's all. No need to worry." As she finished she secretly cast a quick spell. When it was finished, Iris could hear Alex in her head, not the first time she had done that but it was a first considering that they were alone. 'It's probably safer to continue like this.'

Iris was puzzled, 'Why is that? Are you being watched? What did you do this time?'

Alex frowned at her, 'Why are you implying that it's because of something I did?'

Iris smiled at her, 'Because we have that in common, we both like to do what we want to do and ignore what others think is best for us.'

'Hmm, true. I'm currently in a bit of hot water with the Council. I've been focusing on extracurricular activities too much and ignoring Council work. Because of that, I need to be on my best behaviour for a while. The issue with that is that for elves a while is a really long time.'

Iris tried not to react too much but she was doing a bad job of holding back the laughter, 'Okay, that explains the meeting back there. Still it will be odd for you not to be able to join us.'

Alex suddenly just switched the subject, 'So Rosamia quit the Order. I can't say I ever saw that coming. I wonder how she is feeling about that.'

Iris was once again puzzled and very concerned, 'I can't say that I saw that coming as well.' She stopped and looked at Alex a bit more closely, 'Are you planning on doing something unexpected as well?'

Alex gave her a shocked look, 'I would never do something like run off with a group, then jump into a portal into an unknown situation all the while ignoring important matters here.' After that comment Iris was very worried considering that is exactly what she did last time. Alex smiled like she was trying to erase Iris' worried thoughts, 'Don't worry I'm not planning on doing something too drastic just yet.'

Iris was still worried. The last thing she wanted was for Alex to be unhappy, but it was hard to figure out what to tell her in order to help her out. Not being able to think of anything she

just sat there and enjoyed her company.

Even later during the night in another house that Anna and Mike had been assigned to for the night, Mike was also on the balcony looking at the distant sky. His state of being lost in thought was broken by Anna wrapping a bed sheet around both of them to offer a bit more cover to them, as he had just quickly thrown on some pants.

"You know this is probably the only bed we will see in a long time, so why are you out here? Alone I might add."

He held her hands that were wrapped around him. "Just trying to figure everything out. Seems a lot has happened to everyone while we were gone."

"Well that is to be expected, but I am concerned that they all seem to be off somehow. Alex is not her cheerful curious self and looks more reserved. Iris is very eager to prove herself. Then you have Rosa who just seems troubled. I think Adam is the one who is the most well off of the whole group. Which is a refreshing surprise but considering what we are about to face, I really don't see this being easy on anyone." She paused for a while, "Maybe you're rubbing off on me and I'm just worried for nothing."

He turned around and wrapped his arms around her. "I don't think that's the case. You're just very worried about our friends who are all going through a hard time, nothing wrong about that. Plus with the choice you were faced with, it's even more understandable that you be worried about them."

"I guess you're right, but let's not talk about that anymore. We have pretty much already talked about it so much between the two of us, I just want to move ahead and not look back on it for now."

He kissed her, "You're right, and you are also right about the soon to be missing comforts that

we will have to experience. Let's head back."

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After a few more hours of sleep, they both awoke and looked at each other. Anna gave him a half smile, "You hear her too?"

He nodded, "Time to get ready I guess."

A few minutes later, Alex and Iris were knocking on their door. As they came in Mike and Anna noticed that they were holding four backpacks. Mike took one of them and handed the other to Anna, "I take it these are our supplies?" As they both walked in and closed the door Alex nodded in approval.

Anna looked at both of them, "Why do I get the feeling that we are not taking the planned route to the portal?" Alex looked at them and put her index finger to her mouth. Anna and Mike both looked at each other and figured that it would be best to just follow along. They were both positioned in the middle of the room, Alex seemed to be preparing some sigils on the floor. Iris on the other hand seemed like a nervous wreck, she also stood in the middle and looked like she was reciting some words. Alex finished drawing the sigils and then jumped in and stood in the middle of the two, grabbing both their hands. She then nodded at Iris and gave her a big smile. Iris' eyes went wide for a few seconds and then she shook her head like she was about to do something she really did not want to do. After a few seconds of convincing herself she put both hands on Alex's shoulders and then started reciting a spell. As the spell moved to its conclusion, she closed her eyes and the sigils glowed green for a few seconds and then they all disappeared.

As they all reappeared in the main room of the

Portal Tower, Iris just sat down on the floor trying to regain her energy. Alex bowed down to her and took both of her hands. "See, I told you that you could do it. You should believe in your arcane talents more."

Mike cut in, "What is going on?"

Alex stood up, "Sorry for the secrecy, but if we had followed the normal plan then there was no way that I could come with you guys."

Iris, who was slowly regaining her strength, added, "It seems that during the night while I was sleeping she made her choice to follow us, she then proceeded to wake me up so that I could go grab the supplies and then teach me the spell for mass teleportation."

Mike was very concerned and was glad that Iris was as good as she was. Anna was more confused and pointed at Alex, "Why not just cast the spell yourself?"

She thought about it for a little while and then answered, "The short version is that if I had done a spell like that the Council would have been alerted and would have probably tried to stop me. They want me to stay and the simple answer is I don't. As we all agreed a long time ago, 'Follow your heart and your regrets will be few', and that's what I'm doing."

Anna smiled at her. She was starting to see the Alex that she remembered from before and not the one she had seen at the meeting. It put her a little bit at ease. Mike looked at Alex, "You know, I hope that the Council doesn't start blaming us for your escape out of Astrum."

Alex thought about that statement for a while, "You know, that could work, do you mind if I use that when we get back?"

Mike was suddenly very afraid and Anna just laughed, "Nice to have you back."

Alex cracked her hands together as she headed for the portal, "Nice to be back actually. I think most of you know the drill, once the spell is cast the portal will be useable again. At that time, step through." She cast the spell and the two warriors went first and then Iris. Alexandria looked back one more time and looked at the sky, "I'm sorry Daddy, but I have to do this. I hope you don't mind." She then jumped in.

## Chapter 4

Early the next morning, Rosamia got ready after waking up and going over the morning routine. As she got out of the room Adam was waiting for her. He looked at her with a small smirk, "You seem very different today."

She smiled back, "I feel different." As they both left their temporary residence and made their way to the Astrum entrance portal she continued, "I guess it's because finally I'm going to do something again. I wish that it had not taken them to push me in that direction. I mean this is something that I could have done myself, it just never occurred to me."

On their way, they also bumped into Julia who overheard part of the conversation. "Don't feel like it's only you that feels like that, seems they have a knack for that." As they got close enough to the portal and saw that a few mages were present and no one else, she asked Rosa, "Do you have more details on the preparation that they planned for us?"

Rosamia just shook her head, "Not at all, let's find out now." She approached one of the mages "I take it that you have information for us?"

He nodded in approval, "Yes, we have been told that we will teleport you to Calculus. The teleportation will bring you to a room that Bernard, the head mage over there, has prepared."

Rosa nodded, it all made sense overall plus she had met him very quickly during the last time she was there so that helped. She looked around a bit and was about to ask the mage another question. Before she could the mage cut her off, "If

you are wondering about your other group it seems that they took another method of getting to the tower and left earlier than planned."

Rosa just looked at Adam and smirked, she turned back to the mage. "Thanks, well that being the case then I guess we are ready to go. What do you need us to do?" They were instructed to stand in the middle of the portal zone and hold hands. As they did the mages chanted a spell, the portal glowed and then their world disappeared.

When they opened their eyes, they were on top of a tower in Calculus and Bernard was there to greet them. Bernard led them to the room below where a round table and a few chairs had been prepared. Already present were the two Crimsons that Julia had mentioned, the captain of the guards Kyle and also the head priestess Jessica.

Jessica smiled at everyone. "I did not expect news from the Order so quickly and like this but it is welcomed." Rosa glanced at Adam and then at Julia, who also seemed to not have a clue what she was referring to. Jessica was puzzled herself by this action. "We are having an issue with certain people that were dead but are alive again. They seem to have started this new church here. I asked the Order about it and they mentioned that someone would eventually inform me on how to deal with the situation. I assumed that this is why a priest and a Crusader had shown up."

The three now understood. Rosamia asked everyone to sit down while she explained everything. After a long tale and many questions, Jessica looked at Kyle. "This is going to be a problem."

He nodded, "Yes, we can't leave this alone like this."

Julia wondered what they meant by this. Kyle pointed to the other Crimsons. "I'm sure they can



explain the situation." One of them saluted her and started, "Shortly after we got here we heard about this new church that had started up. Because of the promises they were making we decided to check it out. To their credit, they hid nothing during the welcoming ceremony. When most heard about what they needed to do to fully join them, not a lot of people were interested. We decided to stay around to see what would happen. Eventually, we realised that a lot of people who were uninterested, returned and joined up. It was pretty obvious when they themselves started to try and convince others. It's about that time when we met up with the captain here."

Kyle continued for him. "I was told by the merchants to investigate the place, when I heard that two Crimsons were around I immediately assumed another pair. As I realised who they were and what they were doing I figured that it would be best if we teamed up." Kyle's look turned serious. "As they told me more I asked that they describe the people that seemed in charge. Some of them were familiar to me. After looking around I realised that the people they were describing were old thieves, assassins and looters that had been arrested and put to death for their crimes. That's when I got Jessica involved."

She continued, "After what he told me I went over to see this place for myself from a distance, after a quick check the place and the people all radiated lots of magic. I took as much information about the spell that surrounded them and sent that to the Order. This is when they told me that they are looking into it and that I should wait."

Kyle then continued, "From there the real issues started to occur; now they are starting to have influential recruits from the merchant Guilds. No one knows how they got them to... convert..."

but now that they have, they are causing no ends of problems. The Guilds are worried that pretty soon they may lose control over everything if this continues. Hence I have been ordered to stop them post haste."

Jessica then looked at Rosa and the rest, "We thank you for the information that you just gave us but at this time I cannot help you. We first need to contain this issue and then depending on how and when it's resolved maybe I could be of help."

Rosa thought about it for a little while and then gave her a quick smile. "That's no problem at all, the reason why is because we will help you contain this issue and then we can talk."

Later that night they all got ready. The plan was simple: infiltrate the new church and see what was happening and if something could be done to stop it. Seeing as Adam and Julia had more experience dealing with the reborns they took the lead. They were followed by Rosamia, Kyle, Jessica, Bernard and the two Crimsons. They came at the building from the back for obvious reasons, as they were a block away they stopped and waited. Rosa got close to Adam and Julia who were currently looking around. "While it seems that I was put as leader for this, Adam if you would not mind taking over inside that would be a big help."

Not looking back, he simply answered. "Makes sense, no problem."

Shortly after, Julia pointed ahead at two people making their way to one of the back doors of the building, "Looks like we have our entry point."

Bernard looked ahead. "They are reborns, take care."

Adam magically charged in. Seeing as quick normal wounds would do nothing to these people to keep them from alerting anyone, he changed his

tactic to something else that may work better. As he got in closer, he could see that these two were not armoured but both pulled out a long sword and a dagger as weapons. When he reached melee attacking distance he noticed that they were fast too, still his spell was in effect so he would have the first blow. As he got close to the first one, he flipped both blades and stabbed forward at the target throat with the bottom of his sword hilt. The effect crushed his windpipe and should have also incapacitated him but it seemed that these reborns also did not need to breathe, which was something that he would need to let the others know about later. Still, the strength of the blow staggered him a bit, giving him time to turn around and perform the same manoeuvre on his other target as Adam avoided his first swing. While both were now affected, the magical healing they had was already at work. To resolve that problem, and perform his final action, Adam cast a cleansing burst spell. A large smile appeared on Adam's face as both targets were now on the ground gasping for breath, the cleansing had temporarily removed their power and their wounds were still present.

Julia arrived first followed by everyone else. She looked at everyone, "So, anyone know of a way to quickly get information from them? Otherwise, we will have to take them elsewhere."

Bernard stepped up, "I can glimpse in their minds with a spell, I'm not sure what information I will get but typically the spell does prove to be very useful. Also the target need not be awake while it's performed."

Julia and Adam looked at each other and then simultaneously gave each of the targets a blow on the back of the head with the bottom of their weapons. They moved them next to the wall in a sitting position and then moved away to give

Bernard the room he needed. He looked at both of them, "Efficient." He moved one of his hands on the head of one of the targets and cast what seemed like a quick spell. He stood motionless for a few minutes and then repeated the process on the other one.

Once the process was done, Bernard stood up and turned to the others, "Sadly, there was not much, but there was information on the fact that they have what seem to be important hostages down below. I was unable to get information on who or why mind you, sorry about that." While Adam dispatched the two targets Kyle thought about the situation and what was also told to him from the Guilds. "I think that we may want to hurry. I think I have a hunch as to how these people got the people that are not interested to come back and change their minds."

Adam nodded at Kyle in approval and then turned to Julia, "I think that we should head in first, I would like it if Bernard and your two Crimson soldiers stay here and guard our escape. I think the last thing we want is to get flanked by new people coming in while we are in the middle of something." Julia agreed with the plan and ordered her men to stay with the mage.

Bernard cast a quick spell on all of them. "This should allow you to see who is a reborn and who is not, essentially it will look like their whole body is glowing due to the magic that is always active on them." The group thanked him and then went inside.

The group was separated into two, Adam and Julia in the front and Rosamia, Kyle and Jessica in the rear. As they entered the room, they were greeted by stairs leading down to what should be the basement of the building. Adam and Julia silently and slowly walked down the stairs, as they

got midway, they could see glows coming from both sides of the doorway at the bottom. Adam continued down a bit further and crouched down as low as he could to see if other glows could be seen, other than the two on the side nothing could be seen.

Both he and Julia rushed down to catch the two reborn guards by surprise; as soon as he got close Adam cast an area version of a cleansing spell. He then dodged the guard attack more easily than the last two outside, and countered with one horizontal slice of his sword aimed for his stomach followed by a piercing attack with his other sword to the guard's neck. As he turned, he expected similar results from Julia. This was not the case. He saw that she had pierced his gut with her spear but was now running to the other end of the room. As he looked ahead, he realised his mistake.

The room was dimly lit and held very little for furniture and people. You had the two guards at the entrance, a small table with a few chairs. The other end of the room had another door and to the side of the door a bell with a rope dangling from it. This bell was now being rung by someone and this someone was a regular normal human. Adam magically sped to the target and got there at the same time as Julia. She had already thrust her spear at the hand ringing the bell and severed it. As Adam finished the job and stopped him from screaming with a thrust of his sword, he turned on his magical tracking ability and looked for humans. As he saw that already a large group was coming their way from the doorway, he and Julia positioned themselves at each edge of the doorway in order to be in flanking position. As they took up position, a large group of about eight reborns came through.

Kyle and Rosamia positioned themselves in

front of Jessica to meet the incoming wave of enemies. As Kyle saw that Adam and Julia started attacking them from behind, he and Rosa advanced to meet the head of the attacking group. As they got closer one of the attackers ordered two of them to go after Rosa, three to attack Kyle and the others were already busy with Julia and Adam. As Kyle locked swords with the person that had given the orders from the attacker side, he realised that the attacker had a large smile on his face. "I see that you enjoy getting your asses kicked."

The attacker still had a smile on his face, "No you have it wrong, I'm happy because I get to have my revenge on you and this city that you protect. It's because of you that I was put to death for what I did and now, I get to do something about that and you cannot stop me."

"I think that the real cause of your problem is because of what you did and not that you got caught." Kyle then dodged the attack and blocked another. He quickly looked around him to see how the others were doing, worried that someone would be after Jessica.

Jessica had started casting the cleansing spell on the two attacking Rosamia, thinking that Kyle would be able to handle the other three for a little while. Once the spell was cast, she let Rosamia take over who just blocked the incoming attacks with her spear and twisted out of the way.

Rosamia now had both her attackers huddled together and Jessica nullified their powers. She cast a pillar of fire on their location and burned both of them. As the pillar of fire disappeared, only two piles of sand were left on the ground. She turned to Kyle and her eyes went wide, "*Look out!*"

Kyle had been so busy with his two attackers that he had lost track of the person that looked like the leader of the group. After hearing Rosa's

warning he turned his head and realised how big a mistake that was. The leader's sword was now glowing dark and was being swung at him in a sideways slash, his own sword was locked with one other attacker. There was no way for him to guard or dodge against it. As he prepared for the hit, he saw that Rosamia got in the way and took the hit for him. While she had positioned herself in a way that the blade would be weakened when it hit her armour, it was still strong enough to crack it and hit her side. As soon as it did, the glowing black energy left the sword and went into Rosamia's body. She instantly dropped to her knees and screamed, "*Adam!* Would you stop fooling around and *deal* with these guys."

Adam had finally dropped his own opponent, but had only had the time to cleanse one of the two that were left. Julia looked at him, "Go help them out. I can deal with these two." Without hesitating, he left her alone.

Julia then focused her sights on the reborn that still had his powers. Thinking that she was distracted, the other charged at her, sword in front aimed at her midsection. Not distracted at all and also not impressed with the charge she positioned her spear to block his charge with the shaft pushing him to her left. As he lost his balance she pulled back her spear and aimed her spear head into a sideways stab at his midsection. As he fell on the ground, she pulled out her spear and once again focused on the last remaining one. He looked at her and smiled, "Cute, and I'll admit you are good but there is no way that your skill can deal with this new body."

Julia hated to admit it but he had a point. While she had to work at dodging and parrying all his attacks he cared for very little of that. She had managed to pierce him at vital areas but that only

slowed him down for a little while. She managed to push him off and score a large hit on his knee temporarily immobilizing him and then a thought occurred to her. "Your healing abilities are really impressive but I have to wonder if it's good enough for something like this?" She swung her spear in a horizontal arc aimed at his neck. As his eyes went wide for a second, she was sure that she saw doubt in his eyes as her spear severed his head from his body. As his body turned to sand she looked down. "Looks like there is another way to get rid of you guys... interesting."

Adam rushed at the three attackers, more specifically one that seemed to be generating a dark glow again on his weapon. "*Arrrrggghh!*" he screamed at him to draw attention. The attacker changed his target from Kyle to the Crusader who was barrelling at him, as the attacker was preparing a vertical strike. Adam countered the hit by doing an upward slash but instead of blocking the blow, he aimed at the wrist. As Adam's blade connected and severed the hand holding the sword, it dropped on the ground and the effect dissipated.

The attacker was clearly in pain and was also very angry. "You will accomplish nothing, we will only come back time and time again." As he was about to take out a dagger with his other hand, Adam thrust his other sword in his chest and cast a targeted cleansing spell. As soon as the spell hit, the attacker's body turned to a pile of sand.

Adam turned around to see that Kyle had also dispatched the last two with the help of Jessica. As he looked around and thought about what had happened, he realised that overall they had fooled themselves in thinking that this would be easy. So far, they had been reacting all the time and this would probably be a continuing theme. They also



knew how to deal with these reborns, if a normal group of guards had been sent they would have been completely destroyed. Was this what was happening everywhere? He put those thoughts away and crouched in front of Rosamia who was still on her knees with both hands around the wound she had been given. As he was about to cast a spell to help her she stopped him.

"No, Adam, you can't and you know why. I appreciate the thought mind you." As Adam stopped, Kyle was a bit confused. "You really did not have to do that, Rosamia, I mean sure it would have hurt me but Jessica could have healed the wound right after."

Jessica looked at him and nodded her head. "That would only be true for the wound itself, the dark energy would have been a different matter and that possibly could not have been healed."

Kyle seemed to still not completely understand the situation so Adam stood up and continued the explanation, "The energy would have infiltrated your heart and corrupted it. Once the damage is done, it's very hard to undo. Most priests are the best people to be able to handle this corruption because of what they do. Some Crusaders can also do this but it's not the norm."

Rosamia stood up now having found her centre of being again. "In theory, every time we cleanse one of the reborns, we essentially take the darkness in ourselves and neutralise it. The big difference is that when we cast the spell we control how much we take in. When an attack like this occurs we are just forced to deal with the amount given and that causes a shock when it happens." Kyle looked at Jessica to confirm what he had just heard. She nodded in agreement. "That's essentially what happens every time we cast that spell."

Rosa saw that Kyle had a worried look on his face so she continued, "Because of the type of tasks Crusaders do they are more susceptible to the corruption, hence why I told Adam not to help me out. There are only so many times he can cast the spell consecutively before permanent damage occurs." She gave everyone a smile to try and change the mood. "All this to tell you that I will be fine. It will just take a while longer and also during that time I probably will not be able to use holy magic due to the current imbalance. In a few hours I'll be back to normal."

Julia got closer to the group. "There is something else I would like to bring up. This is twice that one of these people has said they will return. I have yet to see it happening but they seem to be very convinced. Are we just doing this to repeat this in a little while?"

Rosa did not really know what to answer to that. "I don't know, I agree with Solanar. Their bodies are created with magic, so there is no real reason why it can't be done again if this person doing it in the first place allows it."

Julia thought about that. "So in theory, if that is the case and all they have to do is 'wait their turn' then these reborn essentially live a life with very little consequence for their actions. That is not a pleasing thought to entertain."

Adam interrupted, "Ah, I was told in the past that I should mention these things so I hate to break it to everyone but my tracking spell just picked up a quick blip on the other side of a door that they just came out of after passing through that long corridor. I guess someone checked to see who had won and realised it was the wrong group."

Rosa had to smile at that comment. It would have been nice to have Anna and Alex around to hear that. "All right, I'm good to go. Let's go save

those possible hostages." They went in the long corridor that led to a door. Adam crouched and got ready to sprint into the room. He looked at Julia who nodded at him, understanding what he was going to do. She moved back a bit and then ran at the door, kicking it open. As soon as a single crack occurred Adam's spell got the information he needed. It seemed that there were two humans on each side of the door, followed by one on each side a little bit further in and two more in the back. There were also about seven more of them huddled together in one spot. He assumed that those would possibly be the hostages. As the broken door gave away from Julia's kick he magically sprinted in, his target was the person in the back that was in front of the mass he had detected. As he rushed in he realised that the mass was indeed hostages, they were kept in a group behind what looked like a steel cage. His target was in front of the door. The target pulled out his blade to try to defend himself but he was way too slow for Adam who took both his blades and put them in a cross pattern aimed at his throat.

Rosamia looked around the room. Kyle and Jessica attacked the two that had been waiting for them on one side of the door and Julia went for the others on the other side. The two middle kidnappers rushed to Adam and then there was the one that stayed in the far corner. He got up from his chair and was reaching for what seemed like a lever. Adam could not reach him in time and nor could anyone else. Rosamia's only option was to use holy magic. She knew that casting the spell normally would have very little effect so instead she focused all she had on one little part and hoped it would be enough.

Having dispatched his target Adam looked to his right where he noticed that one of the

kidnappers was reaching for something. As soon as he realised this he also saw a pillar of fire with a diameter that looked as big as a human fist target the arm of the kidnapper that was reaching for what seemed like a lever. Still under the effect of his spell, he raced to his new target ignoring the two that would soon be on him.

Rosamia was in sweats and afraid. She really should not have casted that spell. It took way too much out of her and she was still dealing with the effect of the dark energy in her body. She put her hand over her beating heart and looked inside herself. She realised that her fear was right, when she had cast the spell the dark energy still in her had merged with her holy powers and corrupted her spell. While the energy was now gone, from what she was told when she was studying to be a priestess, this also meant that a small part of it had also made its way into her centre of being. She knew that a level of exposure like this would not be harmful but she would have to be mindful about it for the future.

She then heard Kyle's voice, which seemed very close to her now. "I thought that you shouldn't cast any magic?" As she composed herself, she took note of everyone's new position. Adam was occupied with the two that had rushed him, it seems as he was currently staying in that location to guard the lever. The others had grouped up around her putting themselves in the way of the four kidnappers. Rosamia gave Kyle a half smile, "Necessity trumping caution, I guess."

She then readied her spear and joined up with Julia on the attack.

Adam was worried, first the blow and now casting when she should not have. He did not know the details but he did know that it had a negative effect. As Adam lost his focus thinking of

other things besides the two kidnappers that were attacking him, one of them scored a hit on his arm and the other on his leg. Luckily the blows were not deep but as the blood was flowing out they certainly looked pretty bad. As a secondary effect the leg wound would impede his movements a bit. Adam simply cursed himself, first it was not seeing that human who sounded the alarm, second was not reacting quickly enough to defend Rosa from that blow and now this. Being alone in that tower for so long had dulled him. He was not pleased by this. As his two attackers began to act a bit more brazenly due to their minor victory, Adam just stopped and dropped his guard and gave them a look of death. His attackers both rushed him. Adam waited for the right time. He had now removed all thoughts from his mind and focused only on his enemies. This was how he had survived all those years in combat and this is how he would survive this combat as well.

As they got close to him he gave himself a minor speed jolt to overcome the slowness that would be caused by the wound, this would also amplify the pain of the wound but it allowed him to avoid both attackers and position himself behind both of them. Seeing as his first target was defenceless as he was recovering from his charge, Adam aimed for the quick kill by slicing at his neck. As his target turned into sand, Adam rushed at his other. His target blocked his first blow but was unable to stop his second with his other sword that was once again now impaled in his neck. He too turned into sand a moment after.

Having ignored the others, Adam turned around and realised that they too had finished with their targets. As Rosa came to him to check on his wounds, he shook his head and tried to return to his new normal self. "It's okay, the

wounds are not that deep. I'll heal them up in a minute."

Rosa looked at him, unconvinced. "And just like you, I worry." They both stayed silent for a quick moment and then spoke at the same time. "I'm sorry..." As they both quickly laughed at the timing Rosa shook her head and continued. "We are quite the sorry couple always worrying about the other." As he healed his wounds, she grabbed his hand. "Let's get out of here. Kyle and Jessica should be ready to escort the hostages out."

As they got out, they linked up with Bernard and the others. Kyle continued his escort of the hostages to the Guilds as Jessica motioned for the others to stay behind. She looked at Rosamia. "I will go and see how many of the priests under me are interested in joining the groups you talked about."

Rosamia was happy but shocked at the same time. "You don't know how happy I am that you will be helping us, but what changed your mind? While tonight was a good step in helping your city I'm sure there is more to be done to finish this up."

Jessica nodded, "Yes I'm sure there will be, but after seeing what you're up against and thinking of how other towns can't possibly do anything against them to defend themselves if they need to... well let's just say that it would be very cold-hearted of me to only think of this place. Anyways, while it's late it's not that late for me to go see who would be available. Once I'm done with that we can meet up at Bernard's mage tower." She looked at Julia, "You mentioned that you needed to communicate with someone from the Council to arrange the groups, so it's probably best to meet up there when I'm done." As she started to leave, the others started to follow Bernard to his tower.

After a few steps, Adam looked at Rosa's

damaged armour. "I remember where his tower is. As Jessica mentioned it's late but not that late, give me your half plate chest piece. I'll go fix it while there is still time." She realised that he was still troubled over how he had performed. She gave him a sad smile and removed her armour. As he took it he gave her a quick look as if he had figured out what she was thinking about. "Don't worry I just need to think things over a bit." He pointed at the chest piece as he turned and started to leave in search of a blacksmith. "This will give me the time to do so. I'll meet you at the tower once it's done."

It had taken Adam more time than expected for the repairs. Seems he could only find one opened blacksmith and he was already busy. After some convincing, it was agreed that Adam would pay for the materials and be able to use the tools there to do the work himself, as long as he stayed out of the way. This worked out to his advantage. As he blew some frustration out on the metal he was also able to figure out that during combat he had to revert to his original cold self. That is what he had learned and practiced for so many years, changing that now would probably lead to someone else's death or his own for that matter. A few years ago that would not have bothered him in the least, but now things were different. He still felt like he was surrounded by darkness but now there was a light there with him. Right now, he was holding on for dear life to that light because it helped him see a better way. In exchange, it requested that he live and try to find some happiness in his life. After today he realized that a balance would be needed to be learned if he wanted to continue to hold on to that light and be as skilled as he was during combat.

He made his way to the tower to learn that Rosa was not in her room. He wondered if she took

a page from another couple they knew very well for possible places to hide out to be alone. After a climb up the stairs, he made his way to the top of the tower and saw that he had assumed right. He got close to her as she was lost in thought. "So, I dropped off our armour in your room. It's pretty much good as new now," he paused for a second before continuing, "and are you good too?"

A small smile appeared on her face at that last comment. "I am not so sure about that. So much has happened and the future is so... dark. It's hard to tell. Still we do what we can, never giving up." She turned and looked at him. "About sixteen groups will be created and sent all around."

Adam thought about that. "Hmm, I'm not really sure that will be enough in the end. I take it that's why you are here?"

She nodded. "I just needed a bit of time, like you. I know all this will not be enough but at the same time we still need to do it. Doing nothing will be the worst choice, I just hope that everyone sees it my way that even if we do all this and we only get to save one person that it will be worth it."

Adam figured that it looked like everything would be okay with Rosa, considering she was acting like her normal self even with everything going on. "I'm sure a few good sword swipes will help them see it that way."

She chuckled, "Not really sure that will help. Speaking of helping, tomorrow morning there is a small town Kyle would like us to investigate. Seems something big is happening there and it's reborn related. It will just be you, Julia and me. We only need to figure out what is going on at this point. It's not that far and we would make it there with plenty of sunlight left."

Adam nodded, "All right, then if that is the case we should probably head back and get some



sleep." She joined him as they headed back to the room.

The next morning, their preparations had already been made by Kyle. A map was also given with a precise location on how to get there. Julia was already there when they arrived. She looked more tired than usual after having spent a good portion of her night with the mage communicating with the Crimsones to organize the groups and where they would be sent based on other communications that were being relayed from Lithius. All in all, it was very impressive. After today, all sixteen groups would be at their target locations all around the map ready to do what needed to be done. She wondered if the teleport spell had ever been so abused since it got created, assuming that's how it worked.

The three made their way to the small town mentioned, not really sure what to expect. As they were riding Julia looked to Rosa. "Do we have a plan of attack?" Rosa shook her head. "Ideally, the plan is to not have to attack at all. The town is very close to Calculus so if there is a big issue then we should report back. Communication has been cut with certain people there and we are to see what happened."

Adam was unconvinced. "When was the last time any of us followed that order?"

Rosamia looked at him and gave him a small shrug, "It could happen."

Julia did not like going in blind, too many times it had resulted in bad consequences for her. "Okay, so no on the plan. Do we have a means to detect if there are reborns in the town?"

To this Rosamia could answer, "So far, we have used arcane magic to do this, after some thinking with Bernard and Jessica a holy spell was found that would work in the same manner."

Essentially, the detection spell will allow us to see who has been affected by the dark energy and show us a level of corruption. It will not tell us if they are reborn but given the amount they need to sustain their powers it should be a safe assumption. I'll cast the spell as we get close."

As they arrived near the town, Adam had a bad feeling about it. He figured he would turn on his tracking ahead of time; the information he got from it puzzled him. "We may have an issue. I'm getting information that there are a lot of small clusters of people in the forest, they are not really moving from their position but it is odd." Julia now concerned, added her own findings. "I also find it odd that there seems to be no activity in the town, no merchants, caravans or people for that matter. It seems like the town is closed, just like it was for us when we refused outsiders."

Rosamia was not encouraged, but they would be there in a few minutes so the best they could do is be on guard. "I'll cast the spell now." Once the spell was done, Adam curiously looked over at Rosamia, to his relief he saw nothing. Noticing the look, she gave him a small smile and shook her head a bit.

As they arrived, they dismounted and walked to the entrance. It seems that there was a large commotion occurring in the middle of the town. The three slowly made their way to it to see what it was all about. As Rosamia and the others got closer, mild shock took over. In the middle of the town most of the villagers had gathered around what seemed like a woman and two children. Most of the men had farm equipment, very few had daggers and even fewer were wielding a sword. Rosamia did another quick look around to confirm what she was seeing and then looked at Adam and Julia. "They are all reborn, how can that be?"

Julia was the first to answer. "Are you sure that the spell is working correctly? I mean you said something about just recently discovering it..."

Rosa shook her head. "No, that's impossible, what I mean is the spell is actually quite old and has existed for a while. The only thing new about it is the fact that it's being used for this purpose. So the fact that all these people are brimming with dark energy is correct, the new part is that we are assuming that this level means that they are reborn... that's the only part of it that's new." As she finished her statement, it had seemed that they had attracted the attention of the people.

A man separated himself from the mob that was still circling the woman and the two children. He had short dark hair, was unarmoured but seemed physically fit and he was also one of the few wielding a sword. As he got close, Adam looked at Rosa, "There is no way that we can fight them all if that situation happens, doing so will result in our deaths." She was still looking at the man approaching them. "I figured as much, but we still need information as to what is happening here." Rosa then turned to Julia and then Adam, "That said, be prepared to run if we need to."

The man was now about fifteen feet away from them. He pointed his sword at them, "I see that we have new people in our town, what is your business here?"

Rosamia addressed him with open hands in front of her, "My name is Rosamia. We are not here to cause trouble; we just came here to get information on what is happening here. May I ask what your name is and who you are?"

The man put away his sword, "My name is Peter, and I now lead this town." He looked around at his people and then pointed at the woman and children in the middle. "As for what is happening,

we are enforcing a new rule that these people were made aware of and have broken."

Adam looked at Julia, it seemed that both of them had the idea that this situation would end badly. Still, that did not seem to stop Rosamia who continued with her questions, "And what new rule would that be?"

"I'm not sure you are aware but the world is currently changing. A new way of life has been offered to us. All of us here have willingly agreed to this new way of life. For a while, we lived with the others but eventually we saw that keeping the old way of life was too demanding and required work that was just unnecessary for us. All because of these pathetic people that don't want to agree with this change."

As he continued his explanation, he paced a bit back and forth, "So we got together and thought of the idea that this town would be a town just for us. If you want to join us we will welcome you with open arms otherwise just stay away and leave us alone. Once that was decided, we removed all the regular people, they were given a few days to pack up their things and then they were ordered to leave. We warned them that they would not be welcomed back and if they insisted that they would be punished."

Rosa could not believe what she had just heard, in a way that explained all the people that Adam had tracked in the forest. Those were probably the leftover families who had nowhere to go, eventually they would have no choice but to come back here and try and plead with them to let them stay, which would probably result in the situation that is happening now. She tried to think about what they would do in a situation like this but that line of thought was cut as she realised something. She pointed to a little girl who would be

about five or six years old. The girl was currently wrapping her arms around the leg of a woman who was probably her mother. "You say that everyone was given a choice, I find it hard to believe that this little one chose this for herself."

She expected Peter to come back with some pseudo warped logical reason to explain everything but it was not Peter who stepped up but the woman herself, who had now crouched and was holding the little girl like Rosamia was about to take her away from her. "How *dare* you, *you* of all people, judge my actions? My little girl was deeply sick for years, I went to your Order for help but I didn't have the funds to pay for its services. I implored them, begged them, mentioned that I would offer any services for as long as they wished in exchange for their help." As she was recalling the events, the woman started crying, "You know what they answered me? They told me that doing so would show favouritism and that they had to be equal with everyone."

Now even Rosa could feel tears running down her cheeks, how far had they all fallen for something like this to happen? The mother continued as she protected her child, "So when this new option came to me, of course I debated it... I did not want this, nor did I want to do this to my child but the only other option that I was given was that she was just going to die. At least this way she would be able to see another sun rise, and while her body will not change her mind will and she will be able to experience a sort of life without having to suffer like she was all the time."

Peter noticed that Rosamia's eyes were now closed, trying to hold back the tears. While he would make it a pleasure to tell her of all the others who were in a similar situation, all that would do it bring up the past that they were all

trying to move away from. "If you truly are not here to fight us, then I suggest that you turn around and leave us alone. I mean that's what you people have done for many years now so this should just be status quo for you."

She just could not believe what was happening and the current situation, even now was there nothing she could do? Adam was starting to reach out to Rosa and she shook her head. She opened her eyes, "I refuse to believe that it's too late, there is still something that I can do." She pointed to the woman and the two children that the mob was still circling, "Let me take them away from here, we will also take the ones that are out in the forest. We will make sure that they never come back and bother you again. I understand that your minds are made up and that there is no changing this, but please at least let me save these people."

Peter snickered, "After what you just heard, you are pleading? For the ones outside, fine do what you wish, but for these three who were warned, why should we show favouritism as your Order once told some of us?"

Rosamia was not sure what to answer him, it's then that Julia took a step next to her and pointed at Rosa, "Then don't look at it as favouritism. Look at it as showing them that you are better than them, showing them that with your way you will do something better than they ever did."

Peter looked at Julia and then at the children, "You have a way with words, Crimson. Fine take them..." He waved his arms at the people around him in a motion that told them to spread out. A lot of mumbling could be heard and no movement could be seen being made, Peter turned to address them, "Agree or disagree with what the Crimson said, what does it matter? What do we care about these people anymore? We gave them a chance and

they refused. They say that they will take them away so they don't bother us anymore and that's what we all wanted. This way, we can stop looking at the past and start enjoying this new life that we have all been blessed with." After he had finished, a lot of the townspeople could be seen looking at each other, a little while after, movement could be seen and a path opened up. Peter pointed at Rosa, "Take them, and leave. As well make sure that they or anyone else not willing to join us ever come back here again. Next time the results maybe very different."

Rosa moved to the woman and the children. "Please come with me. We will gather the others and then escort you to Calculus where a home will be found for you." Knowing what was going to happen if they stayed, they agreed to follow Rosamia. Soon after, the three turned and left to go get the others.

The process of finding the others and convincing them to follow them had been very easy considering Adam's tracking magic and also the situation that the people they found were in. They were all homeless and hungry, some of them also had wounds that Adam and Rosa quickly healed. A few hours had passed after they had gathered them all, Julia and Adam had gone hunting to help out with the food situation. Once everyone was eating, Julia kept on an eye on everyone as Adam made his way to Rosamia who had pulled away.

When he found her, she was sitting on a stump of a tree that had been cut down a while back. Her shoulders were slumped and she was just staring at the ground. He bent down to meet her at eye level and put a hand on her shoulder, "There is nothing more that you could have done."

She turned her head to look at him. He could tell that she had been crying a while back but now

it seemed that she had made up her mind about something. "You know how hard these last few days have been right?" He simply nodded as she continued, "First, I have realised how bad the situation really is right now. This last town was just one example but there are bound to be more like them. So I will do everything with the others to help stop this, and if that can't be done then find a way that this new way of life can't be simply snatched away from all of them from the person that gave it to them." She reached out to put her hand on top of his, "Once that's done I want to do all I can to change things, we can't keep doing things like we are now. This is the exact same thing that happened to the Crimsons when they were attacked, just on a bigger scale. And just like Julia, I don't want to give up, even if there are only a few handfuls of us left."

He took his other hand and brushed it against her cheek. "And we don't have to give up. While I'm sure that the others will join you in this too, I can tell you right now that no matter what, I'll be by your side throughout this new journey of yours. What you want is a good thing for everyone and everyone who doesn't agree with that is a fool."

She reached out and hugged him, "Thanks Adam, thank you so very much."

Adam had a sad smile on his face, "At this point let's just hope that the others are having better luck than we are."



## Chapter 5

As Alexandria appeared on the other side of the portal, she had a big smile on her face. She shook her head because deep down inside she felt really guilty. Here you have this crisis happening, for sure back home, and part of her is glad that it happened because it means that she can go on an adventure with her friends again. What type of person does that make her she wondered. Shaking those feelings off she looked ahead to see a familiar yet different scenario. Anna, Iris and Mike were located next to one of the open arches on the top of the tower and like the last time had concerned looks on their faces. As Alex paid more attention to her surroundings, she also heard the sound of combat coming from down below. As she moved to where the others were located she wondered who the orcs could be fighting.

As Alex looked down she saw that the orcs were in a heated battle with six giants and also other orcs. She looked at the others, "So, I take it that this time the first thing that we are doing is going against that?"

Mike nodded, "In theory yes, but first we need more information before we jump in. Can you tell us if there are reborns in there?"

"Easy enough..." Alex cast a quick spell and instantly everyone was able to see what she was seeing, as she looked around her eyes widened in shock, "... ah ... that's not good. I'm not sure why I never thought about it. This is really not good..."

Mike and Anna looked at each other as Alex continued to mumble. As they looked again, nearly

half of the orcs were glowing and so were all the giants. Anna turned to Iris, "What are we seeing?"

Iris took a deep breath, "Well, the spell allows you to see who is a reborn. This is done by the glowing effect you see down below. What has Alex freaked out is the fact that the spell indicates that all the giants are reborn."

Mike looked at her, "Meaning that we have enemies as big as a house who can wing around a giant piece of metal that can cleave five to ten in one shot, able to regenerate most wounds and will probably not tire compared to anything normal?" Iris simply nodded in approval.

"Hmm, well that's a small problem."

Alex having regained some focus looked at him puzzled, "Small problem? I think that now is a good time to point out that Iris can only use the cleanse spell so many times."

Mike looked at Iris, "How many times is so many times?"

Iris looked frustrated, she did not want to start this up with her limitations, "Well there is no way that I can do all that or even half, sadly."

Anna gave her a small smile, "That's fine Iris, no worries at all."

Mike cut in, "She's right you know, still are you able to handle the giants?"

Iris looked below and thought about it, "... I think so, yes." Alex would admit that her knowledge of holy spells and how they work was very limited but she still had some knowledge and knew that the task that Iris was given should be much harder than she let on. Still not wanting to put Iris down she walked next to her and looked at the others, "I'll help her with that, as she cuts off their energy I'll smash them down."

Before Iris could cut in Mike nodded, "Sounds good." He then looked at Anna, "While you two are

dealing with the giants we will put a dent on the reborns down below. Once you are done come bail us out, I have a feeling that we will need the help." He then looked at everyone, "Keep in mind the main targets are the giants, if we notice that the normal orcs start attacking us while we are trying to help then we will regroup outside of the battle zone and form a new plan from there."

Alexandria turned to Iris, "Okay then, before we go, cast a protection spell on us and a spell to reduce your weight."

Iris wondered what she was planning. "I get the protection spell but why the other and why just on me?"

Alex just smiled. "Well, Mike mentioned something about jumping in, so I'll cast a floating spell on them. As for us, I'll cast a levitate spell on you so that you will not drop at all and use a fly spell on me. With your weight reduced you will be easy to carry to each target, that way it will be quicker than trying to get at each of them via the ground."

Iris now understood what she was planning, "Okay and the protection spell will help us not become pin cushions as we do all that." She summoned the holy energy and cast both spells. As she did this Alex cast the floating spell on Mike and Anna, once done they took each other's hands and dropped down. Alex then grabbed Iris by the waist and cast a flying spell and then they flew outside the tower.

As they buzzed around outside, Iris noticed that they did not attract that much attention, yet. Alex was half screaming at her in order for her to understand what she was saying, "I'm guessing that you will be doing the targeted version of the spell, how close do you have to be?"

"I'll have to be about twenty feet from the

target but the spell will only take a second to cast." Alex thought about that for a little bit, "How much time will you need between castings?"

Iris nodded her head, "Don't worry about that..." As she was about to continue Iris felt an unexpected jerk on her body. Alex was now flying in an upwards direction. At this point, they were almost higher than the tower that they had flown out of. As Iris was about to ask what the heck Alex was doing, she suddenly stopped, Alex let her go and with the levitation spell she was just floating in midair.

Alex flew closer to her, "Look, I understand that you want to prove yourself to those two for some reason, I don't get it but that's fine. That being said, at least be honest to me okay? I know that you need time for something with that spell so don't tell me to not worry about it. So I'll ask again how much time, but if you don't answer me with something reasonable I'll leave you up here and go deal with them myself."

Iris rolled her eyes, "You know full well that I could move around if I wished."

Unimpressed, Alexandria smiled at her, "Sure you could do that, but I also know that because of your current experience you have difficulty casting both types of magic at the same time, let alone casting a cleansing spell and maintaining your flying. So, you want to try again?"

Iris realised that she was not going to budge on this, "Fine... after three I'll need a few minutes before we go for the other three." As soon as she said that, she felt hands around her waist and again her body jerked but this time downwards.

Alexandria was happy that Iris had answered her but she still worried and wished that she knew more about it to figure out if what she had said made sense. As they got closer, she put those

thoughts away and focused on the flying. It was a good thing that she could ignore the arrows coming at them but she had to position herself and come at an angle so that the giant could not simply swat at them with his massive weapon. She saw her first target take a swing at the orcs below. As he arched downwards she flew close behind him, that way there was no way that he could cancel his swing and then target them before the spell was finished even if he wanted to. As it turns out, he paid them no attention. When Iris was close enough she cast the cleansing spell. Instantly after it was cast, Alex felt Iris' stomach muscles contract. The giant, now having figured out what had happened, tried to reposition himself in order to get at them. Alex immediately moved away and flew upwards and then took a roundabout way to get at her next target.

As she felt Iris' stomach muscles release, taking it as a sign that things were now good, she took a more direct course to the target that was now too busy trying to step on the orcs below him. She positioned herself right on top of his head, once again she felt the muscles contract. Alexandria took her time to fly to the last one of the first batch, she had noticed that this time it had taken a bit longer for Iris to recover. This last one was unarmed, which would make it interesting, as he would be able to react faster. She took a path that would put her behind him. As she got close enough, the giant quickly twisted his body and tried to swat them with his arm. Alexandria flew away from it keeping in mind the distance Iris would need and also make it so it would be awkward for the giant to take another quick swing. Soon after, Alex got very worried as she expected Iris' stomach to tense up and while it did that so did her whole body. As fast as she could she flew

upwards.

Alexandria let Iris float away from everything, she had her eyes closed and had positioned herself in a foetal position. Alex shook her head and reached out to Iris, as she touched her forehead that had mild cold sweats, Iris talked to her, "I'll be fine, I just need a moment. Because of their size, I had to take in a lot more energy than expected to be able to momentarily break the flow. Just go do what you need to do, I'm not sure how long the spell will last on those things."

Alex let go and slowly started to lower herself, "You better be fine by the time I get back, otherwise we are figuring out something else for the other three."

Alexandria dove down and powered up a lighting spell, by the time the giants were in site the sky around her was covered in dark clouds. This time, the giants paid a bit more attention to her as she got closer. She neared the first one and arched her hand up at the sky. The giant jumped in her direction and swung his weapon to try and hit her but there was no way that he would make it. The second one that had been affected took the other approach of throwing his large weapon at her, thinking maybe that she had to stay in the same position in order to channel the spell. As Alex moved away he realised that was not the case. Now that the spell was powered up she targeted both of them at the same time, bolts of lightning hit the giants in their backs, shoulders and head. As the strikes finished and the clouds turned back to normal the large creatures turned rigid and started crumbling to the ground creating a small hill of sand.

The last giant got a bit more creative than the others and started picking up orcs and throwing them at her. Seeing as some of them were still alive

as they were being thrown she decided to go with a close range fireball spell seeing as this spell would take less time than the other that she had used. As she zigzagged her way to the target she powered the spell, as she got closer than she needed to be the giant took both of his hands and clapped them together in order to squish her between them.

Again, she easily missed the attack and let loose her own. As the fireball exploded and the giant was dispatched, Alex flew upwards to go check on Iris.

As Anna and Mike landed on the ground near the battlefield they both powered their enchanted swords, she looked at him, "So conservation of power will be key here right?" He simply nodded as they both rushed in.

The environment was extremely chaotic as they started fighting. While they could tell which ones were reborn there was no way to tell if the normal orcs also knew, plus there was no real way for the normal orcs to know that they were there to help initially. They focused their attacks on the sides, trying not to get in too deep, this was their first time fighting these so it took a few attacks to figure things out. As they stood back-to-back parrying and attacking, Mike shouted at Anna, "Looks like their regeneration was not exaggerated after all."

"Seems like it, but that's not going to stop us is it?"

Not that she could see it but he had a small smile on his face. "Heck no, let's try something a bit more drastic than just cutting and piercing then."

The enchantment as it was powered now was constantly active on the sword. The idea was that a bit of power would be released as it made contact with the target. This would remove the range capabilities of the enchantment but would give an

extra perk of making the sword slice through anything like it was a hot knife on butter. Anna dodged an attack aimed at her and sliced at the target's leg, severing it from his body. She turned around and did a horizontal slash against the arm of another one coming at her, severing that as well. It's at that point that she noticed something. "Seems like their regeneration is great for fixing things and closing wounds but nothing for re-growth, that's going to be our way to stop them, I guess."

As Mike kicked off a normal orc that was coming at them, pushing him away, he nodded in agreement, "It's a good thing that we have the spell to tell them apart as well, otherwise this would just turn into a random bloodbath." He saw a reborn coming at him and decided to try to something a bit more violent. As the orc came at him with an overhead swing, he waited until the last possible second and moved away to dodge the blow. As the orc was bending forward from his momentum, Mike arced his blade and aimed for the orc's neck. As the orc turned to sand Mike got his confirmation, "Decapitation always seems to work no matter what magic is involved."

Anna was close to him again, "There is something else I'm realising, I don't know how but have you noticed that all the normal orcs are only attacking the reborns. They seem to know the difference somehow."

Mike quickly looked around to confirm, "Looks like you're right, I'm wondering how they are doing that without magic?"

Anna had no clue but added something else that she had noticed. "Also, it seems that they are getting the message that we too are targeting the reborns."

As they continued to attack, Mike had realised



the same thing. "Sure, but with all the arrows that our protective shield is stopping I'm thinking that they don't really care if we get hit during one of their attacks."

They both continued their attacks on the reborns, from afar they noticed lightning dropping from the sky and large giants dropping shortly after. Anna parried a blow, "Looks like they are doing well. That should help things out in our overall favour."

"True," A small smile appeared on his face. "Still, let's try and do our own share before they meet up with us." They both charged in deeper.

Iris waited as she saw Alex return, "What took you so long?"

Alex smiled "*Rüüüight*, so I'll take it that you are ready for round two?" Iris nodded as she once again felt Alex take hold of her round her waist. "Now be prepared, I think it will take some fancy flying this time around." As Alex dove down Iris realised what she was talking about. This time around there were more arrows coming at them, there was no way that they would be enough to bypass the protective shield that she had had put up but they did not know that and Iris was okay with that. The giants had also grouped up and seemed more focused on them than any of the orcs still attacking them.

As Alex got close she twisted, went up and down suddenly and even barrelled rolled at one point to avoid the attacks and try and get close enough for her to cast the spell. As one of them was almost in range, Iris wondered what would hurt more, the spell itself or the nausea caused by the flying. She cast the cleansing spell, taking in as much energy in herself in order to break the link, as soon as she did she got her answer of what was going to hurt more. As she focused to keep the

dark energy contained in her, she also had to work at destroying it in order to totally dissipate its effects. Otherwise, if left unchecked, it would eventually corrupt her. The problem was that for these amounts, in order to do it safely, one would have to do it in parts like Rosamia had done for her a long time ago. This unfortunately was not an option here and the effects of that were starting to go well past her limits, not that she would tell Alex or everyone else that.

As Alex continued her fancy flying in order to give her time and also to position everyone, Iris saw a perfect opening that would allow her to get both last giants one after another. Not thinking about if she could actually do that or not she screamed at Alex, "This is too perfect. Go for it!"

The speed at which Alex was flying was slowing down a bit. She figured that Alex was figuring if she should actually do as she had requested. Iris reached out to where Alex was holding her and squeezed Alex's hand in a way to plead with her to do this. Iris smiled as Alex sped up and angled herself low to the first giant, missing his strike, close enough now she cast the spell. Alex then banked to the left and upwards to get away completely, as she was doing that, the last giant was now in range. Iris focused through the pain of her last spell and cast the spell once again. This time, there was no way that she could hide or hold back the pain of the effects. Her whole body seized up, she opened her mouth to scream but nothing came out and then due to not being able to handle the pain, her world went dark as she passed out.

As Iris came to, she realised that she was still floating in the sky above everything and she also saw a very angry and concerned look on Alexandria's face. Alex screamed at her, "*What the*

*heck happened back there?"*

Iris really was not sure how to answer, "I don't know. I blanked out after casting the last cleansing spell. I guess it was a bit too much for me."

Alexandria eyes were wide open, "A bit too much, I think there is a bit more to it than that."

Iris was now curious as to what she meant. "What did I do and are the giants gone?"

Calming down a bit Alexandria explained what had happened. "Don't worry about the giants I took care of them after I made sure that you were stable. As for the details, after you seized up in my arms I flew as high as I could as quickly as I could then I heard you mumbling a spell. As I caught the last of the words I had to let you go, it seems that you cast a pillar of fire around you. Now of course the spell did not hurt you but it would have done a number on me." Alex then looked directly at her eyes with a very concerned look, "While I can ignore the surprise of that, I can't ignore the colour of the flames that came out..." She took a small pause and continued, "Iris, they were black."

At that, Iris closed her eyes and focused inside herself, she felt okay now. Sure, she was completely drained but she felt no darkness inside of her or any of it lingering. She had to admit that this had her worried; was she slowly being corrupted again without realising it? She shook her head and looked at Alex who was impatiently awaiting an answer. "I don't know what to say, I'm sorry I don't even remember casting the spell. All I know is that at this time I feel no darkness inside of me and that I can't seem to muster any energy at all to cast anything holy or arcane."

Alexandria reached out and hugged her as hard as she could. "Don't do that anymore okay? You're the only family I have left; I don't want to lose you too. I get that you are trying to prove

yourself, but doing it at the expense of your life will mean nothing in the end." Alex pulled back and looked at her "You understand that, right?"

Iris could only nod in agreement, she understood Alex's concerns and agreed with them but at the same time for what she wanted to do, she had to push herself past her limits. There was no other way. Alex grabbed her around her waist again, "All right, let's go meet up with the others, for now that's all we can do."

It took a while to find them but at the same time, it was easier than it should have been, there were only so many green and red glowing swords in the battlefield. Alexandria hovered around them, landing in the middle of the battlefield safely was not something a person could just do. She waited for the right time and cast an ice spell that would create a semi-circle wall of ice with Anna and Mike in the front of the opening. As Alex did that Iris was left floating next to her, she just stayed there marvelling at the skill of those two in battle. Adam had talked about it but it was another thing to see it, they were in perfect harmony and fought as if they were one person. The other thing that she noticed was that these two were not rusty, she assumed that they would have been after being away for so long but that was not the case. She had nothing to base this on but if anything it looked like they were better than what had been described. Once the spell had been cast, Alexandria grabbed her and they both landed in the newly-created enclosure.

Without turning, Mike addressed the two, "I take it things went well?"

Alexandria finally landed on the ground. "All of them have been taken care of but there is an issue..." She felt Iris grab her arm. As Alex looked at her, she had a pleading look on her face.

Alexandria did not feel too comfortable about it but continued, "Iris is magically drained for now and is unable to use magic. I have to admit that I'm a bit drained as well with all that flying around." Iris smiled at Alex thankful that she had not mentioned more to them, as she was closer to the others she realised that they had taken some wounds during their battle. "I'm sorry, but it will take a bit of time before I can heal those."

Anna unarmed her target, "That's all right, we can wait. We are just happy that you are both safe."

Mike then cut in, "She's right, now assuming that you both will be joining us I would like to point out an interesting discovery. They can't regrow limbs, so any loss that would normally be fatal still is."

Anna continued, "It's also important to mention that the normal orcs seems to be rallying. Reason being that the giants are now gone and also it seems that reinforcements are coming. But we are unsure how they know that or if it's true."

Having heard that news and seeing as her flying spell would still last a few more seconds, Alex lifted herself up just to be able to see above everyone and used another spell to amplify her sight. After looking around for a bit, she spotted something, "There seems to be a group coming in our general direction, they should be here in maybe fifteen more minutes." As she landed before the spell finally cancelled she looked at everyone, "Thing is, there is no way for me to determine from that far if they are reborns or not. Still I guess we can assume not, due to the news you overheard from the orcs."

Mike gave a small laugh at that last comment. "Glass half full is it, and if not then we will figure something out, let's slowly make our way to greet

them and figure it out."

Before diving in Alex cast her five reserved instant spells just in case she needed them, as she finished she saw that Iris was pointing at her swords. "Can you enchant these, seeing as I can't?" She gave Iris a quick smile and then her swords were engulfed in flames. Iris thanked her and then joined up with the other two. Sadly there was not much that Alexandria could do in a situation like this with everyone piled on like they were, so she used very targeted spells that would freeze them in place or push them away. She let the others do the fighting while she played support and guided Mike on where these reinforcements would show up.

Mike realised that Alexandria's assumption on when the reinforcements would arrive was a bit off, but eventually they did arrive. Luckily they were normal orcs and as a bonus the person leading them was K'azugg, which was extremely fortunate. Currently everyone in the group needed a bit of a breather, this meeting would give them that. As they broke off to meet up with the orc leader, Mike had to give it to the orcs, they had been fighting for longer than they had and they were still at it with no sign of letting go.

K'azugg had with him about one hundred orcs, considering the amount of reborns that there was left there should be no more issues winning this battle. As Alexandria waved at K'azugg to draw his attention with a large smile on her face, the orc leader's shoulders slumped downwards and he shook his head.

Alex was a bit disappointed by his reaction, "Ahhh, he seems disappointed."

Anna let a small chuckle escape, "Don't take it too personally, I think he's like that with all humans."

Iris was puzzled as to how they could be so

comical, Adam had mentioned it but she did not expect Alex to be like that as well. She had always been mostly serious in Astrum. Sure, there were a few jokes here and there but in a situation like this, it was very unexpected for her.

Mike approached K'azugg, "Glad you could make it, we were just passing by and thought that we would help out. Hope you don't mind."

The leader had a more serious tone to his voice, "What are you doing here at all, and is this mess your fault again?"

Alex stepped up. "What do you mean by again? We are not the ones that let a dragon control them."

Now growling K'azugg responded, "Yes, and I'm sure that this dragon recruited tons of orcs to become his dark clerics."

Anna stepped in to defuse the situation a bit, "Let's not bring in old issues to this new situation." She looked at K'azugg, "Is this happening everywhere as well as here?"

He shook his head, "No only at certain places, overall this occurrence is only a minor nuisance to us." He looked at all of them with a wide grin, "I take it that it's not the same thing on your end?"

Mike looked at him with a serious face, not really enjoying the pleasure that the leader was taking with the realisation that he had made, "That's correct, it's a pretty big problem on our end."

This had the leader puzzled, "If that is the case what are you doing here?"

Anna with a bit of a tone answered, "We figured that we would see if you needed help considering your lack in the magical territory. As well, we wondered if there could be more information that we could get on the current situation from this side. Ignoring it cost us all the

last time, as you reminded us."

"Hmm, well for now you people have done enough. Just stay here while I go and finish this. Afterwards we can see if there is any information that you can get, then you can all go back to where you belong."

As he marched to join his brethren in battle, Iris just looked at everyone confused. "Okay, so what happened there and what are we doing now?"

Alexandria turned to look at her and realised what was happening "Oh my God, I did not realise you don't have the language spell on you to understand them. You were not there when we made it permanent and you can't cast it right now. Oh, we will have to fix that as soon as you can cast again." Mike filled her on the details of the conversation as the orcs started to finish this fight that had started for quite some time now.

As Alexandria continued to play support here and there the others waited, they needed to catch their breath and did not want to overshadow K'azugg's reinforcement victory. After a while, Iris turned and took both Mike and Anna's hand. "This will not be much but it should heal the major wounds at least." A nice warm feeling passed all around their bodies and as she had mentioned their major wounds had suddenly healed up.

Anna smiled, "Thanks Iris, it's much appreciated, it feels like it's been a while since we had someone be able to do that when we have been wounded."

Mike nodded with a smile, "Yes, much better this way and would have been very handy during the escort times."

Iris had a curious look on her face, "What have you two been doing in the past year that would have needed so much healing?"

Mike looked at Anna wondering where to start,



"Well you see it's not like..." He then stopped and looked backwards. Annoyed because she really wanted to know, Iris looked in the same direction. She saw an orc riding something that looked like a wild horse but bigger and shaggier as well. As the orc rider got close, he dismounted and made a beeline to K'azugg, ignoring them altogether. K'azugg pulled out of combat and talked to this new orc who had just arrived. By the look on his face it did not appear to be good news. As they all made their way to the orc leader to see what was happening, Iris cast a language spell in order to understand.

As they got close K'azugg addressed them, "So I take it that you want to know and will meddle again in our business?"

Mike realised that his comments were always made as attacks with him, "As we mentioned we are here to see if we can find out information on our current problem so if the news relates we would like to know." Mike looked at his small group, "As for the meddling part... that will depend I suppose."

"It relates. It seems that one of our cities, Cagan, will soon be attacked by a large force of these creatures. The city is protected and there are defenders there but I have been asked to provide support as soon as I'm done here."

It's at this point that Alex wondered about something, "I've been meaning to ask how do you know who's who without magic? That's what we use to figure out if someone is normal or what we are calling reborn."

Standing tall and upright to show a level of superiority, "We just know."

"I'm not buying it, there has to be a way."

Not wanting to waste time with her, he decided to answer Alex, "Their colour is off, it's that

simple."

Alex was more confused with that answer, she turned off the spell and looked at the difference only to see none whatsoever. She looked back at K'azugg who shrugged, "I'm not surprised that you outsiders can't tell, that's why I did not want to mention it."

Alexandria could see where he had a point with that comment but was still not convinced, she turned and looked again to see what she was missing. Anna had a playful smile on her face due to Alex's actions, she turned to the orc leader, "How far is this city and is it okay if we tag along? If we can be of help we'll help and in exchange during the trip there you can maybe give us information on your current situation with this particular problem we share."

He seemed to think about it for a while before he answered her. When he did, he still seemed unconvinced that he was doing the right thing. "The journey there would take about a day, including a short rest. As for your help, that decision will be mine seeing I have been put in charge of you people after all the leaders agreed to leave that portal opened." He crossed his arms, "Again, I do not have the luxury of taking the time and effort to stop you from meddling in our affairs. So, as long as you stay close and do not create a situation where I need to take the time to take care of you people I can allow you to join us."

Mike hated to deal with K'azugg's backhanded comments, there were so many of them that they were hard to ignore. Thankfully, Anna did not seem to have as many issues with it as he did. "I guess that we will be tagging along then as soon as you leave here." As K'azugg left to join back the battle Anna looked at Mike, "You just have to let it go, otherwise he may continue doing it just

because he sees that it bugs you."

"Don't you think that that is wrong as well?"

She shrugged, "Sure I do, but can you do anything about it at this time?"

Mike was thinking about that but could not come up with anything.

The battle had finally finished and about half of the reinforcements had followed K'azugg to the city of Cagan. On the way, he had shared the information on what had happened with the reborns on his side. Currently the troop was breaking for the day, at the request of the orc leader the Lights Templar were camping away from the main troops but in clear viewing distance.

As the group sat around a fire to discuss what they had learned Mike was very happy that Adam had not joined them. He figured that having a repeat of the last time was the last thing that Adam would want to go over again. Seeing as everyone was now done eating he figured that he would start things up. "All right, so it seems that we have confirmed that this event is happening even here. Considering they have the same powers, it's safe to say that the same person is probably behind everything. The other thing that has been confirmed, which is also the most troubling, is the fact that events are happening quite differently here."

Iris looked at Mike curiously, "I don't understand what you mean by most troubling? From what I understand so far only two places have been attacked, a town that had very few people in it and the portal just now. The way I see it, they have had it easy over here this time."

Anna shook her head, "The issue is that difference, why attack those two places? One had almost no people in it so why bother at all? The portal in theory only had guards so why attack

that? One place had nothing and the other could have been seen as hurting their military but from what K'azugg mentioned only a small group was left to guard the portal due to the inactivity, so in the end even if the attack had succeeded it would not have done a whole lot." She pointed at Mike, "When things don't make sense to him he finds it troubling. Mind you, in this case it really is."

Alexandria waved at everyone, "What is most troubling for me is that I magically compared both skin colours and the results are the same, there is no difference." Mike and Anna just silently shook their heads back and forth, Iris on the other hand looked at Alex confused, "Seriously, you're still on that?"

Alex started to defend herself, "Why would he lie about that? Why not just tell me the truth?" As she saw that she was getting nowhere with anyone she decided to drop the subject. "Fine, I'll let it go. I will add that we are overlooking something else that is in fact really odd with the situation here." As she noticed that she had their attention she continued, "Don't you all think that it's funny that over here they are attacking at all?"

Iris jumped in to correct her, "No, they are attacking over on our side as well, the Crimson town being the first example of that."

Mike then cut in understating what Alexandria was mentioning. "Yes, the town was attacked but that was the will of the people who were reborn not the will of the person who gave them life again. Adam also mentioned something about the attack at the tower being the will of the people."

Alexandria nodded and continued for him "That's what I mean. Over on our side it seems the focus is recruitment more than anything. Once they join this new way of life, they are essentially free to do whatever they want. Over here that does

not seem to be the case, I mean orcs and giants working together? They are enemies so why join up now?"

Iris was catching on now, "I see what you mean, assuming that it's the same person controlling everything why act so differently? It would make sense if he was recruiting on our side and using those people to attack on this side, but that's not the case at all. That being the case, can we then assume that Mike was wrong and that maybe it's not the same person behind this?"

Mike thought about it for a little while, "You could be right but something tells me that is not the case. I mean doing what he is doing takes a large amount of control over the dark energy, from what Solanar mentioned. I think that it's also safe to assume that doing what is happening also causes a large drain on this total amount of energy. I just can't see it where there is another person allowing the other to cause such a drain on it if they don't have the same overall goal in mind." He thought about it more. "Still, I do agree that the lack of connection between the two does indicate that I should be wrong."

Anna moved closer to him, "Maybe you should stop trying to link both of them together at this time and just focus on the here and now. There could in fact be two plans at work, one for over here and another for over there. Once we figure out what is happening here it may help figure out things on our side, even if they are not directly connected."

Alexandria got up and took a deep breath, "I think that the only thing we are going to figure out at this point is that we only have more questions more than anything else. Personally, I think that we should go to bed and hope that tomorrow things will become clearer when we get to Cagan."

Agreeing with that Iris also got up and joined Alex, as she did Alexandria remembered something important, "Oh wait, before we do that, let's make that language spell of yours permanent for you as well. I have a feeling that it will be very useful tomorrow."

As they began the process, Mike could only stare at the fire lost in thought. Anna gave him a small smile and leaned next to him, "She is right you know, you don't have enough information for this right now. Instead, let's talk about what we will do about Iris."

Mike turned to look at her "What do you mean?"

"I have a feeling that Alex is hiding something about what happened with those giants, and I also figure that she is doing that to cover for Iris for some reason."

"Hum, I see what you mean. I did notice that she was pushing herself quite a bit during the fight when she joined us. You think that we should deal with it in the morning?"

Anna thought about it for a bit "No let's not, ideally I would like it for her to come to us or for her to figure things out for herself. Actually, I think a confrontation would only worsen things at this time. Still we should be on guard in case she does something too reckless."

"All right, I'll keep it in mind tomorrow as things happen. Even if he wants to or not, I have a feeling that we will be participating in the defence of that city."

Seeing as Mike had first watch, Anna then got up and gave him a kiss, "That's all I wanted you to do."

As he sat there looking at her leave to join the others, he wondered what tomorrow would bring.

## Chapter 6

As they got closer to the city K'azugg explained more about it. The city had two different architectures. The first one was originally there and had long been deserted when the orcs had taken it over. That architecture was comprised of long towers built using strong stones, these towers were interlocked with bridges that allowed someone to move between them. Eventually the city began to grow and more orcs decided to live there even when no more original housing could be found, this is where the second architecture showed up. The orcs had built small houses around the towers, as more and more joined the second section had completely surrounded the original.

Eventually, the Lights Templar could start to see what the orc leader had described to them as they were now close enough to see it on the horizon. Iris pointed upwards and looked at K'azugg "Ah, is that dark spot normal?"

He squinted to get a clearer view, "No, I have no clue what that is." Alexandria enhanced her vision to get a clearer picture, as soon as she did she regretted it. She stopped walking and just stared at it while all the others stared at her. She had no clue how much time had passed, but eventually she turned to Iris with a look of dread on her face, "Please, please promise me that you will not do anything crazy."

"What do you mean, what's up there?"

Alexandria looked at everyone, "That black spot is a dragon, and I don't even need the spell to tell that it's a reborn type dragon. It's brimming

with so much energy it's hard to miss." She let that information sink in for everyone. What worried her the most, besides the obvious, was the glint in Iris' eyes that she swears she had noticed when she had mentioned the news.

Mike turned to K'azugg, "What's in that city? Military forces? Leaders? Why is something like that here?"

Having dropped his attitude the leader just answered him, "Nothing like that at all. The city is mostly populated by elders. We noticed that the walls offer more protection to them from the elements so most of them end up there. The reason why the city has grown so much is because we look up to our elders and often seek their wisdom so a lot of families wanted to stay close to them. There is nothing of what you have mentioned there and no reason that I can think of to attack it with something like that."

From the way he was talking and the way he was acting there was no reason for Mike to doubt him. Still this new information made no sense but there was very little time to think about that. As the orc leader and his group started to run at the city, the Lights Templar followed.

The closer they got to the city the worse the situation seemed. Now clearly visible, the dragon floated high above the city spewing dark flamed fireballs at the city's older structures. This caused the towers that K'azugg had talked about to collapse. As close to the city as they were they now saw tons of orcs fleeing it in a disorganized fashion. K'azugg quickly ordered a lot of his men to stay behind and help the people evacuate in a fashion that would not cause more harm to those around them.

When they finally got in the city, they all realised that while the fireballs and the dragon was



bad news in itself, the real problem was the fallen debris caused by the towers. As they collapsed, they came down on other homes and also caused a lot of orcs to be buried alive. During that time, the dragon was still floating up in the sky targeting the towers that were still standing causing even more ongoing damage.

Mike looked at Iris, "I'm assuming that Adam taught you how to use the tracking ability for orcs, are you able to use it even with this many around you?"

Iris nodded as she looked around, "Yes I am, I will admit that it will not be a pleasant feeling but it's something that Adam forced me to get used to with that ability." She then pointed at the dragon, "But how is that going to help against that?"

Mike looked at her with a bit of a sad smile, he knew that she would not like what he was going to say next, "The spell will do nothing to help against that you're right, but that is not my intention." He looked at Alexandria, "If Iris is able to help you find the trapped orcs can you remove the debris so that help can get to them?" This statement had a lot of different reactions from those around him. First you had Alexandria and Anna who just had big smiles on their faces, as Alex got closer to Iris, "Sure no problem, if she can point out the location I can transform the materials to their smaller base components. Essentially this is how we get rid of waste in Astrum."

As K'azugg got closer to him he could see that the orc was also happy and respectful, "Thank you for this, I expected you to leave us alone to try and deal with the dragon."

Mike was surprised by the leader's reaction, "As someone once told me, it's the right thing to do. Also, in this case it's the only thing we can do as long as it stays that high up. Plus it allows you

to do something else."

K'azugg nodded in agreement, "Yes you are right, the dragon was not a part of the original army that was spotted and the guardians of this city are nowhere to be found. I have to assume that they are currently too busy going against the army at this time. I need to go and find out what is happening." He then smiled at Mike, which was scarier than his normal look in a way. "Now that you will take care of my people I can do this duty, thank you."

"No problem, can I ask that a few of your soldiers stay to help out. We don't need a lot but I think it would be best if the people we help see orcs first instead of humans." K'azugg pointed at four of his men, "You will stay here and help them." He then pointed at everyone else, "The rest follow me, we need to figure out what is going on here before the rest of this place falls on top of us."

Iris who was a bit torn by her feelings of helping the orcs and wanting to fight the dragon looked at Mike and Anna, "I take it that you two will be helping as well with the rescue efforts?"

Anna looked at Mike, "I'll tell her... No we will not, we need to help reduce the destruction."

Iris was confused by that one and a bit frustrated, "What, but how are you going to do that without me providing a shield?"

Alexandria was wondering on that one too. Anna looked at both of them, "It's a bit of a trick that we learned on our travels, what happens when two fireballs meet?"

Iris looked at Alexandria for support, "They don't cancel out if that is what you are implying."

Alex nodded, catching on to the plan, "No they don't, but they will both explode on contact causing the initial target to be safe, depending on the distance from the impact."

Iris looked back at the two warriors who both smiled in agreement, "So you plan on using your enchantment sword blast to destroy those fireballs, all while we try and save as many orcs as we can who are trapped in the rubble?"

Mike turned to the orcs who had stayed, "Now that everyone understands the plan I think it's best that we all go to it."

Iris was about to protest more as Alexandria just pulled on her arm to follow her to the first section of large debris, which was around the corner from where they were. "Come on, turn that tracking spell on and give yourself another type of headache. We need to save innocent people." Iris did as she was instructed and cast the spell and also remembered that something like that had been done when she had challenged Mike.

"But where did they practice something like that, what have they been doing this past year?"

Alexandria just pushed her closer to the debris, "You can ask them later. Now focus, I'm figuring that with the number you are dealing with this is not going to be that easy."

Iris took a deep breath, Alex was right. Even while she was able to handle the information being sent to her brain for all the locations of the orcs, currently it would not be easy to spot those who were buried. The spell would not penetrate a closed environment but if there was at least one tiny open space between her and the target it would let her know but the signal back would be much weaker. In a situation like this one, finding a weaker signal in a crowd of stronger ones would be very hard.

Iris focused and pointed ahead, "Alex there, there should be at least one person alive under this section." Alexandria moved to the debris and touched it with one of her hands and took the other one and pointed it in the other direction.

When she finished casting the spell a very large amount of destroyed tower mixed in with clay and wood was now neatly piled to the other side in nice square blocks perfectly separated by its type ready to be used. Iris shook her head in amazement "That is a very large amount for one casting, you should be able to reach the target with the next one."

As Alex bent down to touch the other section she told Iris, "You know as well as me that this spell is used by every new mage as practice when they start up in order to help with the constant waste recycling in Astrum. What you may not know is that it's also used as a task for community service." Alex now had a small smile on her face, "You could say that because of my training I am very competent with this spell." Iris too had a smile after hearing that. For all the time that she had spent with her, she was finally seeing the real Alex. She wished that she had known her much earlier.

As Alexandria finished casting the spell all smiles disappeared, she moved away to let the orcs come in. What they saw was a male orc body on top of a female orc body, both dead. They looked at Iris wondering if she had it wrong, she closed her eyes, "Just look under them." They moved the bodies to find a small orc boy who was unconscious and had some small wounds but was alive. One of the orcs lifted the boy in his arms and took him away. As Alexandria looked at Iris, who was once again focusing on the tracking spell, she realised that she too now wanted to go after the dragon. While that would be physically hard, she realised that this rescue would probably be harder to deal with emotionally. Iris moved a few steps, "Next one is over here Alex, there should be more than one this time." Alex ran to where Iris was pointing "Right, I'm on it, start looking for the next

ones."

In order to do what they had planned Mike and Anna needed to move in a space where they would get a nice clear unobstructed view of the city sky. As they both looked around, he quickly looked in her direction, "Do you think that she will forgive me for excluding her like this?" Anna launched a glowing bright green blast as she saw a black fireball that she could stop from where she was. Doing what she was doing was tricky at best, not only did you have to aim properly at a quickly moving target but you also had to take in the damage that the blast radius would cause when the two connected. Assuming that you could even stop it, if the results would cause more damage than the original intended blast, it was just better to leave it alone.

After seeing that she had judged correctly and stopped the damage to the intended target she answered him, "I think that it will be fine, I'm sure that she will realise that saving the trapped people is more important right now."

He launched a pink energy blast at another black fireball, "I hope you're right."

She pointed ahead, "Trust me, I know she will. Now let's head there, it looks like it will be a much better spot for us."

As he ran to join her, "You know I always do. Now let's try to outlast this thing."

A long while passed and while they had done a good job of minimizing the damage and giving more time for people to escape, the dragon was still not showing any signs of slowing down. Eventually an orc came to their location to inform them of a new development. "The leaders are busy holding off the attacking army, there are a lot of them and some have broken through. It seems that their target is the people saving the orcs who are trapped."

Anna looked at Mike, "So I guess they really want those orcs dead for some reason. Go, I'll try to keep this up as long as I can." Mike gave her a quick kiss and left to join the others.

When he got there, he saw that Iris was already in a defensive position ready to go on the attack as soon as they got close. He figured that she had already realised that something was coming at them with her tracking ability. He readied himself next to her, "You keep helping Alexandria, I'll keep them at bay."

Iris refused, "No, don't send me away, I can assist you while you handle the main attack. Don't worry I'll still be able to tell Alex where to go, plus seeing as they are moving to us we can keep moving to the next targets as we fight them off." She looked at him with pleading eyes, "Please let me do this."

Mike nodded, "All right I'll take the main attack and I'll follow your lead as you focus on where we should go next as you assist."

Iris pulled back a bit from his location to put herself in a better position for assisting. "Alex, from this point on I'll be marking the next locations as we move around." As she mentioned it a red glowing capital 'I' with lines dropping downwards from both top and bottom appeared on debris about five feet from where Alexandria was. Iris turned forward, "Mike, get ready, you should see them any moment now, there should be seven of them."

As if on cue the seven orcs appeared, Mike looked at her, "Are you ready to give them a blast of a welcome?" Understanding his meaning she nodded at him. As the enemy got closer he launched a red blast at their direction by swinging his sword. Iris did a similar move and let the fire enchantment leave her swords and go in the same

direction. As the spells connected with the incoming team a large explosion occurred. As the dust cleared, only four badly wounded orcs remained.

Mike charged in at the already healing orcs with his glowing red sword, Iris let him take their attention as she marked another two places for Alexandria. She then reapplied her fiery enchantments and joined Mike as he dispatched one of the orcs. As she got close she released a quick cleansing spell to remove their links to the energy currently still healing them. Taken a bit by surprised one of the orcs dropped his guard and she took the opening by stabbing one of her swords into his chest. Mike then gave his target in front of him a horizontal slash across his stomach.

Without the healing ability the wound would be fatal very quickly, and then as he reached the end of his arc he thrust his blade into the last remaining one that was trying too slowly to attack him with an upward slash with his blade. As the final orc turned to a pile of sand Mike turned to Iris, "Thanks, but conserve your power as much as you can, I get the feeling this will be a long one."

At the time, Iris had not been too happy about the comment, now she was glad that she had listened to it. They had moved around quite a bit in order to follow the orcs who needed help. While that part was becoming easier due to most orcs now having left her tracking spell range. The issue was the never-ending groups of attackers, every time there was a group of seven to ten coming at them at regular intervals. They had received no word from K'azugg and also the dragon was still spewing his fireballs from high above. While most of them were stopped by a green energy blast and while the forces attacking them had been stopped as well, it was all taking a toll on them.

She looked at Mike as she tagged a few more places in their new location, "How long do you think this will last?"

He looked up at the sky as another green energy blast stopped a black fireball heading their way, "I'm not sure, but I'm hoping something changes quickly, otherwise we will have to change tactics." He looked at Iris with sadness in his eyes, "She can't keep it up for much longer, already her energy glow is becoming less bright. We are not doing much better." Not knowing what to tell him she prepared herself for the eventual other group that would show up.

Two more attack groups later Mike stopped. "Get ready, something is about to happen."

Iris was wondering what he meant, "I see that yet another group is coming our way it will be a while by the time they get here but besides that nothing has changed."

He pointed upwards, "It stopped attacking."

As she realised what he meant she looked up. The dragon had indeed stopped attacking and was now hovering in the same location. After a few quick moments, a large energy dome started to appear. It covered the whole sky and then eventually dropped all around the older section of the city. It appeared that they were all now trapped inside a magic dome.

After a few minutes, Alexandria ran to their location, "We have another problem, the dome is preventing the orcs from moving the injured to someplace safer. I need to go take a closer look at it to see what I can do. On the up side, in order to cast something like this the dragon can't do anything else otherwise the spell will cancel so that's good I guess."

It was not much of a silver lining but Mike was going to take anything he could get. "Go for it, Iris



and I will stay here and block the advance of the attacking orcs that will be coming this way." Alexandria nodded at him, turned around and ran towards the edge of the dome. "I'll be back as soon as I can."

Alexandria raced to the edge of the dome. There she saw that many of the orc warriors were taking their weapons at it, trying to hack it to pieces. As she had assumed, it had little effect. She got closer and touched the energy itself. She cast a spell to help her identify what the dragon had cast. As the information from the spell poured into her head, she felt a sudden flash of pain in her head. While she rubbed her head she asked herself, *'Why must ancient beings always complicate base spells with so much more information and protection?'* It's something she had noticed that the elves also did. It irritated her a bit every time she realised it because it was a constant reminder of how much she needed to learn and given her life span compared to these beings there was no way that she would naturally get there. She looked at the wall of energy once again; dispelling it would be near impossible for her.

She looked around her and at the orcs still hacking away at the shield. "No matter how much you all swing, this spell is too complex for something as simple as that." While they ignored her a thought popped in her head... *'Too complex... Nah something simple like that won't work will it?'* She thought about it for a while and went over the information that she had been able to understand from the spell that she had cast, she could see nothing in the spell to prevent what she was about to try. She took her staff in her hand, "Well, might as well try it out." She plunged the staff inside the ground next to the shield and pushed in at an angle that in theory a proper shield should stop.

The staff went in deeper, Alexandria had to laugh at that one, "So you make sure that your spell has tons of protection in order for it not to get dispelled and you also minimize its energy cost but you don't bother to make sure that it covers the section below ground. That's just too funny."

She tried to get the attention of the orc warriors round her, "Just give me a while and I'll create a passage so that you can move out of here." To their credit most of them stopped, which was surprising considering that she assumed that most of them probably still had a distaste for humans. Putting those thoughts away Alexandria kneeled and put both hands on the ground. The next spell she would use was another one that was practiced a lot in Astrum. Basically, once they had the base components a mage would use magic to form it in whatever shape they could imagine. Unfortunately, this was not a spell that Alex was really good at, she tried to remember what her teachers had told her. "Okay, all I need to do is imagine it in my mind... Imagine it and let the spell do the rest." After a little while, the ground around her hand disappeared and solid steps leading down appeared. As she stood up, she walked down the steps, at the bottom you had a few feet and then another flight of stairs leading upwards on the other side of the dome. Alex looked at her handiwork. "The supports seem strong enough to hold, still not the most artistic creation I could have come up with... oh well." She walked back and approached the orcs closest to her, "You will be able to get on the other side now." She did not wait to see them start using this new path and hurried back to her friends who she assumed were still fighting.

Anna had figured that once the shield was up it was probably best for her to return to the others.

Before leaving she took a few seconds, doing that many blasts consecutively was like having run a marathon that you were only partially prepared for. Having regained some strength she reached out using the magical item that was given to them about a year ago and searched for where Mike was. Now having the information she needed she made her way to them.

Iris had suffered some minor wounds during the multiple attacks, Mike on the other hand had some major ones. She cast a quick heal spell on him, "You mind if we switch? I mean you have been taking point for all of these and now that I don't have to mark anymore, it would make sense."

Mike tilted his head and looked away for a bit, after a while he turned back to her, "Sure, why not. Pretty soon Anna will be joining us so that should help out if the waves keep staying at their current sizes."

"It might take her a while to find us. We are pretty far from our original location."

Mike smiled at that comment, "I don't think that will be a problem. By the way, when is the next attack? They are not going to go past us, right?"

Iris was a bit angry at that comment, "Of course not, they are just taking longer than the others that's all and there are only seven of them this time, so it should be fairly quick."

As soon as she had finished Anna arrived at their location only to have heard the final part of Iris's comment, "Oh, now you jinxed it."

She stopped next to Mike who was standing a bit behind Iris, "What's the situation?"

Before Mike could explain, Iris cut in, "Alex is currently trying to figure out a way around that dome, and in the meantime we are to stop any groups that come this way in order to provide

defence."

Anna was surprised that Iris had taken the lead but did not question it, "Sounds like a plan, have you had to fight many of these waves?"

"Yes we have, and in a few seconds the next one should be visible so get ready."

Anna slowly let her sword blaze with green energy, turned to Mike and whispered, "Get ready? I take it she is a bit nervous?"

Mike smiled at that, "Maybe." He looked at the green energy around her weapon and then looked at her with a serious look, "Are you okay for this?"

As the enemy appeared she got in a defensive position and answered him, "I would rather not use another blast from this thing if possible but I'll be fine."

Iris magically charged in and with her first blade aimed at the arm of an orc severing it and at the same time disarming him. She then bent down and with her other sword aimed for the leg of the other orc next to her. As she slashed away, the orc fell on the ground. Two more of them were now charging at her. She stood up and let the fire enchantment cast on her swords fly in their direction both hitting their targets and turning them to piles of sand. With only three orcs left, she felt pretty proud of herself for a moment. The last three orcs stood behind their fallen comrades. Not really sure why they had stopped, Iris took a few steps back and went on the defensive. The next thing that she saw made her speechless. The piles of sand around her were reforming in the shape of orcs, soon after the sand turned hard and then their green colour returned, and then their eyes opened. The reborns were now being reborn in front of her. Also the ones that had missing limbs now were able to re-grow them suddenly, as they all stood in front of them big smiles could be seen

plastered on their faces. She looked to both her sides to see if Anna and Mike were seeing the same thing. They both turned very serious confirming that she was not seeing things.

Mike and Anna jumped in before Iris could react, they used their enchantment and cut off limbs and also decapitated their targets. Not even a minute after, they reformed and stood again. Mike screamed at Iris, "Try a cleanse spell!" Iris targeted one of the orcs with a cleansing spell, she had a small smile appear on her face as she saw the orc flinch as the spell took effect. Not long after Mike's sword could be seen cutting the same target in various lethal places. The orc went down and turned to a pile of sand only to once again reform.

Iris asked the both of them, "What do we do? Nothing works." Both of them furiously attacked the orcs as Anna answered her question, "We don't give up, and we keep trying." Iris nodded as she joined in the attack against this new problem.

After a while, they had tried everything they could think of to stop them but nothing worked. Iris had tried to encase them in an ice block to stop them, but then the rest just hacked away breaking it into pieces along with the orc body encased in it. Shortly after that the orc combined itself back together and continued the attack. Iris wondered how these two could keep on fighting when faced with something like this. It's at that point that Mike chimed in as if reading her thoughts "Don't worry Iris, as soon as Alexandria gets here I may have a plan. It maybe a stupid plan but I think it will work."

As if on cue Alexandria arrived, looked at the situation and was simply amazed. The amount of magical energy to perform this feat was near impossible in her mind. "I created an opening in the shield. So I heard something about a stupid

plan, what do you need?"

Not looking back Mike answered, "I need a large hole in the ground, big enough for all of them to fit."

As Alex started casting the spell, Iris had doubts about this plan, "I'm not sure that will be enough..." She then paused, new information was coming in from the tracking spell. "Alex, build a bigger hole. There is like one hundred orcs coming our way."

Anna blocked an attack from an orc trying to get at Mike, "Don't just give an order like that, wait a bit longer."

"But there really is near a hundred orcs..."

Mike cut her off, "Does not matter, wait and you will see why."

Alex then chimed in, "It's done. What now?" Mike looked at Anna and both of them started throwing the orcs in the pit that was newly created. Iris used some of her arcane magic to push the others in. As the orcs were stumbling to get on their feet and start climbing up Mike gave his second command to Alexandria, "Okay, now ice the whole thing up." Both Iris and Alex looked at him for a few seconds, Iris then looked at Alex and wondered if she could actually do that. Alexandria took a deep breath and focused on a large ice spell, as the orcs started to climb up she let the spell go. In a few seconds, the whole area was encased in a block of ice with all the orcs trapped inside. The only way to free them would be to chip away at it from above.

Alexandria put her hands on her knees and took a few deep breaths. Anna went to her, "Are you okay?" Alex stood upright, "Sure I'll be fine, but if that's how we will be dealing with those then I'm going to have to make smaller holes." Mike turned to Alex, "Sorry about that Alexandria, I did

not want to mention the second part in case they reacted differently. Again I'm sorry if that was too much."

"It's okay, I understand why, and there was no way for you to know that doing that would have that effect." Alex now had a tired look on her face and looked at Iris, "So about those hundred that you were talking about."

Iris focused on her tracking spell again, "They should be here any minute now. There is also what looks like another group behind them."

Anna turned to Mike, "Are you thinking glass half full?"

Mike pointed at the orcs encased in ice, "Assuming that K'azugg and the other guards also are fighting against something like those, then yes I agree that is probably them falling back." He then turned to everyone around him, "At least I hope that is the case."

Having recovered a bit Alexandria grabbed Iris, "I too would rather think that's what's happening, and assuming that's the case and that the same strategy will be used when the other group shows up let's prepare some smaller holes ahead of time." She then looked at Iris, "By the way, you will have to help me fill them up when the time comes, so don't get any ideas okay?"

Anna looked at the two as they started creating holes half the size of the first one. "I wish there was some way that we could help them, still I realise that that can't always be the case with every situation, especially for something like this." She looked concerned as she turned to Mike, "Do you think the same thing is happening on our side?"

Mike was still looking ahead to try and catch a glimpse of what was coming ahead of them. "I don't know, I don't think so. I mean here they are

purposely attacking and have a mission that they need to accomplish, back home that's not so much the case so why waste so much energy and focus on two ends? Oh, here they come..."

Anna looked ahead as well, from there she could see that the assumption had been right. A large group of orcs helping other wounded orcs were coming at them. As they got closer she could see K'azzug in the group, who looked pretty beat-up, being yelled at by a heavily armoured orc. The closer they got the more they both could understand what the argument was about.

"You are getting soft, relying on your humans again. We can take care of this on our own." K'azugg looked very annoyed and tired like this had been an ongoing argument for some time now, "As I have said many times, I understand what you are saying but we have already taken too many losses today; taking more would be foolish and if they can be of help with that then so be it." As Anna and Mike walked closer to K'azugg, the other orc just sneered at them, "Fine, then in a situation like this what can you possibly add to save lives?"

Anna stood her ground, as this new orc was now standing very close to her trying to possibly intimidate her. "I recommend that you take your wounded to the shield's edge behind us. There you will find an opening that will allow them to leave the shield and get medical attention. As for what is coming, assuming it's what we were facing, well there is a plan for those as well." She pointed to a patch of ice on the ground, as they all advanced to see it more clearly the orcs realised what they had done. It was hard for Anna to tell if she was right but after seeing the results she thought that she saw a small smile appear on K'azugg's face, the other orc was not so happy about it. "While this plan is not a victory it does allow for your people to



save some lives. That being said, preparations are being made to deal with what is behind you, we will still need your help with this plan in order to put them in the holes and keep them there until they can be sealed up temporarily."

The orc warrior shook his head as he started to make his way to the edge of the shield, "Bah, you got lucky this time but keep in mind that getting help from others has always ended badly for us or has brought trouble for our people. It's only a matter of time. I just hope you are wise enough to cut your ties before that time comes."

Mike extended his hand to thank K'azugg for the trust he had given them. "It's as we have said many times before, we are here to help, thanks for believing in that."

The orc leader shook his head slowly, "You misunderstand, I do thank you for the help today and also for what you are about to do and I do now believe that you are indeed here to help us. But I also believe in what he has said, eventually all dealings with other races end badly for us, and unfortunately I still think that eventually this will be the case as well here." He then turned to his people and explained the plan to them. Mike and Anna both looked at each other, not really sure what to say in a situation like this.

A few minutes after every hole had been created all had a small troop of orcs around them waiting for the attackers that were now in sight. Alexandria moved closer to Iris, "So, how many do we have coming?"

Iris looked a bit worried, "Around sixty. I think we have enough holes assuming four per but..."

Alexandria cut her off, "Yeah, filling them so rapidly is another thing, I know. Just do what you can." She left her to go to the other side. Before she had even gotten there it already had started.

As the attacking orcs simply charged in without a care in the world, which she could hardly blame them considering their current situation, they were met with the other orcs who simply used their momentum and threw them in the holes that were around them. Now this initial first charge worked beautifully, by her count a good twenty were already in their soon to be cages. As Iris sealed them up by filling all the space with an ice spell, preventing any movement whatsoever and creating a giant ice cube in the ground, the other forty orcs were quickly starting to catch on to what was happening and were a little more careful on how they attacked. Iris stopped focusing on the orcs attacking the orcs and focused on the task that she had to do. She had to leave them to it and she had to do what only she could do.

Alexandria was running around from place to place as she did the same as Iris. She checked what Iris's status was. It was hard to tell but from what Alex had learned from her, after the many times she spent training her, she was nearing her limit of arcane magic. While it was true that Iris could use both, Alex had noticed that she was able to use holy easier and longer than arcane. Considering how many they had to fill out Alexandria figured that a new strategy would be needed, otherwise they probably would not make it.

Iris was now exhausted. She checked to see how many were still left and realised that she was falling behind. She then realised Alex was suddenly going faster, what was more odd about it was that she could still hear screams coming from the holes that she had just finished freezing. Iris took a few seconds to catch her breath and think, "What are you doing, and how are you building up enough energy for the spell to fill the whole thing up? ...

Wait, ah I'm such an idiot." Iris snapped out of it for a bit and went to the other location closest to confirm. "Just what I thought, I really should have figured that out sooner." Iris realised that the idea was to make sure that they could not move in order to break the ice in order to set themselves free, there was nothing that said that they had to be completely fill it up. The real goal was to make sure that they could not move their legs and arms, this allowed to conserve energy and every bit would be welcomed.

Mike was happy with the overall outcome of this last-minute crazy idea, currently both Anna and him were attacking what was left of the attacking force. He figured that their numbers were around fifteen at this time. As they both slashed away at different targets and moved on to the next they realised that they had stopped coming back. It seems that they were not the only ones that had noticed this, as the defending orcs had starting focusing more on attacking their targets than throwing them in the holes that had been prepared. While the reborn's normal regeneration was strong it was no match for the number of people who were left attacking them.

As the fighting finished, the Lights Templar grouped up together. By the looks of it, they were all at their limit and there was still one big problem to deal with. Alexandria pointed at the sky "So what do we do with him?"

Mike shrugged his shoulders, "I'm thinking nothing at this time."

Maybe it was because she was too exhausted or had missed something but Iris did not understand how one could just ignore a dragon. "Nothing? I don't get it. It could attack any time, the only reason it does not is because of that shield."

Mike agreed with her, "That's just it, as long as it's just sitting there and the orcs can evacuate whoever is left there really is no need for us to do anything about it. I'm sure that eventually we will have to deal with it, but I don't think that now is the time for that."

Anna sheathed her sword, "I for one do not have any objection." She looked at Alex who was now lying on the ground, "Alex?"

"I'm good right where I am, doing what I'm doing. Anyways going after that the way we are now is suicide so I'll pass on that if you don't mind." Immediately after she finished, the dragon that was feeding the shield with energy stopped. As he did the shield dropped all around them. Alexandria got up, "We really need to work on these breaks between combat, what now?"

Mike looked up, "Well it could be dropping the shield so that more can enter, or it's about to continue his attacks..." As the dragon moved all eyes were on it, it gave a loud piecing scream that made everyone flinch and then flew off away from the city. Anna was puzzled by this and looked at the others, "... Or it could just leave? Considering our situation why would it do that?"

Alex had a big smile on her face, "I don't know but I'll look at this as a win considering that it ran away from us."

Iris did not have the same feeling, "Don't we have to go after it to see where it's going? I mean it could be going to attack another city."

The orc leader suddenly showed up close to the group, seems that they had all lost track of him during their very small break. "I had the same thought, it's why I ordered a runner to go after it. He will report back once he has a general direction or target of where it's going."

That made sense to Iris, "All right, I guess we

are done for now?"

Alex put a hand on her shoulder, "Oh if only that was the case. You are coming with me. I'm sure there are still some trapped orcs everywhere and we need to free them and I'll need your help with that this time so you will be doing some casting too."

Iris did not know if she could do that but did not want to admit it outright. "But wait, I thought that you were done and empty?"

Alexandria had a smile on her face. "Sure I am, but I would not want that to stop you from being able to help these poor people when there is something that you can do about it. So don't worry about me, I'll be fine and I'm sure that you can keep up, right?"

Iris was not sure if she was trying to punish her for what happened with the giants, or the fact that she had asked her not to tell anyone or something else. What she did know is that she was going to be using more arcane energy soon enough. She took a deep breath, "Of course you can count on me."

Anna waved at them to slow down for a bit, "Wait, do you need any help from us?" Alexandria turned and answered her before Iris could, "Nope you two rest up and do what you do best, which is figure out what we are going to do next and how we will go against that dragon next time we meet it."

Anna looked at Mike who was shaking his head, "She makes it sound so simple." She smiled at his comment, "I'm sure we will figure something out." He took her hand and smiled too, "I'm sure... So you want to go exploring what is left of city that got destroyed? Maybe we will see something that will help figure out why it was a target in the first place."

"Sounds like a plan." As they left the group

and the orcs to do what they all needed to do and were now out of hearing range from everyone she looked at him and stopped. "Do you think that we can kill that thing without going all out with the enchantments?"

He thought about it for a while, "At this time, I don't see another way." As he looked at her, he knew that it was not the answer she wanted to hear he also knew that it was the answer she had also come up with herself. "Look, the truth is we really should avoid that dragon for as long as we can. Doing what we did today, fine, but going at it trying to kill it... We can't do that."

She thought about what he said and something stuck out, "Wait, you're saying something else there. You're saying that we should avoid it altogether right? Meaning that if we need to fight it that we should run?"

He nodded in approval, "You got it. I mean think about it. Let's say we kill it. After what we have just learned what's to stop it from just forming itself all up again and attacking anew? The process will be a big waste for us. So it destroys buildings, let's just try and be a step ahead of it and make sure that we can evacuate the people and stop there." Anna then got closer to him and kissed him, when the kiss finished and they were still close he whispered to her, "I'm not arguing but what was that for?"

A small smile appeared on her face, "I'm glad, I'm not sure the old you would have been okay with not being able to figure out the perfect solution."

"I keep telling you, you make me a better person. But is that the only reason or are you happy as well that you will not have to step in and remind me that sometimes you just have to take the wins that you can get?"

As she moved away and they started walking again she had that half smile on her face that he liked so much. "That is a nice change of pace as well, but while you may not need to be reminded I'm pretty sure that someone else will."

"You mean Iris. Hmm... When the time comes, I guess."

She nodded in agreement, "...When the time comes."

## *Chapter 7*

Anna felt a bit of a chill as she woke up. She looked around herself as she started to remember where she was and what had happened. The rescue efforts had taken much longer than expected. By the end of it, Alexandria and Iris had very little energy left physically and mentally. This had forced them to camp in one of the less destroyed houses they found. On the ground floor, the main sleeping area was still intact and two beds could be found. Those beds were now occupied by Alexandria and Iris, who would need the better rest in order to regain most of their strength. The second floor of the house had been damaged and a corner of it was simply gone. This is where Mike and Anna had made a makeshift bed with things that they had found around. It was not as comfortable as they would have liked and allowed for little privacy but it would be better than sleeping on the ground in the forest, which is something that they had done many times over.

As Anna got up and reached for her boots near the rest of her and Mike's gear, she looked around to see that Mike was already awake and sitting on the edge of the floor where part of the walls and roof were missing, his legs and feet dangling. She wondered if he had gotten any sleep at all, she knew how hard it was for him to let go when something needed to be fixed. She walked and sat next to him, "Good morning, please tell me that you got some rest last night."

Mike turned and gave her a warm smile, "I did, I've only been up for about one hour at best."



She smiled at that, "Good, still I'm guessing that this means one of two things. It means that you have finally figured out something or that you had to give up because you just could not come up with anything."

He chuckled a bit at that one, "You know me so well, it's the latter actually. I just don't see it and I know I need to."

Her smile had now turned into a sad one, "Did walking around not give you any clues?"

"Yes and no, I keep thinking that I have seen that architecture somewhere but I just can't remember it. After the damage that the dragon did it's hard to picture it as it would have looked when it was whole."

Anna thought about that as well, "I've been with you for a long time now and I can't recall it as well, unless it's something that you saw before me. Is that possible?"

Mike shook his head, "No, I can't see that, I mean I was born in the Crimson town; as soon as I was of age I was training. There were not too many times where the family would go out exploring the world so to speak. So it has to be something that I have seen with you."

She got closer to him and wrapped her arms around him. "Well, maybe it will come back to you eventually. In the meantime don't worry about it too much. I mean you don't always have to come up with the answer to these things."

He looked at her and put his arms around her. "True, but that's what I do, if I can't do that what else can I do to be of use to the group?"

Anna wondered about the proper answer to that question. "Hmm, well I'm not sure about the group but you could make sure I'm not cold when I wake up anymore, back rubs would be nice too, oh and learning how to make better meals would be

great."

"I can do that if you wish..."

She poked him a bit for that, "You know I'm only kidding, now stop beating yourself over this. I'm sure there are better things to do."

He gave her a small smile, "Yes I was going to wait until you and either Alexandria or Iris woke up. Once one of them gets up, I'm assuming Iris, I was going to suggest that we both head to K'azugg and see if he has news about that dragon."

"I'm guessing that you are right about Iris, Alexandria seemed extremely drained after everything. I'll assume that avoid attacking the dragon head-on is still the ongoing plan?"

"Yes, there is nothing that we can do about it at this time but learning where it's going and what it's doing seems like a good idea nonetheless."

After hearing that, Anna got up and started to head towards the stairs, "Well on that note let's see if she is up." As they got down, they realised that Alexandria was still fast asleep and Iris was currently sitting on her bed waiting. They walked as silently as they could to her and explained what they wanted to do.

Iris nodded, "Go, I'll keep an eye on her just in case, just don't leave out any details when you get back okay?" They both smiled at that comment as Mike whispered to her, "Sure, not a problem."

K'azugg had mentioned that he would stay in Cagan for a while, at least until things settled down. The other orc he had argued with had left with a small portion of his troops to report to the other leaders on what had happened and see what could be done about the giant flying lizard that was now attacking them. They both finally found him already busy giving orders to those around him. It seemed that his focus was helping his wounded people and also safe transport to some other

location if it was needed. As they got close to him, he stopped and gave them his attention. "So you are finally awake, seems you humans like your sleep."

Mike thought to himself sarcastically that morning welcomes like that were priceless, "Yes, well now that we are awake, did you get any news on the dragon's location?"

The orc leader unrolled what looked like a very basic map that had the location of where there were some basic natural landmarks and a red 'x'. "The runner came back late last night after he had figured out the only known location for the dragon to go," he pointed to the 'x' on the map "which is here. Now comes the part where you start asking all these questions and only half believe my answers."

Anna was not sure about the last part of his comment but started the questions part off, "So what is at that location?"

"Currently nothing of importance to us, it's an old ruin location that has already been destroyed for a long time now. No one lives there at this time."

Mike was now more curious, "So how old is old and any clues as to why it would be heading there?"

The orc seemed very uninterested, "None at all. Currently, I'm more thinking that it's going over there only to rest and recover. Another runner was already sent over in order to see where it's heading next after it's rested. As for your other question, old is as old as this place. We don't know what it originally looked like because we have always seen it destroyed but we think it was a tower built by the same people that built this place."

Mike eyes went wide, finally a logical link. "Is it okay if we go and see this place for ourselves?"

This time it was K'azzug's eyes that went wide for a few seconds and then he had that odd smile of his, "No problems with me, please go there and get eaten by the dragon or kill it if you wish. Both are good outcomes for me."

Anna was not impressed with his comments, especially after what had recently happened. *'I guess when he woke up this morning the old him took over'*, she figured that shifting the subject a little would be of help. "How far is it from here to there and are there any supplies that you can spare for us to get there?"

The orc leader shook his head from side to side, "I can spare nothing, I could barely spare that animal the runner used. I'm currently using everything to transport some of my wounded people and elderly to a safer location. Food is also very scarce so all in all you will have to fend for yourself on this one. Also, on foot the trip would take you about two days."

His answer had both of them worried. In two days the dragon could be long gone. Which would not really be a bad thing but it would also mean that it would have accomplished what it had to do there potentially removing something that would give them a better idea of what was going on. They thanked the orc for the information and made their way back to the house, in order to explain the situation and also start the journey there.

They had already walked for a few hours, Iris looked around to see a lot of flat plains of grass. Thankfully, the weather was nice, which made the walk physically pleasant, still besides the four of them there really was not much around. Alex was still half asleep and just following everyone else, Anna and Mike were in front leading the way and she was in the back. Seeing as there was nothing around, she quickened her pace to match the two

in front. The way she looked at it now would be a perfect time to fill in those blanks. "So now that we have plenty of time, mind letting me know about all those extra activities?"

Mike scratched his head a bit, "Sure, but it's nothing special."

Iris shrugged, "It's all good; I'm still curious."

Seeing that she was being passively insistent about it Mike looked at Anna and started going over the details, "Well, I guess we spent a few weeks helping this fishing family that were having issues, then I guess the farmers to the southwest... then..."

Anna then cut in to clarify, "We spent a lot of time with those people, first to help them with crops, then with certain wild creatures and then bandits. All in all that whole time was very time consuming for that year that we were apart."

Now Iris was puzzled, "But wait, then what was all that about the energy blast cancelling out spells practice that you mentioned back in Cagan?"

"When we went against the bandits there were a few mages, they fancied using fireball spells a lot so that gave us a lot of practice. That's about it."

Iris was still confused. While everything they mentioned seem to make sense and explained everything, it was so normal. From the way they fought and the things that she had seen them do, she expected that they had spent their time doing great things. She was happy that they had continued helping others along their way but at the same time did not understand why they had not come back to the others once their vacation had been over. Clearly, they were still interested in the Lights Templar group, so why go on their own and leave everyone behind? Was it as simple as they just did not know that the team needed them during the time that they were away?

If that was the case then why did they not check up on them? Iris had a lot of questions that she wanted to confront them with but really did not know how to approach them to ask. It was true that she still had many questions but the fact remained the team members that they had left behind needed their help, even if they probably did not realise it. After this event was settled, there was no reason why things would not go back to the way it was. This is why during this time she needed to prove herself to everyone, if she managed to do that then they would have to listen to her when she would mention that they should stay together. Showing her usefulness during a dragon fight would be a great way to accomplish that. While lost in thought, Iris noticed that her pace had slowed down and that she was once again in the rear. It did not matter to her, she was sure that she needed to do what she needed to do for the ongoing good mental health of the team. Now all that needed to be done is figuring out a way to do it.

After more hours of walking the group paused for lunch. At that point Alexandria was now fully awake and wanted to go over the details seeing as she had missed most of it during the morning. "Okay, so we are going to a ruin of some sort?"

Mike nodded, "Seems like it. We have about another day and a half to get there but from what we were told the ruins are already abandoned and also mostly already destroyed."

"Okay, so do we have any clues as to why the dragon wants to go to an already destroyed and abandoned place?"

Iris jumped in on that one, "Not really, the orc leader seems to think that it's just going there to rest up. Once done he thinks, as well as I, that it's just going to head to its next target."

Alexandria frowned at that comment and then looked at Anna and Mike. "Is that what you two think as well? Because I don't think that's the case."

Anna smiled, "Seems that we agree with that, sure it's possible that it's going there to rest but it also has to be at that spot for another reason."

"That's my thought as well. I mean if it's looking for a spot to rest where it will not be bothered then I'm sure there are plenty of other places that it could fly to and make sure that no one could follow it or give it a poke while it's resting."

Iris looked away and silently whispered, "... I had not looked at it from that angle. Hmm..."

Not wanting to draw too much attention to her comment of having made a mistake, Mike moved the conversation, "The real issue at this time is the distance. We need to get there faster. Is there any way that you can help with that maybe with a teleport spell or something?"

Alexandria thought about it, "I can't really use a teleport spell if I don't know where I'm going. Blind teleports are tricky and dangerous so I would not recommend it." She then looked at Iris "Still there is a way to get there faster. We could do the same thing that we did when we fought those giants when we got here, essentially reduce both of your weights and then use a flying spell for ourselves. How long do you think you could maintain the spell?"

Iris thought about it, "Maybe about eight hours or so, then I would need a break."

Alexandria made a few quick calculations in her head, "That should work, so we continue walking for the rest of the day and then tomorrow we fly to our location. Given the speed after eight hours we should be close enough that walking

would probably be best."

Both Anna and Mike were thrilled, "That's great news Alexandria, with any luck we will get a clue as to why it went there."

Now having a plan, the rest of the walking was spent with Alexandria updating both Anna and Mike on what had happened over the last year while they were gone, seeing as they only now finally had the time to do so.

Eventually night came and after spending the night on the hard ground morning arrived. Iris cast the weight reduction spells on both Mike and Anna. She then wrapped her arms around Anna and Alexandria took Mike, and a short while after they were off. The speed at which they were going was faster than a horse going full speed, so Alex had been right that they should get there quicker. It also meant that the journey would also mostly be spent in silence, the only person you could speak to was the person that you were carrying and even then you had to be pretty loud about it.

After a few hours, Anna noticed that Mike and Alex were exchanging words but there was no way to know what they were talking about. She was a bit saddened that Iris was not doing the same thing, as she looked back Anna was able to get a glimpse of Iris' face. From the looks of it, Iris seemed to be in full concentration on the task at hand. It made Anna wonder if she was pushing herself again in order to do what needed to be done. The thing is that taking a small break would have been fine in this case so if that was the case why push yourself needlessly? It was a question that she was sure that she would not get an answer to anytime soon.

Eventually the group could see in the distance the ruins that K'azugg was talking about, they could also see the black dragon that was in fact



resting about half a mile distance from the ruins. From what they could see, they were probably too late and the dragon had already destroyed what had been left of the ruins. Mike waved his arm and pointed to the ground, shortly after they landed.

Alexandria was the first to point out what was all in their minds, "That looks pretty destroyed, you think there is anything left?"

Mike looked at her, "Only way to find out is to go, would it be worth it to put a spell on us in order for the dragon not to see us?"

Alexandria really did not know what to say to that. "Well, I'm not sure, I mean I don't really have too much experience with dragons. Still my educated guess tells me that it would be better not to use magic at all. If it is in fact sleeping, I'm willing to bet that it has detection spells that will probably be seeking out magic used in its proximity." She looked away "... I could also be wrong about that but I think that's what we should do."

Mike gave a small chuckle, "I think that it will be best to go with your educated guess than mine any day when it comes to magic."

Iris was then curious about something, "So I guess that we first see about those ruins and then see about that dragon?" Mike gave a look to Anna who then turned to Iris, "Yes that would be the plan." Iris simply nodded in approval and with that the group slowly and quietly made their way to the ruins to see if there was anything left.

As they got closer, they realised that the dragon had in fact done nothing to the place. From the looks of it the ruins were probably of a very large tower of some sort and almost all of it was gone, but from what they could tell the damage had been done a very long time ago. What was left of the base of the tower was a large circular stone

floor, now cracked with plants and also with very large stones dumped everywhere.

After a few minutes of looking around Anna discovered this very large boulder that seemed to be hiding something below it. She waved at everyone to gather around her, once they were all present she pointed around one particular spot on the edge of the boulder. "Is it just me or does that look like more than a crack on the surface?"

Alexandria got closer and looked at it for a while. Puzzled, she jabbed one of her fingers in the fissure. Iris looked at her a bit bewildered, "I would have thought that you of all people would be more careful of where you jammed your fingers."

Alex just shrugged, "Normally sure, but we are pressed for time and it's not like I expect a trap of some sort to cut it off if I poked at it." Having removed her finger she stood up and looked around the boulder, "Hmm, yeah I think you are right. Considering that this thing is placed right at the edge of the stone floor and seeing as I was able to poke through, I would guess that this is maybe where stairs leading to the lower levels could be."

Mike looked at everyone, "Well let's start pushing, seeing as magic is still out of the question." It took a while but eventually they managed to move enough of it out of the way. Once they could inspect it more they realised that Alex had been right on the mark, worn out stairs could be found leading downwards. Mike went down first, followed by Iris, Alex and Anna guarding the rear.

The stairs led them to a lower level about as large as the surface diameter, the walls and floor were all made of moulded stone as they had seen in Cagan. The only thing inside that was left was a passageway that led to what seemed like another room. As they started to make their way there

Alexandria suddenly got a chill on the back of her neck. She nervously looked at the others. "Ah, you don't think that this place is haunted do you?"

Iris turned around, "I didn't know you're afraid of ghosts."

"Not really but I've read enough books on spirits possessing others that I would rather not have that happen to me if at all possible."

Iris just smiled back, "No worries, I can always repel them with holy magic if need be."

Mike then turned to both of them, "I don't even think that will be needed, I mean if you think about what is currently going on, those evil spirits would just come back to life and attack you with their own bodies. So I would not worry too much about ghosts."

Anna then jumped in questioning his logic, "Now are you saying that crazed spirits come back from the beyond in near invulnerable bodies are better than ghosts?" Thinking that he may have made things worse Mike turned around and started walking to the passageway.

The passageway was about ten feet long and led to another smaller circular room. As soon as they got in, a statue of a small man started to glow and illuminate the surroundings. Everyone but Alexandria looked very cautious, she on the other hand was wide-eyed and opened mouthed, filled with surprise and joy. The rest of the group looked around. All the walls had odd carvings on them in a language that they had never seen, the middle statue that was still glowing depicted a man who was about five feet tall with a long beard. His two hands were holding an axe that had its head resting on the ground. Seeing as they seemed to be in no immediate danger Mike approached Alex, "So Alexandria, what are we looking at?"

She was still in mild shock as she looked

around, she then pointed at the statue, "That is something that I never thought I would see in my life. That marvellous statue represents one of the first ones, or as they are also called a dwarf." She then turned around, "And this on the walls, is probably ancient Dwarven writing. It was so worth it to come here and find this."

Iris looked more closely at the statue, "It's not exactly how I pictured the first ones that you told me about."

Anna was more curious about something else, "What do you mean by probably ancient writing? You can't read it?"

A large smile could still be seen on Alexandria's face. "Heck no, I can't read something like that." She looked at Iris, "I wonder can you cast a language spell, my guess is that it will be ineffective."

Iris did as she was asked, "You are right it looks the same as without the spell, why is that? I thought that the spell would understand all languages."

Alex thought about it for a few seconds, "In theory, the way it was explained the spell will only understand the languages that have been infused with it when the spell was created. I'm guessing that when that was done there were not too many of these guys around."

Mike looked closely at the scribbles on the wall, "Are you sure that these are not just random carvings? I mean I think that you are right but it could also be a possibility, right?"

Alexandria wagged a figure in his direction, "No, no, no, you will not pooh-pooh on my parade, I'm sure that this is..." She then stopped as all felt a small tremor. "What was that?"

Anna looked at Mike, "You think that his nap time is over?" They were then hit with another

tremor, but this time it was much larger. Mike shook his head, "Yeah, I think you have it right. We need to get out of here before we get buried alive. Plus I think we also got what we were looking for, I just need to confirm one thing with K'azugg to make sure."

As the others started the process of leaving, Alexandria was fiddling with something in her pockets. After a few seconds, she pulled out a small glass orb. "There is no way that I'm leaving this to be destroyed, just give me a few seconds." Not waiting to see if they agreed she cast a spell on the orb and made her way to the passageway. The orb then hovered on top of the statue and then a flash of light could be seen coming from the orb. When the light disappeared, the orb floated back into Alexandria's hands, "Okay, now we can go."

They all went as fast as they could as the tremors were now violent enough for the inner walls to start crumbling. While they all made it safely out, there was a much bigger problem to deal with. Hovering above them was the dragon spewing out fireballs as it had done in Cagan. The real issue was that the dragon had a much smaller target than a whole city to destroy so the fireballs were pretty much aimed at them as well.

Iris turned to the others, "I'll cover you all with a shield." This plan sounded good to the others as they ran as fast as they could away from the ruins and the dragon. They stopped when they felt a different type of large tremor on the ground, as they turned around they noticed that Iris had not followed them. She was currently in front of the dragon, which had now landed, with both her blades glowing with the fire enchantment. Before they could say anything, the dragon spoke to her, "You are the same people that caused issues for me at that other city." His eyes glowed bright red,

"Excellent, you will all make a fine snack for the trouble that you caused." Not answering him Iris launched both her enchantments at the dragon and ran at him to attack his underbelly.

Mike and Anna both turned to Alex, "Why is she fighting the dragon?"

Alex was still looking at Iris with a worried look on her face, "I'm not sure, I think that maybe she thinks that we should get rid of it before it does more harm." She then turned to both of them "I mean, maybe she has the right idea?"

Mike shook his head, "No, what she is doing is meaningless, I mean we kill it and then what... Why would it stay dead?"

Alex was wide-eyed as she now understood, "Oh I don't think that she has realised that, we need to stop her."

"Agreed, can you teleport all of us out of here?"

"I can, not sure how safe it will be and we also need to all be in contact with each other."

"Okay, you work on that and once the spell is ready come to us." He then turned to Anna, "I'll occupy him while you explain the situation to Iris. Once everything is ready let me know and I'll come running."

As they both started running to their targets, Mike powered his sword with a pink glow and launched it at the dragon. This instantly got his attention, "Ahhh, the dragon killer enchantment, I was surprised to have seen it back there. Now that its powers have little effect I can finally have my revenge." The dragon then stomped away from Iris, who had only managed to scratch it, and went after Mike.

When Anna got close to Iris, she pulled her away from going after the dragon. "You need to stop this now and come back with us, Alex will cast a teleport spell and we can get out of here."

Iris was in full rage, "And run away... again?"

Anna shook her head, "You are missing the big picture here, Mike thinks he has figured things out here and that's what we needed to know. As for the dragon, attacking it is useless. Think about it, it's just going to come back again, assuming we kill it."

This had not occurred to her. Iris looked in Mike's direction. He was desperately trying to avoid the dragon's blows and at the same time deliver some of his own. He had managed to cut it a bit using the enchantment but already those wounds were healing. Anna was right, it now sunk in just how much trouble she had caused with her actions. She turned to Anna, "But, I ... I ..."

Alex then arrived next to them, "The spell is ready. I just need to say the last words and we are off."

Anna looked at the fight that was happening, if it could be called that. From her point of view the dragon was playing with Mike like he was a mouse and it the cat before it finished it off. She yelled at him, "*Mike!*" As soon as he heard her, he ran towards them.

The dragon turned to see where he was going, "Ah look, how nice. You've decided to group up for me." He then proceeded to take a large breath.

Alex grabbed Iris' shoulder with one of her hands, "Iris, I can't cast anything against that because I'll lose the teleport spell." Understanding, Iris raised both hands in the air as the dragon launched a large cone of dark fire coming from his mouth. The cone of fire hit the shield that she had created with such force that she was currently on her knees still giving it all that she had in order to keep the flames at bay. After what felt like an eternity but was really more like five second the flames stopped. The dragon then realised that they were all still alive. "Can you do that again I

wonder?" He then took another large breath.

Mike had finally arrived and grabbed Anna's hand that she had stretched from him to grab. As soon as contact was made, Alex then grabbed Anna's shoulder with her other hand and said the final words. When the dragon started doing another cone attack the group had vanished.

When they reappeared and dropped from a few feet off the ground Alexandria nervously looked at herself and the others to make sure they were all in one piece. After realising that this was the case she let go a sigh of relief.

Mike did the same and then started to look around to try and determine where they were. "Where did you bring us, Alexandria?"

She did not really know, "I think we are a few hours walk away from the ruins." She turned to Iris, "Given the situation I needed to cast a blind teleport. Truth of the matter I'm just happy that we did not show up God knows how high off the ground or on top of a tree, or a boulder..."

Iris did not know what to say, she knew that she needed to say something but the only thing that came out was, "...I'm so sorry..."

Anna faced her with a look of concern on her face, "Look, I realise that we do some pretty crazy things sometimes and I also realise that you did not realise that he would just come back but you have to be more careful. We could easily not be so lucky next time." Anna wanted to continue to learn the real reason why Iris had done what she had done but she realised that Iris was currently punishing herself in her head for what she had done or the obvious that she had missed. She had seen that mood often with Mike and knew that her questions would have to wait. Leaving Iris alone she walked over to Mike, "So what next? You said that maybe you had finally figured it out?"



His mood of concern quickly changed to a bit of excitement like having finally broken part of a puzzle that he had been working on for a while now. "Yes, I think I have but first I guess we should start walking toward Cagan to see if K'azugg is still there. Only he can confirm if I'm right or wrong." Leaving the many questions that they had on the situation that had just occurred, the group started their long silent walk back to the city.

## *Chapter 8*

The group made it back to Cagan late during the night. As they arrived they were instantly escorted to a similar house they had used the last time but the difference being the house was whole and had a third bed on the second floor. When the morning came Anna woke up warm, which brought a smile to her face, as she turned she whispered "I'm not going to argue but I really was joking around."

Mike did not open his eyes and smiled, "Hey I like this too you know, it's nice." He then opened his eyes and looked at her. God he loved her more than life itself. "Sadly given K'azugg's comment from the last time we should probably get ready."

Anna slightly shook her head, "You had to break the moment." She then turned around and stretched out, "Still you're probably right about our oh so nice host, plus I think the others are also awake and it would be a shame to keep them all waiting on our account."

As they got ready and went downstairs, they noticed that Alexandria and Iris were indeed awake and all ready to head out. As they reached for the door, a knock was heard from the other side. "Open up, I need to leave this place and I can't leave you here."

Mike opened the door to see K'azugg on the other side, "We were about to go to you."

The orc leader cut him off as he entered the small house, "And just like the last time, you were taking a long while to do it. So, what did you learned over there?"

Mike explained the high levels of what they found and what happened, purposely ignoring the

battle with the dragon, if it could be called that. When he finished, K'azugg nodded his head, "This seems to match what the runner told me, so in the end you made the journey for no reason I take it." He stopped as he realised that Mike now had a smile on his face, "Is there more?"

Mike nodded, "Assuming you can confirm something yes there is. That first place that was attacked, were there any markings or buildings that had been made by the people who were there before you?"

K'azzug thought about it for a bit. "I think there were markings matching those that could be found here but besides that nothing like a tower or anything."

Alexandria then looked at Mike, "Wait, you think that their targets are places that have information left by the first ones? If that is the case, why did the dragon create a magical dome and have the reborns attack the people?"

"The people living here have been living here for a while now and I would guess a lot of them did not leave this place too often considering their age. Would it be hard to believe that some have memorized the carvings enough to be able to replicate them if asked by someone? I'm thinking that the answer to that is that it would be pretty easy, and if your goal was to remove that knowledge would you not also remove the people that had been living there as well, just in case?" Mike then looked at K'azugg, "So I guess the next question is, are there any other spots that have more markings like those, that you know of?"

Again K'azugg had to think about it for a while, "That I know, there should be none left now. What you said would make sense based on the other report I received." All of them looked at him with a look that told him he should elaborate. "I

got information on the direction that the dragon was heading. He was heading east in the direction of the great desert like he was leaving us alone to go plague someone else. I supposed if what you say is true then he could really be done with us after all."

All Lights Templar members had very concerned looks on their faces. Mike turned to Alex, "Do you think something like that could cross that desert?"

She slowly nodded, "Even with the magical chaos of that place that is always at play I would assume that something like that could cross if it really wanted to. Do you think that it's heading for our side of the world? I mean to my knowledge we don't have anything left by the first ones so what would be the point?"

K'azzug then cut in, "I figure that you will learn this eventually but I also got a report that the effects of that desert are now gone it seems."

Alexandria was wide-eyed, "That's impossible! No one is strong enough to get rid of that, you must be wrong."

The orc leader had a wide smile, "Believe what you will little human, but there is no error in our information."

Alex thought about it and still could not believe it. "If that is the case then the dragon would have no issues at all reaching our side. I still don't think that we have a valid target, mind you."

Anna looked to Alexandria, "I'm not so sure about that." She then turned to Mike, "You know when you said that the architecture in Cagan was familiar, that you had seen it before? I think I know from where. Remember that impregnable tower with something glowing on top that we stopped to look at before all this started? Don't you think that it may be that's the place that it

reminded you about?"

Mike tried to recall the tower, "I think you may be right, if that is the case it could be the target on our side."

Alexandria was even more confused, "Are you two talking about the same tower that everyone can't seem to get into? But, I was never told that it was built by the first ones, are you sure?"

They both nodded, "It's very similar to what we have seen so far." Alexandria was a bit angry about this news, she figured that they could be wrong but at the same time, her gut told her that this was not the case. "...All this time and it was right there..."

Iris looked at Alex who seemed a bit lost in her mumblings. She turned to the others, "Okay, so assuming that it's a target I guess we should head back? There is also the desert. I suppose there could be information there as well."

Mike thought about that for a few seconds, "No, I think that we should head back using the portal, we need to let them know as soon as we can and also get an update on what has happened in the last few days."

This got K'azugg's attention, "I think going back would be a great idea. I've prepared some of our fastest animals to help you out. I can only spare two of them but that should be okay to get you to the portal quickly enough."

Mike gave him a sarcastic smile, "Why are you trying to get rid of us?"

Seemingly unaffected by his comment the orc leader shrugged. Anna gave Mike a quick smile and a small nod telling him that he should let it go.

Soon after, the Lights Templar were on their way to the portal tower. K'azugg had provided them with a resupply, two beasts like the ones that the runners were using and also two escorts to make

sure that they did not get lost as he had mentioned. Again, Anna was with Iris and Mike with Alex. As they rode to their location Mike figured that now would be as good a time as any, "I'm sorry by the way."

Alex clearly had no clue what he was talking about. "I know that you wanted to study those carvings more at that ruined tower but I figured that we would have little time considering what the dragon had in mind."

Alexandria now understood a bit more, "No worries, it's not your fault plus I was able to get all the information I needed. Sure, having access to the original would be best but I'm okay with a copy."

Now it was Mike's turn to be in the dark, "What do you mean by a copy?" Alex took out a small orb from her pocket, "I cast a spell on this orb before we left. Essentially, it got a copy of all the runes on the walls. Now there was no time to also get a copy of the statue but at least I was able to save the information. If I concentrate on the orb the sections I want will appear in front of me, kind of like that map that I used when we were all looking for that portal way back when."

Mike now had a smile on his face, "I'm glad then, I was afraid that the information would have been lost."

Alex was puzzled at his comment, "I did not know that you would be interested in writings from the first ones?"

"I'm not, but I realise how important it seems to you so..."

A warm small smile appeared on Alexandria's face, "Thanks and it is important to me."

"Can I ask why? I mean given the current situation I do want to know more about them but only because it may help figure out the overall

plan. I take it you have a different reason."

"I do. All of my life was spent in Astrum and a lot of that time was spent in the library, learning. I always liked to learn about other cultures, how they worked, what they did. I suppose that the main reason would be because I could not really go anywhere and this helped me see the world in a way. While I was doing that, I also realised that the more mysterious or different a culture was the more interested I became. When I learned about the first ones I was hooked, I wanted to know more but there were issues with that."

"Because of the limited knowledge on them, one would think that the elves could help with that."

Alex's smile dropped at that comment and she took a while to find her words, "Don't get me wrong, I have nothing against the elves and I will forever be grateful to them for what they have done for me, my family and everyone. That being said they do hide things, things they don't want others to know about."

Mike was not really sure where she was heading with this. "I would think that normal to a certain extent. Still, I would think that seeing as you are on the Council that you would have more access than most."

Again, Alex chose her words carefully, "You're right on both counts but in this case it's not an issue of privacy. The reason why they withheld information from me is simply because I'm human."

She saw that Mike had a confused look on his face, "Compare our lifespan to theirs, the amount of time it would take for me to learn this language and understand it would take many years at best. For them, years are not an issue, for us not so much. It's the same with certain spells, when you

learn a complex spells it takes a certain amount of time in order to study it before you are able to even attempt to cast it. In the case of some, the fundamentals can take a year to understand and that is just the start of it. Because of those reasons, they figure that wasting what little time we have on things like that is meaningless and so that knowledge is locked away. Again, don't get me wrong, I understand why they do this and having a human on the Council is very new to them. Considering everything, for them this arrangement is still very much in its trial period so adjustments are being made as we all go along."

She took a moment after that comment, "Still, I'm realising that part of me hates this very much and having this is like having a hidden treasure all to myself. I know that feeling that way is wrong but I just can't help it."

Mike shook his head, "Personally, I don't see anything wrong with what you are feeling. I mean it's like they are telling you that you will fail at something before you have the chance to even try. Now that I know all this I'm sorry about that comment I made in the ruins."

Alexandria smiled, "Don't worry about it and thanks."

"I think the thanks go more to you. I realise that you are not supposed to be with us right now, again, and I have no clue if it will cause you trouble because of it, but truly, thanks for joining us again. We both really appreciate it. We just both hope that it was worth it for you as well."

She gave him a small laugh, "Being with you two is always life-changing, did you both not realise that?" He was not sure what she meant by that one and decided to let it go, as they would soon be arriving at the tower.

Arriving at their destination, the army of orcs



still guarding the portal let them through only due to the order of the runners that had accompanied them. While the others did not notice, Mike saw that this disappointed Anna. He knew that she had not given up on having better relations with the orc race. As the other two had already started the long climb up, he took her hand and gave her a smile of encouragement. As they too started the climb, she looked at him with thanks, "I know, there is a lot of bad blood and it's going to take a very long time before anything changes. I also know that I may not see any change in my lifetime. Still, I hope that in the end it will eventually make a difference."

"I'm sure it will... eventually."

After purposely putting some distance between them and Alex and Iris, Anna shook her head a bit, "I did not get anywhere with Iris sadly. I'm still not sure what her plan was back there. Did you get anywhere with Alex?"

"I think so, I mean she did not lose the information like we thought but she mentioned other things that were a bit troubling. I'm sure you would have understood her better than me."

Anna let out a small sigh, "The idea was that Alex would have been more approachable and that I would have been given time to try and approach Iris. I guess that plan failed."

Mike let out a small chuckle, "Seems like it, I guess for now we give it more time."

"We have to it seems, I'm just wondering how much time we really have left after all that has happened."

When it seemed that hours had gone by they all finally reached the top of the tower. As Mike and Anna looked around, they noticed that something was missing. Mike reached for Alex who was just standing there eyes wide open.

"Alexandria, I know this is a stupid question but

why does it look like the portal is closed?"

It was Iris who answered his question as Alex was still staring at the empty space in front of her. "It's not just that it looks closed, it is closed. I can feel some residual magic, meaning that it was just recently closed."

Anna thought about that and turned to Mike, "You think that he knew? Is that why he told us about the desert?"

He frowned after hearing that comment, "I think it's more that he did not know or that he just thought that we made it look like it was closed, at least I hope that is the case." He turned to the only two magic users, "So is there anything that can be done?"

Alex slowly nodded her head, "No... nothing at all... There is no way that we have the power to open this up again with just us two. Plus it's not like there are any other casters that can help us out on this side."

Anna was a bit surprised by her comment, "That's not like you, there has to be a way to get back. Can't we send a message to Astrum? I'm sure they would be able to open it from there."

Iris cut in before Alex could answer, "That is something that could be done but getting a message there would take a long time, and before you ask, the communication pendants can't work at these distances from each other."

Alexandria then turned quickly to Iris, like something she had said had given her an idea. She then turned to Mike and Anna, "She's right the pendants will not work, but if I combine the pendant with the original items that I created I think it would work... assuming you both don't mind that is."

Iris was lost. "What do you mean original items?" She then turned to the couple who seemed

to know what Alexandria was talking about.

Mike looked at Anna, "I'll give her mine, it's okay."

Anna shook her head. "Nope, it's not, I know it means as much to you as it does to me. So we both do it."

As he nodded in approval, Iris watched them both remove their wedding rings and give them to Alexandria. It was then that Iris finally understood and finally knew the answer to the question that she had about a year and a half ago. She was not really talking to anyone in particular as the realisation of everything formed in her head "So the thing that was special about the rings was that they allowed you to communicate with Alex... She mentioned original, so I'm guessing that your version was not as advanced as ours but allowed for a greater distance because you were not sure where you were going." She then turned to Alex, "That's why you were never worried when I asked about them and why you told me to wait at the Crimson town for them... Wait, did Julia also know about this, is that why she was also sure that you would show up?"

Alex had a very guilty look on her face, "Look, I realise how upset you are about this but it's not like that. I created the communication spell on the rings as more of a just in case. I mean you're right, there was no way to tell where they were going and I know how much they tend to find trouble so I figured that it would be a good thing to do just in case." Both of them looked at each other with an odd look and then Anna continued Alex's explanation. "I'm not really sure what you mean by that but she is right, in the end I think we only used them three times. When she mentioned it back then we did not think that it would be necessary but it was of help here and there, plus

there was the added bonus of being able to find each other if we ever separated. That's how I found you both so quickly during that attack in Cagan."

Again, the explanations all seemed logical but this meant that Iris had been wrong again. All this time, she figured that everyone had unintentionally left the group, as she visited them for training she realised that they were not as happy as they were before. She had thought that the reason why was that the two people that led the group had disappeared. She had wanted to bring that happiness back and the way to do that was to try to replace the empty space that they had created by not being around. But all that had been wrong, had it been "... all for nothing?" As Iris realised that she had said that last part out loud she saw that Anna was now approaching her and put both her hands on her shoulders and looked at her with a very serious look.

"Don't be mad at Alex, okay? All three of us agreed to keep this between ourselves because at the time we felt that there would be no reasons to let anyone else know. As for your last comment, I don't think any of us understand exactly why you have been acting the way you have and that's okay but don't think for a second that your efforts have been for nothing."

She took a moment to make sure that Iris had her full attention and then Anna continued, "Recently, you have saved tons of people who were essentially buried alive, you helped defeat giants and helped a good friend of mine when a ghost from the past came back to hurt her efforts. Not to mention that not even two years ago you could not even swing a sword and now look at you. We are currently at the peak of our game and it took us years to get where we are, and you are just at the start of it and you are already very close to us."

Anna let go and took a few steps back, "Look, we are okay if you don't want to talk about it. I mean it's okay if you want to figure it out for yourself. But please don't tell yourself that what you have done was for nothing because it's simply not true."

As Anna once again stood next to Mike who was giving her a warm smile, Alex approached her as well, "She is right you know, well maybe not about us being at our peaks but ignoring that everything else is all true." Alex then tried to compose herself but small tears could be seen in her eyes, "Look, I'm really sorry, I just knew that what you wanted was to be a part of our little group and the last thing I wanted was to distract you from all the training that you were working so hard on in order to reach that goal. I know that we are not really sisters, and maybe what I did broke your trust in me but you are the only family I have left and I just wanted to do what I thought was best for you."

Iris closed her eyes for a few seconds, that is what she originally wanted and then all she wanted to do was help them find the happiness that they had lost. In trying to do that she had only made them worry and apologize to her for her own stupid actions. Iris reached out to Alexandria and wrapped her arms around her, "I'm the one who's sorry, so very sorry. You're also the only family I have left... You all are really, and the last thing I want is for that to change. Please stop worrying about me. I'll be fine from this point on, just give me a bit more time to get everything together again."

Alex wiped the small tears that had escaped her eyes and took in a deep breath, a large smile appeared on her face again as she looked at Iris, "All right, if you feel up for it I will need help in

order to combine the magic between the pendant and their rings." Iris returned the smile and nodded in approval. Mike reached out to hold Anna's hand, "Looks like that went better than expected."

She gave him a small smile, "Looks like it."

After a long while had passed, both Mike and Anna were still watching Alexandria and Iris at work creating the new artifact that would allow them to communicate with the others. They had realised that Alexandria had oversimplified the procedure. The second version of the communication devices that she had created was a pearl that was about half an inch in diameter. From what they understood from the process the first version, one of their rings, would readjust itself and merge with the pearl through its diameter. When they had tried this the first time the procedure had not worked and the ring had shattered the pearl as it had tried to merge, this result had also caused the ring to warp on itself destroying it as well. At this time, they were both nearing the end of the spell. The other ring started to wrap around the pearl, as it came in contact it once again started to embed itself on the pearl. Sweat could be seen pouring from Alexandria and Iris as they applied a bit more power to the spell. In a second, the ring snapped into position and solidified half in and half out around the pearl. Alexandria relaxed for a few seconds as Iris took the item and inspected it. All eyes were on her as she tested its magic with her own using an identification spell, a short while after a smile appeared on her face, "Looks like it worked, with this we should be able to communicate with Rosamia or Adam back home." She handed the modified pearl to Alex.

Alexandria looked at the new device and then turned to Anna and Mike, "I promise when this is

over I will get you two new rings that will be better than the last ones." As they both smiled at her Anna tried to remove some of the guilt that Alex was currently feeling, "Don't worry about it, it was the right thing to do." She then turned to Mike, "Losing the rings stings, sure, but it changes nothing between us and that's really what matters" Mike just smiled and took her hand having nothing to add to her comment. Alex nodded at both of them understanding what they meant, while that helped with her guilt she still wished that she had not had to do it. She shook her head a bit and convinced herself not to worry about it. Alex then held the artifact with renewed strength, closed her eyes and focused on Rosamia.

When she opened them a floating blue face of Rosamia, Adam and Lithius could be seen by everyone. It seems that the new artifact was in fact working perfectly fine. Rosamia had a joyful look on her face, "I'm so happy that you found a way to contact us, we were all worried when the portal closed." Alex bobbed her head a bit, "Yeah well, we got lucky on that actually. Ignoring that, why is the portal closed at all? What is happening over there?"

Rosamia's smile disappeared as she started the explanation, "Things are not good over here. Currently, it's estimated that about a little more than one-third of the human population is reborn. Most believe that the numbers are not as high due the efforts that we have put in..." As she paused for a second Alexandria looked at the concerned faces of all the others around her. She did not need Mike to tell her that at those numbers if they decided to group together there would be little they could do to stop them. Rosamia then continued the answer to her question, "It's when we learned of those numbers that something odd happened. It seems that somehow all the reborns got a message

informing them to go to our Portal Tower. There was little that we could do to stop them from taking it over. Once they did, Lithius informs us that they closed the portal and then re-opened it. Since that time all reborns have been making their way to the portal tower and then stepping through the new portal."

They all could see that Rosamia was in a lot of emotional pain. Alex looked at Lithius, "Did you figure out where this new portal is leading everyone?" As he answered his face took the centre to replace Rosamia. "We are currently working on that at this time, we are assuming that we will have an answer in a few days time." Alex's eyes went wide at his comment, "A few days? That's not good."

"We realise this, but if we want to remain undetected we need to take certain precautions, I'm sure you understand." She did understand, but it did little to lessen the worry that she was feeling.

Mike stepped in closer to Alex in order for the artifact to pick him up, "Given that news I think we should go over what we have learned over here." The more and more he explained the more the looks from the others on the other side went from curiosity to fear, which was expected. The reaction that was unexpected was the surprise when he went over the details of the destroyed ruins and the news of the first ones. This reaction was doubled when he saw the look on Lithius' face when he mentioned the last part about the magic in the great desert now being removed. Alexandria had also noticed the same thing, "I would think that the news of an undying dragon would cause more reaction than news of the first ones and the lost magic over the desert. What have you not told us?"

Lithius glanced at Rosa and Adam, paused for



a moment and then back at Alex, "While the information of the dragon is concerning, there is a bigger threat at hand. The report that Mike has told us has only helped to confirm the next piece of news that we need to tell you."

Alex did not like this at all, she had known Lithius her whole life and if he thought that the dragon was just concerning then she could not imagine what his next news could possibly be.

A thought occurred to Lithius, he then turned to Rosa, "Let me get the scroll, while you explain the nature of our true enemy." Rosamia nodded and the face of Lithius disappeared, "While you were away the Council managed to trace down the source of the magic that is directing all the energy to the reborns." She took a deep breath and continued, "The Council is now convinced that the source of all this is the avatar of the dark lord now freed from his prison." As soon as Alex heard the news, her eyes went wide, while everyone else around her had questioning looks. This time it was Anna who got closer to Alex, "I think we need a quick history lesson here, if you don't mind."

Rosa gave her a small smile before she began. "Before the war of the dragons, there was another great war that took place between the avatars of darkness, light and both their respective armies. In the end light won, but only really managed to imprison the avatar of darkness in the great desert. To make it hard for others from the outside to help him, it is rumoured that he also created the wild magic around the desert. It is also rumoured that the real cause of the war of the dragons was a way for them to get rid of us so that we would not get in their way when they tried to find a way to free their master." Rosa paused after that last comment, "Mind you, that last part is only information that we have recently been given by the Council."

Anna was not sure how to take all this, dragons were one thing but avatars of gods were another. "So what's the next steps?"

Adam took over to answer her question, "Well, as mentioned the Council is trying to determine where all those people are going. Once they have that they mentioned that a plan of action would be created. As for us, it seems that we are taking a small detour and going on a trip." Not sure what to make of his comment they saw Adam move away for Lithius, who had come back, to explain the rest.

"Yes, well when our true enemy had been figured out Solanar gave me a scroll and informed me to use it." He paused and looked at Alexandria, "I must tell you that even I did not know about this."

Alex was very puzzled, "I was basically told that our enemy is the avatar of a god, what could possibly be in that scroll that would make you worry about my reaction?"

"Very well, the scroll was given to our ancestors by the first ones. It holds a spell to teleport to one of the locations that they gave us in case something world-ending occurred. We don't know if the first ones are still there, but the plan was to send these two to verify."

Given the conversation that Mike had had with Alexandria, he could understand why Lithius had worries on how Alexandria would take this particular news. Her expression was cold, but she closed her eyes, took a deep breath and let her frustration go. She looked at Lithius, "So what can we do?"

Lithius nodded in what seemed a sign of approval, "I have the scroll here, I was planning on showing it to you so that you two could maybe make your way there." As he unrolled the scroll,

Iris got closer to Alexandria to take a better look. The contents of the scroll showed up, blocking the faces of the others. As they read the spell, they both understood why Lithius had added the 'maybe' in his comment.

Iris looked at Alex, "Can we even cast that?"

Alexandria ignored her and focused on memorizing the content of what she was seeing. After a while she then addressed Lithius, "So, I take it that you have a few mages over there that will be performing this spell on your end?"

As his face reappeared, he confirmed her suspicions, "Yes, we also have a Council member who will help with the casting. We are planning on sending them tonight."

Alex looked at the people around her, "Anyone else have something they want to ask or add?" Everyone slowly nodded their heads to let her know that they had nothing. Alexandria took another look at Rosa and Adam, "We'll see you there." As they wished them good luck Alexandria terminated the communication.

Mike looked at everyone, the mood was very grim. "Okay, so to recap, people are being offered a new way of life by an avatar of the dark lord. About one-third of the human population have agreed, probably not counting the ones that have just returned, and they are all headed to some other location. Because of who we are dealing with, the Council think that we should try and see if we can contact the first ones for help."

Anna then continued, "I guess it's safe to assume that once we have made contact and that the Council has figured out this location we will probably head there for what will be the final battle."

Mike nodded, as he thought the same thing. He then looked at Alexandria and Iris, "Given that,

Alexandria, Iris... are you able to cast that spell?"

Iris was not sure what to answer, and just looked at Alex. Alexandria gave her a small smile, "It's not that the spell is complicated, which is very surprising in itself, but it's the amount of power needed to cast the spell that's a problem." She looked at Iris and then back at Mike, "We will give it a try, but I don't know if I can make any guarantees."

Anna gave both of them a warm smile, "Just do your best, if it does not work then we will figure out something else. No matter what, we are not just giving up."

"Okay... Well in that case you two can figure out where we will be going next. During that time both of us need to rest up a bit and focus our energy before we try this." As the two ladies unrolled some blankets from their packs both of them sat down and started what appeared like a meditation exercise.

Mike and Anna looked in the distance as they left them alone for the time they needed to take. He wrapped his arms around her, "That was informative."

A small smile appeared on her face "That's one way to put it, still at least now we have a better picture of what's going on."

"There are still blanks but yes, it seems very clear."

She was puzzled by that statement, "Seems like?"

He shook his head a bit. "I'm not sure; something tells me we are still missing something. It could be just me, mind you." He paused for a bit and looked back at the other two, "Assuming that they are not able to cast the spell, I think we should make our way to the great desert."

"I figured that would be your next target,

makes sense. Mind you, I think that they will be able to pull it off, call it a gut feeling."

He smiled at that comment, "I've learned never to go against those, still I hope that you are right."

It took many hours but eventually Alexandria and Iris were both ready. She instructed that they should form a circle and hold hands to keep physical contact. Once everyone was in position, she informed them of what could happen. "Ideally for both of you this should feel like the teleport spell. The spell will not function if the proper amount of power is not supplied, so there is really no harm in trying this and there should be nothing to worry about." She could then feel a harder squeeze from both of her hands, which were in contact with Anna and Mike. "No worries just do your best."

Alexandria nodded and then looked at Iris, who also looked nervous, "All right Iris, hold nothing back. Just focus on channelling all the power you can. I'll do the same and also take care of the casting itself. Ready?" As she nodded in approval they both closed their eyes and Alexandria started the chanting.

From Mike and Anna's view point the chanting finished really quickly compared to the teleport spell that had been used before. What was also different was what came next. A large light came from Iris, this light traced the bodies of everyone who was connected in the circle. As it went through, a warm and kind feeling could be felt. This light was heading in the direction of Alexandria, when they turned to look in her direction she had turned into a large bright beacon of light. As the seconds ticked by the light grew brighter and brighter, after a while they had to close their eyes and turn away from the pain that it caused them. A little while after they had closed

their eyes a large feeling of nausea fell over them  
and then in a blink all of it was gone.

## Chapter 9

When they opened their eyes, they saw that they were no longer on top of the tower but in an underground cave. The cave looked like an old channel. Due to the warmth that they could feel one had to assume that the channel had been created from an old lava tube that was hopefully very dormant. At their feet, they could see that there was a small circular stone design carved into the stone floor. Some patterns matching the script found in the destroyed ruins could be seen on the stone that formed the small circle. Finally, as they turned their heads to figure out the source of the light that was helping them see anything they saw their two friends, one of whom had a very large smile on her face.

Rosamia opened her arms wide and started to walk in Alex's direction, "I'm so glad you were able to make it. Lithius did not think you would have been able to."

Alexandria gave a weak chuckle at that. "He tends to underestimate my resolve, plus did I not say that we would meet you here? There was no way that I was going to miss a potential meeting with first ones..." As she talked, a wave of dizziness came over her. Mike and Anna were still holding her hands and were able to catch her quickly as she almost fell on the ground. Anna put her arm around Alexandria's waist to help support some of her weight and help with her balance. "Are you all right?"

Alexandria looked at the worried looks she was getting from her friends, Adam included. "It's all right, I'm just really out of it right now. Casting

that spell took all the power I had in one short burst." She then looked at Anna and Mike, "I'm sure you two have experience on how a person feels after something like that." Both of them remembered that last attack that they did against that dragon long ago and understood what she was getting at.

Iris let out a small sigh, "I'm sorry, I guess I messed up again and did not give all I had. I thought I did but for some reason, while I do feel drained, I still have energy to cast."

Alexandria slowly shook her head, "Don't feel too badly about it, it's actually very normal. You're still new at all this and don't know your limits. Because of that, it's very common when a situation like this happens that you think you are giving all you have only to realise after that you actually had more to give. Give it more practice and you will not have that problem."

Mike looked at Rosamia who was putting more power in the light ball that was floating around her in order for them to see a bit more clearly. "Did Lithius give you any information on what to do when you got here?"

Rosamia shook her head, "Not at all, he had no clue what we would find at all. We only got here recently ourselves, we figured that we would wait here in case you were able to make it and then see what we could see together."

Iris looked around and then a thought occurred to her, "So not that I want to ask a stupid question, especially after we just got here but does anyone know how we will get back?"

Adam chuckled for a bit, "There is no way back. In theory this has the possibility of being a one way trip for us." He pointed to the circular stone design on the ground, "From what we were told the spell only works one way and that is



because it was linked to that beacon on the floor there. I guess in theory as long as the marker is present we may still get help from Astrum. Still hopefully we will find something, otherwise this is going to be an interesting detour."

Anna gave Adam a sad smile, "This is the first time that we are all together and not being rushed off someplace and you had to drop that news on us, breaking this nice moment." She looked at Mike, "Your sense of timing is still as bad as his." Adam just rolled his eyes, it had been a while since he had been the target of her teasing. "I was just answering her question, you don't need to be all..." Suddenly he stopped talking and turned his head to the other side of the cave channel. "Something is coming our way, pretty quick too."

Alexandria looked confused, "How can you tell that? I'm not going to believe that you suddenly have a tracking spell for first ones... I'm not."

Adam gave her a serious look as he got into a defensive position, "Yes, I am using my tracking spell, and I never said anything about first ones. I just said something is coming. This version of the spell does not tell me what, just that there is something." He turned back to face what was going to be soon in front of them. "You're not the only one that's learned new tricks during the last year." Alex was a bit flustered by his comment but ignored him, she then moved away from Anna who was still helping her out in order for Anna to be able to act depending on what was coming. She slowly moved behind everyone so that she would not be in the way and waited.

Adam had been right about their speed and pretty soon they were able to see what was coming at them. The group was about twenty stocky humanoid looking creatures, they wore plate armour that covers all the typical major targets on

the body save for their heads. Their hair was braided and bound so that the braids would drop down their backs, presumably so as not to get in the way during combat. They all wielded a variety of weapons ranging from axes, to spears and swords all of which looked very sharp and in excellent condition. They stopped in a defensive line in front of the Lights Templar group. After a few seconds of trying to stare them down, one of them stepped forward and pointed at them. Words came out of his mouth and he was clearly saying something in a very deep tone but none in the group could understand what he was saying.

Rosamia was still looking at them as she addressed her friends, "I can try to cast a language spell, but I don't know if the action of casting will provoke them. Should I try?"

Alexandria then stepped in to get in line with the others, "No don't, it won't work anyways. We tried that back at the ruins." While looking at what was clearly a living breathing version of the statue that they had seen in the ruins a thought occurred to Alex. "Look, I think I remember a welcoming ritual that could be done, it should at least give them a message that we mean no harm." She glanced at her friends, "Basically, slowly go on one knee and place your weapon on the ground. Then slowly unsheathe your weapon place it next to the scabbard, once done put your hands on the ground and leave them there."

Adam slowly turned his head towards Alexandria, "Are... you... *nuts*? Where did you read that? That's not a welcoming ritual it's an 'I give up and end it quick' ritual." He then looked at Mike, "You're not thinking of going along with this are you?" Mike did not even think about it, "Everyone do what she said."

Adam's shoulders dropped, "Of course, why

would I think otherwise...?" Reluctantly Adam joined in and did exactly as Alexandria had told them. Adam looked at everyone as the first one that had tried to communicate with them was now approaching them. "I would like to go on record that I completely disagree with this plan and feel that this is a lousy way to go."

To everyone's surprise, the first one reached out and grabbed Mike's sword and inspected it, he then turned and motioned for another one to come and see it as well. They guessed that they were talking about something but again there was no way to tell. Rosamia looked at Alex, "Is this part of the ritual as well?" Alexandria was thankful that there was very little light, she was pretty sure that otherwise they would all see her sweat due to the nervousness that she was currently feeling. "Ah sure..."

Adam was furious. "You don't know do you?"

One of the first ones then touched Mike's blade with a stone that he had taken from his pouch, when it came in contact with the blade the enchantment flared up a bit and a red glow could be seen. He then removed the stone and placed it back in his pouch, more talking occurred between the two and then one of them made a pointing gesture in their direction and with his other hand raised two fingers. Iris was also nervous at this point, clearly Alex's plan had not worked out as she had intended, "Anyone know what they could be talking about?"

Alex looked at the two first ones, "I think they are trying to say that there should be two." She then waved at them to get their attention, as soon as she did all the others took a step forward and pointed their weapons at them. Alex turned to Anna, "Okay, now slowly touch your sword and let them see a small green glow." As Anna gave her a

look of surprise, Alexandria reassured her, "Don't worry, I know I'm right about this... this time." Anna slowly shook her head a bit with a slight smile on her face and then reached out and touched her blade. Once the proper emotion was triggered, the bladed glowed green. She then broke contact with it and looked at the reaction this had caused.

The first ones were talking again but this time in a more agitated manner, like something had just been confirmed. The one who had taken the stone to activate Mike's blade was now reluctantly nodding his head and reached for something else in his pouch. He pulled out what looked like a seed and approached Anna and offered it to her. As she took the seed, he then made a motion with his hand that told her to swallow it. Mike had a very concerned look on his face, Anna gave him a warm smile, "It will be fine, I don't think they have any reason to poison us while we are in this position." She then swallowed the seed in her mouth. Soon after she was hit with what felt like an electric shock in her brain, while it caused a sharp pain it was quickly over. She shook her head a bit to clear it out, "I'm okay, just some momentary discomfort."

"Good, now you should be able to understand us." Anna was surprised momentarily and then things became pretty obvious, she looked up at the first one who was still next to her, "So because of the seed I can understand you?"

"Yes, essentially you are still talking in your language but the magic in the seed also allows us to hear what you are saying and also allows you to understand as you hear it. Long ago, we figured that it was quicker to change the target than to use the magic on all of us. The effect will only last a few days." He then crossed his arms, "So what is your business here and how did you get here?"

Now understanding that her teammates would understand what she was saying but not what he was asking Anna decided to confirm his comments and then answer them, killing two birds with one stone. "So the seed will allow us to talk but only temporarily and you wish to know who we are and how we got here. Okay, well we are the Lights Templar, we were sent by the elves using a spell that was given to them a long time ago. We came here because we have news, the avatar of the dark lord is free from his prison it seems. Essentially, we need..."

The first one raises his hand to cut her off, "That's enough, there are currently issues that we need to deal with and your needs will have to wait."

It's then that another one got close to him, "Seems like we will have to pause our mission, are they not the ones that the Oracles told us about? They should be escorted to the city. That was the order given many years ago."

It seems that the other was not convinced, "And they will be, but first we need to protect our people. Once that is done then I'll escort them, keep in mind that they mentioned that we should trust them only and I still believe that trust should be earned not simply given." He looked at Anna, "Still, you did help confirm our suspicions." He reached in again in his pouch and pulled out another seed and gave it to Anna. "Pick wisely this will be the last given. Also you can all stand up now and take back your weapons." He walked past her and made his way to the carved circular stone design on the floor. "I mean if you were here to hurt us then I seriously don't think that you would open up like you did by showing us you have a death wish... why would you do something that crazy anyways?"

Anna relayed his comment, while ignoring his

last one to the others. "So who gets the seed and what do we do next?" Mike looked around him, Adam or Iris would be a poor choice and the same would go for himself. He knew that Alexandria would relish the idea of understanding the first ones but Rosamia would be better at communicating with them due to all her recent diplomatic experience she gained in the last year. He looked at Anna who gave him a smile, "I recommend going emotionally on this one." Understanding what she was telling him he gave the order, "Give the seed to Alexandria, and as for what we do next," Mike looked at Adam and Iris "well that should be obvious, we butt in of course." Adam shook his head at the comment while Iris simply smiled.

Alex quickly used the magic of the seed before anyone could have a chance to change their minds. Anna got up and walked to the first one who seemed to be in charge of the group, "You mentioned that trust should be earned, then let us earn it by helping you with your task."

The first one smiled as he pulled out a stone from the pouch again. He then placed it on the circular design, as soon as he did the stone melded with it and then suddenly the design shattered. "Are you sure? Currently, we are being attacked by shadow creatures. They are using these markers to infiltrate our tunnels. Our job is to destroy any that we see and also close all the markers."

Anna just smiled at him, "Yes we are sure, you need help so we will help. It's the right thing to do." Mike smiled at that comment.

"Fine, but if you join us there is something that you will need." He pointed to another in his team, "Coat their weapons. If they are going to fight they will need to be able to hit them." When the order was given the other first one who had argued

with the captain approached Anna. "I'm Dovar Torral, please explain to the others that I'll be pouring this ooze in your scabbards. When you put your weapons in it will coat them with the substance that will allow you to hit the shadow creatures. You will still pass through them but the action will hurt them."

As Anna explained what was happening to the others, Alexandria approached Dovar. "So seeds for communication, stones to destroy a marker and now ooze to hit shadow creatures. Do you always use magic this way?"

As Dovar poured the liquid in Mike's scabbard he chuckled a bit, "It's been a while since our ways of using the world magic has been questioned like that. I take it that you use it like the elves?"

Alex nodded in approval. "We never agreed with the elves to use it like that. We imbue our items with the world magic, this allows us to use it and also not to suffer any stamina loss like they do when they take in the magic in themselves and release it." Alexandria had to admit that doing it that way did give a major advantage, "I never knew that the first ones used magic that way."

Dovar shook his head, "Oh don't call us that, it's a name the elves gave us and we never really liked it... Just call us what we are missy, call us dwarves."

When the task was done, the dwarves started making their way to the next marking. Dovar had been told to stay by their side in case they had some questions. Alexandria had bombarded him with everything she could think of. During the talks, she had learned that the person in charge was named Helram Blackfist, he was in charge of the warrior clan. At that point, she had also learned that they used a clan system for their people. Currently the group had been away sealing

markers for a while now. So far, the marker where they had met had been one of the few that had not been overrun with shadow creatures. At this time, they had no clue why they were being attacked or what their goal was.

Eventually, Anna noticed that Dovar was getting a bit frustrated by the amount of questions that Alex had asked and asked her to calm down a bit. Reluctantly Alexandria listened to Anna. Glad that she had stopped, Dovar turned to give her one last bit of information, "It's best to save all your questions to when we get to our city, there you will be escorted to Kilor. He speaks your language and is in charge of the group that keeps our information and history. I'm sure both of you will enjoy each other's company." Alex's eyes were as wide as her smile, she then turned to the others in her group, "All right guys we need to get rid of these creatures for them quick, we need to make it to that city as soon as we can." Everyone laughed at her obvious ulterior motive with her request.

After walking from tunnel to tunnel for what felt like an hour the Lights Templar eventually all realised that they had been very fortunate in meeting the dwarves right as they had appeared. There would have been very little way for them to navigate in these tunnels in a quick manner, it also would have been possible to have been lost in them for many months. The dwarves started to slow down after a while and Helram made his way to Anna, "Seems that we are close to the next marker but it's already been infested with lots of shadow creatures. I know that you want to help, and I'll take it but I can't guarantee being able to help you if things go south. If you're not okay with that then I suggest that you say behind."

Anna gave him a small smile, "Thanks for the considerations, but we said that we would help



and we will." She then looked at her teammates who now understood the warning he had given them by Alex translating for them and saw that none were willing to back down. "As for the guarantee, it's all good. If something bad happens, do what you need to do first, whatever happens the consequences are on our shoulders not yours." Helram appreciated her understanding and nodded his head and started to head back to the front.

It did not take too long to reach the combat zone that the captain of the dwarves had mentioned. When they got there, they counted about fifty shadow beasts. These beasts looked like cats the size of bears and as soon as the dwarves started charging at them, they pounced on their targets. The Lights Templar divided themselves into two groups: the first was composed of Adam and Iris who positioned themselves in front of the others to cut off the advance coming at them. Their main goal was to break the pack apart and let the second group finish them off. As they got into position, Adam glanced at Iris, "You sure you are up for this? You have been overly quiet."

Not that he could see it but Iris gave him a smirk. "There is just a lot on my mind, that's all. Don't worry I'll make sure to leave you some."

Adam had to smile at that, "Good, you had me worried there and as for your challenge consider it accepted." He then charged at the first beast that was running at them, he slashed both his swords on its side. As the dwarves had explained, the weapon would still pass through but because of that ooze they had applied there was some resistance and the resistance caused the beasts pain. Adam saw another one that was about to jump on him, while the goo was a great help he figured he would add a little something extra to teach these beasts a lesson. He focused a low level

cleansing spell on it while it was in the air, and then magically charged at it slashing its underbelly with both blades. The beast never made it to the ground as its shadow body dissipated into the air.

Iris was not about to be outdone. She aimed both her swords at the beast that Adam had wounded, taking it out as it made its way to attack Adam from the rear. Doing this had opened her up to another beast that had positioned itself to attack her from her own rear. Casting the portal had drained her but Iris still had some magic left and had also recovered some stamina during her walk. She channelled some speed in her legs to twist herself out of the way of the attack and was able counterattack with a horizontal slash to the beast's sides. The beast twisted his head and started to turn in her direction to try for another attack. As he did so, Iris let a low level cleansing spell drain some of the beast's magical defences and then shoved both swords at its head as it moved at her. The connecting blow of it moving at her and her moving at it was enough for the beast to disappear back into the shadows that had created it.

For the second group, Rosamia was put in the leadership role of creating targets for Anna and Mike. Seeing as their enchantments would be useless against these foes they too relied on the magical ooze that had been provided. When a group reformed, Rosamia used a low level cleansing pulse in order to affect as many as she could in order for the two warriors to finish them off. While Rosa recovered from the effects of the pulse, Alexandria provided her with defence in order push the beasts away that were getting too close with her staff, seeing as her magic was still depleted. Eventually by the time Rosamia was ready again another group had reformed itself and the process started anew.

This attack pattern went on for a while. During this time, all the Lights Templar could see that while the dwarves were also furiously fighting the enemies they were also taking a measure of their abilities. Eventually, the second group met up with a group that Dovar was a part of and he purposely got closer to Anna, "Your team seems very competent, but should your mage not have stayed behind considering her situation?"

Anna chuckled, "That would have been the prudent thing to do, but this group is more akin to close friends and family. That being said, would any of you be able to stand on the side if the rest participated in a battle like this?" She let his silence provide the answer and then a smile appeared on her face. "So, because of that we choose to support her in her decision to help. Heck, next time the roles maybe reversed and there is no way that we would want to stand on the side while she gave it her all." Anna noticed that Dovar liked her explanation. This was a good thing considering the help they would need from them for their own fight. Once the fighting was over Helram used a stone on a familiar looking circular pattern on the floor. In a few seconds, the marker was destroyed.

Two more battles like this happened, seeing as the enemy type was the same everyone agreed to use the same strategy. At each marker, some of the Lights Templar and dwarves had suffered some wounds but with Rosamia, Iris, the dwarves own healing elixirs and even Adam's healing powers no one stayed hurt for long. This also helped everyone not become too depleted. From what Dovar had told them they had finally reached the final marker that needed sealing. Once again, shadow creatures were present to greet them. During the fight, Alexandria had finally been able to participate with

her magic, even if she was able to cast there was little that she could do against pure shadow creatures unless they were cleansed at least partially. So instead of fighting off the attackers with her staff that aimed for Rosa after she had cast the pulse version of the spell, she used minor fireball spells. This also allowed Mike and Anna to stay on the attack and not have to fall back to help with the defence from time to time.

When the fighting stopped, everyone was in a circle as Helram once again destroyed the marker. As this was happening a thought occurred to Adam, "With this destroyed the spell that was used to get us here is probably useless now. Given that, I think it's safe to say that we are really on our own for help getting back."

Iris looked at him with an unconcerned look on her face, "I just assumed that the dwarves would help us with that, but now that you mention it can we confirm that part or should we start making alternate plans when the time comes?"

Mike shrugged, "I assumed that even if they can't help us that we could always contact Astrum using the new communication artifact, like we used to contact you guys."

Alexandria turned to face him, "Ah, that's not really going to work, the device can only communicate with our own and I never gave one to Lithius." She then looked at Adam and Rosamia, "So unless one of you two left yours with him, that plan can't happen."

Adam looked at Rosamia and then the rest of them, "That's not going to happen then because we still both have ours."

Alexandria looked at Mike's worried expression, "Don't worry, even if the dwarves are unable to help us get back I'm sure they can tell us how deep we are. From there, after a day or two's

rest, I will be able to easily teleport high enough to get back on the surface."

Iris was a bit concerned with Alex's answer, "So another blind teleport again, I thought you did not want to do another one of those?"

"This one is a bit different, first you reduce our weight then I teleport us so high that we will be in the clouds. As we fall you can cast a floating spell on all of us with little power due to our new weight and from there we are all good." Alexandria then rolled her eyes a bit, "The only issue that I can really think of is where we will end up. If we are lucky then this place is below our section of the world, at worst it will be the orcs. There is also a good possibility that on top of us is the desert, but considering its current condition that may not be a bad stop for us."

It's at that point that Dovar cut in, "You folks sure have an interesting way of doing things I have to give you that. Still, don't worry, while you will in theory not be able to come back here we will be able to send you back home without issues."

Anna relayed the message back and looked at Mike's still worried expression, when he noticed it he answered her unasked question, "Now that Alexandria mentioned it maybe going to the desert would in fact be a better next target for us. Depending on how much help we can get from here." He waved his concerns away, "Anyways, I'm worrying for nothing again as you would tell me. Depending on what we find or don't then we will figure out where the next best place for us should be. There is no sense in worrying about something we can't do anything about at this time."

Anna smiled, he was learning to be more like the person he wanted to be and that made her very happy.

After another myriad of tunnels and caves that

looked too similar to tell apart for anyone except the dwarves, the group finally made it to the city they had mentioned. Once inside everyone, save for Rosamia and Adam, noticed how similar things were and at the same time very different. From what was explained by Dovar the main section of the city was built using the large pillars that had been emptied out and reinforced with their magic. This is where most of them lived. Some of the pillars had interconnecting bridges and others had staircases leading to the ground. On the ground, small stands could be found to sell items, clothes and food. It was also explained that to the left of the city was a large mine and foundry where they built and repaired their weapons. To the right housed towers where the scholars lived; it was also the location they grew plants and beans. As Dovar was about to accompany them to Kilor Urban, the head scholar who would be able to answer their questions, Helram stopped them and extended his hand to Anna. "I want to say that your group fought well and to thank you for the help. If a day comes that we have to fight together again, I know that I can trust you with our backs if need be."

Anna took his hand and shook it. "Thanks to you too for leading us here and here's hoping that the next time we meet is not on a battlefield." He simply nodded at that and then left with the rest of his men.

Dovar escorted them to what looked like four towers fused into one. As they all stepped in, they understood some of the purpose for its shape. The middle part is where tons of books could be found on each level, each side of the circular towers housed tables, desks and in some cases small rooms. Alexandria was in heaven, the way she saw it this was where untold knowledge was held. She had lived in Astrum Library and this one looked to

have about as many books, it was just a beautiful thing to see with her own eyes. The only person in the group nervous about this was Iris, who figured that the others did not realise how deep Alex's love of the knowledge held in books was. Iris had to wonder if Alexandria would leave this place, assuming they let her stay. Dovar continued his escort until they reached one of the rooms they had seen near the top of the towers. As they went in, they noticed the room was a lot bigger then they had figured. A large table was in the middle of it that could seat ten people. Dovar informed them to stay here until Kilor arrived.

They waited about fifteen minutes before a dwarf showed up. Unlike the others, his hair was very long and untied; he also had a very long beard that reached his stomach. He was dressed in normal looking clothes. He took up a seat at the end of the table with a very big smile. He cleared his throat a bit and looked at all of them. "This is a treat." His accent was harsh but more importantly he was also speaking their language so everyone could understand. "You will have to excuse me a bit, I don't get a lot of practice with this language." Kilor knew that they had tons of questions they wanted to ask him, heck the little lady with long blonde hair seemed like she was using all her restraint not to say anything during his moment of silence. It was all very humorous for him, "I have been told that you have tons of questions and I promise that I will answer them. But first I need to hear your story. Who are you, why are you here and what are you looking for? I know those will not be easy to answer but let's start from there."

Even Mike had to smile at Alexandria's reaction of emotional pain she was feeling right now. He figured that he would do his best to answer Kilor's questions. Mike started by

introducing the people in the group and what their specialty was; he briefly told them about their first adventure with the portals and its conclusion with the dragon. Then he moved to what had recently happened and what they currently knew about the situation. He finished with what they needed and for that he simply said that they needed help.

Kilor was very impressed with what these people had achieved but there were a lot of issues as well in what Mike had mentioned. "You accomplished a lot but there is also a lot that you did wrong." He paused for a second, "Or maybe it's something we did by leaving it all to the other two races. This whole situation was caused when you killed the last dragon, it seems that you did not know it but that is the case. Also, from what you told me I would not be a surprised to figure out that it was in fact the dragon that opened that first portal from your location. He would have needed to be there in the first place in order to get those humans that would have served for his clerics. The orc would not have been able to due to how they were created and the elves would not have followed with his plan." The expression on all of them was like he had dropped a bomb in the room and left.

Adam was the first that was going to talk but Alexandria cut him off before he could even say a word. "*What?* First, how could have killing the last dragon free the prison created for the dark avatar? Second, what two races are you talking about? I'm guessing one of them is the elves but what is the second one? Plus, there is this whole thing about the dragon coming to our section of the world to open the portal in order to go to the other section to attack it, only to save it in order to convince them to attack us... What was the point of all that?"

Kilor raised his hands, gesturing everyone to



calm down, "Maybe I started off too harshly." Again, he paused for a while, "Hmm, I think the best way for you all to understand is to explain what really happened. I don't think you understand your history as clearly as you think you do."

"A *loonnng* time ago the two first races were created. The dark lord created dragons, mighty beasts that could rule the skies. The lord of light created us, we would rule the lands or so we were told. Both races would never die of natural causes and we also had access to the world magic. The issue started when the lord of darkness ordered his creations to start ruling the lands as well as the sky. We defended ourselves but in the end, we had to hide underground to survive. Unlike other races both first races can't reproduce, so when one of us gets killed there is no other. Due to this new issue the lord of light created the second race." He took a moment knowing that this knowledge may cause issues. "The other race was very strong, had a short lifespan and would be unable to use any magic at all. You call them orcs."

While Adam's mouth was still opened by the shock of the news he still managed to ask for confirmation, "Ah... so... You mean the orcs we've been at war with for a while now?"

Kilor nodded in agreement, "They are the second race and with their help we managed to take back the land. You see while they could not use any magic they did have one special gift that none of us have, they can reproduce. That in itself is a very powerful weapon, more so than magic ever was." Kilor looked at everyone, "I know this will be hard to accept but the orcs are probably the reason why you are here in the first place. If not for them we would have eventually lost to the dragons." While that fact sunk in, he decided to

continue with the history lesson of their lives."

"Once the dragons had been pushed back to the skies again, with the help of the orcs we started to once again build on the surface and live peaceful lives. A few centuries passed and the next race was created by the lord of light. This race lived much longer than the orcs and could use magic. They also had the ability to have children but it was more difficult for them than the orcs. You know them as elves."

"This is when things went bad. The dark lord did not appreciate his defeat and while the lands belong to us, and we could share them with anyone we wanted he did not approve of the new race that had been added. At that point, he created his second race, this race was created as a mirror to the orcs but housed much more physical power than them. In order to hold that power they were created in a much larger size. Also, in order to put the first blow to the orcs he made their home in the mountains that surrounded them, and so the giants were created and then the second war started. To add to their power he also created a second energy source that would be easier to use than the world magic. The dark energy as you call it enticed the younger race of the elves. The power itself was harmless but there was a bitter pill that was also attached to it and if you did not know about it, which at the time we did not, this pill would corrupt you. Because of this, the war lasted a long time. In order to tip the scales in his favour the dark lord created an avatar for his power. This helped him to have more direct control over his children and the world we live in."

"We pleaded with the lord of light to help us again, to give us some tools to destroy this avatar or at least level the playing field. While the lord of light would not help us destroy the avatar of

darkness he did help us in creating a crafty yet flawed prison for him. With this, we banded together and made one final push to trap the avatar. The price was high for all three of our races but in the end, we managed to trap him and push back his army. The crafty part of the trap was also its flaw. The spell would keep the avatar in his prison as long as there were dragons alive. The lord of light figured that we would not attack them to the point of genocide; he also knew that the dragons would try to stay alive as long as they could in order to try and save their trapped master. In order to conceal and make it hard for anyone to see this flaw we dwarves damaged the surrounding area and made it unliveable by any race. In theory, the surrounding spell was set to end when the trap was broken, which is what you indirectly did."

"Once the dust settled the lord of light created his final race, humans. He also added to the second energy source, this addition could only be used by humans. Your original reason for being was to heal the wounds created by the war." Kilor looked at the humans around him. He could see that all of them were processing the information he had given them. "Now with this, I think that you understand a bit more why this current situation is happening and why I mentioned that comment at the start."

Iris was the first to chime in, "How were we supposed to know?" She looked at her new family. "I was not present at the time they killed the last dragon, but had I had the abilities to as I do now I would have gladly joined them and would not have thought otherwise. So again, how were we supposed to know?"

The dwarf shrugged his shoulders, "This all happened so very long ago, it was maybe three or four generations of elves and you know of their

lifespan. While the fact remains that you killed the last dragon the blame is really on all the races. At one point we left you three races to live underground. This eventually caused a large disagreement with the elves and the orcs. The orcs then decided to separate as well and along the way lost a lot of their history, probably due to their short lifespan. For them, every time the story was told it probably changed a bit and eventually it was not the same story anymore. The elves probably wanted to hide their shame and changed things a bit as they went. As for your race, your history was told to you at the start and eventually the same issue occurred as the orcs the more it got told. I would also think that even that information at the start was not as accurate. The final blame came probably to us when we learned of the dragon war. It was already too late to stop what had been done and that event alone drastically sped up the freedom of the dark avatar."

Mike could not believe it, there was so much misinformation that had occurred still all that would do very little now that the damage had been done. "Okay, given everything that has happened, can you help us again like last time to trap him but use something else other than dragons?" He looked over at Rosamia and then back to the dwarf, "Also could the lord of light not be able to help again?"

The scholar looked at all of them with very sad eyes. "I think the answer to that will cause a lot of pain, do you still wish to know?"

Alexandria shook her head in disbelief, "I think that after all this we probably still want to know."

He pointed at Rosamia and then at Adam. "Fine, but I think the news will have a greater impact on these two if I understand their roles. In order to cast the trap a large amount of power was

used, power that no race could channel. In order to do it the lord of light created an avatar for himself and cast the spell himself. While we did help with the casting, we really did not have anything to do with it. Once it was done, the action had damaged the avatar of light in some way. His final actions were that addition to the second source and your creation and then he perished. May be perished is the wrong word, returned from where he came would be a better way to say it. The end result is that we are on our own with this. When the dragon war finished we tried to recreate a new version of the spell, this one would be dependent on all races. This way if he did find a way to get free, there would be no one around to care. Unfortunately the spell was a massive failure, there are parts that we cannot recreate and they are only known to the lord of light."

The news had struck a large blow to Rosamia. "But how? The whole Order and everything all serving nothing?"

Kilor took a deep breath before answering, "In theory, the magic is still present and he did exist at one point, even we don't know where we all go once we leave this place. Is it at the same place as where he is now...? I'm sorry to say that I don't have an answer for that question."

Adam did not know what to tell Rosa to help her out, to him if the lord was there or not mattered little but for Rosamia it was very different. He then saw Anna stand up and walk to Rosa. She put her arms around Rosa, "Not for nothing, never for nothing. From what we were told we were created to help, is that not the main goal of the Order? In a way, are they not the only humans still carrying out the lord of light's original order? Think what you will of the current methods but the original intent is still there I would think."

A weak smile could be seen on Rosa's face and also a tear or two "...Thanks. Those are very kind words."

The dwarf was impressed by the exchange, even after everything that he had told them this one person was still able to help another. Maybe that was another of the gifts that the lord of light had given them instead of a task. Mike took this time to go over a question that had been missed, "So the lord of light can't help, but what about the dwarves?"

Kilor sighed, "A debate was had a few years ago on that very question. When we realised that the new version of the trap was impossible, we knew this day would come. Eventually a decision was made. I tend to think that it's the wrong one but at this time can't change it." Mike really did not like where this was going. "Due to our current numbers we are unable to help with the situation. If the worst occurs then a plan has been formulated." He closed his eyes for he did not want to see their reactions. "Before you ask, this plan is only for us. All the other races have been excluded from it."

The mood was very sombre, Iris was confused by all this power and nothing, "...So we are on our own then, against something that you at the time could not destroy."

Before anyone could answer or add to her comment another dwarf barged in the room, he seemed very agitated. He spoke using the Dwarven language, Anna provided the translation. "It seems that their main library is under attack by a very large dragon. I guess we know where it was really heading now. Helram and his men are heading there now to try and stop it." She then looked at everyone around the table. "So, are we going to help out with this?" While no one chimed in Mike

knew that Anna already had an answer to her question; he stood up and got ready.

"We are. We are going to help because it's the right thing to do."

Adam shook his head, "You have got to be kidding me. You are going to use that line for something like this? I mean are we not in this trouble now because we did the right thing before?"

Mike let out a large sigh, "Sure you can look at it that way but it's what we both want to do. If you want a better reason to do it, then look at it from an angle more like this. We will eventually have to deal with this dragon one way or another. This way we have the help of the dwarves even if they don't want to help us with what comes next." He turned to look at Anna, he knew that she would not agree with his second reasoning and the fact that he had thought about it would make her sad. He gave her a sad smile and she responded with a smile of her own, telling him not to worry about it.

Adam then stood, followed by Iris and the rest. Mike looked at them and then at the dwarf who had a surprised look on his face. "You do realise that this will not change the decision, nothing you do will. The consequence of this fight could also hinder your next goal... Are you sure you want to do this?"

Mike nodded, "Seems that way, plus you never know what will happen after this. If anything, we can hope that something good will come of it." He looked again at Anna, "In the end is that not all we can hope for?"

The scholar smiled at his comment, "Thank you." He then got up himself, "Now let me escort you to Helram and his team, it's the least I can do."

As they all left, Alexandria pulled Rosamia away. "I need to ask you a favour after we are done with this." Alex wanted to take more time to

explain the situation and her worries but there was little time. "When we first got here, something odd happened to Iris after she overused that cleansing spell. She seems fine and she told me she was fine, but maybe she isn't and she just does not know... Can you..."

Rosamia gave her a small smile and nodded, "Of course I will check it out."

Alex felt a bit relieved. "Right, so let's go get rid of a dragon then." She smiled back and left to join the others.

Rosamia wondered about what had happened, was it similar to what happened to her? She would have to let it go for now, their next target would need every bit of focus.



## Chapter 10

As they made their way to the battlefield, Kilor gave them more information about the location. It would seem that the library they had been in only housed the books and information that were pertinent for the more current centuries. The place where the dragon was attacking was where the rest of the written knowledge that the dwarves had accumulated over their whole lifespan was housed. Alexandria could not even imagine the size of that place or the amount of books that would be stored there. This main library was housed about twenty minutes from where they currently were. Seeing as it was a part of the large area within the city it would seem that the dragon could in fact have enough room to take its original shape. Flying around would be impossible but he would be able to extend his wingspan if he wanted to.

Half way, the group met up with Helram, Dovar and the other dwarves that they had accompanied. Helram moved closer to Anna, seeing as she would be one of the few in the group who could still understand him. "Your group decided to join us on this one as well?"

She smiled back, "Seems like it, can you tell us anything about what to expect... besides the dragon itself."

The captain nodded his head, "Not really, we know that the beast is there and is targeting the library. We also know that there are shadow beasts with it, but we don't know how many he conjured up. That will be a surprise for both of us when we get there."

It was not the news that Mike would like when she would tell him but she figured that he would half expect it. When the news was shared, Iris gave Kilor a puzzled look, "We destroyed all the markers, are there any clues on how a dragon would get this far without anyone noticing?" Kilor did not seem to even think about his answer, "Dragons can change their shape, he probably came here before the attacks started and waited." Iris nodded, she now remembered that originally the dragon the Lights Templar had killed had looked like an older man. It would not be hard to believe that instead of a man, a dwarf could have been impersonated.

Moments later, they all arrived on the scene. From what they could see, the library was just a large wall at the edge of the cavern. The wall had been crafted to look like the front side of a mansion. You had large pillars that stood from bottom to top and in between them, the surface had been carved out to look like a giant wall of brick. At the bottom two large doors could be seen. From the looks of it those doors would be the only way in or out of the library. The dragon was in fact there and was currently breathing down fiery black flames at the entryway. Currently the doors were still holding. Around the dragon, you had a small army of shadow creatures, a quick count numbered them in the hundreds. Mike looked at Helram and gave him a look that tried to communicate that they would have their work cut out for them. Adam got close to him. "So, what is the plan?"

Mike turned and looked at the group. "I think we should aim for the dragon and at worst keep it busy until the dwarves can back us up." He then looked at the dragon. It seems that it was the same one that had attacked Cagan and those ruins. "As

for that, Adam and Iris aim for his wings. Too many times they have been used to remove our mobility with the force that they can create, damage them as much as you can. Anna you are with me, our target is the centre. Ideally, we are to focus his attention on us, I figure our enchantments will help with that seeing as that could be how he originally got killed or many of his kin did. Alexandria do as much damage as you can, if you see an opening that gets created from any group take it." He then looked at Rosa, "Rosamia you have the hardest job of keeping us alive longer than the dark energy will be able to keep it alive." He then turned to Kilor, "I know you will not participate in this but relay our plan to Helram, and tell him to hurry if he can."

Iris enchanted her blades and Adam's with fire. Alexandria prepared her assortment of five instant spells and Anna and Mike turned on their sword enchantment already the colour of light green and pink. When they were all ready, they charged at the dragon. Helram was about to move out as he saw the humans charge in. "What the heck are they doing...?" As he was about to yell at them Kilor stopped him and updated him on their plans. Helram could not believe his ears "They're mad or they have a death wish, which is not the impression I got from them. So I have to go with they are mad."

Kilor shook his head, "I would prefer to use the word brave."

"Think what you will but for me mad still stands." He looked at his men, "All right let's follow their plan then. There are about five of them for each of us, still let's try and make it snappy." As soon as the order was given, they all joined the battle, save for Kilor who could just stand back and watch.

Adam and Iris got to the dragon first using their magic. As they got close, Adam motioned to her to take the right wing as he would take the left. The dragon was currently on the ground and had turned his attention on the oncoming warriors. Iris used a spell to reach her target, as she got close to the connecting section where the wing met the main body she planted both swords and let her fire enchantment release. This resulted in a minor explosion at the contact point and caused some pain. As she started to drop down she noticed that the wound was already starting to close.

Adam took advantage of Iris' first attack that drew the attention of the dragon to her. He focused his enhancing abilities in his legs and jumped as high as he could and stabbed both swords in the side of the dragon's body. He then positioned his legs on the side of the dragon's body and used it as a springboard to jump at the right wings. His target was to destroy the membrane of the wing itself. As he got close, he jabbed both blades and let gravity take him down cutting the membrane all the way down. He figured that this attack would be more of an annoyance than anything but would get the job done, eventually. As he turned to make another run from the back he noticed that the cut he had just made was healing as well.

Both Mike and Anna had time to see the outcome of what the attacks of the others had caused. While discouraging it was also expected. Mike was first in the charge, "Let's go for the blast, switch and recharge manoeuvre. Hopefully it will cause enough damage to keep the healing focused on our attacks and not the others." When he got close, he stabbed his sword in the centre of the dragon's belly and let the enchantment go point blank. As it released he moved out of the way and let Anna take his place as she let the enchantment

fly in the wound that had been created. This gave time for Mike to repower for another blow at which point Anna switched with him and the process repeated itself.

The dragon roared in anger, "*Fools!* This time I will eat you and there will be no running away." He summoned a black fireball and aimed it at both of them. Mike was the one that was currently charged up, he swung his sword up and let the blast fly to connect with the incoming fireball. The connection of the two resulted in a small explosion. Anna and Mike used that blast to cover their movements and ran to another section of the dragon's main body and continued the same attack pattern. The dragon twisted his large neck to his side where they were in order to continue his attack on them.

Alexandria smiled, currently in front of her was a dragon that was looking the other way. It would be impossible for him to counter her spell in time so she tried to make it a good one. She extended both hands in the air, large clouds appeared in the back of them. Rosamia gave her a puzzled look, "I did not know you could do that in a cave."

Alexandria was still smiling, "If there is air I can cast it, now try this." As she pointed both hands at the dragon, eight large bolts of lightning made their way from the clouds that had formed to the dragon. After they had connected, large amounts of scales were destroyed, leaving a large wound on his side. The dragon then used his tail to swat at Mike and Anna, forcing them to back away for a bit, he then turned his attentions to the mage. "So you think you can best me with the arcane art, try dispelling this." Suddenly a dome appeared around the dragon's main body and head.

Alexandria recognized the spell for the same

one that he had used at Cagan. This one was much much smaller and so he did not have to focus in order to keep it active. Alex nodded her head, "You think you are so smart, your shield means nothing to me." She then went on one knee and touched the ground, a few seconds after a large stalagmite appeared from the ground below him and punctured his body. Alexandria gave herself a pat on the back, her assumption had been right and the spell still had the same weakness she had figured out at Cagan.

"Impressive, little mage, but how will you deal with this?" He inhaled a very large breath and then a cone of black fire was coming at her, a shield appeared in front of her courtesy of Rosamia and blocked all incoming damage.

Helram took a second to look at the Lights Templar's progress. He still thought they were mad but he had to give them credit. Had this been a normal dragon like in his time he would have to wager they would be able to beat it down. Unfortunately, this was not the case. From his position, he could easily see that the beast was healing faster than they could damage it. It was only a matter of time before they were overpowered by it. He himself wondered what help they could give to help bring the beast down. Something needed to be figured out, otherwise they would lose. He yelled at Kilor who was still in the back. "Go back and tell them what is happening, tell them to prepare." Kilor understood what the captain was referring to, he did not agree with it but he understood the reasoning. Quickly he turned back and did as he was ordered.

Unknown to Helram, Rosamia was thinking the very same thing that he was. From her point of view she too could tell that the damage inflicted by everyone was not enough. She searched her

memory for anything that would be powerful enough to help out, only the Valkyrie spell came to mind. Rosamia quickly put the thoughts of using it away. Even if it did work, there was no guarantee that the dragon would not survive the blow, and as the others had mentioned in their reports he would just regenerate from nothing after. What was needed was to cut off his source to the dark energy. The only way she could do that was using a cleansing spell. But her body would not be able hold the amount of energy she would need to take before it consumed her. Rosamia paused for a second, would she need to hold it?

She got close to Alex, "Move away from me and prepare yourself. If this works I'm about to give everyone the largest opening for all their attacks."

Alexandria was very worried, "You're not planning anything too stupid are you?"

Rosa smiled, "You're right it is stupid and a large risk but it's not what you are thinking. Don't worry about that." Somewhat convinced but still very nervous Alexandria did as she was told.

Rosamia positioned herself in front of the dragon, extended both her hands and cast the cleansing spell. She took in as much energy as she could, as it all rushed inside of her she could feel its power taking over her body. She looked inside herself and then she felt it and heard its small voice, like a low whisper, 'You will be mine.'

'No I won't. I can hear you and I know you are there, unlike the others before me.'

'Hahaha little child, you think you are the first to know of my presence? How special you must think you are. Don't you realise that it does not matter, my corruption will still eventually take you over. It may be over time, when you next take in more of my power or a combination of both. There is no escape from me, I'm inside you now.'

Rosamia centred the core of herself. They had been trained to take in this energy, contain it and slowly destroy it before it could affect their being. But the many recent events had made her question if that was the right thing to do. Back in Calculus she had failed to do so and somehow had come out of it with no effect, the same it seemed had happened to Iris.

'You are right, by the time it would take me to contain and destroy your presence inside of me, you would probably be able to corrupt me. But you are making a wrong assumption on the current situation.'

Rosamia opened her eyes again and looked at the dragon, she went on one knee and touched the ground and said two words "Holy Wrath." She took all the energy that she had collected from the dragon and channelled it all back into a fifteen foot diameter pillar of black flames that roared in from under the dragon. The beast screamed in pain, forcing everyone around him to stop and block their ears. Rosamia had a big smile on her face, as all the dark energy had left her body and the dark lord's whispers could no longer reach her due to its source being no longer present in her body. Her smile then disappeared, if only anyone had realized this sooner then all the damage caused by the dark clerics could have been prevented.

The dragon was very angry, "How *dare* you? For that I will burn you with fires so fierce that no one will be able to find your ashes." Rosa's eyes glared at the beast with enough intensity to match it, as it talked she stood and took a step and reached in to grab as much power as she could from it. The dragon was taking in a large breath and its target was just standing there taunting it to make his move. Inside Rosa's head, she once again could hear the dark lord's voice that was no longer



a whisper but a scream.

'You *witch!* You think I will let you get away with this?'

'I don't really think you can do anything about it.'

As the dragon's flaming cone came at her, she once again took in all the power that she had taken and used it all to create a shield to protect herself. As the flames stopped and the spell's energy left her body, the dark lord's screams once again vanished from her inner being. Before the dragon could make his next move, she repeated the process and cast another holy wrath. To her surprise, the beast just stood there looking at her with burning eyes. "I see what you are doing now. As long as you keep feeding off of me you don't need to use your own energy and are able to use my own power against me. But there is a way around that." The dragon closed his eyes for a few seconds and then his head twitched, after that moment his wounds stopped healing.

"I've cancelled my link to the power, there is nothing for you to draw on anymore." Quickly after this, his head swung out and he opened his large mouth and aimed at Rosamia. For the others it looked like he had swallowed her whole, but when the dragon stopped moving they could see that Rosa had extended a small energy shield around herself. The beast was squeezing his powerful jaw trying to crack the shield. "Once you have been eaten I will once again re-establish my link with the power and then finish all of you once and for all."

Rosamia was holding on for dear life, she used every ounce of power she had in herself to hold back the large teeth. "You too are making a wrong assumption on the current situation."

Mike screamed the order, "*Now!*" The dragon's

head was at ground level. Mike and Anna led the charge directly at it at the same time, when they got close they both targeted a point blank blast at his throat. While Mike and Anna attacked the bottom of the head, Adam and Iris aimed for the top. Iris lifted herself and Adam at the base of his skull, both planted their sword at that location and let go of the fire enchantments creating a large explosion on the top of his head. They dropped down and away as Alexandria stepped inside his protective dome shield spell that he had created, "If you thought the previous spell was impressive eat this." A large single bolt of lightning left her hand and landed on top of his head. She then released all of her five instant spells at once. After the bombardment the dragon's head had all of its scales removed from it and had deep and fatal wounds around it.

The beast pulled its head back, "You think this is over? I still have enough power left to destroy you and I'm willing to bet that your priest there spent all her power on that shield in order to save herself, so what now?"

Rosa looked at the badly bleeding dragon and a small smile appeared on her face once again. "Your first assumption of forgetting that I don't fight alone cost you dearly. Now it's time for you to pay for your other assumption." Rosamia took a few steps back and reached out her hands and once again pulled in dark energy using the cleansing spell. But this time not from the dragon but from the shadow beasts that were still around them busy with the dwarves. "You thought that cutting yourself off would not allow me to draw more of your power and use it against you, but you forgot that you provided me with tons of little sources all around me. Even if I am near depleted I can still fight you." Once again, she put her hand

on the ground and looked up "Holy Wrath." As she said the words, she could swear she could see the dragon flinch a bit. Maybe it was her imagination or maybe it was a result of the impact of the spell combined with more spells from Alexandria, with a few dragon killer enchantment blasts from Anna and Mike, only to be finished off by the 'thousand cuts' courtesy of Adam and Iris.

Shortly after the dragon fell and did not rise again for doing so would only repeat the same process and would only result in a loss of overall power. Victory over the remaining shadow beasts was quick and shortly after everyone headed back to the dwarf city for a well-deserved rest.

As they walked back, Helram moved closer to Anna. "Never in all my years have I seen anyone attempt doing what your priest has done... It was very impressive and dangerous."

"You're right it was, but she has been through a lot in the last while and I guess in the end she took another leap of faith." Anna gave a warm smile to the dwarf, "I think you just realised that she is a really good jumper, most times."

Helram nodded at that. "That's the issue with leapers, I guess." His mood saddened, "I'm sure that Kilor mentioned that we could not help you in your next fight and after what you just did I'm sure that the dark lord is very well pissed at all of you. Even after what you did, the decision will still stand... But for what it's worth I hope that you succeed and wish you the best of luck in doing what we could not way back so many years ago." Anna just gave him a sad smile as they continued their way back.

The Lights Templar made it back to a familiar room in the new library, once again only Kilor was present at the edge of the table. Kilor informed them of the new situation, "I have been told to say

that we are at your service for any information that you may want, as payback for what you did back there. Also, before you ask, the decision still stands, you are still on your own for the final fight."

Mike started the ball rolling, "Does it have any weaknesses, something that we can use against it?"

Kilor thought about it for a long while. "Whatever form it takes to fight you it will have limitless power taken from the source that it created. The avatar can use the world magic but the power it can channel is limited from that source so it will not use it unless it needs to. As for a weakness, the lord itself does not have any... Still we have speculated that while it does not have any that the body it's using does. If any weakness could be found that is where it would be."

Iris jumped in next, "Not wanting to make the same mistake again, assuming we are able to destroy it, can it not just as well recreate itself like it does for everything else?"

The dwarf shook his head at that question. "No, he cannot. Once the avatar is destroyed, he cannot simply recreate another, which we are sure of because of what happened to the avatar of the lord of light when it was destroyed after casting the trap spell. If you manage to somehow accomplish this then you in fact have defeated his physical presence on this world for all of time."

Adam figured he would ask the obvious question, "So, given that you have gone against him for so long, what do you think our chances are?"

The dwarf tried not to make eye contact with any of them as he answered the question. "You may have a chance, in a way I did not think that you would all survive that last fight and yet here

you all are." He then looked at Adam, "Still I don't know the answer to that question because as old as I am I cannot anticipate what the future will bring."

His last comment made Anna remember something she had heard. "Speaking of future, when we first met Helram and Dovar when we teleported here they mentioned something about an Oracle. Could that be of any use to us?"

Kilor gave a heavy sigh, "I don't recommend you use that route. Over time, some of us studied how to use the world magic to see what would come next. Those who do are called Oracles and they will be the first to admit that deciding what to do based on their knowledge is not a recommended path to take. Many times in the past we have tried and it has led to ruin. The future is always moving. At any given time, there are a hundred possibilities just for one event. Given that, there are too many variables to correctly predict a path that should be taken to reach a certain point."

"What they see and all the paths that they figure out are still written down only to be analyzed once the event has happened in order to try and understand what was possibly missed. The overall knowledge is also used to sometime influence certain decisions. An example of that would be if eighty of the hundred paths seen lead to success, then the odds are in your favour. That being said, the other twenty could still occur."

An unintentional small chuckle escaped Mike's mouth as he had realised something from Kilor's explanation and reaction to Adam's question. "So how many paths lead to our victory and is the number the real reason why you will not help us?"

Everyone looked at the dwarf. "Yes, ultimately that is the main reason for the decision. As for the other part of your question, it's best you not

know."

Now that everyone's spirits were lowered Anna figured that now would be a good time to take a break from it all. "Well it's been a long day and there is a lot of information to go over, is there a place we can use to have a rest?"

Kilor smiled, "Yes, of course."

The dwarf led them inside one of the large pillars that were used for housing for most of them. The centre part was used as stairs and the left and right half was split in two to create two large rooms on each side. He opened the right side and escorted them in. The middle of the room housed a common area where large comfortable chairs and a table could be found. On the table, food and drinks had been prepared. Each side of the area was split again in two creating two smaller rooms to sleep in. All in all their section had four rooms. As Kilor left, he gave them a final message, "Stay as long as you like, when you are ready or if you have more questions you can come and find me at the library."

The group ate in silence and after a few short good night's headed to their respective rooms. Later that night, Anna looked at Mike. "This time it's my turn to ask what your thoughts are on the current situation. Do you think what we have planned is the way to go?"

He gave her a small smile, "As I recall, I did not get an answer when I asked that."

She simply shrugged and he chuckled a bit. It's at that point that a knock could be heard on their door. They heard Iris' voice, "We are all in the common area. Can you two join us as well?" Anna and Mike got dressed and opened the door to see Iris standing in front and everyone else sitting on the chairs in the middle of the room.

The three joined the others and Iris started,

"Considering what is going on I figured that everyone would be up. Now I know now is not the best time, but when is it really?" She looked around at everyone, "Anyways I wanted to tell you that I've now had time to think about things and I just want to apologize. I realise that I have not been acting as I wanted to, I thought I was doing the right thing but... I was wrong it seems and I really want to apologize for that, especially considering what we are going up against next. I wanted to get that off my chest." She once again looked at everyone around her, "Again, I'm sorry."

Anna tilted her head in curiosity, "I think that we are all just happy that you figured things out... Still if you don't mind me asking what was the issue about?" Iris thought about it and before she could answer Anna just waved it off. "You know what? If you don't want to talk about it, it's all right, you don't need to."

Iris nodded, "No, you know what? I think I do want to talk about it because I still think it's an issue. It's just that it's very embarrassing." Iris took a deep breath, "I look at you all as my family now, I mean I really have no one else. The dark clerics made sure of that. With you two gone for that year, I noticed that everyone was less happy with their lives and they were growing apart. I did not want that, I wanted to be together. I thought that if I got good enough that maybe I could replace the hole that you two left and that it would fix the problem."

"Unfortunately, during my travels with you two I noticed that I had a long way to go before I was able to do that, and then that error with the dragon happened and then I wondered if I was even qualified." She looked at the two of them. They had puzzled looks on their faces. "Like I said, it was stupid and embarrassing. I realise that now

and I won't try to do that anymore."

Anna cut her off, "You don't need to apologize for wanting us to all stay together, also if that is what you want to do then you should keep trying." She looked at Mike for a second and then turned back to Iris, "But don't try to be like us, just be yourself. That being said, did us being away really cause that much of an issue? I mean you all had things that you were doing that we could be of no help with, so we figured that it would be best to leave you with it and not be in your way."

Rosamia had a small smile on her face. "Well personally, I agree that Iris should not have tried to replace you two and that she should just be who she should be and not simply a replacement. That aside, she is right in that you did leave a big hole in the group."

"Now don't get me wrong I'm not blaming you for what you did nor will I blame you for what happened during that time you were away. The actions I took are my own and they were my decision to make, so the person to blame is myself and myself only. Still after going from town to town helping with the reborns situation, I realised that during that year we were going about this the wrong way and ultimately helping very little. I can't help but feel that if you had been around then that fishing family would have had the help they requested, those farmers would not be attacked by bandits and so many more little things would have been done. It may not be much in the grand scheme but at least it would have been something."

Iris thought about what Rosamia mentioned. "Wait a sec, a fishing family and bandit attacking the farms..." She looked at Anna and Mike, "Did you not tell me that you helped a family and dealt with bandits?" She then thought about it for a second and turned to Alexandria, "You have



something to do with this, I just know it."

Alexandria avoided eye contact. "Maybe..."

Rosamia cut in, "What does she mean, what's going on?"

Alexandria sighed. "When you asked me for a list of people who needed help due to the outcome of the war, I may have given that information to two other people." She looked in Mike and Anna's direction. Rosamia turned to them, "Wait, so that's where you were all this time, helping the people on the list?"

Mike scratched his head. "Well we helped as many as we could but it was a really long list and some of the things took a lot of time so there was only so much that could be done."

Rosamia just laughed. "You have got to be kidding me. When Iris told me that Alex had told her to stay at the Crimson town to wait for you, I figured she had contacted you. But I never imagined that this is what you were up to. I'm relieved that some of those people actually got help but at the same time..." A thought then occurred to her, "Wait, is that what Julia was talking about when she mentioned that she saw it as helping each other out?"

Rosa noticed that both Mike and Anna had no clue what she was referring to so she continued, "When we started the plan to go from town to town, Julia mentioned that she already had Crimsons posted here and there. She mentioned that she too got a push from both of you."

Mike thought about it. "It's possible, I mean I'm sure people assumed that it was Crimsons helping them when we did. I would assume that word would eventually get to Julia. If we are the cause then it was unintentional." He shook his head for a bit, "Still, I mean we are just like all of you and we were just doing simple little things, I

think that maybe you are reading too much into it."

Adam gave a low chuckle. "Aren't you both always trying to tell us that we all have an important part in this group? I think it may be time that you both realise how important your actions are to all of us and how they change the people around you."

Everyone was stunned at his comment save for Rosamia who gave him a nice warm smile. Out of all of them she knew him best. Mike looked at Anna, "I still don't see it but if they are right, you think that's the ability they were talking about?"

Anna's mood went dark and silent, "...Maybe."

Adam was curious, "What are you talking about?"

Alexandria jumped in, "It's nothing really, it was just a passing comment that was mentioned."

Anna smiled at Alex, "It's okay, I mean Iris and Rosa just shared something very personal; I suppose I should do the same." As she started she felt Mike's hands take hers, "Before this all started my parents paid us a visit. They explained everything about this new life. They mentioned that they would be able to stay around and that we could be a family again, but only if we both did not interfere. They said that the power that was responsible had concerns with the ability we possess." She looked at Mike, "At the time we thought that the ability was the sword enchantment, but now with everything you all told us we're wondering if it was something else."

Adam was the least surprised, "Oh, he meant your ability to butt in and have people follow you, I have no doubts about that."

Rosamia just shook her head. "Ignoring his bluntness I have to agree. During the meeting with the Council it was both of you who wanted to send

teams to help out. I'm sure that in the end it made a difference, small as it may have been."

Alexandria then jumped in, "And it was your idea to go to the other side, something that would have been ignored and look at all the lives we saved because of that."

Rosamia nodded, "I'm pretty sure things would have played out very differently if you had agreed. At the same time, now I realise what you gave up for all of us. I can't imagine how hard that decision was for you."

Anna gave her a small smile, "It's something that I would have rather not have to do but especially knowing what we know now, I hate to say it but it was the right choice. Still you had to make a hard choice yourself, quitting being a part of the priesthood and all."

Rosamia thought about it, "At the time, yes." She then looked at everyone, "But now I know I did the right thing. Again, when we helped from town to town I realised that we, the priesthood, were going about it the wrong way. I saw a mother turn her child into a reborn because she was dying and the priest turned her down when she asked for healing. While the reasoning given made sense the end results did not." She then looked at Adam, "That's why when this is over both of us are going to try and help as many as we can. I realise that we will not be able to save everyone but at least I can say that the reason why we could not help them was because we were trying to help others and not because I was stuck trying to convince others in a meeting to act and did not succeed." She then turned to Anna and Mike, "That just feels empty to me and I don't want that, especially in my case with the second chance that I got." She then turned to Alex, "The last thing I want to do is waste this precious gift that was given to me."

Rosamia then turned again to the two Crimsons. "I know that it will be selfish of me but I would really like it if you two would join me on this."

Mike closed his eyes, "Follow you heart and your regrets will be few."

Anna smiled and turned to Rosa, "I think it's safe to say that we will join on this as well."

Iris smiled too, "I know you can count me in."

Alexandria then jumped in as well, "Same goes for me." Alexandria realised that everyone was puzzled by her comment. "You all thought that I would be heading back to the Astrum Council when this is all over right? I think my position on the Council is dubious at best. I was already in hot water with my actions and I'm pretty sure I sealed the deal when I warped with you guys to the other side."

Iris now understood, "So that night after the Council meeting, you were making up your mind weren't you?"

Alex shrugged, "I still wasn't sure at that time. I think that I knew only once we stepped though the portal." She noticed the concerned looked from Rosamia. "Don't worry, like you said this is my choice. All my life I was groomed to be a part of the Council; that's all I really knew. But then this group happened and then we made a bit of history by stopping a war. That opened my eyes a bit... maybe there was more, maybe I should do something else. Then I was actually a part of the Council and realised that it's not what I thought it would be. So because of that, when something came up," she turned to Rosa, "like making a list, I jumped on it and it made me feel better." Then she looked at Anna and Mike. "I then figured why not give the list to you two as well, and again that felt right inside of me. Eventually I was always looking

for things like that to do." Alex then smiled at Rosa, "In a way we were both going through the same issue and we did not realise it. But when I learned of what was going on and then you made the jump I knew that it was the same thing I needed to do. I just needed an extra push."

Rosamia nodded, "Seems like we all needed that extra push."

Adam shrugged, "I was fine."

Iris laughed at that one. "You were fine, trapped in a tower for all that time not really able to leave. Seriously, you think that we will all believe that?" Adam avoided Iris' comment and then looked at Mike and Anna, "So now that everything is out in the open what is the next step?"

Mike chuckled, turned to Anna for a few seconds and then turned to everyone else. "We were talking about that before this. Here is what we know. We are going against the dark lord, he is amassing an army right now and moving them to a certain location using the main portal. At this time I'm sure the Council knows where that location is, I'm also willing to bet that this is where we will find his avatar."

"Now knowing all this, and after this talk I realise that what I'm about to ask is going to be really hard on everyone but here is the proposed plan. The dwarves will not help us with the fight but I still want to try and abuse their generosity a bit and have them teleport us to different places. Essentially, I want to split the group." Everyone's reaction of shock was anticipated. "Hear me out. The only way that I think we can beat this avatar is if we all join forces for one big push. I think that if we all wait or try separately we will fail in the end."

He turned to Adam, "I want you to go to the Crusader, find a commander and convince him to

join us and bring as many as he can. I know that will be hard but I'm sure you can think of someone who may listen and agree."

Then it was Rosa. "Rosamia, I need you to go see Jessica and with her see if you can get more priests. You alone can deal with reborns in a different way but we will need that for the avatar, so it's up to the other priests. I'm not sure if they can do the same thing you can do but..."

Rosa nodded, "I don't think that will be the case. Eventually some will be able to but not in the time that we need. You need a certain state of mind and body otherwise he will take control."

Mike let out a small sigh. "All right, I figured that was the case but had to ask. Still their help with the power they currently have will be needed."

"Alexandria, I think it's obvious but we will need Astrum magical support on this one as well and that means convincing the Council."

Alexandria smiled, "I'll figure out a way."

Mike then looked at Anna who continued with the plan's directions, "As for us we will be splitting up as well. I will go ask a dear friend for her help again. She has given so much that it has to be me in person who asks, anything else would be disrespectful." No one questioned her reasoning, "As for Mike he will be asking help from the orcs."

Adam cut in, "What? There is no way."

Mike had to nod, "Yeah, I agree with you on that, but with everything that we have learned from the dwarves how can we not ask? At the least, they deserve to know, what they do with that is up to them. Who knows, maybe we will get lucky."

Iris looked at everyone, "So what will I be doing?"

Mike smiled, "You will have the most important part in all this. While we are all out and about you will be our main point of contact and

you will be coordinating our efforts and where everyone should be going as they get people involved. In a way you are the best suited for that job and can interact with all the aspects. You fight like a Crusader, you were also trained by Crimsons, you understand the capabilities of what the priests can do because you have access to the same holy power and the same goes for the mages. In a way that makes you the most unique out of all of us."

Iris was stunned at the comment. It never occurred to her, probably the same way that it had not occurred to them about their roles in the group. Well now was the time for her to step up and this time she would do it as herself.

After giving her a moment Mike continued, "I'll take the new communication pendant, seeing as I'll be the farthest away. From what I understand, the other normal version will be okay for everyone else to stay in contact. Keep us up to date, if there is anything don't hesitate to ask. We need to show we are capable of the trust everyone will be putting on us otherwise it will all fall apart."

Adam stood, "Well, tomorrow will be interesting. I think I'll go get some rest and at the same time think about how I'm going to do what you asked." Everyone else agreed and started to do the same.

Later, Mike and Anna were back in their room alone. He turned to her, "So what are your thoughts on the current situation?"

She laughed, "So we are back here are we?"

Mike had a big smile, "Seems like it."

She wrapped her arms around him, "Well, I know that I love you and that we will all be trying the best we can to make this happen. In the end it's all we can do."

He pulled closer to her and kissed her, "No

matter what happens always know that I love you  
as well."



## *Chapter 11*

The next day the group woke emotionally refreshed but physically still exhausted. Last night had helped clear out most of the questions everyone had, which was a great thing for the group itself. The issue shared by everyone now was the same. They all knew what needed to be done and they knew the consequences that failure would bring. Those consequences were a large reason for the current mood in the group.

The Lights Templar made their way to the new library to find Kilor. As they stepped in, they were quickly escorted to the same familiar room they had now spent a lot of time in. Kilor showed up shortly after they arrived. For some reason he looked as though he had not had a good night's sleep as well.

The dwarf looked at them. "You all seem a bit different today."

Anna nodded in agreement, "Yes, we all had time to think things through and had a long talk about everything and what we are going to do next."

The dwarf was surprised. "So quickly? That's impressive..." He thought about it for a little while, "Then again maybe it's impressive for beings like us who take more time because we have it. Anyways, enough of my random thoughts, what is your current plan?"

Mike explained the plan, for what it was. Kilor had hoped for something else, it's not that the plan was bad but it's also what the dwarves had come up with a few years ago. This disappointed him in a way because it would mean that things would

probably end up with a conclusion that he did not appreciate, still there was still hope. "I'm surprised again that you will ask the orcs for help. Given your current relations with them it will be hard to convince them." Adam snickered at his comment.

Mike shrugged, "Yeah it will be, and out of all of them it's the biggest long shot." He then looked at Anna, gave her a quick smile and then turned back, "But we have to try, if we don't even try then how can we hope to succeed at anything?"

Kilor could not disagree, "Well best of luck. As for your request for transport that can be arranged. We will not be able to move you to the exact location mind you but we will try and get you as close as possible. Would you have a current map of the surface? That should help the dwarves who will perform the transport ritual." Anna pulled out a map from her backpack and gave it to him. "It came in handy while we were traveling around."

Kilor took the map. "Good. Now if you don't mind let's mark where you will need to go."

Anna pointed to the location of the Crimson town, Kilor then studied the location. "We can move you here." He pointed to a section next to the mountain ridge. Anna figured that from there it would take her half a day to get to the town, which was pretty good. She nodded in approval.

Mike did not really know where he could find K'azugg but he figured the orcs around the portal could maybe give him a general direction and probably an escort, even if he wanted it or not. The dwarf did not have to think about that location, "That place will not be an issue, we can move you there directly."

Hearing that, Adam then pointed at the Portal Tower as well but on their side. The others had a questioning look. "Is it possible to drop me off around the tower? We still don't know if the

reborns are using it and I would rather not have to fight them all by myself if I don't need to."

Kilor thought about it, "It should not be too much of an issue, but if I can ask what help will you find there if the place is in fact full of reborns as you mentioned." Adam saw that it was not only the dwarf who was interested in his answer. "If the place is still full of reborns then I know that he will be around, if not then he will probably still be around. There is no way after everything that has happened that he would let that tower be taken over again without doing anything about it."

Rosamia then clued in on who Adam was referring to, "You mean to see the General, you think that you can convince *him* of all people?"

Adam shrugged, "I'm sure he's not going to welcome me with open arms, but he is the person we need for this. I just hope I can convince him."

Rosamia did not envy Adam's reunion, mind you she had her own to wonder about. She pointed to the city of Calculus. "We should be able to move you just outside the city" Rosamia smiled, "Good that will be my first stop, after I'll ask Bernard if he can teleport me to the holy city or get into contact with the High Order." She let out a small sigh, "I'm sure I can convince Jessica but I need to try and reach out and see if I can get more to help. I can't leave it all on her again."

Alexandria looked at everyone. Compared to the others she and Anna should have the easiest time. "I think it's obvious where I will be going."

Iris then jumped in, "I'll be joining you there as well. That way I can be closer to mostly anyone who may need help or information." This all seemed to make sense to everyone, the dwarf did not have to look at the map for the location of Astrum. "We will move both of you on the surface next to the floating city, around here." Alexandria

looked at the location on the map, it seemed like it was at most one hour's walk from Newport.

Once all the locations were given, Kilor informed them that he would go and make the preparations. He suggested the group go to the centre of the city and get a bite to eat during that time. The group bumped into Dovar who was in the process of grabbing a bite to eat as well. They asked if he would like to join them. He agreed and led them to an interesting place that griddled different types of meat. The food was great but Iris could not figure out what she was eating. "So, what is this?"

After a translation was given Dovar thought about it as he finished chewing his food, "It's probably best if you just keep enjoying it. Some things are better if they stay a mystery." In her head, Iris questioned that one but figured she would just follow along.

Alexandria looked around and a small sigh could be heard. "I really don't want to go just yet, there is so much I want to know." She looked at Dovar, "Is there no other way to come back, you know when we defeat the avatar that is."

The dwarf had to smirk at that one, "Assuming that you are able to do that... no probably not." This had Alex's attention, "Probably?"

"I'm sorry, I really don't want to give you false hope. But in theory a way was given to the elves, which has now been destroyed. A way was also given to the orcs, but we think that its also been destroyed. The details were given to their ancestors and we are not really sure what was done with it. Given what was said, would they remember or care to remember at this time?"

Alexandria let out another sigh, "Yeah, I think I see what you mean." She looked around her. She would miss this place, but at least she was

fortunate enough to have been here at all, which she was quite happy about.

Eventually Helram came and found them. "The preparations are completed, I'm to escort you to the entrance of the city where everyone is waiting for you." As they walked over Anna moved closer to Helram, "I'm stunned that they gave you the job of messenger, the seeds are still active, anyone could have been sent."

Helram shrugged, "True, but this gave me a chance to see you all off. I mean we fought together and you helped us out back there so this is the least I can do."

Anna smiled. It looked like they had earned that trust after all.

When they arrived at the entrance, a lot of dwarves they had never seen were present. Some of them were off to the side, like spectators. Helram explained that most of them were the Oracles and other people of importance. Like it or not, the coming days would be a turning point for everyone, win or lose.

Five circles had been drawn in the ground with runes stones around its shape. Around them you could find four dwarves, they would be the ones responsible for moving everyone to their destination. Iris and Alexandria moved to their circle. As they did Kilor showed up with a book in hand. "I'm glad I made it in time. Here, it's nothing too special considering but I think that you of all people will appreciate it." Alex took the book and looked at it. It was a pretty heavy book but what was odd was that on the top of the cover there was a small container with a seed in it, she looked at Kilor who explained, "The seed will allow you to understand the writing. Keep in mind that it too will only last about two days and then it will be done. So make sure that you are able to take the

proper time it will take to appreciate the gift." Alexandria gave him a big warm smile and then hugged him, "Thank you." The gift alone was very nice but this was the first time it had been acknowledged by them that there would be something after this. He believed they would win and that meant a lot.

Mike and Anna were the last to make it to their circle, in a way it had been a long time since they had separated and an even longer time before that. As they finished with their embrace, they still held each other for a while longer. "You will come back to me right, nothing crazy without me."

Mike smiled, "I don't think that will be an issue, I'm not going over there to start an orc revolution or anything."

She held him a bit more firmly, "Please don't even joke about things like that."

"You're right, I'm sorry, still I am happy that we will be able to communicate. I have the new pendant and Rosa gave you hers?"

Anna nodded, "Yes, she said she would stay in contact with Bernard's magic."

He gave her one last kiss, "I love you more than life itself."

She smiled, "I love you as well and that's why it's important you come back." She let go and they made their way to their assigned circles.

Once everyone was in place, the dwarves around the circles began to chant. As the runes started to glow the ground below each of the members of the group started to feel like they were now stepping on mud and not stone. Once the chanting finished, the runes glowed one last time and then the ground below felt like it disappeared and they all fell into darkness.

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Anna felt a jolt and opened her eyes. This way of transportation was very different from using a teleport spell and left you feeling like you just stepped out of a wild ride. She looked around and the location seemed to be exactly where Kilor had mentioned. "Well at least it's a nice day for a long walk."

It took a little bit less than the half day that was expected for Anna to finally make it to her destination. As she got close, she could see guards posted at the entrance wearing familiar armour and red capes. When she was next to them, the guards blocked her path. Anna had a quick flashback to about seven years ago when she was being trained and generally not liked by all the others. She stopped in front of them. "I'm Anna, a Lights Templar and Crimson member, I'm here to see the Commander at Arms Julia. Will you let me in? Or at least let her know that I'm here."

The two guards got close to each other and started to mumble something. After a quick debate one of them addressed Anna, "I can escort you in. Julia mentioned to follow the requests of a member of the Lights Templar group. Follow me." One of the guards led her into the town as the other took his position in the middle of the door. She looked around. The town had a very different feel to when she lived here and also from when she last visited around a week back. Everywhere you looked you had Crimson guards, the villagers were going about their normal business; they seemed happy with the extra protection everywhere. "Why the high alert?"

The guard did not turn his head but still answered her. "We have been under constant attack from old Crusaders who have been reborn. Seeing as a lot of our more experienced members

are still everywhere in small groups helping others, we have taken every precaution to make sure that the villagers and the city as a whole will be safe when they return." Anna had to smile, things sure was different than in her days.

The guard knocked at the door of the Commander at Arms, "Ma'am, an Anna from the Lights Templar is here to see you."

A noise could be heard from inside like someone was rushing to the door. A few seconds later the door was opened by a smiling redhead. "Anna! I did not expect to see you. Truth is I expected someone else on your behalf." Anna reached out and hugged Julia.

For a second, the guard went on the defensive but then relaxed, "I take it that everything is fine and that I should return to my post?"

Julia smiled at the guard, "Yes Nathan, everything is all right, thanks for carrying out my orders." Nathan did a quick salute and left. Julia pulled away, "Come in, Come in."

Julia's quarters were a bit bigger than most but only for the reasons that a large table with many chairs could be found. Other than that it held the same items as all the other Crimsons: a bed, a small bookcase, a little desk which was littered with many papers and maps and a small wardrobe. As Anna sat down at the table, she realised there was something else that was different than all the others, privacy. All other Crimsons shared a room with someone else, only the Commander and Commander at Arms were allowed to have a private room.

Anna looked at Julia sitting across from her. "I was told that you have been under constant attack?"

Julia nodded, "Ever since this started there has been an attack at least every day and night.



Things have been different mind you since yesterday. So far, nothing has happened. I have received word that this has been the case pretty much everywhere." Julia took a moment, "So just you? Where are the others or your better half? I thought he never left your side."

Anna chuckled, "I guess we are always together, but this time we all had to separate. There are important things to discuss and not a lot of time to go over them."

Julia let out a large breath and then stood up, "Well in that case, I suppose we should continue this conversation elsewhere."

Anna followed Julia as she led her to their new destination, "I'm guessing this is going to be like the last time and that dragon?" Anna shook her head, "Already dealt with one of those, this is much bigger."

Julia let out a little whistle, "Okay, that's not encouraging."

Saddened, Anna did not really know what to say, "... I'm sorry."

Julia simply nodded and continued her way to the Commander's house. As she walked in she saw the somewhat private training room and the corridor that led to the Commander's office. Anna once again could not help but have another flash of the time that was. Here is where she was blowing off steam after being told she should leave, it was also the place where her opponent had bumped into her and she had challenged him. It was so long ago but being here brought it all back. Even now as she was sitting on the floor cushions at the Commander's table, the last time she had been here her life had completely turned around. Anna focused back to the present, things were much different now and there was a lot of information to go over.

The Commander smiled at Anna, "It has been a long time since I picked you up from the street where I found you after your parents died; you have grown up quite well."

Anna smiled back, "It has been quite the journey so far, but overall I like where I ended up and finally I think I can say thank you for everything you did."

"I'm glad this is the case. What brings you here?"

Anna explained the situation, how the people were coming back, who was pulling the strings, the history of the avatar and how he had been freed. She also talked of the orcs and what had occurred on their side, she finished with the dwarves and went over what had happened. She did not talk about the lord of light, knowing that the Crimsons would not care so much about that news but also because of the nature of the news. It had been agreed it should not be shared unless necessary. Julia could not believe what she had heard, she had assumed things were bad but this was beyond what she had expected. "What do you need of us?"

Anna took a moment, "We are currently recruiting, there is no way that we can go against something like that with just ourselves. We also assume we will have to go through all those reborns who have recently disappeared using that portal. So, again we are looking for help but this time from everyone." Before Julia could cut in Anna stopped her, "Before you say anything, know that there is a good chance that none of us will come back from this. At the same time we need to do this otherwise we may not have anything left after the avatar takes full control."

The Commander looked at Anna. "A long time ago a young man once told me I had been wrong about my expectations of you, that it all had not

been for nothing even with what was happening at the time. Back then I just thought the young man was smitten, but now I see that he had been right all along."

The Commander looked at Julia for a little while and then continued, "A seed was planted back then that allowed for all this to happen. While we Crimsones are not where we wish to be at this time, with the efforts of Julia we are getting there. With her, I'm sure that eventually we will go back to what we were many years ago. In order to go back to the legend that we were we need to participate, and we will not just do it for that reason but for other personal ones as well. You can count on the Crimsones to participate against this avatar and his forces."

Anna was having a hard time holding back being teary-eyed. Mike had never told her the details of what he had talked about with the Commander after she had left. Now she finally knew and she felt a warm feeling inside of her. He kept saying that he was the person he was because of her but she wondered how much he realised how much she was different because of him and his actions.

"Thank you both. We will make sure to win this, for everyone sake."

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Adam opened his eyes to very familiar scenery, he was a few minutes' walk from the tower as had been mentioned. Instantly he searched for cover, he barely had to think about it as his body reacted. He started to make his way to the church next to the tower. As he made his way there he noticed that he had a smile on his face. These woods, these actions and this feeling brought about a level of comfort. He thought about his situation now and

his past life. Things were simpler for sure back then: eat, sleep, reconnaissance and killing. Still as much as things are different now he would not want to go back, now he was with Rosa and his actions mattered. When he joined, he never would have thought this is where he would end up. All he knew was that he wanted to help stop the war in order to protect her. He hoped he would be wrong but really he always assumed that his end would have been alone in these woods by some random patrol. Things were very different now.

After a few hours, Adam noticed something odd. While he had seen small patrols of Crusaders he had not seen any reborns. He figured that he would pick up the pace a bit, clearly something had happened while they were gone. Soon enough he got close to where the camp was. He could hear the familiar sounds but he also realised that there were fewer than before. He could sneak in and figure out what was going on but he also wanted to make a good first impression, and if he was seen by someone then everything could end right there.

Adam shook his head, "They are putting ideas in my head, darn them." He made up his mind and walked in using the front of the camp, where everyone would see him coming. It did not take long for a patrol to encircle him and point their weapons at him. He stopped and raised both arms high, "I need to speak to the General, I'm assuming he is here. Tell him that his ex-Lieutenant Adam would like to talk to him." A guard left and all others stayed. It looked like he would need to stay like this until new orders arrived.

The guard came back and motioned for Adam to follow him. The good news was that he was going to get his chance. The bad news was that the General had made him wait there for close to one hour. Clearly, he was still a bit angry with him for

what had happened. He was escorted to a familiar tent, with a familiar desk filled with paperwork with an all too familiar person sitting behind it. The General looked at Adam and waved the guard away, the guard saluted and then left Adam alone with the General. "Gen..."

Instantly, the General cut Adam off. "You know your group always has the most interesting proposals, the only reason why I let you in was because I'm curious as to what trouble you are causing now. Once I know, I hope you will leave."

Surprisingly enough this was going as Adam had expected, in a way. "The most important fight in our recent history is about to happen and we need your help."

The General nodded his head, "Most important fight... How dramatic as always. Who is the enemy that makes this fight so important?"

"The dark lord himself, the main enemy of the lord of light." It was the first time Adam had seen the General speechless. It was odd. "The person who created the spell for all the reborns, the one who has been pulling all the strings for some time now it seems is none other than him. Once we get a location and also others, we are to set out and stop him."

The General was now very serious, "We have received nothing from the High Order. Our last command was to try and take back the portal, which we have in a way. Before anything gets done they will have to confirm this."

Adam knew that this was going to be the hard part. He looked around him, there were still a lot of Crusaders around many of whom could overhear their conversation. "Can we go someplace more private? There are things that need to be discussed and once you know I'm sure you will agree that this news should be kept private." Much to his

surprise, the General stood. He did not believe in these private meetings but sadly he had to take into account what this group had done and for that he figured he would amuse them one last time. They made their way outside of the camp. "You realise this will change very little."

Adam took a deep breath and told his story. The reborns, why they had appeared, the dark lord and his avatar and how he was freed. He told them about their plan and what they were trying to do and finally he told him about the lord of light. Again, the General shook his head, "You know as much as I do that the last comment you told me is blasphemous and that we are ordered to stop that. Why would you say something like that and why did you think it would affect my decision?"

"I did not think it would at all, you're like me in that respect. Still you are a man of honour, everyone respects you and believes in your orders. I know you follow orders but you have broken them from time to time when you were sure the High Order had given you the wrong command. You are on the ground where things are happening. They are not, so it makes sense they could be wrong from time to time." Adam paused for a moment, "I wanted you to have all the information. I wanted to tell you that the Order is essentially comprised of normal people who don't receive divine guidance, which makes some of their calls wrong, as you have experienced in the past. General, they are also wrong about how they are treating this situation. Towns have fallen, vicious crimes have occurred due to bad people coming back, the people are afraid. This is what I saw as we went from town to town. What orders have the Crusaders been given?"

"We have been told to wait until things can be confirmed."

"They have been told, they just don't want to believe or they do and they are afraid to act due to the target. I'm not really sure what is the cause of their orders, what I do know is that things are really bad right now. Look at the scope of it, do you seriously think that one person like a powerful rogue mage could be the cause of all this? Also, how much time do you think is left? How much of the current population is gone and given more time how many more will join them?" Adam looked the General in the eye. "I'm here to ask you to make another one of those calls and help us, but I also know that this time the consequences will be very high so you should be aware of everything before you make that call."

The General stroked his beard, "I'll be fortunate if I'm just court-martialled and sentenced to prison." The General took another moment before he continued, "My men have come to me with a lot of comments in the past few days. First, some got reports that their homes were being attacked. This was not the case with everyone but enough for them to start questioning. Our orders had been to mobilize and find traces of the source that was behind this. We are soldiers and we are not to question those orders, still we are not mindless puppets as well and no matter the order, it's hard not to question it when issues of family and home start happening."

"Then, a few days later, we heard reports that small groups of people are now in those towns helping and trying to protect those who need it. Again questions came, thankful as some are now they still wonder why they were not the ones to carry out this mission. More days passed and this issue with the portal happens, people assume that it was just reopened but still why did suddenly everyone leave to cross it? What's about to happen

next? It's our jobs as commanders to not panic and be in control so others can follow but it's hard to follow and believe when you are just sitting and waiting with no information being given."

When the General stopped again, Adam had no clue where he was standing, would he help or not? He could not tell. Adam was not sure how to convince him. He thought to what Rosa would tell him, heck he even thought about how Anna and Mike would approach it. After too much time had passed and no answer came, a small smile appeared on his face, "General you now have another option available to you and your men, so which of the two options do you wish to follow? I know this goes against our training but there are times where we have to make our own choice."

After thinking about it some more the General looked at Adam. "You have changed quite a bit, Lieutenant. Still you must realise that I can only assist you with the men I have at my command. That will be the extent of what I'm able to do."

Adam smiled again, "That's more than we could have hoped for. Thank you, General."

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When she felt solid ground under her feet Rosamia opened her eyes again, she was in front of the city of Calculus. Getting here had been an interesting event but all that did not matter as she was here and had a big job ahead of her. She rushed to the main gates and asked the first guard where she could find the head priestess Jessica or Captain of the Guard Kyle. The guard seemed put off for a second and then realised something. "Hmm, I think it's best if I escort you to see the Captain."

Along the way to the captain's home Rosamia realised that there were a lot of Crusaders around.



Given a city of this size it was normal to have a few but it seemed to her like it was a bit more than that. She was also a bit worried. Why escort her to Kyle and not Jessica?

Once they reached the city guard house, he continued the escort until they reached Kyle's office. He knocked on his door, "Rosamia is here to see you."

Kyle's voice could be heard and it did not sound pleasant, "Oh please, do let her come in."

The guard looked at Rosa very quickly before he left, muttering, "Good luck to you."

Rosamia was not encouraged but she opened the door and walked in. Kyle was standing next to his desk and Bernard was sitting in one of the chairs that were around his desk. Kyle looked very angry and Bernard very tired. She approached the Captain. "What's wrong? What happened?"

Kyle stared at Rosa with a lot of hate in his eyes, "You want to know what happened? Well it seems the Order you once belonged to has seen fit to escort Jessica back to their city and have a heart to heart about her punishment for involving herself with you." Rosamia did not know the particulars but she could guess what had happened, this was very unexpected and very inconvenient. Kyle continued on with his rant, "I tried to tell her I would stop them but she insisted I do nothing because there was nothing I could really do as the Crusaders dragged her away like she was a heretic. Then I asked the Guild for assistance and got blown away. Now I'm asking our resident mage if Astrum can do something about this, he seems to tell me that they can't. Now that you are here, I'm thinking you are the perfect person to fix this."

Rosa did not blame Kyle at all for the way he was acting. From what she had been told, Jessica

was a way better priestess then she had been, for something like that happen to her after performing actions of help was disappointing at best. Rosa took a deep breath, "Please, Kyle calm down and tell me everything that happened."

"That's just it, there is nothing else. They came in with orders to take her in about two days ago and that was all I got. I asked the other priests and priestesses who work with her but all they tell me is that I should not expect her back anytime soon. What is up with that?"

Rosamia also understood that answer, "It's not that Jessica did anything wrong, it's just that she acted without their consent. Now for one priest or a few to do that is not a big deal, but when she helped us out she moved a lot of priests and gave them a duty that was seen pretty much by everyone. This would have been fine if the High Order had known and approved of that decision."

Kyle was very attentive now that he was getting a detailed reason for what had happened.

"Normally, when something like this happens for someone like her, she will have a meeting with the High Order and then they will evaluate her standing. Depending on the decision, she could come right back or they may force her to do certain things as a reminder of how things are supposed to work before she is able to come back."

Kyle was a bit doubtful, "So just a slap on the hand and then that's it?"

Rosamia thought about it. This had happened during her year while she was part of the High Order. The priest in question had also done something similar to help those around him. Rosamia had questioned why he was being questioned at all, only to have both of them be reminded of the big picture and the importance of approval. Programs were in place for things like

this and if an issue was found with those programs because they were lacking then they should be brought up in order for them to get fixed or changed. This change did occur but, more often than not, occurred far too late to help the intended current issue. Still Rosamia shared Kyle's concern, she knew that the High Order would not appreciate Jessica's involvement with Rosa after she had left as she did and that could cause issues not only for Jessica but for what Rosa needed to ask the High Order for.

She looked at Kyle with a sad expression, "Because I'm involved it will probably be more involved than that." She sat in one of the chairs that was free. "While I think about what to do about it let me explain what is currently happening and then I'll see what I can do to help Jessica out." She explained mostly everything to both of them, only skipping over the status of the lord of light and also about what she had figured out about the dark energy.

Bernard looked at her, "If I understand correctly you are in an interesting position then. How can you help Jessica and at the same time get the High Order's consent, will aiming for one not ruin your chances at the other? So what will you do?" Both Kyle and Bernard were looking at her waiting to see what she was going to say.

Following the Order's way of thinking, she should side with the High Order. This could in theory both lessen Jessica's punishment and also help out in the battle to come. Once the battle was over then Jessica's issue could be looked at. The important big picture item was the coming battle. That's what the Order would have recommended but it's not what her heart recommended she do, so she would follow the Lights Templar rule number two, 'Follow your heart and your regrets

will be few.' Mind you, she did wonder about the consequences. She looked at Bernard "Can you teleport me to the city where the High Order is? Seeing as they took her a few days ago I really don't have much time."

Kyle jumped in, "So you're going to help her?"

Rosamia nodded in agreement.

Bernard was impressed and surprised. "Sure I can take you there, we will have to go to my tower first but there should be no issues."

As they left, Rosamia turned to Kyle, "Don't worry. I'll bring her back."

Bernard explained that he would use a modified version of the teleport spell that would allow him to teleport back with no issues. The spell would only give them one hour before they would have to return and he would have to accompany her. Rosamia had no objections and appreciated the company. The head church had a teleportation marker already in place in front of the main gates, so there was little surprise to the guards when they both appeared. Because Rosamia was recognized, they simply let her in.

This made Bernard question a few things. "Do they not know you have left the Order?"

Rosamia shrugged, "Considering how I left, I would not be surprised if the news has not traveled around. I'm sure something will eventually be said about it but it will depend on what I did after I left and how that would represent them."

Bernard thought about it for a while, "I guess I can see that. By the way are you really going to help Jessica? Considering what you need to do next, I'm sure she would understand your decision and eventually be able to calm Kyle down."

Rosamia let out a small sigh, "I'm guessing you are right on that one, but I just can't do that. Jessica took a chance with me when we all really

needed the help, turning away from her now would help our odds of succeeding, which we really need, but at what cost? Understanding the reasons why is one thing, getting over the pain of the blow is another and I'm not ready to give that blow where it's not deserved. That's already happening way too often these days."

They made their way to where the High Order had its meetings, it was very helpful that everyone still thought that she was still a part of the group. She assumed that after today this would no longer be the case. Four guards were present in front of the door in order to make sure no one could eavesdrop or cause a disturbance. Bernard looked at Rosamia, "Those guards are going to be a problem."

She nodded, "Yes, they will. Can you put them to sleep? If they are meeting it means they are probably questioning her. We can verify once they are out of the way."

"I could but those guards radiate magic, I'm assuming they are protected. I cannot remove the protection and cast the sleep spell."

Rosamia smirked at that one, "I'll handle the protection spell." She figured that now would be a good time to test out her theory; she moved closer to the guards. They blocked her way. "Please turn around there is a session currently in place and you know the rules." Rosamia smiled and nodded, she also took the time to cast a cleansing spell that reached out to the guards and pulled their magic energy into herself. The protection spell had never been created to help against something like that. She took the energy and some of her own and rechanneled it into a dispelling spell to remove their very strong defences. Right on cue Bernard cast his sleeping spell. Before the guards could react they dropped to the ground. She could tell

Bernard was curious but now was not the time to go over it and explain, still now she knew that the cleansing spell was not a cleansing spell at all but more of an energy transfer spell. As she made her way to the door to hear if Jessica was in fact in there, she wondered if there was a way to protect yourself from a spell like that.

Jessica had experienced many firsts in the last few days. A first for being escorted by Crusaders out of her city, a first at the hospitality that had been offered and now a first at being present at a High Order meeting. All experiences she could have done without. Currently, there was this insistent woman name Catherine who was constantly asking the same questions again. "Do you know why Rosamia was called back to Astrum and what she is doing right now?" Jessica did not know what to tell her beyond what she already had. As she was about to tell her the same thing again the door behind her opened. This action caused more surprise for the others than herself. Rosamia and Bernard walked in. Rosamia got close to her, "Do you mind if I take your place?"

Jessica jumped out of her seat, "By all means."

Rosamia sat down in a familiar chair looking at very familiar people, still this time things would be different. Outraged, Joseph first spoke, "What is the meaning of this? And how did you get past the guard?"

"You all seemed more interested in me and what I was doing than Jessica, so I figured I would take her place. Who better to ask about myself than me directly? As for the guards, they are currently taking a small nap."

Catherine then jumped in, "Well, seeing as you are here what business do you have with the Council?"

Rosa could now understand where all the

issues with the Order and the Council came from. In a way everything the Order knew originally had been told to them by the elves, who was to say what they had not told them. Knowing what she now knew she also understood why past members could have been jaded over time with the elves especially after what Alexandria had explained.

"They wanted Adam and I to go on what could have been a wild goose chase, as it turned out that was not the case. I've only just returned from there with very important news I am willing to share with all of you if you wish to listen." Unimpressed, Catherine motioned for her to continue. "We went to seek help from the first ones to see if they had any information on what is currently happening. As it turns out they are still alive and were able to confirm quite a bit, mainly that the person who is the cause of the people coming back to life is the dark lord himself... or at least his avatar."

Joseph then cut in, "And what proof did they have to confirm this?"

"As it turns out quite a bit actually but if you don't want to believe their words you can believe mine. While I was over there we were attacked by shadow creatures, it's at that point I took in its power into myself and confirmed it."

Joseph eyes went wide, "You must be cleansed at once, who knows what lasting effects you are under." Rosamia was touched in a way as she detected a hint of concern coming from the priest. "There is no need for that as it turns out he is probably more angry with me than you all are at this moment and is also not present at all in my body or mind."

They were not convinced but that hardly mattered at this point. "At this time we are raising an army to go against all those reborns who have disappeared and also to challenge this avatar. We

are all under the agreement that if not stopped then our whole way of life will be destroyed. I was going to seek help from Jessica and her priests again to help with this, but then I learned about this and had to change the plans a bit."

This was not going at all how she had planned but there was no real turning back now. "Here is what I propose. Image will be very important soon. I suggest you pass the order along to let Jessica join me in this. If we win then you can say you agreed to help when you were asked because you saw what was at stake. If we lose, well in a way it will not matter, but you have on record that I admitted to letting the dark energy in me. Tell everyone that you sent Jessica in order to deal with the issue. It's as simple as that."

Catherine was not pleased at all. "I think we all feel like you are giving us no choice in the matter. Why should we oblige you?"

"Because you have no choice in the matter, this army is happening. At this time we don't know the numbers but we know it will be enough to be noticed. I'm also thinking you are all probably having issues dealing with the questions around the reborns and pretty soon you will need to provide answers. By using Jessica you can give them an answer. This helps keep the impression that you are in control and also keeps her out of harm and places all the blame on me if need be."

She looked at all of them. "So will you let her go back to her city and then join us on this attack we have planned?"

After a moment of silence, Rob answered her question. "I think it's best if you leave now. Do what you need to do and we will deal with what we will tell the public once we know of the outcome." Rosamia stood up and bowed. As she left with Bernard and Jessica, Catherine had some final



words "By the way, no matter how this all turns out we will figure out a way to make sure that you are no longer welcomed here. Please do not come back unless we request it." Rosamia did not acknowledge her and simply left.

When they were outside, Jessica turned to Rosa. "So is this all true what you said back there?"

She simply nodded.

"If that is the case did you just not lessen the help you needed on my account?"

Rosamia nodded again, "That I did, but as I explained to Bernard I was not willing to get the help I needed at your expense. I will have to report back and let everyone know. I'm sure we will figure something out. Still am I able to count on your help again and the help of the priests that you command?"

Jessica smiled, "I will need to know more about the details but yes you will have my help again, plus it seems that it will be a part of a coming command from the High Order so I have very little choice."

As Bernard activated his teleport spell to head back, Rosamia took one last look at a place she was no longer welcomed but then wondered if she even wanted to ever come back.

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Alexandria and Iris appeared near the mountainside next to Newport. Iris figured it would take them at most an hour to get there. She turned to Alex to see that she was all smiles and had a bit of a goofy grin on her face. "That was so cool, so much not like a teleport spell. I wonder how they do that. I mean in theory they are using the same arcane magic as we are so in theory we should be

able to do the same, right?" And there she went. Iris had to smile at Alex's comments and questions. During this adventure, she had learned so much about her, she had never seen this happy, bubbly side of her. Always it had been the serious Council version, or worse the teacher version. As they started their walk, images of those training sessions popped in her head. Iris quickly wanted to forget about those. "Are you going to check out the book as we walk? I mean maybe there is a part you can understand without using the seed right away."

"I don't need to I've already checked and there is nothing that makes sense to me, well at this time anyways." Iris was currently retracing what had happened in the last little while, "Wait, when did you even have time to check?"

Alexandria shrugged, "That's not important but what is, is that I now have two items to focus on. I'm figuring the seed will also allow me to understand those writings we found in that ruin." Her smile disappeared as she continued, "Unfortunately we have to deal with this little issue of the dark lord first, too bad there is not more time."

Iris was stunned by her attitude. "Just a little issue? How can you not be more worried?"

"You know what I mean, but at the same time what is the point? Will me being worried help anyone? There is nothing I can do about it at this time so I'll just not think about it. I won't ignore the issue but I don't see how dreading about how things will go wrong will help. I'll leave that off for someone else to do."

"I guess that's the same approach you will have for this meeting with the Council?"

Alexandria's shoulders slumped at the mention of the Council. "Oh that... No, that I'm

worried about. I have no clue how I'm going to announce the news. I'm sure they will help so I'm not worried about that but..." She turned to Iris, "Promise me if things go bad you will come to my rescue." Again, so not like the person she had lived with for a while now.

"I promise." The thing was that Iris knew there would be no need for this promise. She had recently been told about some of the things that she had done and every time there were few consequences for her actions. Iris guessed the reason was because of how hard Alex worked and also tried to live up to everyone's expectation. They probably all realised that her worst enemy was herself and there was little need to punish her more.

The rest of the trip was suspiciously quiet as Alexandria was probably going over all the bad things that would happen to her in her head. They made their way to the main portal that would bring them to Astrum. The guards stopped them. "I'm sorry Miss Alexandria, but we have been told to send an advance message when you came back, if you can just wait please." Alexandria glanced at Iris using one of her 'I told you so' looks. Iris simply gave a quick smirk as a response.

The guard having done his duty informed them they could use the portal, as they stepped in and reappeared on the other side they were again greeted by more guards. Alex was not impressed. "So what, you're going to tell me you have orders to escort me directly to the Council?" The guard was caught off guard for a bit. "That's exactly right, please follow me." As the guard started walking the two followed him. Alexandria was stunned so much so that she just did not know what to say. The guard had not realised it but she had said that comment as a sarcastic joke and now it seems the

joke had been turned back on her.

They made their way to an all too familiar building but at one point the guard turned right when he should have gone left. Alexandria stopped, "Ah, where are you going, the Council room is that way."

The guard turned to face her, "True, but that is not the room I was asked to escort you to." All joking aside, now even Iris was starting to wonder if Alex had not been so paranoid for nothing after all. They kept following the guard, who led them to an empty room, the only thing in the room was an all too familiar large half sphere in the middle. The room only had one door and was covered with an odd type of surface on both walls and floor. Alex looked at it closely. After a quick inspection she realised the substance was used to create extra resistance against scrying spells. This whole situation was very odd.

Moments later, only two Council members showed up: Solanar and Lithius. Once they were in, Solanar cast a barrier spell on the door, which pretty much meant that no one was going in or out until he wanted them to. As they took their place around the orb, Alex looked at both of them. "What's going on? I know I'm trouble again but this is a bit much."

Lithius and Solanar looked at each other, not really knowing what she was talking about. Solanar then turned to Alex, "These precautions are not because of your little break out if that is what you are assuming. We have just learned a few things and we are also assuming you have important information for us we may not want other ears to hear about. That's all there is to it. Now what have you learned?"

He was straight to the point but Alex was a little bit calmer about the situation. She explained

almost everything that had happened when they were with the orcs and also about the dwarves. The two things she purposely ignored was the orb, which had a copy of the inscription found in the ruins and also the truth about the lord of light. She would have also not mentioned the book but that was hard to do considering she was still holding it and had no time to hide it.

Lithius turned to Solanar, "This seems to follow what you informed me about."

Solanar nodded, "Sadly yes, but there is one part missing." He then looked at both Alex and Iris "And I don't see that any of you would have not asked the first ones about it. Can the lord of light provide assistance?" With the best poker face that she could muster Alex answered him "No, the dwarves informed us he could not."

Solanar smiled, "Of course, because he is dead correct?"

Alex paused for one quick second, which was enough for the old elf. "It's all right, you have just confirmed what has been assumed for a long time now." Again, she had lost the battle but the frustration of that left quickly as she realised this was new information to Lithius.

Lithius turned to face the head of the Council, "When did you learn of this?"

"It was never confirmed by our race and even we are not clear on what happened during that day of the casting. We also did not know about the flaw Alexandria mentioned, a different path would have been taken during the dragon wars had we known. So I agree with the first ones in saying that we are all to blame for what is occurring at this time." He paused for a moment, "Still, there are certain things that are only told to the new head of the Council from the previous one, things that are not to be shared until the time is right." Alexandria

was a bit surprised, she had assumed this happened but not amongst the elves in the Council.

"Eventually, this new knowledge will be known to others, but even still I would think it will be to a close few, hence the precautions. So, your group is planning on rallying everyone they can and going against this avatar. I agree this is the best course of action and you will have our full support. All mages in Astrum will be at your disposal and Lithius as well. The Council members will unfortunately not be able to help." Alex and Iris looked at each other, silently questioning that last statement as Solanar continued, "I take it that a person has been chosen to coordinate all these efforts?"

Iris nodded, "That would be me, sir."

"Then I suppose you will be using this room more than anyone else." Lithius explained the comment in more detail. "We are assuming that you will be using those orbs in order to communicate. After my experience with them the last time with your other group members, I realised they had an interesting limitation if more people needed to be involved. So a larger version was created and placed in this room." Alexandria was not sure how she felt about that, but they were right that it would come in handy in the next little while.

Solanar then turned and started going to the door. As he got there he did mention one last thing. "Oh by the way, once this is over we will have to talk about how you went off on your own again."

She knew she was not going to get away with it, at the same time did it even matter anymore? "About that I have news." Alexandria took a moment to collect her thoughts and then said, "I would like to bow down from being a Council

member." As she said it, a large weight lifted off her shoulders. "Look, I am very, very grateful for everything you have done for me and also all the things you put up with because of me, but I realised during this last adventure that it's not where I belong. I thought it was where I belonged but my heart is telling me it's not the case." She bowed to both of them, "I'm truly sorry."

Everyone was looking at Solanar who was thinking about what had been said. Having made up his mind on something he stared at Alexandria, "Your resignation is denied."

Iris had not expected that and the same went for Alex as she looked at him with a confused look on her face. "... *What?* Why not?"

Solanar took a deep breath and started to explain his reasoning. "The world is changing Miss Alexandria and we need to learn to change with it. Currently, the Council is ruled mostly with elves, eventually this will change. In order to do that we need people like you and your father before you to start this process. When this started, we all assumed there would be issues. Admittedly these issues only really started once you took the position. At the same time, you and your friends have been at the centre of most large events somehow. Given that, we agreed to give you more leniencies because of the results of these 'adventures' as you call them. I am to assume that you were planning on leaving the Council to join up with your group in order to do something else after all this was done?"

Alexandria simply nodded in agreement. Solanar continued, "Fine, then assuming this is still what you intend to do afterwards then come to us and arrangements will be made. We are not giving up on this and nor should you but there is also no set timeline. So, your request is denied,

and I would appreciate it if an issue like this occurs in the future that you come talk to Lithius or myself ahead of time." Once again, he turned and made his way to the door, removed the seal around it and left. Lithius looked at the two who still were going over what had been said. "I think I will leave you for a while. Iris, when you are ready come find me, there is information I must share with you."

Iris nodded at Lithius to acknowledge his request and then moved closer to Alex. "Are you okay? I know this did not go as you planned."

Alex was confused, "I'm not sure really, I mean if I'm able to do what I need to do with you guys and stay a member then it should be fine. I don't know, there is something that does not feel right about this." Alex shook her head, "Anyways, that does not matter now. We have the help we wanted and the means to coordinate it. We should focus on that for now. I'll quickly head home and drop the book off and see about creating two new pendants for ourselves. I'm assuming that you will need to leave this room from time to time so I'm sure it will come in handy still."

As she left, Iris wondered if it was okay to just leave things off like that. She agreed that logically now was not the time but it also did not feel right for her. Maybe now was one of those times to ask for help, still that too would have to wait for now.

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Mike let out a large breath when he realised where he was, again. He really did not want to be here, it did not help things out that he was alone. As he looked at where the portal would normally be it only helped to worsen his mood as it reminded him that in theory no confirmed arrangements had



been made for him to go back. "Well sitting around will not help get this done." He walked to the edge and looked down, a large orc encampment was still present. While it seemed smaller than before, they would still be able to provide him with the means to contact K'azugg.

He eventually made his way down, as soon as he got to the ground floor everyone erupted into action and started yelling at him and pointing their weapons. Mike slowly continued downward from the stairs and raised both arms. While he did not expect a warm greeting this was not remotely close to what he would have thought possible. This was not a good sign. Could it be that something else had happened here while they had been away?

"Guys, guys, I'm not here to fight. I'm just here to talk to K'azugg that's all. I have some information for him he will probably want to know."

One of the orcs stepped forward and waved his long sword closer, "I'm sure you do human, still you being here confirms our suspicions about the portal. I'm glad that our orc leader was not completely fooled by you."

Mike had no clue what he was talking about but clearly, something had happened. "Look is it possible to get him here? I think there has been a big misunderstanding again. Let's clear it up this time before anything goes horribly wrong." It's at that point that he heard another orc from somewhere say, "...It's too late for that..." Now Mike was really worried. In his current position, making it to the door would be interesting at best but then there were all the others outside. No, they had not actually attacked him yet so letting the situation play out would probably be for the best. "Okay, so now that you have me, what now?"

The orc looked frustrated. "Now, I go get the

leader. We were ordered to let him know if anyone came through the portal." As he started to leave, he stopped for a second. "We were also instructed to kill the person if they gave us any trouble." A weird smile appeared on his face, "So please try something."

Mike had to stay in this current situation for a very, very long time. It was hard to tell but many hours had passed by. Clearly, this leader wanted to test him and see if he would take action, that or he was just really far away. Over time, he had heard something about an impending attack and nearly their entire army going somewhere. There were also many questions as to why he had come back and why alone. This was also a question that Mike asked himself given the current circumstances.

Eventually, the leader arrived, Mike was relieved. For one, this wait would be over; for the second, it seemed that the leader was K'azugg. The leader seem very pissed, he marched close to Mike and grabbed his throat. K'azugg then used his force to drag Mike to the second floor. As they arrived away from everyone, he pushed him into the room. "Explain yourself. What is going on?"

Mike got up and rubbed his throat. "I have no clue what you are all talking about, how about you fill me in on what is going on and maybe I can start answering your questions properly."

The leader growled at him and then motioned with his hand to climb up again to the other floor, going further away from his men. As they reached the third floor, K'azugg crossed his arms and stood firm next to the stairs. "It seems that there is a rather large army of humans coming at us from the desert. Currently, we are mobilizing to greet them. What do you know of this?"

Mike shook his head. "Nothing, we are currently in no position to attack you with such a

force as you ... wait..."

"I knew it, it was only a matter of time."

"Not like you think, it seems that I was wrong about something and will need to contact my group to let them know."

K'azugg immediately responded, "No! First, you answer my questions. If I approve of the answers then I won't kill you outright. Now what is going on, what do you know?"

Mike took a second to calm down. "Look, currently all the reborns from our side have disappeared. We figured they got an order somehow, got organized, took over the main portal, closed it and reopened it to go someplace else. We, I, assumed they left to go protect whoever is in charge, which we have confirmed is in fact the dark lord himself using an avatar body. If you are correct and a large force is coming your way, then you need to tell them that they are all reborns. Heck, you may not even be able to kill them."

K'azugg looked at him. "Why do you say that the portal is closed? Did you not just use it right now and then?"

Mike again shook his head, "Look for yourself. The portal is closed. We used a teleport spell to go see the first ones, the dwarves. After we spent some time there and learned a great deal and formed a plan to stop this, I came here alone using the first ones' magic in order to tell you all about it."

K'azugg seemed to relax a bit, which meant that some part of him believed him, which was good.

"Seriously, you need to let me contact my group. They need to know about this. At least tell your people about it, if they go there thinking they are fighting regular humans then the casualties will..."

K'azugg cut him off, "*Don't you think I know that?* Because of what happened in Cagan, I lost my standing with the other leaders. Even if I did warn them, there is nothing I can do. Currently me and my men have been sent here because they all think we have been influenced by your group. It seems that we will be dealt with after they deal with the coming army."

Mike rubbed his forehead, "This is really bad." He looked at the orc leader, "Can I?" The leader just waved him off. Mike reached for the pendant and thought of Iris, soon after a full version of Iris showed up in front of him. He was surprised not to see just her head.

Noticing his reaction Iris explained, "There has been a bit of an upgrade courtesy of Lithius and the Council. I have news..."

Mike cut her off, "Before you do that, it seems there is a larger issue here. Seems I was wrong, the human army of reborns is heading to attack the orcs using the desert."

Iris shook her head. "But wait, we have confirmed you were right. The portal led to the desert, there a large pyramid can be found and there are a lot of human reborns there too." She paused for a second, "Still, with the numbers we saw, we did conclude that there were missing way too many and they had to have gone someplace else as well. Looks like you just found them."

"Swell, well I need to clear things up here. I'll contact you later, thanks." Before he let go of the pendant Iris waved her arms, "Wait, wait, wait, there are other things I need to tell you." Mike looked over at K'azugg and then back at Iris, "Does this news change the overall plan?" She thought about it, "Not really, no."

"Then I'm sorry Iris, but it will have to wait. I promise you I will contact you as soon as I can."

"I understand, I'll keep things going here in the meantime."

He gave her a smile as he let go of the pendant. As the image disappeared, he looked in the orc leader's direction. He still seemed pissed. "Explain."

Mike nodded and then went on to explain everything they had learned about the orcs and what they had done, the reason why things were happening now and their next steps.

Once it was all done K'azugg shook his head, "That is quite the story."

Mike nodded. "It's hard to argue that one, but it also explains why you keep saying that your race must be cursed. In a way, that first victory cursed your race in the eyes of the dark lord. It also explains why the dragon used you. Your race had forgotten about it and was on its own. Plus, why not use the race that tipped the balance in order to help destroy everything?"

"Don't you dare blame this on us."

Mike shook his head, "I'm just explaining the reasons why. I'm not blaming you at all. Heck, if not for your race mine would not even exist, actually we all would probably not exist so really we all owe your ancestors pretty much everything."

"And now all that is about to disappear. So I'm curious, what will you do next?"

Mike thought about it. "Well Iris just told me that the overall plan is still in play. Seeing as you told me that warning your race will amount to nothing, the way I see it is that the only way to help you is to make sure we succeed with our plan."

The orc leader was puzzled. "How so?"

"Assuming we defeat the avatar, his spell will also end. Cutting the flow of magic to a reborn will hamper it. But as you saw at Cagan, that does not

stop the overall spell that can bring them back. It was theorized before all this started that if we stop the caster then the spell has to stop because someone needs to maintain it. If no one is there then everything comes undone."

"Wait, by undone you mean that essentially everyone who has returned..."

Mike nodded "Yes, everyone who has returned will return to dust. Sadly this also includes the ones who have joined their ranks and took to this new way of life."

"So if everything goes well, a lot of humans will die and stay dead including the attacking army."

Mike did not appreciate how he put it but could not argue the statement.

K'azugg then nodded, "I can work with that, I'll join you on this quest to free my people."

Mike was confused. "Okay ... I did not expect that considering what is going on and that's not the main goal but it is what will happen unintentionally."

The orc leader shrugged. "The way I see it I really have no choice in the matter. I can stay here and hope you succeed. Assuming you don't, then we are all dead or will be once that army continues to march on. If I say it as I just did, with a more creative spin, I can at least convince the troops I have here to join me in helping you. When we succeed then we come back the heroes who destroyed the vast army attacking us. If we die in the process... Well, we were probably dead anyways if we stayed here."

As the orc turned around to go below, Mike could not argue with his logic, which was a new one for him with K'azugg. Still there was one issue. "Do you have a means to travel to the desert? Or should I arrange something with my group?"

The orc stopped. "No we will not be using that

moving spell of yours, we will use our own method. Below this place, there are many tunnels that allow us to move quickly from one place to another. They have been there for a long time now. Those tunnels are also how we learned about the desert magic being gone in the first place. It should take us a few days but we will get there."

The orc left after his comment and left Mike even more confused. "Tunnels? Where the heck did that come from and who built those... wait... ah... I'm so stupid."

He then took a few moments to think things through and then contacted Iris once again. "I think I have good news for you." He explained about the orc's situation and what was going to happen. Iris seemed as confused as he had been.

"Tunnels?"

He nodded, "Think about it. How else did the dwarves move around when there were dragons flying free in the sky attacking them. I would not be surprised if those paths were also used to move around during that first victory. Anyways, using those we should be able to get there. Now you mentioned something that you needed to tell me."

"Yes, we have been able to determine the location of the pyramid I told you about. On the top, we detected a large force of magic. We assume this is where the avatar is located. But we could not confirm that because attempts of scrying are being blocked."

"Hmm, but the portal is still active in that location?"

"Yes, it seems like it is."

"Well that's good news at least but it feels like he wants us to go there blind, which could be a problem." He thought about it for a little while.

"Prepare as much as you can and keep probing as well. Once we get there, we will physically be able

to inform you of what is happening. From there we will plan accordingly. Was there anything else?"

Iris took a moment to think about it. "Hum, yes but I'll deal with it... Wait there is something, it has nothing to do with this but something odd happened with Solanar when Alex said she was going to quit."

As Iris mentioned the details, Mike had to admit that he too was surprised but at the same time, it made some sense considering his dealings with the elf. "I would not worry too much about it at this time." As he looked at Iris he could see it was still an issue. "What he said was probably all true but at the same time look at what we did and are doing now. Because of the duties Alexandria has, they are always in the loop and more often than not Astrum is our central point. Assuming she leaves, will that stay the same? How aware of the situation will they be when the next things happen? Like I said, I don't see that we need to worry about this now... Maybe later depending on what we do but at this time if they allow Alexandria to do what she wants to do then I really don't see why we should change things. Unless that is what she wants to do."

"Hmm, I see what you mean. I'll mention it to her, I know she said not to worry but I can tell it's annoying her and given what we need to do I think it will be best to let her know."

Mike shrugged. "That I will leave in your capable hands, or Anna's. I've been told that my timing on those things has always been bad so..."

She smiled, "It's all right. Anyway, I have many things to do and I'm sure it's the same for you. Let me know when you arrive and we can send you a more accurate location then somewhere in the desert based on where the tunnel will lead you."

"I will, and if there is anything else let me



know."

"I will."

Her image then faded and he was left alone. It's then he realised he really did not have anything to do until K'azugg came back. He sighed heavily, he really did not want to be here given what was happening but it seemed that the long shot had paid off in a roundabout way. As Mike waited, he played with the pendant and thought of Anna.

## *Chapter 12*

*T*he last few days had been very busy for Iris. All other Lights Templar members had stayed with the groups that had agreed to help out. That way, all groups would be in contact with one and the other and there would be no wait time for the messages to go from and to, which was a great advantage. The orcs and Mike had arrived at the destination, which was the missing piece they had all been waiting for.

Currently, the heads of each group were in the room specially built for this. Physically you had the General from the Crusaders, Julia from the Crimson, Jessica for the Priests and Lithius from the Council. K'azugg from the orcs and Mike from the Lights Templar were present by using the pendant communication device. The only person extra was Iris who was the only one who had contact with everyone before this meeting.

Iris thought she would have been nervous at this time, but for some reason she was not. She told herself that she was prepared and this time she knew the big picture. Everyone had helped her be at this stage and were confident in her abilities. The least she could do is match that confidence herself.

Iris took a look around and started the battle meeting. "Seeing as we all know why we are here and what we need to do let's start by going over what we have. The General was able to bring four hundred Crusaders; the Commander at Arms Julia, has two hundred Crimson; Group Leader K'azugg of the orcs has about one hundred; the

Head Priestess Jessica has twenty-five priests; Council member Lithius has sixty mages; and last, Mike of the Lights Templar has six members. So pure numbers, from what we have learned, we have a little bit less than eight hundred versus approximately two thousand of them."

She paused for a second, "Normally, that would not be too bad, but unfortunately we have to plan for the worst in this case and assume that all those two thousands will be unkillable due to the powers of the dark energy that feeds all of them. We also have no clue what is waiting inside the pyramid. We can guess there will be added enemies in the form of shadow creatures in the ranks of the reborns."

Iris looked at all the members around her. "Now there are certain issues with our members. After talking with everyone, I've come up with methods to help with those issues. The first issue is the lack of priests to heal or give assistance during combat. To help with that I've asked the General to select about one hundred of his men to help in that regards. Now keep in mind that Crusader healing has its limits but it will keep your insides from going outside. Priests have been instructed to help with major wounds and minor but debilitating ones will be handled by the Crusaders."

Iris then looked at K'azzug and Julia. "The other issue is the lack of magic abilities in certain groups against magical creatures. Now when we were with the first ones, the dwarves, we learned that they use magic a bit differently than we do and that is where I got the idea on how to help with that problem. With the help of Alexandria and *many* mages in Astrum we have been able to recreate the same ooze type that was used in order for us to hurt the shadow creatures. Because there

were lots of samples left in our scabbards Alexandria also went the extra mile and was able to create something new. Basically, she was able to create another concoction that when applied to your weapon will give it the same properties of it being magically enchanted with a fire spell. Now this is where nearly everyone in Astrum comes in. Each of us will be supplied with two vials. One will have the ooze against shadow creatures and the other the fire enchantment. Simply apply the content on your weapon and you are done. The limitations are that you only have one application of each, and the fire enactment will only last about one hour. So keep that in mind."

"Currently, most of our forces are at the Portal Tower. We are to get to our destination using the portal. It will lead us to where the orcs and Mike currently are. From what they have said their location is secure and right in front of the pyramid. At this point, we're not really sure why it was kept open but we have a working theory that this fight is as important to us as it is to the avatar. Assuming he wins then he will probably be in control of everything shortly after. That being said the working theory is that he wants this done as much as we do and he has waited for a much longer time than we have. Now the last part we need to go over is the battle plan." Iris looked at Mike. "The representative of the Lights Templar would like to start it up."

Mike knew the General probably had his own ideas on how to proceed but after talking with K'azugg this was probably the best way to go about it. "Iris was right. We know what we need to do but at the same time we need to keep something else in mind. Our goal is to kill the avatar. As for everything else, the only thing that needs to be done is to keep them at bay. If you can get rid of

them permanently, all the better but that may not be feasible so really there are two goals here. A small group will head in and confront the avatar in order to kill it. Everyone else's job will be to make sure they are protected and nothing else adds to their fight."

The General coughed, "And I assume this small group will be yours? Considering what is at stake, why play hero? Why not assault the avatar with everything we have or at least a larger portion than just a small team."

"Yes, that would make sense General, and the reason why I'm not suggesting it is because of what a dwarf mentioned. He said, 'Whatever form it takes to fight you it will have limitless power taken from the source that it created.' I'm assuming that if we attack it with a large force he will take on a shape to compensate, probably a large dragon would be my guess. Going against something that large, surrounded by a force who can't be stopped does not seem wise to me at all. If a small yet powerful force goes against him, as he is expecting, then he will probably match that. Well that's what we are thinking seeing as there no large lizards flying around where we are right now." Mike gave the General time to argue his logic but nothing came.

While he could see the General was not too pleased he continued, "The idea would be to split the force in three parts, the large part of it outside holding everyone out. The others would be inside holding everyone in where they are and the last one would be the force actually attacking the avatar. The Lights Templar will be attacking the avatar. The inside force will be comprised of the orcs, in order to avoid possible internal conflicts. The outside force will be everyone else."

Again the General coughed, "So I am to leave

my back to the orcs? I'm not sure we can agree to that. As you said, there is a lack of trust that they will do what they need to do."

K'azugg smiled, "Yes, I suppose that's true now that you mention it. It would be a good time for us to finish you off using the enemy."

Mike shook his head, "You don't have to worry about that General, it's not going to happen."

Almost at the same time both K'azugg and the General responded, "It's not?"

A few members gave a small chuckle at the timing of the comments. Mike smiled as he continued, "Nope it's not. The way I see it if the orcs do as you say, they are next. They cannot let you be attacked and expect to walk out of there alive once they are done with you. If anything the avatar wants the orcs dead more than any other race. While it will let them kill you it will not let them escape after they are done. In a way it's more them that should be worried not you, General. If you decided to leave, you have a chance of doing that. The orcs on the other hand will be boxed in, same as our group. So again, they attack you, they die. You leave and they die and so do we shortly after."

This time, the General had a nice smile on his face whereas K'azugg just slowly turned to Mike with an angry look. "This part was not explained to us, human."

Mike shrugged. "And yet when I asked inside or outside you refused outside and mentioned inside, because you would have more knowledge of the possible creatures inside assuming it was similar to the towers inhabited by the dark clerics. I still agree that it's the right way to go for your people and I don't think the General would leave. Not because of your people but there is no way he would leave the Crimson and everyone else there

alone."

Mike then turned to everyone. "Anyways, that's the general plan and why. Now we need to work out some details. General, any thoughts?"

The General stroked his beard for a bit as he thought. "The pyramid only has one entrance and he has a sizable force in front of that entrance, from what you reported. Seeing as we are there to get you all inside and make sure that no one else passes then this is what I suggest for our part." He pointed at the orc leader, "First, we will enchant your men and the Lights Templar in order to protect them from projectiles. The mages will also make sure to dispel as much magic coming at you, assuming there are also mages in his ranks." He then turned to Lithius, "As they charge ahead, with us behind them, I would like it if some of your mages could also bombard the entrance with all you have. While I know that these *things*, as I will call them, can come back to life they can't do that instantaneously. The bombardment will help create a beachhead in front of the door. Once the orcs and Lights Templar reach it they are to go in and then leave us to take over and cement our position at the door to stop anything from coming in."

K'azugg was surprised. "That is a very bold plan! Why was something like that never used when you needed to take the tower from us?"

"Believe me if I could have, I would have. Unfortunately, at that time we only had Crusaders in our ranks. Now it's different." He turned again to Lithius, "Can this be done?"

Lithius nodded in agreement. "I will find other recruits to join us but it shall be done."

"Good, thank you. Once the outside group is in position, we will form a half circle around the door. In the middle of the circle is where the priests, Crusaders on healing duty and mages will be." He

then turned to Julia, "Our men's job will be to create that half circle and keep everyone safe. In order to maximize our strengths I suggest we combine our forces, essentially one Crimson for every two Crusaders. Combat casting maybe required from the Crusaders which will leave your men to hold the enemy at bay in order for them to cast the spell uninterrupted. Any objections?"

Julia thought about it for a few seconds. "No, that sound reasonable, I'm also interested to see what we can do once our forces are combined like this."

This pleased the General as he too was interested. "Good, in theory then all we have to do is hold out long enough for everyone to do what they need to do." The General looked at Lithius again, "This may be asking for a lot but ideally if a way could be created to protect our sides with minimal men then that would help us last longer. We could then possibly have extra people to swap with the wounded as they get healed and help focus our overall efforts. Is there any way this can be done?"

This time it was Lithius who had to think for a while. After a few moments he turned to the General. "A fellow Council member may have found a way to help you with that. I can't make any promises because it will depend on a few factors but we may be able to help with that."

The General gave a small smirk. "Well, let's hope for the best then." He turned to everyone else. "Unless someone wants to add something, that should be the overall plan." He turned to the orc leader, "Seeing as we don't know anything about the inside, it will be up to you to figure out how you can accomplish your goal when you get there."

K'azugg did not seem too worried and again smiled, "That will be okay with us. We have



experience holding out in places for long periods of time where we are not welcomed."

Before the General could acknowledge that comment Mike jumped in. He looked at Jessica. "Are you and your priests okay with all this? Should they require more people around them during the attack to protect them? I was told that the combat competencies Rosamia possesses should not be assumed with all priests, so I want to make sure you will be okay considering your role."

Jessica had to chuckle at that comment. "No, you are correct. She is unique in that regard. Still I would not worry, while Iris did not mention it, an extra volunteer group will be participating in our defence. I have been told there will be a guard from Calculus present for every priest, this comes from the Captain of the Guard who will also be present to assist for this function."

Mike smiled, he guessed there was no way Kyle would let Jessica go into something like that if he was not present. He could not blame him for doing so. "All right then, I'm good if that is the case."

After a few moments where no one had anything to add, Iris took centre stage again. "It seems like we are all good. I'll help communicate the plan and continue with the preparations." She turned quickly to K'azugg and then back at everyone. "Due to the nature of another battle that will soon occur we will need to start moving people over as soon as we can. Ideally, a day from now, we will start this final battle against the avatar. Unfortunately, during that time the other battle should start as well. Mind you, once we are done with our task, then both battles should stop and be declared a win for both us and the other orc army." Iris paused for a few seconds, "Well, good

luck to everyone."

As everyone else left to complete their final preparations, now that a general plan was figured out, Iris looked around the now empty room and thought, *'Well, that went well, I hope it continues tomorrow.'*

About a day and a half had passed and the little area around the portal that K'azugg's troops had been guarding was pretty lively. So far, everyone had now transferred over and arrived safely. The enchantment vials had been passed to everyone and generally, everyone was now getting ready for the final attack that would take place in a few hours. Mike had just left the last quick meeting in order to go over the last details. As he walked to where his group was he could not help but wonder why the avatar's army was still just sitting there waiting for them to attack. In his mind there were two possibilities: the first being that this whole thing was just an elaborate trap and the other was that he was so sure of himself he just thought there was no way for him to lose. In either case, whether it was a trap or ego would soon be clear.

He reached his group. They were sitting on the empty crates used to carry the vials. He sat on one they had saved for him. "So no real change in the plans, the only addition is that Lithius added a few extra mages to his team. He explained that they will be in charge of the initial bombardment and help cause a distraction while the entrance is being secured. After that they will disappear."

Iris thought about it for a little while. "I suppose it makes sense but why simply hide? Could they not be ordered to help if things go wrong?"

Mike shrugged. "And that is what everyone else at the meeting asked. Unfortunately, there was this whole complicated matter of power

conservation and stamina use when casting that was used to confuse everyone and resulted in all of us not really having an answer to the question."

Alexandria chuckled at that one. "Ah, how many times was that done to me? I completely lost count. Still I wonder what the rest of the Council is really doing against such a foe. They really would have been welcomed to join us in the fight against him." She then looked at the group and was a bit embarrassed at what she had said. "Not that I will not be able to do what's needed in that department I assure you... I mean what was I thinking, we don't need their help or anything..."

Anna cut in before she dug deeper. "No worries. I think we all wished that a few Council members and dwarves could have joined us, but they can't and there are not too many others who have experience dealing with things like this and can contribute. Still, no worries. I'm sure we will find a way."

Mike nodded at Anna, "I agree. As for my theory on the disappearing help, I think Solanar is just playing it safe. This could be a huge trap and if something happens then whoever is left will need that information. Considering all the help we got from Astrum, the way I look at it is if the only thing they request is that we leave their backup plan alone then we got off easy. Still, I just wish we knew more about this pyramid and its inside." He then looked at everyone, "In any case are we all clear on our plan of attack against the avatar? It may not be much of a plan but I think it will be our best shot." They all nodded in silent acknowledgment, the plan had made a lot of assumptions but there was no real way around it, considering the target.

Rosamia got up and smiled at the group. "Well, at least it's not another tower, right?"

Remembering all the other towers they had to assault they all had to agree on that one. "In any case, I need to go back to Jessica. I'm trying to make her realise something in order for her to be able to do what I'm now able to do with the dark energy. It probably will not be something she will be able to use but it's better than just waiting and you never know."

Adam got up as well. "Mind if I join you on that one? I'm also interested."

She smiled back at him, "Of course you are welcome."

Alex stood and brushed off some of the sand that was on her. "I should go as well. There is some last minute studying I would like to do for a certain spell. I think I'm almost there."

As she left Anna and Mike both looked at Iris. "Just us it seems."

Iris stood up, "Yeah, not really. I too have a spell I have to look at, it's something Adam mentioned to me a long time ago and I think it will be useful today. So I have to go too."

Anna turned to Mike, "So just us for a few hours surrounded by an army. What fun!"

He laughed, "Army? What army? All I see around me is a warm sun, with a nice breeze, the most beautiful woman I ever laid my eyes on and a lot of sand. Actually, if only we had a little lake or a small river it would be perfect. Can't you see it too?"

Anna chuckled, "I don't think that even you have that amount of imagination right now for something like that."

"When you are involved then there are no limits."

She got closer to him and kissed him. "Is that so? Well that will come in handy in the next little while."

Mike frowned a bit, "Now who is breaking the mood...?"

She kissed him again, "I guess you are rubbing off on me."

"Somehow we will win, I'm sure of it."

"I know."

As agreed after a few hours the time had come. Currently, the Lights Templar were surrounded by the orcs who were in the front, as planned. K'azugg was next to them. "All right, we will act as your shield for the start. When we get in, there will probably be a long passageway leading to a large room. This room will hold another passageway leading to another large room. As we go from passageway to passageway we will be moving up until we reach the top. Our goal is to reach the top as soon as we can, so do not stop for anything, you understand? And keep up with our climbing pace."

If Mike had a more surprised and confused look, Anna had never seen it. He looked at the orc leader, "What the heck, how do you know what to expect in there and why do you think now is the right time to talk about it?"

K'azugg gave him a smile he knew Mike hated. "We had a similar looking pyramid in our land. From what you told me of our past it was probably built by the same persons." He turned and started to charge in. "As for the time, now is the perfect time, seeing as there is no time for you people to ask a million questions on the subject." As the Lights Templar followed the charge, Mike was very pissed at the orc especially after being told so blatantly that he had done so on purpose.

The outside group was also charging a little bit after the inside group. The General could clearly see as they rushed to the entrance that the mages were throwing everything they had at the army in front of them. Lightning and large flaming balls of

fire rained down on them. The barrage was continuous and would be that way until the orcs got close, at which point they would stop. This would create a moment where no one would occupy that section. This is when the orcs would rush in and the second group follow behind to block the way. The defending army was no longer standing still, they threw arrows at them, which were stopped by a protection shield cast on nearly everyone. The real problem was that there were also mages in their midst and while some of their spells were stopped some of the faster ones, like lightning, proved difficult to dispel. This caused their first casualties. The orcs were hit and also some of them in their groups as well. The General had factored in losses at this stage of the game. As he looked over at Julia he could tell that she was not taking the news as well as he was.

The orcs hardly slowed down and barrelled through the main door and into the pyramid. The outside group took its position and started to form a semicircle to protect everyone. So far, the plan was working as expected. The General and Julia were both fighting in the same middle section but command had been split between the two. He would control the left section and her the right. As the semicircle of defence got into place, the first part of the outside group was completed successfully. Now all they needed to do is last as long as they could.

As the fighting was going on a few things were noticed. The first one was that everyone present had some level of fighting experience. They were dead Crusaders, Crimsones, Guards or just random sell swords, which made the General wonder where all the peasants were. The other thing noticed was that while some of them did in fact come back soon after you dispatched them, not all of them seemed

to have that ability. As they realised this both he and Julia gave orders to press on and take advantage of this good fortune, as long as it lasted.

After a while of fighting, Lithius made his way to the front where both the General and Julia could hear him. "We will now begin the plan to help defend our side. Essentially, we will use a similar tactic used by Miss Alexandria when she was in Cagan. Large trenches will be created under the reborns' feet. The idea will be to keep them in there and minimize their ability to easily attack us in melee range from the sides. Please, both of you advise your men as they appear."

This time around, the hole would not be filled up but it would be made deeper, making it really hard for the reborns to get out once they were pushed in. At that point, if they were unkillable it would matter little if they could not reach them. This also allowed the side defence to be made weaker and created groups that could be used to switch with others who were wounded. Once switched, the priest and backup healing Crusaders would help with their wounds and the cycle would continue until they could not or when something changed. So far, the General was quite pleased with how this battle was turning out. He just hoped that it would continue this way.

The inside of the pyramid had been as K'azugg had described. As they ran in this corridor that was slowly taking them up higher Alex noticed something odd. The walls were covered with Dwarven writing and the text was pulsing. She had no clue what it meant, but she knew it was important. "Guys, the walls are littered with runes in Dwarven and they're pulsing. It's got to mean something..."

K'azugg overhead her and immediately cut in, "*No stopping!* We need to continue this momentum

if you are to get to the top without issues."

"Yeah, but..."

This time it was Mike who cut her off.

"Alexandria, can you use magic or anything else to understand these runes?"

Alex was silent for a moment, "I don't think so but I know it's important and we will need it for what's ahead."

Mike shook his head. "I'm sorry, but while I agree it would be good to know we have to continue with the orcs' plan."

Alex was a bit angry, she understood the reason why but still could not shake the feeling that this knowledge could help them win. She cursed having left the seed Kilor had given her in Astrum. Sure, he had intended it for the content of the book but it would probably have been more useful here. There was still time before they got to the top, she just had to figure out something before then.

Mike was sad that he had to turn down Alex's request. When it came to magic he trusted her implicitly but now was not the right time for that. They reached the first room. As K'azugg had explained, the room was rather large. As they stepped in, Mike saw human guards, shadow beasts and what were possibly mages present in the room. He figured K'azugg would stop but instead he turned the corner and went straight for the next corridor. Mike looked back to see if the enemy would simply not just follow them but then realised that some of the orcs had stayed back in the room. This pattern continued as they got to the next one. Again, fewer orcs were found climbing up with them. Mike had to admit it was an interesting plan to get them up there fast, still he wondered how much of it relied on surprise and the slow reaction time of the enemy as they realised they



would not stop to confront them.

Alexandria was getting very worried. By the looks of it, she was running out of time, as they would reach the top very soon. Everywhere she looked the runes could be found and they were all slowly pulsing in a wave going from top to bottom. She figured it would have to do with a spell of some sort but what could it be?

K'azugg yelled back at the Lights Templar. "*Okay, this is it!* You continue on to the next corridor. It should lead you to the top room. We will stay here and keep control of the corridors for as long as we can. Don't take your time and don't fail. I would hate for my last actions to be leading my men in order to protect you people." When they got to the room K'azugg and the last of his people stopped and attacked the people and creatures found in the room. "Focus on the casters, chop off their heads. If they grow a new one hack it off before it finishes. For the beasts use that goop that was given to us. This is where we are holding out and we will let no human pass through."

The Lights Templar were running in the last corridor. At the end they could see light coming from that top final room. Alexandria suddenly stopped. "Look, I'm sorry, but I have to try this."

Mike nodded, "Go for it."

Alexandria was relieved but at the same time not really sure if she could do anything. No matter how advanced or what language was used she was convinced this was all part of a spell. In theory, an identification spell should be able to understand its meaning, but it did not guarantee she would understand the meaning it gave. Still, that would not prevent her from trying. As the spell was cast the information was dumped in her head, but an issue happened.

It was too much information and too much of

it she could not understand. She closed her eyes and ground her teeth until the spell finished. Unfortunately, it lasted much longer than any spell she had ever seen. Once it was all over she realised Anna was supporting her. Alex did not know when she had grabbed her. Alexandria looked at everyone, "I'm sorry, I was too curious for my own good and it cost us time we may not have. The only thing I learned about the spell is that it's part of the trap spell that was cast, everything else is something I just can't understand." She looked at all of them again with such a sad look on her face, only to realise that Mike was actually smiling.

"Did I miss something?"

"You just gave us something very important." Anna and Rosamia understood Mike's meaning but the others had missed it so he continued, "You said that this is part of the trap spell that was cast, but the dwarves said that spell was broken when we killed the last dragon." He put his hand on the glowing runes. "Clearly, it's still active in some manner, meaning that the dwarves missed something the lord of light probably did. This is good news, even if we don't necessarily know what it is."

Alex, now with the pain of the identification spell gone was actually quite happy. Mike turned and continued the climb up. "All right, let's stick to the plan. Still because of this during the fight let's look for anything that is out of sorts, it could be the key to winning."

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Overall, the General was pleased with how this battle was going, everyone was fighting bravely to the best of their abilities. He looked at Julia for a brief few seconds. He was also very impressed with her. During the meetings, her presence was hardly

felt but now it was the complete opposite. Under her command, he wondered how far the Crimson would get.

Something was happening up ahead, as he turned to look the pit of his stomach was telling him something was wrong. All this time they had held their own. Sure, they had lost a few, but things had gone well. As two large piles of sand clumped together, he wondered if this is where things would turn. More and more sand collected itself and then solidified, after a few seconds the colour changed to something more brownish. When the process was finished there stood two giants in front of them. This was the first time the General had seen one of these creatures. He turned and yelled at Julia, "Commander, you mind joining me to deal with these new targets?"

Julia gave a signal and a few men grouped around her. "Go out there and fight giants who can't be slain? Why I thought you would never ask. Heck, I've already selected a few others to join in on this fun." She positioned her enchanted flaming spear and charged in with the General right behind her. Impressed as he was, he knew there was only a small amount of time from this point on

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The group made it to the top. The final room was the tip of the pyramid and considering everything was a fairly small room. Each side had holes about two feet wide to help the air pass through. The middle of the room had a large circle where burned out runes could be found. Everywhere else, the same pulsing Dwarven runes could be seen. In the middle of the room stood a figure. He was bipedal and had a similar build to an elf but instead of skin you would find scales that looked like the

ones found on a dragon. For his face, he had the long ears of the elves but eyes that were reptilian. None of the Lights Templar knew what to expect of the avatar of the dark lord but it was safe to say that this in front of them surprised them all.

He was already facing them, he was also unarmed. "I must say it took you long enough. I've been watching you building your little army, thinking up plans to stop me. It's been quite amusing, but I have to ask... Why are you doing this? I've offered you humans a new way to live your lives in a better way than he ever did. Why are you standing in my way?"

Anna shook her head, "Oh I know firsthand what you are offering and it's not a new way of life at all. It's just a form of control over all of us."

"You are referring to what happened to your parents, and yes that was unfortunate but this is all a large misunderstanding. Let me bring them back as a way to prove myself." Anna cut him off, "Don't ... you... *dare!* Yes what you pulled with my parents was horrible, but what about all those people outside or more importantly all those innocent villagers who followed your command and left their homes. Was that a misunderstanding too?"

The avatar shrugged, "Not at all, I asked if those people would like to help me with a certain orc problem I was having. I told them I would give them the power to have their vengeance on the horrible things that happened during the war. They willingly followed my command."

Rosamia was furious. "You think for a second that I'm going to believe a little girl of five would take up arms and go against an orc army? There was never any free choice there, you commanded them and they had to follow."

The avatar frowned, "And what is wrong with

that? Do I not know better, am I not wiser and all powerful? Should I not direct people? Free will only leads to chaos. I plan to solve that problem once and for all. There will be no more attacks, no more wars, no more issues... all life will be peaceful. Is that not the ultimate goal? And you all willingly deny it, this freedom has rendered you all mad."

"Well, I think we've all heard enough from Mister Crazy, time for me to get first hit." Adam moved his swords into position and magically charged in. As he got close, he scored a hit on the avatar's side and then stabbed his chest with his other blade. The avatar quickly moved forward and punched Adam as he was pulling out his blade. The blow hit and Adam was flung across the room only to be stopped by the wall. He and his two swords dropped to the ground. The pain was intense and he was sure that even with the armour he had a few broken ribs.

The avatar looked insulted. "You are just an ant, what can you possibly accomplish here?"

"I'll show you what we can do," Rosamia moved in, reached in and pulled some of his magic. While the effect was not stopped, the avatar clearly disapproved of what she was doing.

"*You!* Oh I will enjoy killing you for what you have done."

Before he could move, Rosa touched the ground and said the two words, "Holy wrath." A large pillar of dark fire engulfed the avatar's body, as the flames roared, laughter could be heard from inside it. When the spell cleared, the avatar was still standing with no damage at all. "Steal what you like at your own risk but know this, you will never be able to hurt me using my own power." Rosamia was worried, this was a setback they had not planned for. She would have to think of something else.

"Then what about this power?" Alexandria cast a lightning bolt spell directed at his face. The blow made him stumble backwards. He held his hands to his face for a few seconds and as he removed them his face was completely healed. The wounds Adam had inflicted were also gone.

"Ah little mage, you have so much to learn if this is the extent of what you can do. Here let me make it more interesting for you." In a blink of an eye, a little shimmer could be seen going around his body. "This is the same protection spell you have been running into." He then pointed at his feet, "But this time even the ground is covered, how are you going to deal with that?"

"Aaaaarrrrrrr...!" Mike screamed as he charged at the avatar. As the avatar turned from Alex and Rosa, Mike slashed his sword to his side and as soon as it made contact, bypassing the shield, he let the enchantment go and the resulting explosion tore at his body. Next, Anna moved around him and did an upward slash at the avatar's back. When contact occurred she too released the energy. They both did their best to dance around him. Adam's frontal attack had helped them figure out how quickly the avatar moved and that allowed them to be able to avoid his attacks. Blocking was out of the question so that was the only defence they had.

They scored a few hits to his arms, legs and main torso but every time the wound healed at an incredible pace. The only thing they were accomplishing was angering him more and more. Mike focused his energy in the enchantment and pierced the avatar's heart, the pink glow then traveled to his body and a large chunk of his chest cavity exploded away. Somehow, the avatar had braced himself and had not moved back from the blow. Still in range he grabbed Mike by the throat

and started to squeeze. "Time to go pop."

It's at that time that a large rock about two feet in diameter connected with the avatar's head. He let go of Mike and moved backwards. As the damage was healing, he looked in the direction the rock had come from. Alexandria had three large stones flying around her.

She gave him a disappointed look. "Ahhhh... That fancy shield of yours does not protect you from that, what a shame." She then flung two stones at him, one that connected with his shoulder dislocating his arm and the other at his right knee forcing him to momentarily drop on the shattered knee.

"Enough of you!" He pointed his hand at her and a jet of dark flame was projected in her direction. Rosamia immediately absorbed some of his energy and created a shield strong enough to block the jet aimed at her friend. "I may not be able to use your power to hurt you but I can still use it to protect my friends." At that time both Adam and Iris stood next to her ready to charge in. The avatar stood, once again healed. "Ant, how are you still up? Ah the priestess healed you while the other two distracted me." He stretched out his hand and a sword materialized from smoky shadows that moved around it. He grabbed it and charged at Rosa.

Iris and Adam both countered his charge with one of their own. Adam aimed his sword at one of the avatar's legs, stopping his charge. Iris continued past him and then turned to pierce both of her blades in his back. She then commanded the fire enchantment to travel to his body creating a small explosion. As he was pushed forward, Rosamia moved in with a holy spear attack. The glowing golden spear tip was aimed at the avatar's chest. The force of the blow put him on the ground.

The avatar used his sword to lift himself back up as his wounds started to heal. Rosamia stepped backwards. Iris and Adam continued to slash, stab and cut at any section they could. The dark lord looked at them, "Away with both of you." A shadow shield appeared around him and then pushed outwards, pushing both Iris and Adam away until their bodies connected with the walls of the pyramid.

The avatar looked at Rosa and summoned six large balls of dark energy that were spinning around him. "I wonder can you shield yourself from all of them?" Alexandria then stepped in next to Rosa. The avatar paused for a second, "No more rocks?"

Alex frowned at him, "No. Seeing as I can't punch through your shield with my spells unless I make direct contact, I figured I would let you enjoy that pleasure as well." She then took her hand and touched Rosamia, a shimmer then appeared around her. "I may not know how to dispel your spell but I've seen it way too many times and researched it enough to be able to cast it." The avatar threw the balls of shadow at Alex. Rosamia grabbed her and put herself in the way, as they connected with the shield they all fizzled into nothing.

Rosamia then turned and drew more energy from the avatar and charged at it. Finally now healed, the dark lord slashed at her as she moved in. Rosamia used the energy she had collected to move the blade away and created an opening for her own spear to pierce his body with a holy spear attack. She continued to deflect his swings every time using the energy she had collected. Once her own spell was charged up, she pierced him in his leg, shattering it and forcing him to the ground until the wounds healed.



During that time, she moved backwards and siphoned more energy out of him. This process continued a few more times. As she was once again taking energy from him the avatar stayed on his knee and pointed his outstretched hand at her. "She may not know how to dispel it but I do." A large cone of flame erupted from his hand and connected with Rosa, the shield held and no harm came to her. The flames continued and soon she was completely covered. Rosa did not know what he was doing but she could guess at the end results. She used the energy she had collected from him to block his ongoing cone of flame. The avatar poured more dark energy in his cone shattering the extra shield Rosa had created. Once again the only thing protecting her was the spell Alex had cast that was now shimmering. Thinking the next little while would hurt, Rosa used her holy powers and created another shield but this time around her body. As Alex's shield collapsed, Rosa was sent backward next to Adam. Her last minute shield had protected her from being killed, but it had left her very injured.

The avatar stood, with a smug smile on his face and then stumbled as he took his first step to get closer to Rosamia. He looked at his leg, more annoyed than anything else. Mike was next to Anna and he looked at her with a puzzled glance. "Interesting, let's go for round two."

She nodded and charged in behind him. Mike slashed his sword sideways but was blocked by the avatar's sword. Still, this created an opening for Anna to attack the shoulder. Mike swung his sword at the dark lord directly, making him block his attacks. This caused more openings for Anna. She aimed all the time at areas that would hamper his movements or his swings, giving them all a chance to better dodge his counterattacks.

Eventually, Mike was finally able to land hits as well, causing even more damage to the avatar's body. At a certain point, he fell once again to the ground. Seeing as he was not getting back up both of them looked down to realise that a large amount of dark energy was now twirling at their feet. Before the spell could be finished all four large rocks landed on his body and pushed him until he hit the wall.

The avatar pushed the rocks away. "This can only end in one way. My body is already healing. How long do you think you can last?"

Now confident about his hunch Mike smiled, "Yes, you said it, your body is still healing. It is not healed. You block my blows now where before you just simply let them land. Heck, you even pushed Adam and Iris away to give yourself time to recover where none was needed before. The trap spell is still active and it has weakened you. So what happens if we push you a little bit further?" Mike turned to Anna and she nodded in agreement, they both closed their eyes and focused everything they had. Their blades glowed brighter and brighter until the colour white could be seen. Now that she knew, Alex could see a very faint trace of pink and light green in the piercing white glow; she prayed it would work once again.

The dark lord stood again, "I think you're overestimating what you are capable of doing." Anna charged in first and twisted around him as he tried to block the blow, enabling her to score a hit in his back. In the blink of an eye, the energy transferred itself to his body. The avatar tried to contain the energy with his own but it was not enough to cancel it all. The explosion caused him to drop to the ground, Anna and her blade dropped a few feet from him. Knowing what to expect Anna had not dropped unconscious this time but was

physically incapable of doing anything. She moved to be able to see the avatar twisting himself trying to heal from the effects.

As the dark lord tried to move, Mike plunged his sword deep in his chest, before releasing the energy he got closer to him and looked at him, eyes full of rage. "Now I can finally get my revenge for what you did to her with her parents." As the energy traveled from his sword into the dark lord's body Mike let go and dropped backward on the ground.

Again, he tried to divert as much as the energy as he could but it was not enough and once again he was flung to the ground by the blast. Everyone looked at the dark lord's body, he was still alive but he was hardly moving. Now back up, Iris moved closer to Anna to move her away while Adam did the same to Mike. Shortly after a large ball of shadow enveloped the avatar, the pulsing dwarven runes suddenly started to glow brightly.

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The General looked around. Things had gone from good to bad very quickly. They knew that in this battle the victor would be the one who would be able to last the longest. At this time, due to the effort they needed to spend on the giants, they were losing. The General launched an attack at a giant once more. They had managed to pin it to the ground and now they attacked the area around his head. They had managed to kill these creatures about four times and every time they just stood back up. As he and the men around him moved away in order for them not to get flattened as the giant once again rose back up, they noticed that this time there was a different outcome. In a matter of seconds, the slain giant turned into a

large pile of sand. He looked to the one Julia was fighting and the same thing occurred. As they were finally able to move back to the defensive half circle, the General moved closer to the Commander at Arms. "Why do you think that they finally stopped?" She pointed upwards to the tip of the pyramid, "I'm hoping it's because they are finally turning the tables on this dark lord."

K'azugg's men were finally reporting to him that the same thing was happening on all floors. There were no longer any shadow creatures materializing. This was good news as a portion of his men were dead and another were badly wounded. By his count, only about half were still able to fight. They were running out of time, but they could still fight and this news helped bolster their spirits.

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As the shadow ball finally collapsed around the avatar, once again he was standing but not all wounds had been healed. He pulled out Mike's sword from his chest. He looked at it with such distaste. "These enchantments have allowed you too much power. It's time we removed these." Still holding the hilt, he took hold of the blade with his other hand.

Alex's eyes went wide, "I'm not sure you want to do that..." She was cut off as the dark lord applied enough force to snap the blade in two. The resulting effect caused an explosion around him. He let the pieces drop to the ground. They could all see that his healing was barely working. He slowly took his own sword and moved to Anna "Now to remove your power as well."

Iris dropped her blades and rushed to grab Anna's before he could reach it. She held the blade

tightly as he looked at her, "And what will you do with that?"

She opened her eyes and looked at her enemy, "A long time ago, Adam told me about something Alexandria had mentioned. It took me a while to find but eventually I found the spell she had mentioned." A quick moment later and Iris eyes glowed green for a few seconds, as she thought about the people around her the blade began to glow green. Alex stared at Adam who was now healing Mike, "Why would you tell her of all people about that?"

Adam shrugged, "She asked and I gave her the same answer you gave me way back then."

Alex shook her head. "But she may not be able to control it, don't you remember what that means?" She then felt Mike's hand grab her shoulder. "Iris has spent her the entire year trying to be like us, I think she of all people can do it."

The dark lord looked at the glowing sword and then at Iris. "I remember you now, you were so close to joining us back then. You of all people should understand what I'm offering. Follow me and you all will never have to suffer or be sick, or feel the pain of losing a loved one. You will never have to worry about your mortal self ever again and be able to do whatever you wish. The only thing I ask in return is that you follow me. It's a small price to pay for all that you get."

Iris charged at him and he moved to block her. "True, it would be nice not to have to worry about these things and while it does seem like a nice and easy deal, it's also the wrong one. Ignoring the fact that if we don't follow you we get snuffed out, what you offer is not life but just a cheap imitation of it." She spun around him and like Anna had done aimed at sections that would hamper his movements. All the while she kept building up the

energy, the blade now glowed bright green.

"While it's true that the pain and suffering of losing someone is something we would all like to live without, it's also something that is a part of us and helps define us and our future actions. I'm sure everyone would like to have their lost kids or parents returned to them. Their loss affects us in a profound way, but life does not stop at their deaths. It's true that a person can choose to focus on the regrets and the lost moments, but they can also choose to move on and create new moments that will affect them in a positive way." She scraped up every ounce of feeling and energy she could find and finally she was rewarded – the glow had turned white.

Mike turned to Rosamia, "Get ready, once she lets go she will need your help as Adam did for us way back when." He then looked at Adam, "Adam... now."

Adam smiled "It's about time."

"Life changes and gives us options, your way robs us of this all this." The avatar was now fully on the defensive and was trying to avoid Iris' attacks. Unfortunately, all the stabs and cuts on the legs, sides and the previous wounds that were still slowly healing would prove to be his downfall. Iris finally saw an opening and pierced his side with the blade and let the enchantment go as she had from her own so many times. The drain it caused was beyond what she had expected. She let go of the blade and dropped to the ground.

The avatar moved backwards and for the third time used his energy to minimize the enchantment's destructive power. After the explosion, he focused on repairing the main organs but he could not generate enough power to properly heal. Out of rage, he took his sword and swung at Anna's blade, shattering it. The resulting

explosion caused him more pain but he did not care.

He turned to all of them, "*Now what?* Three of your members are done, another spell can't affect me and the last one who may have a chance is probably drained herself. You can't kill me." As he took a step forward, Adam stood in front of him smiling. The avatar laughed, "The ant? This is what you have left?"

"You underestimate me, good. Rosa told me that there is no difference in our spells, that in the end what you can do we should be able to do. So here is a little thing I've been dying to try." Adam focused his power on his blade like that bandit had done in Calculus. Unlike him, his blades turned white. Adam then magically rushed in. The avatar was not concerned and used his sword to block the first blow aimed at his chest. As he got the blade close he realised he had missed and now there was no way to block the incoming attack. As the blade struck his chest the white light was absorbed by his body causing a massive amount of pain and draining his power even more by contaminating it. Adam laughed, "All this time you thought I was too slow for you, when in reality I was just seeing how fast you really were and what was the minimal amount of magic I could use in order to be faster than you."

The dark lord tried to block Adam's second blow but was unable to and again his magic infected and hurt him. The avatar swung his sword at Adam and then he felt it, more of his energy was being drained from him. His sword connected with the dark shield that had been cast using his magic, but the priestess should not be able to cast the spell to drain anymore seeing as she was drained herself.

He looked at Rosamia and she smiled at him,

"Why would you assume I was the one healing everyone? You really should not ignore those ants." She reached out and pulled out more of his power. As his eyes went wide full of rage, Adam once again scored a hit. "Yep all this time I was told to stay under the radar and act insignificant because what am I to something like you?" The avatar tried to hit Adam with an upward slash to cleave him in two. As his enhancing magic was still going he easily moved out of the way and the sword only managed to hit the ground.

Alexandria enchanted her own staff and electric shocks could be seen dancing around it. She charged at the avatar as Rosa had taught her and bludgeoned her staff on his back. As soon as contact was made the equivalent of a lightning bolt spell coursed through the inside of his body. She re-cast the spell and took another hit and then twisted the staff and swung it at his face, releasing the spell power. Meanwhile, Adam continued his attacks, pouring as much energy as he could in every hit that connected. While the two were busy with their constant attacks, Rosamia kept draining all the energy she could.

She then saw the avatar was up to something. She quickly used the energy she had stolen and created a shield around Adam and then a large shockwave emanated from the avatar's body and filled the room. As it hit both Alex and Rosa, they were violently thrown across the room only to hit the wall. They both struggled to stay conscious. Rosa tried to focus past the pain to cast a healing spell so she could get back up.

The dark lord's avatar stood in front of Adam who was also still standing. Adam powered only one blade with bright white energy. The avatar smirked, "Looks like you are out of power."

Adam pointed at all his wounds that were



longer healing. "Same goes for you it seems."

He got his blade ready, "You still can't destroy me." Adam focused everything he had and took one last deep breath and moved in.

Rosamia saw the avatar use his sword in a piercing attack aimed at Adam's stomach. When the time came for him to move away using his magic he didn't and then she saw the sword plunge in his stomach and pierce through the other side. Rosamia screamed, "AAA-DAM!"

The avatar pulled him closer, "You are done." Adam looked up and smiled and stabbed his own sword upwards into the avatar's head and released all the magic he had in one final blow. As he looked at the avatar's eyes go wide in shock, Adam told him the final words he would ever hear. "After all your boasting, realise that an ant is what finished you off." Adam then twisted his blade splitting his skull in two.

Both bodies fell to the ground. The blade the avatar had created disappeared in a puff of shadow. As Adam held his hands on his soon to be fatal wound, he looked at the body of the avatar that was now spewing a dark liquid from all his wounds. Black steam rose from his body as it started to disintegrate. When the final piece was gone, all the runes around them stopped glowing and burned out. The fight was over.

Rosamia had healed enough of her wounds for her to stand and make it to Adam. She put both hands on his fatal injury and cast a healing spell. "Why didn't you use your magic to dodge, you stupid fool." As her warmth enveloped his wound and he started to heal, he opened his eyes. "I did not have any left to use, I put it all in the blade and hoped it would be enough. I'm sorry I made you worry but it was the only way to get so close and try and accomplish the mission." The wound

was now healed and he would be safe but he was still cool to the touch due to the amount of blood lost.

Rosamia now relaxed a bit and gave him a quick kiss. "I suppose I understand, but why do you keep doing these things the hard way?"

Alexandria was still on the ground next to the wall, "Ah, sorry to intrude on the moment but I could really use some help here." Rosa left Adam's side and went to Alex.

Iris opened her eyes. She realised she was being held by Anna and Mike was next to her. "So did it work? Did we win?" At that moment everyone could hear cheering from outside. They guessed the theory had held. With the avatar gone, so was his spell keeping everyone alive. When it was gone they all turned to sand. Anna looked down at Iris with a big smile on her face, "It seems like it."

Iris relaxed and let out a large breath. It felt like she had been holding it in for weeks. "I guess we can all go back together now?" Alexandria still being healed, chuckled at that. "Not really, in our shape we need to wait a few days before we can simply jump back into that portal. But after that, yeah a small break sounds good."

Mike reached out and put his arm around Anna's waist. "Looks like we beat the odds again."

She gave him her famous half smile, "Weren't you the one who said that together there are no limits?"

He smiled back. "So I guess in the end the odds never had a chance."

She moved him closer so she could kiss him. "That's exactly right."

## *Epilogue*

### **Iris's journal**

*A*fter the fight, K'azugg and the men who were still alive quickly disappeared. He had to get back to see what damage the army had caused to his people, and it seems there were also many things for him to do to recover the rank he once held. It was clear to see Mike was never a fan of his but at the same time you could tell he felt sorry he had leave so quickly without proper thanks for what he and his people had done. He was not the only one who felt that way.

Once back, the General of the Crusaders heard an interesting bit of news. It seemed that because Rosamia had forced the High Order's hands, they officially went on record and said this had all been part of the plan. That Rosamia had been brought into the High Order so she could help deal with this looming threat. She had recruited the help of a head priestess and also a decorated general of the Crusaders during the last battle in order to strike a mighty blow to the enemy of the lord of light. And now that the task was done, she would return to her normal duties before she had joined the High Order. Considering that Rosamia was still in the process of being assigned her normal duties when she first met Alex, Anna and Mike this basically meant she had no real place in the Order anymore, which was probably the end goal of the High Order. This did not seem to affect her at all, as she had already decided not to go back.

Things turned out differently for Alexandria.

After a few meetings with Solanar and Lithius, they reached an arrangement where she would officially stay as a Council member but her duties would be different than before. Now instead of being forced to stay in Astrum she would be encouraged to go out and explore all she could. So far, every time she left many things got resolved so they were curious to see what she would stumble on to next. She would still have to report back from time to time and attend important meetings but essentially that was the extent of her responsibilities.

I don't think I have ever seen Alexandria so happy. I can see why now. This way, she does not feel guilty for abandoning the work her late father had done and would be free to learn anything she wanted to. All the while, she would also be with the people she could truly be herself with.

In the case of Adam, the last time they had tried to convict him for leaving his post it had only caused a world of headache. Now they just figured it would be easier on everyone to just kick him out and hope they never hear from him again. This caused few issues for him. In his mind, I'm pretty sure he had left them when he chased off after Rosamia the first time. Still, these events did help him close things off properly with his old General, which was the only thing that had probably bugged him about leaving.

I have to admit I was a little bit worried that the past would repeat itself with Anna and Mike but that was not the case. A home has been made in Astrum for them, Rosamia and Adam too. While we all recuperated, they stayed around and made sure to stay in contact with everyone to offer help or just act as a sounding board. After a while I asked them if I should apologize to them. They seemed happy but did they feel trapped because of what I had told them. When I told them this, they

laughed and informed me that they too needed a bit of time to relax so this quiet time was good.

They also told me they were also waiting on the others to fully recuperate as well. When that time came, they would let us know about an idea they have for all of us in order to fix something that is broken. They did not want to say more about it because they are still trying to figure out things themselves. Still I wonder what item that's broken they are referring to. I guess I'll know in time and this time I will wait.

For me, well what can I say? I started this whole thing trying to keep my new family together only to learn that the way I was going about it was very stupid. I thought that this meant that I had wasted my time, but as Anna had told me that was not the case. Had I not chosen that path I would not have cared to ask about being able to use their swords, which from what I was told, would have probably made a pretty big difference in the end. The same thing could be said about Rosamia and what she was able to understand about the magic we used and fought against.

I guess in the end, the only thing we can do is learn from what we have done and see what benefit we can take from the paths we took as we keep trying and living.

