

# **Lights Templar**

## **Book III**



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**by**  
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permission.

Dedicated to Anna.  
Thanks for grabbing my hand and never  
letting go.



## *Prologue*

"So, are you actually going to do it?"

Mike turned around as he heard Anna's voice, "I think so." He was next to an archway on top of the ancient Portal Tower. They had been there for a good part of the day going over the plan they had been thinking about for the better part of the last two months. She moved to lean on the bottom of the archway. "While I'm happy that you yourself actually want to do this," she paused for a second, "I'm not sure how to say this but..."

Mike gave her a quick smile. "You don't think I can do it, right?" As he looked in her sparkling green eyes he realized that she really did not want to answer, so he did it for her. "In all honesty I don't think I can do it as well." He took a big breath and continued, "I mean, who am I to think I can fix what can't seem to be fixed by anyone, well at least for a long time anyways."

Anna figured she would cut in before he could continue. "It's not that I don't think that you should not try, don't get me wrong. Heck, if more people tried then things may not need fixing in the first place." She turned to look at the horizon. "It's just that we have tried to come up with so many different ways to go about it and none of them feel right." She turned back to face him, "I agree that talking about it more will probably not help and that maybe starting on the path may help clear it out but there are also issues with that."

Mike nodded, "Yes there are. I mean, seeing as we are involving the whole team and if it turns out to be a waste of time then I'm not sure how

Rosamia will take it considering what we promised her. Then that could also tumble down to Adam being in a sour mood."

Anna gave a small chuckle at that last comment, "I'm not sure that would be a big change from his current state. He seems to have issues with this down time with nothing to do. I guess that's probably due to the whole year he spent here doing just that... nothing. Anyways, once again, knowing that you will probably fail and the time spent trying may put a kink in our friend's plans, are you going to do it?"

Mike smiled at her, "Do you think I should or should we just drop it and go with what was originally planned?"

She nodded, "Oh no, not this time. This time you come up with the answer on your own. I'll support you whichever way you go, but you came up with this idea in the first place and it's important that you make your own call on this one."

Mike sighed, "It's never easy is it?"

Anna chuckled at that one, "Who told you that it was supposed to be? Still, that's not an answer."

Mike thought about it for a few more minutes, "The plan's end goal is pretty much what she wants to do, it's just incredibly magnified. In the end, I think that the only thing we will be able to do is temporarily repair things. That is probably the best case scenario we can hope for." He turned and nodded, "But even if that is the case I'll be very happy with that outcome. So yes, I'll do it."

He gave her a puzzled look. "Now that I've made up my mind, can you tell me what you were hoping I would do?"

Anna gave him a half smile, "Now that would be telling." She got closer to him and kissed him, she then whispered. "I think it's pretty obvious



which path I wanted you to take."

He chuckled, "Hmm, sadly it's only obvious after the fact."

She slowly nodded, "So much to learn still. Anyways, it's getting late so what's the first step on this grand new adventure, as Alex would call it."

He took out the pendant Alexandria had given him, "First we contact them to meet up here tomorrow. Then I suppose we should see how generous the Crusaders feel if we ask them if we can stay the night at the cathedral. They are men that served under the General so I don't think it will be an issue."

She took out her own pendant; hers was the modified one that still had the wedding ring fused to it. "Oh, I hope not. Even a spare cot would be better than the cold ground, something that we will both need to get used to again probably."

"Yes, the one thing I don't miss about all these years going from one place to another." Putting those thoughts out of his mind he then focused on Rosamia. "Rosamia, can you and Adam meet us at the Portal Tower tomorrow? There is something I want to propose to the group."

At the same time you could hear Anna's voice, "Iris, can you grab Alex and meet us at the Portal Tower? It's time to go over that thing that we need to fix."

They quickly both looked at each other and smiled. The die had been cast now it was time to see if they could beat the odds again.



## *Chapter 1*

The next day arrived and the two had moved some things around to make the conversation a bit more comfortable. While most of the tower was bare there were a few floors with furniture. The Crusaders had moved some over from the cathedral in order to make Adam's year-long duty possible. They found a few chairs and a small table that they moved to the top of the tower.

It was mid spring the sun was shining but there was just a small cool breeze so being on top of the tower for this meeting would not be too uncomfortable. Everyone had arrived and were seated. Adam and Rosamia were the last to come up. Adam looked around and took a deep breath, "God, why did you have to make this meeting here of all places?"

Mike smiled, "This is the place where it all started for us and considering what I want to talk about I figured this would be a good place to start things off again."

Adam thought about it for a few seconds and then looked at Rosamia. "Wait, if I remember correctly I thought you said this all started in a forest with bandits or what you thought were bandits."

As Anna chuckled, Mike frowned. "You're not wrong there but this is the first place where we made a big impact and also where we took our first big leap of faith to go to the other side..."

Iris cut in, "Which I am very glad that you did by the way, otherwise God knows where I would be or what I would be for that matter."

Mike nodded, "See, important place... plus

Alexandria mentioned that this would be a good place where people will have difficulty overhearing what we talk about normally or magically."

As Adam and Rosamia sat down with the others Adam turned to Alex, "Ahhh there we go, what are you getting back at me for this time then?"

Alexandria slowly shook her head, "Believe it or not it has nothing to do with you at all. You must have noticed the difficulty that the mages had when they changed the tower's structure a bit in order to make it easier to get to the top. Well the reason for that is because when the dwarves built this place they imbued it with strong magic in order to help preserve it against the elements and also many forms of magic. This protection also makes it really hard to magically eavesdrop on this place. It's not that it's not doable but it's not something a lot of people can do."

Adam nodded and said in a mock serious tone, "I see. So, that is also why it took a long time when the mage wanted to figure out where the portal lead." Alex simply nodded as he continued, "And why you could not, with all your magical experience see that hidden door when we tried to infiltrate the tower." Alex stopped nodding and looked at him with a serious look. Adam waved his hands to try to call a truce, which Alexandria would have been okay with if it were not for the big grin on his face.

Before she could retaliate, Adam switched the focus of the conversation and looked at Mike. "That aside, what did you want to talk about?"

Hoping to save Adam, Iris jumped in, "Does this have to do with that thing you mentioned a while back that's broken?"

As Mike nodded Anna positioned herself to have a better look at everyone, which made her get

the focus of everyone else. She just pointed at Mike, "Oh don't mind me. It's just that when he first told me apparently I had this odd look on my face. I'm figuring that some of you will have the same, it seems that it was priceless."

Mike scratched his head for a second, "Ah, this is going to be more embarrassing than I thought now." He faced everyone, "Iris is right. This has to do with the thing that I mentioned that was broken, and essentially I would like it if you could all help me to fix it."

Iris was now really curious. "Okay, so I'll ask the same question I asked about a month ago, what is this thing that needs fixing?" Mike gave her a small smile "The thing that I want to help fix is the world."

Iris blinked a few times, "... *the what?*"

Anna smiled as she saw that pretty much everyone had the same reaction and then looked at Mike. "You're right, that is priceless." She then turned back to everyone else "So yes, as he said, we are asking you all to help us fix this broken world."

Alexandria scratched her head, "Okay, but first what do you mean by the world is broken?"

Mike took a deep breath before he started. "As you all know the war left a large scar on the people living here. In theory, everyone should have been protected equally by the Kingdom's guards while the Crusaders performed their duties."

Adam nodded, "That's the theory anyways but it did not work out that way. While most were protected there were a lot people and towns on the fringes that were not as important for whatever reason to that kingdom and they got attacked. We tried to protect as much as we could but there was no way that we were enough to cover everywhere."

Mike continued, "Exactly, when the survivors

figured out that their king would not protect them they turned to the Order, which accepts all in need."

It was then that Rosamia cut in, "Again, in theory. While that is the main goal of the Order and they have set up a lot of programs to help anyone that needs help with anything, over time they also set up a lot of rules and regulations for these programs and services. At this time, it's pretty clear to see that these rules are actually hindering the help that they are supposed to give. At the same time those rules got put in for a reason and in most of those cases those reasons are still valid."

Mike nodded. "Exactly, and this is why many were left with nowhere to turn. This made it easy when the dark lord came around and told them that he would help these people. It's hard to know if those people truly believed him or not but at the same time he was the only one offering to help them when most had turned them down." Mike paused before continuing, "And it's hard not to accept the help when it's being offered when you really need it."

He looked at all of them. "This is why I say the world is broken. It's not really the world that is broken but more the people living on it. The way I look at it is that some of us try so hard to try and change things but it never works out or it gets corrupted somehow."

Rosamia was still puzzled. "Okay, I think I understand what you're saying but how is this different than what we talked about for helping others that needed help?"

Mike tried to choose his words carefully. "The difference is that I don't want to just go from place to place and see what we can do." He turned to Anna, "This is what we did during that year and

sure it helped some, but compare that to when the small groups were formed and sent everywhere during that few weeks period and we did very little."

Alexandria cut in, "But you were just two and now we will be six and we will have magic on our side so that has to make some difference."

Mike nodded, "I agree it would but that would, what, quadruple our results? Still nowhere near what the teams accomplished."

Alexandria was puzzled. "So what are you suggesting, that we give up or join a bigger group?"

Anna answered her question before Mike could reply. "And that is where we are having issues. We agreed to help Rosamia in her goal to help people and we still want to do that, but we are also seeing our own limitations in what we can do." She turned to Rosa, "At the same time we realize that we need to start doing something but before we set off to help the helpless we want to see if we can't figure out a better way to go about it."

Mike continued, "We are both warriors and have traveled a *lot*, but there is still so much that we don't know so before we start this we would like to know more. Why is the Order like it is now? Why did communication break down between the large cities? And so much more. While there is nothing wrong at all in helping a family or whoever, I would like to see if we can't do it in a more efficient way. There are too many things that are broken right now and by just going around helping I feel that all we will be doing is putting out fires that will keep appearing no matter how many we put out."

Rosamia thought about that last statement. "I've currently been building a list of places that need our attention, and after doing that for a few weeks I'm forced to agree with you that the list is ever growing with no end in sight. If it was just

cleaning up the mess the war created then maybe, but this other issue of one-third of the population being gone after we defeated the avatar makes the war cleanup seem like nothing." She looked at Mike, "I agree, being more efficient would be a nice plan, but what would be the first step?"

Mike looked at everyone. "We are in a very fortunate position. We have access to people that have been with us for a long time and know the origins of most of our race. So I would, if we could, get a history lesson from the elves. When we got that information from the dwarves it helped us understand why certain groups were acting the way they are now. I'm hoping that the same thing can happen again." He turned to Alexandria, "Ideally I wish we could get that knowledge from the dwarves again. They have shown that they have been watching us to a certain extent and their Oracles could also be useful in figuring out where it would be best for us to go. Unfortunately, that's not an option, correct?"

Alexandria smiled, "If you had asked me that about a week ago I would have told you that you were correct, but now I'm not so sure that it's not possible anymore."

Everyone save Iris looked surprised by her statement. Mike was the first to ask, "But how? I thought we destroyed all the markers. Does this have to do with that book Kilor gave you?"

Alex shook her head, "In a way yes and in the other no. The book I was given only had one thing in it and that thing was a lexicon of their language. Kilor was right in his statement when he said that I would appreciate the gift but I don't think that even he realized what I was going to do with it." She turned to Iris, "When I realized what it was, I rushed to get Iris and then we spent the next few days together on a little project." As Alexandria had



a big smile on her face, Iris's shoulders slumped a bit.

Iris continued Alex's explanation, "That little project she mentioned was modifying the holy language spell to include Dwarven."

Rosamia was stunned. "Wait a second, modifying a spell like that is no easy task. When we modified the ridding spell it took us weeks and that's a simple stamina spell. From what you are saying you were able to modify the language spell in a matter of days? That's very impressive."

Alexandria then grabbed Iris with both arms and leaned into her, still with a big smile on her face. "I know right – she's amazing."

Iris pushed Alex away. "I won't downplay what I did but you should know that only *I* can cast this modified spell so it was not a complete success."

Mike and Anna were confused. Anna looked at Iris. "I don't get it. How can you modify a spell successfully and not have the task be a complete success?" Seeing as Iris was struggling to explain it Rosamia jumped in with an analogy they both would understand. "Think of it as being able to perform a particular move yourself but not being able to teach it to others."

Anna nodded, understanding perfectly what she meant now. "So she can do it but still has a ways to go to perfect it enough to be able to explain it to others."

Iris nodded, "That's pretty much it. Still, now both Alex and I can speak, read and write in Dwarven, by doing the same thing that was done in order for everyone to learn orc."

Adam scratched his head, "Okay fine, great news but how does that help with being able to reach the dwarves again? You're going to send them a message using magic? Can you do something like that if you don't know their exact

location?"

Alexandria thought about that for a moment, "Maybe I'm not really sure if that would work. But anyways it may not matter because of this." She pulled out a small crystal orb and focused on it. As soon as she did walls of blue light appeared all around them with Dwarven language symbols written on them.

Alexandria looked at Adam and Rosamia. "Now you two will not recognize this but when we went to the destroyed ruins that the dragon was going to attack in the orc section we found these walls with a lot of Dwarven writing on them. Before the dragon destroyed everything, I was able to create this copy. Now I'm sure you all remember when I asked Dovar about it, he mentioned something about them giving a way to the orcs as well in order to contact them."

Mike pointed to the writing that was being displayed all around them and Alexandria gave him a small smile and a nod, "You got it, well at least most of it. Some of the details are a bit fuzzy and it took a bit of time to find the exact location to the entrance they are talking about plus there are a lot of details missing on what we will find inside. But essentially this is it." She took a moment to look at the writing around her, "I guess whoever wrote this realized the information would maybe get lost over time and figured that he would carve it in so it would be harder to destroy."

Adam looked around, "Okay, so where is this magical lost place that will lead us to the dwarves again?"

Alexandria stopped focusing on the orb and the images around them disappeared. "After a lot of scrying I've determined that the place seems to be in an abandoned mine... in the great desert. Now for some reason it seems like there was recent

activity around that mine. The location was too far for me to get any details but it could mean that someone is already there now."

Mike thought about the implication, "That could be a problem."

Adam cut in, "Which part? I mean first off how would we even get to the desert?" He pointed to the side, "The portal is long gone, I guess we could ask for help to reopen a new one but that will take time I would guess and then there is the mystery of who is already there. There are a lot of problems the way I see it."

Rosamia nodded, "About getting help... that would be a bad idea. While I was priestess of the High Order I did make some friends with normal priests and priestesses. Recently, a lot of them have contacted me telling me they have heard my movements are being heavily tracked. Now I've been reassured that I should not worry but also that I should take care if I want to do something and not let the Order know about it. I would think that asking for help to open a main portal would cause a large issue."

Adam looked at Rosa with a concerned and puzzled look. This was the first he had heard about this. Alexandria on the other hand shrugged, "That's not such a big deal. Mind you, you should have told me about it when you knew. There are things that can be done to make it so that you will not be easily tracked using magic, so that could help with that matter."

Rosamia was stunned, "You can use arcane spells to stop holy magic like that?"

Adam cut in, "It's not the first time she has mentioned that and it does make you wonder how much the Council is not telling the Order."

Alexandria looked around, avoiding eye contact. "Anyways that aside, I also have a plan to

get to the desert without using a portal. I thought about it when I figured that I would not want to broadcast this information to all Council members."

Iris turned to Alex, "Are you sure that keeping secrets from them is a good thing? I mean you still are a part of that Council."

Alex rolled her eyes, "I know, I know. You know for someone who spends a lot of time around me you sure worry a lot."

Iris thought about it, "I think that it's because of the time we spend together that I worry a lot. Which makes me wonder what is this plan to get to the desert?"

Alexandria smiled, "And that is where the fun starts. You know that plan I had to get back to the surface when we thought there would be no way to get back from the Dwarven city?"

Iris nodded for a second and then her eyes went wide. "Wait you don't mean you plan to mass teleport us there to a random location and then float down until we touch the ground? I thought you hated the idea of blind teleports and this one is worse because it's a group one."

Alex nodded, "Yes, blind teleports are dangerous but in this case we can make sure to remove the dangerous part. Once that's done it's like any other teleport spell. Plus I'll have you to help me cast the spell so you will be a second set of eyes to make sure everything goes all right." Iris just shook her head not really sure what to reply.

Mike had to smile at Iris's reaction, he did not know what was involved in a teleportation spell but he shared some of her concerns. "I'll choose to believe in Alexandria's judgement on how safe this method will be..."

Adam interrupted him, "You might but I'm not sure I do."

Alex pointed her index finger at Adam, "Shush you, I can make it so that you don't reappear with us after the spell is done."

Adam was unfazed by the empty threat, "You would never do that, no matter how much or often I poke at you."

Alex frowned, "You're probably right but I can think about doing it... in any case, shush."

Once the exchange was finished Mike continued, "As I was saying, seeing as this will be determined as safe, otherwise another method will need to be found, I still think that you should inform someone from the Council on what we are doing. Also, how much time will you need to prepare for something like this and how much distance will we still have to travel after the spell to get to the entrance?"

Alexandria had to take a moment before she answered, "You people need to stop worrying about my Council work. Seriously, it's not an issue anymore. But just so you know, I was planning on telling Lithius about this trip and I'm sure that he will tell Solanar about it who will in turn probably not tell anyone else. Also, I'll inform you now, that during my time away from Astrum I will be in contact with Lithius in the same way we can keep in touch over long distance. This allows me to travel with you guys and not have to worry about how I'll make it back for a meeting or if they need to ask me something. So again, no worries anymore."

"Now for the second set of questions, we will need to travel to that town near Calculus. From there we can use the teleport spell to reach the desert. Once we land then we will need to walk about a day's distance to reach the entrance. That being said we will have to prepare to sleep at least one night in that desert. Which is a funny thing to

say considering that a short while ago that would have been impossible to do."

Alex then turned to Rosa, "Assuming we agree to head there as soon as we can then I will also need an extra two days to confirm a few things and close off others."

Mike looked at Rosamia as well, "I think we should do this, especially if Alexandria reported recent activity near the entrance. Still, are you okay with this plan? Assuming we are able to get to them then we will probably be spending a few weeks there."

Rosamia shook her head, "It's all right, I agree with this as well. The knowledge the dwarves hold could be very important, and being able to have a way to get to them could also be very important. I'm not a fan of leaving people in need but as I mentioned earlier, you are correct in what you said about needing to be more efficient about it." She then looked at everyone and then back to Mike, "That said, I am thrilled that you all agreed to help me out with this but you also don't have to second guess your ideas because of it. I believe in all of you and I know that if we do something it will be with purpose, or at least with the intention of purpose. So if this is what you think we need to do then I agree."

Mike smiled and nodded at Rosamia. "Okay then, let's all prepare for this journey. From what Alexandria said we have two days, so I suggest that we use it to prepare and also close things off as well. After the two days, let's meet back in Astrum to start this next adventure."

As everyone soon after left Anna stayed around with Mike to put things back where they belonged. "That was unexpected, I did not think that Alex would have found a way to get to the dwarf city."

Mike nodded, "Agreed, but if we are able to

make it that will be a big help I'm sure. They have been around since forever, they must know of a way to make things better or at least be able to inform us on the issues that occurred during the process."

She got close to him and kissed him, "I'm very happy that you are taking a chance on trying to help fix this."

He smiled, "Thanks. You know that coming from you that means everything to me. I just hope that I'm able to succeed, at least in part." As he left to get the final chair at the top of the tower, Anna had a small smile on her face and whispered to herself. "I'm not sure that will matter so much as you think."

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On the way back, Adam waited until he was alone with Rosamia to ask her a question that he was wondering about since the end of the meeting. "Are you really okay with this?"

Rosamia looked at him, a bit puzzled by the question, "I meant what I said back there. Why do you ask?" Adam thought about it, he was trying to change when it came to Rosa and be less blunt but he was also having a hard time thinking of a way to get his point across. Rosamia saw his hesitation and chuckled a bit, "Adam, just say it. It's all right."

He was a bit frustrated that he could not do better but he told her anyway, "I don't want you to look back at this like it's a waste of time like last time." He took a moment before he continued, "I don't want to see you cry because of it."

Rosamia was shocked a bit, she had known Adam since childhood and knew he was not the best person to express his feelings or anything related to feelings. Still, this last comment was a

bit harsher than she had expected. "Well, I don't recall you seeing me cry during that night in the forest. I'm pretty sure that when you came by I was at the stage of trying to move on with this new plan. That aside, I don't think you need to worry about that. Nor do I think I need to worry about that as well."

Adam was skeptical, "Fine... I guess."

Now Rosamia was skeptical as well, "Go on, let's deal with this now."

Adam slowly nodded, "I get it, this group, following their crazy plans we have done a lot. Still are you sure that you just want to hand your future to them just like that?"

Rosamia thought about it, "Hmm, I guess I'll return your bluntness a bit and ask you the same question. Did you not in a way hand your future to me? Why is it okay for you and not for me?"

Adam shrugged, "It's different with me. I don't really have much hope like you do. The way I see it I'm your weapon and that's pretty much all I am. In your case, you have dreams, goals and ambition for yourself. I lack in that particular department and I don't want you to fail like I did and give that all up."

Rosamia was holding back her tears, because they were tears of pity for him and she knew he would hate that. Still she never realized that this is how Adam saw himself, he was so wrong. Making him realize that was something she would have to work on. "Hmm, well you are wrong, on many levels actually but let focus on this one for now. While it's true that I trust them, this is not the same as when I was in the High Order. The proof of that happened at the meeting. These people want to help me reach my goal and also take the time to think about how things will affect me on a personal level when they make their decisions on the next



move to take." She smiled at him, "The way I see it, it's not at all about me handing my future to them but more about them wanting the same thing that I want and me letting them lead because I think they will do a better job of it."

Adam hesitated a bit, "You don't necessarily know that as being the case."

Rosamia's mood saddened at that comment. "I do actually. If anything, last year showed me my intensions are good and so are my actions but my methods... I'm realizing that I think too small. During that time at the Order, I was convinced that with funding I could fix the problems of a lot of people. Because I was so focused on that I lost so much time trying to convince the others, but at the same time all I wanted was to help those people so why not just send Crusaders to help with certain situations? Maybe that would have been approved."

She saw that Adam was still not convinced and continued, "They came up with the small group idea. During that time I realized that I wasted tons of time for nothing, so I came up with this idea of helping others. I did not care if it was healing a dying person or getting a cat out of a tree, I was doing something to help so I would be satisfied by that. Thing is would it not have been better to continue with the small group idea that I was just seeing worked very well?"

She shook her head, "But even if I had suggested that, they try to take it further. They are able to aim so high, and I just can't see that far yet. Until I do then I'll trust them and I think that you should too, not because of me but because you want to."

Adam was lost with all that and did not really know where he stood anymore. "I guess I opened something I was not too prepared for with that

question."

Rosamia smiled figuring that this is where that conversation would stop for now, "Seems like you did... but I'm also glad that you did. After saying all that I'm even more sure about them and about what I need to change within myself to try and be more like the person I want to be. You helped me figure that out in your own way, not at all the actions of 'just a weapon.'"

Adam looked forward, "We should hurry up if we want to make it back before sundown." He then spurred his horse to go faster.

*'You are still very stubborn, and also very lucky Iris did not hear what you just told me. Still I wonder will you ever see yourself as we see you?'*  
Rosamia shook those thoughts away and turned her horse to follow his, clearly Adam was now in a hurry to get back.

## Chapter 2

The Lights Templar had met at the appointed time in Astrum, there they had grabbed some horses and made their way to the town next to Calculus. With the help of magic they had made great time and after a day and a half were already close to this town. The idea was to stop there and let the horses and themselves take a short rest.

As they got near, Mike and Adam started to slow down, they both looked at each other. Adam focused for a second and then opened his eyes, "But that makes no sense."

Alexandria looked at Adam, "What does not make sense?"

Before he could answer her question, Anna jumped in. "Seems there are people living in the town." Rosamia was surprised, last she had checked it had been abandoned once all the reborns had left to go to the portal. Adam looked at Anna, "How did you know that? I had to confirm with magic."

Anna simply pointed at the smoke coming from some of the houses and gave him a big smile. Adam showed a bit of frustration for missing the obvious. Alexandria laughed out loud, "Oh that's priceless, the group's tracker misses the obvious."

Adam stared at her, "And you saw it I suppose?"

Alexandria was a bit taken aback by the question, "No, but that's not my job. Let's see if your only student saw it." She turned to Iris, "Please tell me that you have surpassed the master already."

Iris avoided her gaze, "That does not matter,

what matters is that there are people living there." She turned to Mike and Anna, "Should we not check what that is all about?" They both agreed with her statement. As they made their way closer to the town Alexandria got closer to Adam with a wicked little smile. "You know that means she did realize it and you didn't, right?" As Adam ignored her Alex smiled, content that she had won that round.

When they got closer they all dismounted. Rosamia took the lead as they explored this town that was supposed to be empty. While there were people around there were very few of them. When looking around they could see that some houses had been damaged and had been closed off, others were in the process of being repaired. When they stabled their horses at the empty stable, a woman approached them. She had long light brown hair and a big smile on her face as she approached Rosamia, "*You...!* I can't believe you are back here." She stopped for a second and bowed her head, "I'm sorry that's not the way I should have welcomed you."

Rosamia looked at her for a second and then realized who this lady was, "I never imagined that I would meet you here of all places."

Alex was looking back and forth and then turned to Rosamia with a puzzled look, "And this person is?"

Rosa had a small smile on her face as she turned to her friends, "This is the person that Adam, Julia and I saved from that mob when we were asked to check things out." She turned to the lady in front of her, "I guess I should apologize as well as I never got your name."

The lady shook her head a bit and looked at Rosamia, "No need, it's not like that time was the best place for introductions." She bowed, "My

name is Helena." She looked at the group members that had accompanied Rosamia, "I know I may be out of line in asking but why are you and everyone else here?" Her smile disappeared and fear and sadness replaced it, "Please don't tell me that something is happening again."

Anna approached her with a warm smile, "No need to worry, nothing is happening that we know of. Our group is just heading somewhere to try and reach some friends of ours. We figured that we would stop here and rest only to be surprised when we saw that people were actually living here again."

Helena looked relieved, "Oh good, I'm not sure that we could have been able to deal with something else with everything going on." Her smile returned, "You are all more than welcome to stay for the night. We don't have much to offer but there are some houses that I can show you that you can use that have been deemed safe."

Rosamia smiled at her, "That would be great, lead the way." Along the way, Rosamia introduced everyone to Helena.

Once done, Iris asked Helena a question. "What did you mean when you said deal with something else? What's the current issue?"

Both Mike and Anna were happy that Iris had asked since they were curious themselves. Helena nodded her head, "Nothing you need to worry about, also there is very little you people could do about it so there really is no need to trouble you with that."

Rosamia looked at Helena with concern on her face, "We will not pry if this is a personal matter, but if not, tell us. You never know – maybe we can actually help out."

Helena still seemed unsure so Anna figured she would push a bit more, "It's all right to trouble us, and again we are just on a journey to meet

some friends where they live. There is no rush, or trouble if we take a detour. Tell you what, why don't you start telling us why you and everyone else are living here again?"

Helena had a small smile on her face and nodded at Anna, "If you are sure about this then let's head to my house. It's a very long tale and why we are here is probably a good place to start."

Her house was rather odd, it had one bedroom a small kitchen and one very large room. In that large room a table could be found that allowed about a maximum of ten people to be seated. The place itself lacked a lot of normal items and decoration that one would find in a home; it was very plain and basic looking. Helena served them some tea and began her tale.

She explained that the town had in fact been abandoned once the reborns had left. Having only recently settled in Calculus some of the younger people that had been saved talked about returning but at the time that proved to be unreasonable due to the lack of people wanting to go back and other issues. After a few weeks, a group of bandits had taken over the place and started causing trouble on the trade routes. This caused an issue for the guilds, which then caused an issue for the Captain of the guard and his men.

It was explained to her that the Captain and his men had taken care of the bandits but that there would be no way to prevent another group from taking over at one point. Because of this and the earlier request, it was decided that they would agree to let the people go and also provide some support. This support could only be offered for a certain amount of time and once that time ended then the guild would reevaluate the situation.

Iris was a bit frustrated by this situation, "I don't get it, it's your lives why can't you live where

you want especially if this place is abandoned. What would the guilds care?"

Alex shrugged and nodded her head, "It's not that simple. You're right in the fact that they should be free to live where they want and also right that the guilds should not care. But they have to, this place is in the territory of Calculus and ultimately they are responsible for it. They can't just leave this place to bandits and also they can't just leave people here if they can't fend for themselves on some level. If they do that then it will raise questions and issues from the others. This is probably especially more problematic for Calculus as their survival is based on trade, alienate your customers in some way and that could cause a larger issue in the future."

Iris thought about it, "So because of image and profit these people are stuck doing what they are told in order to be able to live in a home? That seems odd to me."

Adam continued for Alex, "That may be the case but that's pretty much how it is. In order to live in a certain place and enjoy its comforts you have to follow that place's rules." He looked at Anna and Mike, "In some cases certain folks are able to choose differently." He turned back to Iris, "I suppose in your case you fall into that category as well and maybe the same goes for all of us, but those are exceptions mostly because of skill and power."

While Iris took it all in Anna jumped in, "It's not all about skill and power but it plays a big factor in it." She turned to Helena, "That all aside, I guess your current goal is to make this place useful again so that the guilds decide to approve of you all staying here once the time comes."

Helena nodded, "Yes, that's exactly right. Most of us have lived here our whole lives and don't

want to live anywhere else. Others just don't like large cities like Calculus and don't know where else to go assuming there is another place to go that will accept us. I am the daughter of the family that lead this place, the last thing I wanted was to come back here considering what happened to them. But when these people came to me because they did not know who else to go to I felt like I owed it to my parents' memories to do this. That being said everyone here is determined to make this happen somehow."

With all this information Mike figured it left one obvious question to ask, "Any reason why you can't perform the tasks that you once did before all this happened?"

Helena smiled at that one, "That would be the easier path but unfortunately we can't do that. Originally, this place was used as a stopping point for people traveling from and to Calculus. We provided food, rest and more importantly protection and shelter."

Adam then cut in, "Wait protection, how was that done? When we were last here all the reborns had farming equipment more than actual weapons."

She nodded, "This town is blessed with lands around it that are very fertile. Essentially, we tended to the land and with the food that was grown exchanged that for protection. In the last few years a deal was made with the Crusaders that lived in the cathedral, we would help them with food and then they would help us." Alexandria turned to Adam, "You know, considering that's where you were most of that time I'm stunned you never knew about this."

Adam nodded, "I agree but at the same time back then I did not really care about things like that and I'm pretty sure I would not have paid too



much attention to it. Still it does explain certain recon missions I had to perform."

Helena smiled and continued, "With the war over we attracted others to perform that duty but that all changed when those people took over." Her smile disappeared as she recalled what happened, "There was no longer a need to farm as much and also no need to ask for help protecting when you yourself could not die. Now we are trying start farming again but while there is equipment left there is no way for us to use it, so that leaves us to till the land by hand and spring is near its end so there is little time left. Currently, protection is handled by guards from Calculus but that will only last for so long, especially when we can barely grow food for ourselves."

Rosamia looked around, "I take it that because of the state of things the children that you had with you are not living here?"

Helena blushed a little, "Ah... yes that would be the reason why there are no kids around at this time." She regained some of her composure, "But if you are referring to the two that were with me when you saved us, those were not my kids but the ones in the care of their grandparents. They did not understand the situation back then and snuck in, seeing as I had very little to lose I went in after them... and the rest you know."

Mike was still thinking about Helena's list of issues. In order to help her they would have to stay there for some time. He quickly looked at Rosamia and Alexandria. That was something they could not afford.

As if knowing what he was thinking Anna jumped in the conversation having figured out something that he had not. "There may be something we can help you with. Because of the time we spent with those farmers, if I understand

correctly horses are not the best for tilling the land but they can be used. It's not much help but if it's okay we can give you the ones we rode in with."

Rosamia was curious as she looked to Alex, "Wait, can we do that? I mean did we not borrow the horses?"

Alexandria saw that they were all looking at her. She also noticed how hopeful Helena looked even when she was trying to hide it. "Why not? I mean following the explanation I gave Iris, Newport pretty much listens to Astrum and they listen to the Council members so there really should not be an issue." She turned to Helena, "Having said that, now that it's mentioned it's probably best that you keep them." She looked at everyone else, "Once we get to the mountains I was never planning on bringing the horses with us. So when I informed the person I got them from of that, you could say that a different arrangement was made and he is not really expecting them back." Once again she turned to Helena, "My original plan was to set them free in the wild, which could cause issues, so as Anna mentioned if they can be of use to you by all means they are yours."

Helena was stunned. "Are you sure? I mean all six of them? That's more than generous... I mean we will use them and it will help with the immediate problem but..."

Anna gave her a warm smile, "It's all good, consider them yours."

Suddenly it seemed that a bit of weight had been lifted from Helena's shoulders, there would still be a lot of issues to deal with but this would help out. She looked at all of them with a big smile on her face. "Thank you so much."

Mike smiled, "From the way it sounds it looks like you are doing us a bit of a favor as we will not have to worry about them once we get to where we

need to be. On that note seeing as we will be going there on foot maybe turning in early would be a good idea. Would it be possible to show us to some of those places that you mentioned earlier?"

Helena instantly got up, "Of course, follow me. Also I'll find some food so that you can eat and keep some of your rations for your trip... it's the least that we can do."

As she showed them to some empty houses, Mike wondered if this place would make it. It would be interesting if it did.

Everyone woke up earlier than planned due to the new mode of transportation. Still it was another nice day out and because of the time they did not have to rush their pace. Overall this trip made Adam feel odd. This was the first time where he was going somewhere and there was no real rush or where he had to look around all the time in order to try and spot an incoming ambush. He supposed that this is what Alexandria called an adventure. Overall he thought it a bit dull and found that it made his mind wander a lot. He realized that last part when Alexandria had ordered everyone to stop after taking out that map of hers and he had not reacted immediately. Had it not been for Rosa he probably would have continued for a bit longer.

Alexandria looked at her map and some of the key locations she had marked earlier. She had made it so the map could track her position and show it as a soft glowing pink dot, which was currently next to where they needed to be.

She looked at everyone, "This is the place." She then turned to Iris, "So are you ready to do this?"

Iris was a bit nervous, "Sure, but I would like to modify one thing if you don't mind. I would like it if we could first cast the weight, levitation and

flying spells, then fly up and finish with the teleport spell."

Alexandria was a bit puzzled, "You do realize that it's a teleport spell so really our point of origin matters little when it come to height."

Iris shrugged, "I know, I know it's just that I'm not a big fan of casting all these spells without making sure first."

Alex was not overly convinced but saw no point in arguing about it and agreed with the change.

As soon as she did, Rosamia cast the weight spell to reduce them each to about fifteen pounds. Then Alexandria and Iris split the levitation spells on everyone else and a flying spell on themselves.

When that was all done Alex turned to all of them, "So the way this will work is that we will both cast the teleport spell and we will each take two of you with us..." Before she could finish Adam took Rosa's hand and tried to move in the direction of Iris. Alexandria frowned as she looked at him barely moving due to the spells on him, "Anything you want to share with me, Adam?"

Adam shrugged, "Not at all, I just feel that it would be better if I joined Iris that's all."

Alex smiled, "So you are afraid that I will drop you to your death after all."

Adam nodded, "Not at all, I have no worries that you will drop me to my death. That being said, I do worry that you would drop me and scare me half to death before you caught me for the fun of it."

Alex laughed at that one, "See I did not even think about doing that, I think you see me as more mischievous then I really am. Still it's good that you think that way, if only you could remember that before you kept pressing my buttons as you often do." Alex then turned to Anna and Mike,

"Looks like you are with me, hope that's okay."  
They both took their hands and extended their free one to Alex.

Anna smiled at her, "Any time you are ready."

Each respective group was pulled by Iris and Alex so high that they could reach the clouds. When they got to a height that Iris was comfortable with they started the casting of the teleport spell and a few minutes later they blinked out of existence.

When they reappeared they were in a much warmer place. As everyone looked around they noticed they were much lower than they were before and with the heat and sand they saw when they looked down it was clear to see that they had made it successfully to the desert.

Iris turned to Alex, "How close to the target are we?" Alex looked at Anna and Mike; she made a gesture showing that she would have to let them go while she checked that out. Both of them let go, for a split second they could feel each other's hands grasping a bit harder as they let go of Alexandria. As a few seconds ticked by, they realized that everything was okay and then they felt it. Anna was first to feel the odd feeling of freedom and near weightlessness that had been given to them thanks to the spells. They both enjoyed spending their time together in high places where they could feel the wind on their faces and this experience simply magnified it. Both of them had big smiles on their faces, it was very unexpected considering that this was their second time in the air like this. Still, this was the first time where they could just sit back and enjoy the moment.

As Alex smiled at their obvious happiness, she took out the map and looked at her marked spot and her current location. "Hmm, seems we are about thirty minutes distant from where I wanted

us to be. That's better than I expected."

Iris was a bit confused, "It is?"

Alex smiled, "Of course! Heck, I'm surprised we even showed up so close to each other considering it was two different people casting the spell." Iris had no answer for that as she had not even considered that as being an issue.

Clearly not liking being up so high under a power he had no control over Adam Looked down, "Seeing as we are already off, should we not get down and start this walk?" He then looked up, "I have a feeling that it's about to get much hotter over here."

Alexandria looked at Mike and Anna still enjoying their time high above the ground. Before Iris started to descend Alex waved at her to stop, "Just curious, but how much time do you still have on the flying spell?"

Iris thought about it for a few seconds, "Maybe thirty minutes, why?"

Alex shrugged, "Why not use the time we have to get to our destination? Considering that we will be pulling two people it will be a lot slower than the last time but still faster than walking." Iris could find no arguments against the idea so she positioned herself to grab Adam and then Rosa by their waists. Alex did the same to Anna and Mike. As she got close to her, Anna whispered to Alexandria, "Thanks, Alex." She gave her a smile and they started the journey, flying as long as they could.

Once they had landed and walked for about one hour, they all realized how ill prepared they were for this type of terrain. They stopped next to a location with plenty of rocks around. Mike was not sure if that was a good thing or a bad thing but at this point, even if it felt right he would take it. As they all sat on the hot rocks, Alex looked at the

others and started to wonder how they had made it this far. She was not really wearing too much armor but everyone else was in half plate and there was no way that it was going to be good for them. "I'm sorry that there is nothing I can do about the heat. I just did not realize how much different it would be from the last time."

Mike wiped the sweat off his face, "It's all right. I don't think any of us knew. I mean how could we? No human has really traveled in deserts with the exception of the attack force."

Anna tied her hair in a makeshift ponytail, "How far do we have to go? Because I think we may need to change the plan."

Alexandria checked again and slowly nodded, "Quite a bit actually, a day still."

Mike removed his red cloak, undid his half plate chest piece and rolled it in a bundle into the cloak. He tied it up in a makeshift bag and then looked at Rosamia, "How long can your weight spell last? If it's a long time then I suggest we all do the same."

Rosamia nodded, "That sounds like a good plan, I'll have to recast the spell every two hours about but it's not a draining spell so I see no issues with it." She then took a moment to think about something, "I also would also like to try something if you all don't mind."

Adam was already taking off his own armor, "At this point I think that if there is anything we can try then we should, because while we can kill dragons and avatars this heat will be the end of us if we go on like this."

Rosamia nodded, "It's a protection spell against elements but I'm not really sure about its effects in this environment." She took a deep breath and recalled the spell and cast it on everyone. Instantly they could all feel its effects, it

was like the heat had dropped down by half. All of them took a moment to enjoy the new temperature. As Iris sat down herself after taking off her armor, it was still very warm but this was much better. "Best... spell... *ever*."

As they all relaxed, a thought popped into Alex's head, "You know last time we were here it was much cooler during the night, maybe we should wait it out and walk then?"

Mike was not convinced and neither was Anna. She looked around and then looked at Alex. "Hmm, I'm not sure that's a good idea. I mean yes it's much better now and you could be right that the same thing may happen again. But I think the worry that both of us have is that it may not be a good idea to just stay in this heat doing nothing for so long."

Alex had to agree with that, she too looked around and then after a little while stood up. "Okay, everyone get up, if that is the only worry about traveling during the night then maybe I can fix that problem." Soon everyone was standing and then Alex kneeled down on the hot sand and touched the stone around them and focused on a spell. "Image it, simply image it." A short while after, the stone around them started to change and shape itself. Three rock pillars erupted from the sand below them and then a large flat stone surface could now be seen on top of those pillars. Then, on the ground around them, more stone formed itself to create a stone floor. When it was all done, Alex stood and looked at her handiwork. The top provided more than adequate shade, which helped drop the temperature even more.

Mike nodded, "Can't think of anything anymore. I guess we go with the plan of traveling at night."

A few hours passed. The group found small



stones and moved them to the shade to sit on. Every so often Rosamia and Iris cast the protection spell to make everyone more comfortable. After the rest, they were all feeling a lot better. Mike looked around a bit and then focused on Rosa and Iris. "If possible can you skip me the next time you cast the protection spell? I would like to see if we can confirm that the temperature is in fact going down."

Rosamia smiled, "There should be no need for that. Basically the spell protects us from a certain amount, once that amount is done the spell finishes. Already we need to cast the spell at longer intervals, so it is getting cooler."

Mike nodded, content with the explanation, "Never mind then."

Adam jumped in with a question to Alex, "I'm not a fan of that flying but I have to admit that it did speed up the journey. Considering the harsh environment would it not be best if we just did that for the rest of the journey?"

Iris looked at Alex as well because she was wondering the same thing. Alex thought about it and then shook her head, "Yeah, I want to as well but I really don't want to take the chance. We only have so much in rations and can't really replenish them. That being said if we need our power for something big I'm not sure how much time it would take for us to replenish ourselves and doing what you propose would drain us quite a bit. Sadly, the flying spell is a great spell but also one of the most draining."

Anna was curious about what she had said, "I'm guessing that you are expecting a similar marker as last time and that being said may need to cast that different teleport spell again and this time with more people. Is that why you want to conserve as much power as you can?"

Alexandria shrugged, "Yes, but I'm not sure if it will be needed, at the same time I don't want to take the chance." Alex saw that Anna still had a questioning look and continued, "Here is my thought, so the dwarves gave a way to the orcs to reach them so can the same method even be used?"

Anna suddenly understood, "If the same way is used then it would impossible for the orcs to reach them because none of them can cast and the dwarves would know that, so why give them something they can't use?"

Alexandria happily nodded away, "You got it, but that's just my own logic at play. We could get there and an item is needed or something and it's because of that something that I don't want to gamble too much on power use."

Mike thought about that as well, "Also you mentioned that there was activity at the location, that unknown maybe another good reason to conserve power."

It was hard for anyone to argue both points, and seeing as it would be a long night the group set up a rotation to try and sleep for a while. The rotation was implemented not in case of an unexpected attack but in case there was a sudden dangerous change in the weather.

During the night, the Lights Templar continued their journey. The temperature had in fact dropped considerably, so much so that the protection spell was not needed. They still carried their heavier pieces of armor and covered them in their cloaks so that they would not overheat. They pushed a bit the next day until they found another large rock formation so that Alex could once again create a mini shelter. This time around, sleep was easy to find considering the long day.

Night came again and from what Alexandria

was seeing from her map they would get to the location she had spotted in early morning. When that time came close, everyone put on their armor and Adam and Iris were sent to scout ahead of the main group.

As they got closer, Iris and Adam returned to report what they had found. Adam seemed a bit concerned as he started the report. "Well, we found the place. It seems to be a large cave that's linking to the mountains at the edge of the desert."

Iris continued, "Seems that Alex was right about the activity. The entrance is littered with large stones that have been mined from the cave. There are also tons of pickaxes that have just been dropped on the ground. It's like they were digging for something but whether they found it or not is hard to tell."

Adam filled in more details, "What she means is that with the amount of pickaxes found there should be a lot of people or things about but there is nothing. We peeked in the cave and could hear something in the distance, so something is still there. I've also used every method of tracking spell I know and there is only one thing that I picked up... ogres."

Everyone was stunned by the enemy he mentioned. Ogres were not the brightest of creatures and could not really be left alone to perform a task, plus it had been a very long time since they had bumped into their kind.

Once they all had gotten to the location they could not find anything beyond what had already been explained or seen by Iris and Adam. They could all hear a picking noise coming from very deep within the cave. Having very few options, they moved in.

The cave corridors were very wide, about four people could easily walk side by side with no

issues. Still considering that they would have to fight ogres they figured they would limit themselves to pairs of two to give themselves more maneuverability during a fight. In front were Mike and Anna, followed by Rosamia and Alexandria, with Iris and Adam in the rear. Rosa had also cast a floating sphere of light that helped everyone see in the unlit cave.

As they moved forward, Adam informed them that the ogres were still very far away.

After a few steps, Mike stopped, "Are you sure that the ogres are still far off?"

Adam nodded, "Yeah, why?"

Mike turned to Anna and then the others, "I thought I saw a glimmer of something in front, it's gone now but it still felt like I saw something." He shook it off, "Anyways, keep a lookout and let's continue."

Shortly after, Iris stopped, "Wait, wait, wait, I saw something too but this time in back of us. It was like a weird translucent thing that quickly showed up and then disappeared."

Alexandria quickly grabbed hold of Iris from her back, "Please, please, please tell me that you are wrong. From what you are describing it seems like there are ghosts in this cave. Remember what you promised me the last time I talked to you about ghosts...?" Before Iris could brush off her worry, something appeared behind them. Four translucent looking beings that looked like dwarves suddenly appeared.

Iris prepared herself, "Yep, ghosts it is, four of them in the back."

Rosamia moved in front and Anna and Mike moved backwards, "And about five in the front. Iris can you cast a barrier spell from your side?"

Iris nodded, "Sure thing." As it was being acknowledged they both started casting and

suddenly a transparent shimmering shield appeared from one side of the cave to the other blocking the spirits from moving forward. The same shield appeared in the back. Mike looked in front, "Will that hold them?"

As the dwarf ghosts were already bashing at the shield, Rosamia shook her head. "In theory it should but it depends on the amount of energy they apply to break it." She pointed her hand in front and reinforced the shield by giving it more power as the ghosts put more energy into breaking it.

Iris was having a harder time than Rosa keeping them at bay, for some reason hers were more coordinated and it was hard for her to keep reinforcing the shield so it wouldn't break. "Uh guys... I'm not really sure if I can..." She did not have time to finish her thought as the shield collapsed. As soon as it did the four spirits moved in. Adam stabbed his sword on the ground and cast a banish spell. The spell hit three of the four and they instantly ran away in pain for a while, leaving enough time for Iris to recast another barrier spell.

The one that had managed to miss the effects of Adam's spell was heading directly for Alexandria who just waved her arms around trying to push it away, "*No no no no no...*" Mostly acting on instinct Anna grabbed Alex and covered her as much as she could as the ghost connected with Anna's body and then disappeared into it. Anna's body instantly froze up as this happened.

Anna had experienced a lot in her life so far and at this time she had to rank being possessed on the top five things she could do without. Currently, she could think for herself and that was it. She was cut out of all of her senses and felt disconnected from her body. She looked around

and found only pure darkness, the only thing she could hear was her own thoughts. After a short while, the large face of a dwarf showed up with a wicked grin. She assumed this was the ghost that had possessed her.

'Finally, a human we can possess! Now I'll use your body to let the others be taken so we can bash in those ogres and then have the pleasure of finishing you off.'

Anna was surprised and also thankful that the language spell that had been put on them was functioning in such an odd scenario, 'What other human are you talking about? Also get out of my body.' The dwarf was surprised and also very angry, '*How?* How can you understand me? Answer me now before I rip it from your mind.'

She was not too pleased with this dwarf, 'It's something that a friend of mine was able to cast on me after learning it from a gift given from one of you, his name was Kilor. I also know of Helram and Dovar – we fought together against the shadow creatures. Our group is friendly with your people... well the still living ones anyways.'

The dwarf was still furious but had calmed down a bit at the mention of names he had not heard in a long time. 'It's good to hear these names again, and your story would explain why you can speak my language but there is too much that is unexplained.' He looked at her for a few moments, 'If you truly are a friend to us then I apologize in advance as this will hurt considerably and if you are lying then those will probably be your last words.' Anna's eyes went wide as his head floated onto her, as soon as he made contact it happened. All her memories were painfully ripped out of her... she screamed as loud as she ever had in her life.

Anna's body muscles tightened and a loud scream could be heard coming from her. Mike's eye

went wide as the one he loved the most was in great pain. "Rosamia is there *nothing* that we can do?"

Rosa looked at his worried face and nodded, "I can't, the others are still trying to get through. If I help her the same thing will happen to us... I'm so sorry."

Mike put his arms around his wife and did the only thing he could do, prayed to a god that he knew was no longer there.

Eventually she stopped screaming and when she did the ghost popped out of her body. Mike supported her body as it went limp as Anna slowly started to regain control. The ghost raised both his hands at his others and after a few seconds he disappeared, as did all the others. Alexandria was looking at everyone and then at Anna, "What the heck, why did they go away?"

Having regained some strength but still being supported Anna explained, "The language spell was still working for some reason, I explained that we were friends." She took a moment to catch her breath, "He did not want to just believe me so he made sure by looking in my mind. It was a horrible experience."

Alex was not really sure what to say, "I'm so sorry. Maybe if I hadn't freaked out as I did then..."

Anna cut her off, "I'm not blaming you, nor should you. He was to blame because he did not want to believe. As a parting gift he gave me some information." She looked at Alex, "You were right, this is the right place. Once we get to the end then there is a marker that will bring us to the Dwarven city." She then looked at everyone else, "As for what happened here, a while back this place collapsed. The dark lord seemed to know of this place and had sent reborns and ogres to dig it out. Why he did not send his mages, I have no clue but

when we killed him all the reborns just disappeared, leaving the ogres alone."

Iris had a weak smile on her face, being glad that she was okay but sad because of what had happened. "That explains all the pickaxes we found and also why Adam only picked up ogres."

Anna nodded, "That's right, now all we need to do is worry about the ogres. The ghosts will leave us be from this point on." As the others regrouped she turn to Mike. He had such a worried look on his face plus he had still not let her go. Now having mostly physically recovered from the effects, she gave him a smile. "I'm fine, you don't have to worry anymore."

His mood did not change, "I just hate not being able to do anything, especially when it comes to you." He gave her a small kiss on her forehead and let her go, "I love you so much and you mean everything to me..."

She again smiled at him, "I love you as well and I'll be fine, really all I need is a bit of time." She then turned and started walking to join the others, "And a great way to do that is dealing with those ogres for being a part of the problem in the first place. So let's go take point again."

Once they were back in front it did not take too long to meet up with a group of ogres. From what they saw there were four of them all equipped with pickaxes. Because of their size they could only fight two side by side at most.

Mike rushed in with Anna each taking one side. He focused his anger as he had often done in the last few years but this time the blade did not glow. He cursed himself for having forgotten. Still, he was charging his first target and would continue with that plan. Normally he would hit the ogre's side, with the enchantment that would have cut deep enough that he would bleed to death.



Seeing as this was not possible he aimed for the first ogre's knee, slicing away. He then positioned himself between the first ogre and the other one behind him, who was preparing to hit him with a vertical slash. Thankfully, ogres are slow and Mike was able to dodge it pretty quickly. His first target had now recovered and was attacking again but could only do a horizontal attack. Seeing as his blow would be obvious he put as much force into it as he could. Mike squeezed himself between his attacker and the wall to go around the first ogre once again and miss his blow. The ogre's missed blow was very strong and penetrated the cave's wall. It needed both hands to pull out the weapon. Seeing as the first ogre would not turn around, Mike had a clear shot at the creature and aimed his sword with both hands and plunged it into the target's chest. *'One down one to go,'* he thought, still this was going much slower this way.

Anna had to smirk as she remembered that there was no longer an enchantment. She had hated the idea of them when it had been explained and now she had to admit that she would miss the power it gave them. Still, this power only modified their overall attack power and changed nothing for their speed. For what Anna lacked in physical strength she gained in agility, for her the ogres were very slow. She easily dodged the first attack and slashed at her first ogre's side. She did not slow her charge and continued to hit the second ogre behind the first one. He was not prepared for an incoming attack so it was easy to hit his side as well and also get behind him. Then both ogres turned and as they did Anna once again charged at them repeating the same move. But this time as the ogres turned the second one in the back was a bit more annoyed than the first and decided to move in where there was no room to. This caused

him to push the first ogre to the wall. The first one resisted being thrown to the side leaving him opened. Anna grabbed her sword with both hands and aimed at the ogre's chest. Her aim was good and the ogre immediately fell to the ground.

Adam was watching the fight, "Iris as soon as the next two go down charge in with me." Iris hesitated for a little while but got ready anyway.

Alex saw that Rosa was puzzled by the command as well and figured she needed to understand the reason he had ordered it. "Wait, if you do that won't you have the same problem as the ogres. They are fine, there is no reason to switch."

He was still looking ahead as he answered her, "The others are coming and there are a lot of them and they are too slow. I'm thinking that because they lost that enchantment we will have to rethink the standard attack formation."

Alexandria was furious at his comment, "Hey, now don't you just write them off like that..."

Before she could continue Rosamia cut in, "I agree with Adam on their speed, but Adam don't you think that you are being too hasty in your assessment of their current situation?"

Adam was still focused on his front, "Nope not at all, I may not see eye to eye most of the time with Mike but in battle we are the same and there is no way that he's not thinking the same thing I am and I'm sure Anna is seeing it too. Just watch, as soon as they drop and we charge in, they will both move away expecting us to take over."

Alexandria was not convinced but figured that she would do as they did and wait to see if that was actually going to happen. Half a minute later the second set of ogres dropped to the ground. As soon as they did Adam and Iris charged in, when they first stepped forward you could also notice

that both Mike and Anna were also stepping backward and were moving next to the wall. Alex was shocked and disappointed at the same time, Adam had been right.

Iris had enchanted both her blades with an ice enchantment to help debilitate her targets with each blow. She used her enhancing magic to boost her speed giving the ogres an unfair disadvantage in trying to hit her. The first one took a horizontal swing with both hands, possibly trying to split her in half with sheer force. Iris moved to his side well ahead of the blow and sliced at his knee, causing it to go numb. She moved to his back and he clumsily turned. She took her other blade and stabbed at his back, she then released the enchantment inside of the ogre's body. In a matter of seconds he was defeated. As she spun around to dodge the attack of the second, she used her other blade and thrust forward at his stomach and once again released the ice enchantment inside his body. As he dropped to the ground she reapplied the enchantments and looked in Adam's direction. He was already dropping his third enemy. It had taken less than thirty seconds to drop her two and she was falling behind, slightly less frustrated than she would have been before she charged ahead at her next enemy.

Adam did not focus on Iris, he knew that she would keep up one way or the other. His only focus was all his targets his tracking spell was giving him information on. In order to defeat these targets he would use his normal swords and his enhancing magic. Normally speed was enough but given this enemy he decided to add in strength as well. Essentially this made him twice as fast as them and now as strong as them as well. When the first blow came, Adam was now able to block it with one of his weapons. This action caused a moment of

confusion on the enemy's side for a normal human should not be able to simply block an ogre. This moment was then abused with a thrust from his other weapon to the chest to aim at the heart or lung of the enemy. When he pulled out his blade, he immediately jumped on the next one leaving the other behind to die slowly or quickly. The way mattered little to Adam, as long as the result was conclusive.

As Adam and Iris made their way through the enemies, the rest followed from behind. Alex looked at the two Crimsons in front of her, "So why did you fall back?"

Mike pointed ahead, "There is no way that we can match that speed anymore."

Alexandria cut in, "But still that does not mean that you... well, you know."

Anna chuckled, "Please don't put any ideas in his head that are already probably there, it's just going to make him realize that there is some truth attached to them."

Mike shrugged, "In this case mind you it's probably true to a certain extent."

Alex was still not convinced, "Not necessarily."

This quick comment puzzled Anna, "Why so defensive Alex?"

Anna felt a hand on her shoulder. She turned to face Rosamia. "Adam had a few choice comments about your performance. You know how he can be sometimes." Rosa paused for a second, "Okay most times."

Anna then understood very clearly and turned to Alexandria, "Ah, I see now, well don't worry about it. We will figure out something I'm sure." She then gave Alex her half smile that Mike liked so much, "Let him have his moment, it's more than due. That will give us time to come back from behind and frustrate him more."

Rosamia simply nodded, she would like to defend Adam but there was no real need for her to come to his rescue especially after he constantly made sure to give them reasons to poke back at him. While Mike listened to the exchange and looked ahead at Iris and Adam, he had to wonder if there even was a way for them to match them and what that meant if they never did. He looked at Anna who did not seemed worried at all, at that point he smiled and thought that he was once again acting like an idiot for worrying again about his contribution to the group. He had to look at it like Anna would, things are different now and that's just how it is. Focusing on what you can't do would help no one, so then he would have to focus on what he could do and move forward from there.

It did not take long for Adam and Iris to finish things up with the ogres, as the others joined them the both of them were catching their breath while using the cave wall as support. Iris pointed at Adam, "Admit it, you purposely pushed yourself didn't you?"

He shrugged, "So? I mean it's been a few months and I needed to work the kinks out, what better way to do that then by pushing yourself." He then smirked at her, "Plus I wanted to see if you could keep up to make sure that you have not been slacking off during the last few months."

She frowned at his comment, in the end she had been able to match him but it had taken more effort than he had used so more practice would be needed. For now she put those thoughts away and looked at Alexandria and pointed at the stones that were still left due to the cave-in. "I take it you can handle this on your own?" She did not want to admit it but keeping up that pace with Adam had taken more out of her then she would have liked.

Alexandria move to the wall of rocks that were

blocking their way and put her hand on it, she then cast a quick spell and turned to Iris with a smile. "You are good, it's only about twenty feet deep now. So I should be able to handle it on my own." That having been said she took a few moments to plan things properly.

Rosamia looked at her, "You are sure that you will be okay to deal with this? I mean if you need help..."

Alex waved at her telling her not to concern herself. "The issue is not the magic power needed to deal with this but the how to deal with it." She then turned to the stone in front of her and started thinking out loud, "The plan is to create a way by molding the stone but the issue with that spell is that I need to get rid of the excess matter somehow without causing another cave-in." Before anyone could jump in to suggest anything a thought occurred to her, "That will work, mind you my teacher would probably scold me if he saw what I'm about to do."

She started casting the spell and then another and then another, the process seem to be moving along which left Rosa curious. "Why would her teacher give her a hard time, it's seems to be going just fine."

Iris chuckled, "Sure the spells that are being cast are okay but her teacher was one of the best with this spell and let's just say that they both argued on the end result."

A small smile appeared on Anna face, "I take it this teacher wanted a certain type of result and Alex did not agree?"

Iris nodded, "You go it, from what I was told this teacher was very artistic and Alex always looked at the spell in a more practical than artistic way."

Having finished with her task Alexandria

turned, "Bah, for things like this as long as it's functional what does it matter?" She then turned again and started walking through the new tunnel she had created. As Mike and the others joined up he could see where her teacher would not have approved. It seems that the first step was to have used all the stone on top to create a large slab of stone that had been fused with the stone on each wall. Then the stone next to the walls had all been turned into support beams with added large columns in the middle. As for the leftover stone in the middle, while it seemed that she had just created a large hole in the ground and let gravity fill it in, if you looked closer you would realize that the stone and ground had been compacted to create a very solid floor. While all this allowed them to get to the other side and was very practical even Mike had to agree it was not the most esthetically pleasing thing he had seen her create.

As they all continued to make their way down the tunnel Rosamia got close to Adam, "Can you pick up anything else ahead of us?"

He nodded, "Nope, I'm going with the generic version this time. While the range is short it should pick up anything. So far it seems like this will be it until we reach the end."

When they reached the large circular room at the end of the tunnel, they saw a familiar circular stone marker was placed in the middle. On the walls, Dwarven writing could be found. Alex and Iris read what they could, as some of it had been damaged, Iris turned to Alexandria. "Am I reading this right?"

Alex shrugged, surprised about what she was reading herself. "Seems like it, I'm going over it again to make sure."

Mike read the content as well. From the looks of it Alexandria's hunch had been correct, still

there were parts that seemed unclear. "So no magic required for this?"

Alexandria turned and made her way to the marker in the center of the room, "Seems like it. I mean it's like I said, the orc can't cast so making the instruction be cast a teleport spell would have been very stupid." She looked more closely at the marker, "Still to say that they were able to imbue this thing with so much magic to warp a group of people is very impressive is a bit of an understatement." She then kneeled down to touch the marker, "Well this is it, I'm pretty sure I don't have to mention that this is once again a one-way trip using this method. Essentially, it seems that it will just teleport all that are in contact with the person that breaks the seal on the marker." She looked up at everyone, "So I guess whenever you're ready."

They all looked at each other and nodded. They once again held hands and Anna grabbed Alex's left shoulder while Rosa had the right. Alexandria made sure that proper contact was made with everyone and then broke off one of the little stones attached to the center. As soon as she did the magic that had been put in a long time ago was finally released and enveloped all the Lights Templar members. They glowed for a second and then the cave went dark, and the now used marker shattered.



## Chapter 3

As the Lights Templar reappeared in familiar tunnels, they looked down to see that the marker was shattered. Mike looked around and smiled, "Well Alexandria, congratulations, looks like you did it."

She smiled with a wicked little grin, "There was no way that I was going to let an unknown location and distance get between me and that library."

Mike could only smile at her comment. He then turned to Adam. "Now comes the next hard part – getting to their city in this maze of tunnels. Are you up for it?"

They all expected a sarcastic comment from him but instead they all saw him frown. He was looking in front of the tunnel. "We may have to deal with something else first, there is something coming our way. It's not too fast but it will be here in a few minutes." Mike nodded as everyone took a defensive position. Adam was in front followed by Iris with Anna and Mike at her side, Alexandria and Rosamia were behind them. Alex was trying to look in front to see what was going to appear. "This is frustrating, I can't use my magic to see in the dark that far in. Any clues on what's coming?"

Adam shook his head, "I would need to cycle through all types of tracking to figure it out and considering the unfamiliar territory I'm not sure that would even work. Plus in less than a minute it will matter very little."

After a little while everyone could see what was coming. They all relaxed and put their weapons away. As they did Alex ran over to the target and

as soon as she reached it gave it a large hug. "Kilor, it's so good to see my favorite dwarf again." The dwarf smiled at her welcome and then froze for a second, as Alexandria let him go he looked at her. "You are speaking Dwarven! How?"

Alex gave him a smile and then went back and reached for Iris, "With her help and with the book that you gave me we were able to modify our language spell. It has limited use but at this time we all can speak and read your language." She then looked at Kilor, "That's okay right? I mean I figured that would be okay considering what you gave me."

Kilor waved her worries away, "No problem at all, it's just surprising that's all. I had figured that something like this would have happened eventually... just not this quickly, hence the surprise." Kilor shook his head, "Anyways, please let me be the first dwarf to thank you for what you have done and also congratulate you on your victory. Shall I escort you to the city?" They all nodded and started to follow their friendly escort.

After having traversed through a lot of different tunnels Mike wondered about something, "It's very fortunate that you were there waiting for us, it would have taken us a lot of effort to find your city on our own."

Kilor nodded, "Yes it would have, but we did have help in knowing that you had a chance in being here. Because of that some of us have taken it upon ourselves to make sure that there was someone present in case you made it back."

Rosamia was surprised by his comment, "From the way you say it, you knew that it would be a possibility but did not know when it would happen. Hopefully, we did not cause trouble for the time it took us to get here."

Again Kilor waved their worries away,

"Considering what we do all day it was a nice change of pace." He turned to look at all of them for a few seconds, "Plus I'm not really sure you realize the impact of your actions on all our people. I suppose I should warn you before we get to the city that there will be a lot of dwarves that will be very thankful to all of you." He then continued walking, "I should also tell you that this time our roles should be reversed and there will also be a lot of dwarves that will want to ask you a lot of questions." He paused for a moment, "And if you don't mind, I have one for all of you now. Why are you back? Is it for a visit or something in particular?"

Mike looked at the group members and then answered the dwarf, "We need information on our history, more specifically why it is the way it currently is. We figured that you would have some of that information." He paused for a moment and then figured that he would have nothing to lose in asking, "We would also like it if we could have access to your library and maybe even the Oracles that were mentioned last time. We want to try and fix our broken world or at least help it out."

Kilor gave a low whistle, "That's quite the goal. Well I'm sure that most of your request will be granted with little problem but access to the knowledge of the Oracle will not."

Mike looked at Anna. That answer was disappointing. They were both hoping for some extra guidance in this quest he had started. He turned again to Kilor, "Is there a reason why, if you don't mind me asking?"

The dwarf shrugged, "Again let me explain, you will meet with the Oracles. In fact, they are the people I am to escort you to as soon as we get to the city. And you will be free to ask them any question you like. The reason I said what I said is

because I think that you were asking for information on the future in order to figure out what to do next. As I told you last time, using their knowledge that way is definitely not recommended. We ourselves only recently fell into that trap by convincing ourselves that you would lose your fight with the dark lord and look what happened." He paused for a moment and continued, "If that warning is not enough, then let me explain that the information they have would be of very little help. When the spell is cast it takes into account the person casting it, so essentially the results that we get are from the viewpoint of our people, which would be of very little help for yours."

Alexandria jumped in at his explanation, "Ahhh, I get it. So the only way the spell would have any accurate information for us is if we did something drastic enough to affect your people. I suppose that makes sense."

Mike nodded, "That being said it's disappointing at the same time."

Alex thought about it, "I guess, but given the spell there has to be a limit on it otherwise no caster would be able to digest the information it gave it."

He smiled at her, "I'm okay with that part of it, the part that is disappointing is the fact that in theory Kilor just indirectly told us that no matter what we do or what we plan, it will affect his people very little or not at all." Alexandria and all the others understood that he was implying that it meant that once again the dwarves will probably be a source of information only.

Kilor simply smiled. He was amazed how quickly this group was able to reach the proper conclusion given little information. He wondered if this was something that was special to them.

When they finally arrived at the city, all

members of the group finally understood what Kilor had warned them about. Everywhere they looked the dwarves were saluting, thanking, and in some rare cases bowing to them. There was also a lot of cheering coming from everyone. Overall it was a bit uncomfortable for the group as this was the first time any of them had experienced anything like this. Eventually they made their way to a very large and circular building. Kilor explained that this is where they will meet the Oracles and other members of high importance to their race.

Inside the building in the middle of the room there was a large semicircle table and behind that ten large chairs. Sitting on those chairs were dwarves they had never met before. For all intents and purposes they looked just like all the other dwarves save for the fact that, unlike Kilor, they wore no armor. They recognized only one in the group and that was Helram. As he saw them he gave them a warm smile and a nod in gratitude. Kilor told them to stand where they were as he continued to walk to the semi-circular table and took the only empty chair. As the Lights Templar looked around they then noticed that the sides of the building had places for the general public to walk in and sit. Overall, the place looked like a mini coliseum with them standing in front of the leaders on the ground and everyone else around them. The place was filling up quickly and made for a very uncomfortable setting for the group.

Adam looked around, "You know I was not a big fan of that little room in the library where we spent most of our time the last time, but looking at all this, I would prefer that over this any day."

Iris nodded, "Yeah, I mean all this is a bit... intimidating."

A small chuckle could be heard from Anna,

"Agreed, but these are the reasons why we nominated a leader for our group so that we would not all have to be uncomfortable."

Mike simply lowered his head and figured that maybe a re-vote would be needed in the near future. As a hand reached out to grab his shoulder, he looked to see Alexandria with a big smile. "They are our friends so there should be nothing to worry about." All of them looked at her not believing that she had just said that, potentially jinxing the whole event.

Once the room was filled to capacity, the meeting started. One of the dwarves in the middle started clearing his throat; he had long black hair that was neatly tied. He wore normal clothes save for some leather shoulder pads. As they looked closer, he and his other members that looked similar to him reminded them, and especially Alex, of the Elven Council but with dwarves. It made them wonder if there was a connection.

The black-haired dwarf started talking. "I would like to introduce myself, I am Adar Dargugan. I lead with my other brothers you see here. I would also like to apologize for the environment that you have been thrown into. Essentially, you people are the reason why our struggle for survival against the dark lord and his kind is finally over. And this battle has been ongoing for longer than you can probably imagine. Because of this a lot of our brothers and sisters wanted to meet the people that were the cause of this." He took a moment and looked around and then focused on them, "Let me officially thank you on behalf of everyone here for ending our war that seemed to be never ending. Because of your actions we are finally free, thank you." As soon as he said it a lot of cheering and clapping could be heard.

When the commotion died down Adar continued, "Now, I'm sure you have your reasons for coming back here but before we get into that we do have one question: how? How did you win?"

Mike looked at his teammates and friends and then addressed Adar, "Mostly luck, as we got to the pyramid we realized that the walls were filled with Dwarven glowing runes. Alexandria our group's mage and fellow Council member strongly recommended that we take a bit of time to examine the runes. The spell was mostly incomprehensible but she was able to determine that it was a part of that trap spell that had been cast by the lord of light, with your assistance. Seeing as the lord of darkness was already freed but the spell was still active we assumed that something from the spell was still in play. After everything that has happened and barely making it out alive after that battle we all agree that we won only because of that still active spell that was somehow affecting him during the fight and limiting his abilities."

Adar had a very serious look on his face, "Hmm, interesting, fortunate and also very disturbing in a way. Being as old as we are, we should have known better and yet somehow we did not. We will need to discuss this further in private and we will have more questions for you at a later time." His face then brightened as he once again smiled, "So I am to assume that you came back here for a reason. Please tell us if there is anything with can help you with."

Mike took a moment and explained the situation, their overall goal and what help they were hoping that the dwarves could provide. It was hard to tell from where they were but Mike could swear that he heard a small chuckle come from Adar before he answered him.

"That's a very ambitious mission you have, but

considering your last one I suppose it's to be expected." He took a moment to think and then continued, "We will give you the right to talk to any dwarf you wish to talk to and ask them anything you wish, keep in mind that it will be at their discretion if they decide to answer you. We cannot give you access to the tomes that have the information written from the Oracles or answer any question on the knowledge that we already have on possible futures. There are too many risks involved in that." He could see that they looked disappointed but that at the same time the answer had been somewhat expected. "We will give you access to all other books in both libraries." This comment caused some mumbling among the other dwarves. Iris looked over at Alexandria who had a big smile on her face. She wondered when was the last time she had been so happy.

The dwarf then stood and made his way to the group, "We got information on what happened after the fight and were told that most of your weapons were destroyed or damaged. Because of this we created new ones for all of you as a gift for what you lost. Helram will take you to the armory once the meeting is over. They should be stronger than any weapon forged by man even with the assistance of the world of magic. I hope they will be of use to you."

He then made his way to Mike and Anna, "Kilor explained what had to be done in order to get here the first time, and he also explained to us the significance of it. They are made of a metal that cannot be found anymore, it was the last bit we had." He pulled out a small box and gave it to Anna, "This is another token of our thanks."

Anna thanked him and then opened the box. Inside were two rings, wedding rings to be precise. They had used their original ones to create the



communication device to reach the others and open the portal to get here. She still wore the pendant around her neck with one of their rings fused into it. These rings seemed to be made of an odd golden material, there was also an inscription in the inside of the rings that read 'forever yours'. They both smiled, they had yet to find replacements. This seemed like fate.

Adar, pleased that the gift had its intended reaction, raised his arms and addressed everyone. "Now please stay for as long as you like, and for the moment rest up, for in a few days we will have a celebration again for what has happened but this time we will all be able to toast the ones who made it happen in person." A large cheering could be heard and Helram and Kilor got up and joined the group to congratulate and thank them again.

A smile was still on Alex's face and this time it was not because of the books but because finally proper replacements had been found for the rings that she had forced them to give up. Then an idea popped in her head, "You know, instead of just putting those on, you could have a renewal of vows... I mean they are planning a celebration – why not add to it?"

Mike turned to Anna who had a big smile on her face, "Why not?" She turned to Adar, "Would that be okay?"

Adar looked at Kilor for confirmation, "So that is the ritual where two people reaffirm their vows to be together, correct? I don't see a problem with that. You will have to provide assistance with the preparations mind you as we don't have that custom at all for our people. Still it would be interesting to witness."

Alexandria continued smiling, this was all perfect. "Not a problem at all, let Iris and I handle that part."

Adam was shaking his head, this was all happening very quickly and he got closer to Mike. "So are you okay with this?"

Mike chuckled, "Look how happy Anna is – of course I'm okay with it."

Hearing that made Anna smile even more and then she looked at Adam and gave him a wicked grin, "You know I would be willing to drop this event if you two would take our place." Adam's eyes instantly went wide and froze as his face slowly turned red. Rosamia was the same shade. Anna chuckled at their reaction, "I guess we go with the original plan then."

Shortly after, Helram escorted them to the armory where he would give them their new weapons. He explained that only Alexandria was skipped because she uses just a regular staff, everyone else had the choice of switching. Each of them was presented with the same type of weapons they normally had but this version was clearly better. The only one that hesitated for a little while was Adam. He had used his regular swords for some time now, so much so that they were a part of his body. In the end, he took them nonetheless if only to try them out. Adam asked Helram if there was a place where he could do just that, the dwarf nodded and led him to a training ground.

Mike followed the others but mostly felt like a third wheel, the others were mostly talking about the preparations for the upcoming wedding. "So is there anything you want me to do?" Anna turned around and thought about it for a while, she then approached him and whispered something that the others could not hear. He looked at her, "Are you sure? I don't mind at all but I don't think it's going to be that easy."

She shrugged and smiled at him, "You asked, and well at least you have about two days. Good

luck." She then turned and joined up with the others to continue the preparations.

Mike stood there, "Yeah ... luck, I think I'm going to need that."

He waited a few hours and then made his way to the training grounds where Adam was still practicing. It seems he was the only one there. Mike approached him, "No one else to practice with?"

Adam did not stop but did answer him, "Seems like it, these new weapons are clearly better but the weight and length is different so I need to get used to them as quickly as possible."

Mike nodded, "Makes sense." He really did not know how to approach this so he figured he would take the Adam approach and just come out and say it. "So for this renewal of vows, I've been given one task and that's for you to be there with me as a best man... are you interested?" Adam suddenly stopped and laughed. Mike was not sure how to take that, "So... can I take that as a yes?"

Adam nodded, "No, that is not a yes. First off, I'm not even sure why you would ask me of all people and second I'm not interested in participating this time. Sorry about that."

Mike nodded again, "Okay, well for starters, Anna mentioned it and I agreed. The reason why I agreed is simple. While it's true that you did leave me to die at one point you also saved my life once. More importantly, you saved the life of the women I love more than anything else in this world, not once but twice. If it was not for you then... really I don't know where the group would be let alone me. So if that's not reason enough, I don't know what is."

Adam slashed his sword, "I just did what needed to be done nothing else."

Mike sighed, "There you go again."

His comment infuriated Adam, maybe it was because of the teasing Anna had given him or the talk that had backfired with Rosamia a few days back. Adam was just not sure what it was but he was angry. "You know nothing of me, so don't pretend. I am a weapon and that's all there is to it. Now leave me be."

Mike knew that this was not going to be easy but there was no way that he was going to disappoint her on this. "Fine then, tell you what Weapon, I challenge you. No magic – straight on fight. If I win then you have to listen to what I have to tell you and actually think about it, if I lose then we never talk about this again and I leave your personal matters to yourself."

Adam smiled, "Oh, that is something you know I will accept."

They both got in position facing each other and after a few seconds of waiting Adam sprang forward on the attack. He used his left weapon to attack with a horizontal slash; Mike blocked it with his own blade. Fully knowing that Adam would attack him with his other blade, Mike moved to the left in order to cancel his attack due to reach. Adam's next attack was to shift and spin around to his right with his right blade to attack him. Mike once again blocked the move but this time could not repeat the same shift himself to avoid the other attack so he moved forward in an attempt to tackle Adam. Adam easily moved out of the way but Mike never expected to hit him, he had just wanted to cancel the other attack once again.

Adam's attacks continued for some time, "You are soft now, losing that enchantment did cripple you after all. Can you even attack me anymore?" Adam was as strong as Mike and he was also faster but he was not faster than Anna. Plus, it seems he had forgotten about something. Now, it was just

figuring out how to take advantage of that somehow. To answer his taunt Mike focused his fury as he would have before. While no glow appeared it did help focus his mind. He sped up and started attacking his target. Adam was pleased by this and increased his own speed and attacks.

This new level of aggression continued and with the many small cuts on Mike and the few on Adam it was a wonder if both even remembered if this was a duel or not. For every three attacks Adam gave, Mike could only retaliate with one. This was not a surprise to him, Adam always focused on full attacks and less on defense plus he was a real fan of the 'deaths by a thousand cuts' method. Mike could feel Adam's aggression plowing at him. He could tell Adam was fighting to kill with little regards for his own life. Adam was in his moment. Mike matched his aggression but not his self-sacrifice. Mike could not do that anymore, he would always return to her no matter what and he would do anything not to let her down. Instead of his own life he used that emotion to fuel him more.

The fight was near its end and Adam was now fully blinded by his need to win against his target. He had forgotten about the why and how. It was all about being able to destroy his target and removing everything else from his mind, this is how he had figured that he would keep his edge as a weapon. And then it occurred to him how he would finish this and destroy his target. He called up the power within him and sped up.

Mike's eyes went wide, this was the moment, now was the time to take that risk. He only saw Adam crouch for a second and then he had to guess where his attacks would come from. Mike assumed low for the first and then an attack to the head for the second. He planted his sword on the ground and then moved back, letting go of his

weapon. As he moved back, he heard a metal on metal sound meaning that the first attack had been blocked, now for the second. Mike did not see it until the move finished but when it did he saw the tip of Adam's second blade about an inch from his face, and he also saw a look of utter surprise on Adam's face. As quick as he could, Mike grabbed Adam's arm and pulled him forward as he rushed with his elbow to Adam's stomach. The blow connected and Adam exhaled and was off balance. Mike quickly let go of Adam's arm and reached for this throat and squeezed. Mike yelled at Adam, "*This is done.*" Calming down, Adam nodded, Mike had won.

After a while, Adam looked at Mike, "You got lucky. During the fight I forgot about the fact I had new blades, these are just a bit shorter than my normal ones. Had that not been the case you would have lost."

Mike nodded, "I can't disagree. Still, ignoring the fact that you cheated you still lost. So will you keep your word and listen?" Adam just waved at him to go on. Not too encouraged Mike proceeded anyway, "Answer me this, why do you push Rosamia away when she clearly wants to be with you?"

Adam's anger returned, "That was not a part of the deal, but I will answer. It's as I said I'm just a weapon for her and nothing more."

Mike sighed, "Look, you are right. I have no clue about your pain and your demons. But here is the thing, I think you keep thinking that all of us want you to forget that and start being someone else and that's where you're wrong. You seem to acknowledge the darkness in yourself and that's fine but at least be fair to yourself and also acknowledge the good as well. Yes, you are a weapon, your home is a battlefield and you are

probably most comfortable when you are fighting. That's who you are but that's not all you are. You are also a friend to all of us, more so to Iris who looks up to you so much and is still constantly trying to make you proud of her. And then Rosamia who... well I think I'll let her tell you that part, but understand my point. We don't want to you forget or change what you are. We just want you to realize that you are so much more than that."

Mike stood, "That's pretty much it." He was pleased that it had been said and he was also happy about the fact that Adam did seem to be thinking about it. He smiled at him and took his sword and waved it at Adam, "Right now unless you want to talk more, let's spar but this time let's just actually spar, okay?"

Adam took his two swords, gave him a small smile and then took Mike's invitation. After a few hours passed, both of them were exhausted and had crashed on benches that were a bit too small for them. Adam looked at Mike, "Look, I'll be next to you for your vow thing, as for the rest..."

Mike stopped him, "The rest can wait. It's fine. We will all be there when you figure it out."

Mike spent the next few days alone. While he did see everyone in passing, they were all extremely busy. Anna was with Iris who was magically creating the dresses. Rosamia was helping with the food and going over certain sections that Kilor had questions on. Alexandria was helping prepare the environment with decorations, flowers and also making sure there was plenty of seating in the middle of town where the event would take place. Seeing as there was nothing for him to do he figured that he would take it easy, the fighting with Adam had left him very sore.

The time finally came, Mike was standing in front of the makeshift altar that Alexandria had created. Adam was next to him as he had promised and Kilor was positioned to play the role of the priest who would perform the ceremony. He could also see Alexandria and Iris in their front row seat. They both looked tired but also very happy. The place was packed with dwarves, so much so that a lot were just standing or looking at them from the windows from the tall towers that were their homes. Soon after the music started, Rosamia made her entrance. She was beautiful. She had tied her blonde hair in a low-neck bun and was wearing a nice long strapless satin dress in a light blue color. Adam just stared having no clue how to react to what he was seeing in front of him.

Rosamia got to her position and smiled, "I really hope you are ready for this." Mike then quickly realized what she meant as Anna showed up slowly walking down the aisle. Her long brown hair had been kept loose, she had a big smile on her face and her green eyes sparkled with so much life in them. She was wearing a strapless white laced mermaid wedding dress that started to flair out right above the knees. The waist was accentuated with a small corset closure. Those details were told to him after the event. Even after being told mind you, all that he would remember were two things. The first was that Iris had done an excellent job and the second and most important was that he was looking at the most beautiful woman he had ever seen in all his life.

As she got into position, Kilor started the proceedings. Mike probably should have paid more attention to what was being said but he could not help it. She was so beautiful he did not want to look at or listen to anyone else. He only returned to the current moment when they reached out to one



and the other and held hands as they were about to say their vows.

"You make me be better and guide me to places and experiences that I would have never dreamed about by myself. I want to keep spending all the time I have with you, I want to keep returning to you and only you. I love you Anna, please allow me the honor of being by your side not only in this lifetime but for now and forever."

"We have been through a lot together and I could not have asked for a better partner to share all those experiences with. You help me be a better person as well and together we are able to reach our dreams. I love you and want to be with you now and forever as well."

They then exchanged rings and Kilor finished with the classic line that Rosamia had told him. Mike reached out to Anna and kissed her passionately.

Shortly after, the banquets started. Everywhere you looked there was food, music, people dancing, talking and laughing. Rosamia looked around and saw that everyone was in high spirits. As she approached Adam, who had separated himself from the main location for a bit, she realized that she should have thought that *nearly* everyone was in high spirits. "I'm happy you came. Anna said you would but I had my doubts after that comment she made a few days back."

He turned and looked at her in her nice light blue dress and smiled, "I lost by an inch so here I am." Rosamia forcefully chuckled, "Good lord, I thought she was joking when she mentioned the fight."

This puzzled Adam, "How much did you hear about that fight?"

Rosa shrugged, "That you and he had a duel and he won. She told me it got heated but that's

about it." She paused for a second, "What did you do?"

Adam thought about it, "Nothing that matters and nothing to be concerned about I guess."

Rosamia turned and looked at the group of happy people, "Does this bother you so much? Is what you have now truly all you want for your future?" She turned to face him, "Because if it is, we may need to talk."

Adam took a deep breath and collected his thoughts. Even he could tell that missing his shot here would probably not end well for both of them and whatever they had. "A few days ago I would have answered yes to both, but now..." He paused for a little while, "I'm not sure anymore. Someone forced me to see that I'm only seeing a part of myself. I think I see what you and he have been trying to tell me, but I'm still trying to sort it all out and see what that means to me. Once I do then I think I'll be able to answer your question." He sighed, "I'm sorry but that's all I have."

Rosamia reached out and kissed him on the cheek and then stood back, "For now that's okay. As long as you try to move forward then it takes the time it takes. It's stopping and simply accepting, that is unacceptable and just unhealthy for you and also for me."

Adam nodded, "I'm slowly realizing that."

They stayed like this a bit longer and then Rosa convinced him to rejoin the festivities with everyone else.

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The next day Iris woke up and got ready. She saw that Rosa and Adam were sharing breakfast together, Anna and Mike were indisposed but Alexandria was nowhere to be found. When she asked the two, they mentioned she was already

gone by the time they woke up. Iris let a low sigh escape; it had officially started. She packed a quick lunch and headed off to the library. When she got there the dwarves told her that Alex had been here but had gone to the main library. It seems she was looking for something specific but had not found it in the current one. So Iris made her way to the main library. The place was guarded but they let her in as it was agreed they would have access. As soon as she took her first steps in the place, her eyes went wide and she stopped.

The main library was immense. Everywhere you looked books could be found, also it looked like there was no end to it. She wondered how anyone could find anything in such a place. As she started walking around, she noticed that the books did in fact have an order. It seems that each book was sorted first by category: history, geography, races, magic, and so on. As you walked in one of those categories it then was divided again: attack spell, defence spells, etc. By using a locator spell Iris eventually found Alexandria in the enchantment section. She was on the floor with a stack of books by her side. She had one in her hand that was open at a particular page. What was odd was that she was not reading it. Alexandria was simply staring at nothing in front of her.

Iris rushed to her side, "What's wrong, what happened?" Alexandria simply handed her the book.

Iris started to read it. She quickly realized that the book in question had the information for the dragon killer enchantment that Mike and Anna used to have. Iris chuckled a bit, it would make sense that the information would be in this place and after Adam's comment it was not too surprising to have Alex go hunt it down in order to have it reapplied. "I don't get it. This is good

news..." As she said it she continued reading and then she saw it too. "Oh, now I get it." She paused for a second, "Wait, I used it too so in a way I'm also affected by this, right?"

Alex nodded, "I didn't know, there was no way for me to know. When they survived the first time, I assumed they had figured out a way around the problem. In a way I guess they did but not really." She looked at Iris, "Every time the blade turned white – partial or full – their life force gets cut just like the Valkyrie spell. The only difference is that partial means you live on and full means instant death. Plus, I have no way of knowing how much they lost." She paused for a second, "How much you lost as well."

Iris thought about it for a little while and then slowly shook her head, "I don't know about them but in my case, that life force was used in order to kill the one that ordered the death of my parents and the torture that I suffered. I can't say that I have any regrets and know that even if I had known I would have done it. It would be nice to know how much was lost – was it a few months or years – but I would still do it."

Alexandria gave her a weak smile, "Hmm, I guess. I'll wait a few days before I tell them, today is not really the time." She looked around and then turned back to Iris, "I know that you don't like spending lots of times in these places, heck even I'll admit that this place is a bit much for me, but can I ask for your help? There are certain things I want to research, and it will go much faster if we are two." She paused for a second, "I don't want to do another mistake like this because I did not know the full details."

Iris smiled, "Of course, that's not a problem at all."

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A few days passed. Alex and Iris had been able to get some alone time with Anna. They were currently getting a quick bite to eat. As Alexandria explained the situation and spell effects, Anna had a very serious look on her face. Alex didn't really know what to say, "I'm so sorry, I did not know."

Anna gave her a small smile, "It's all right, and there is no way that we would blame you anyway. We both agreed at the time to apply the enchantment and that means living with the consequences."

Having said that Anna wondered about something, "Why not tell us at the same time, why did you want to talk to me specifically?"

Alexandria looked at Iris and then Iris attempted to answer the question. "After talking about it, we were not sure how to proceed and wanted to talk to you about it first."

Anna was catching on, "Ah, so the question is, should you tell him about the fact that you found the ability to recast the enchantment, knowing what it does." They both slowly nodded.

Anna let out a low sigh, "Just to make sure I'm clear. This effect only happens when it goes white. When we go light green or pink, no issues, correct?"

Alex nodded, "Yes, essentially at that level it drains your stamina. At most you would eventually pass out from exhaustion."

Anna thought about it for a while longer, "Then it's simple he would want them to be reapplied anyways."

Iris cut her off, "And that's why we wanted to talk to you first. I mean we don't have to tell him about the fact that we can do it."

Then Anna cut her off with a small laugh, "There are certain things you never tell your

significant other and there are things that you must, this is one that I must."

Alexandria looked at Anna, "But why? Knowing the risks and also the fact that you don't need it... why?"

She gave her half smile and then explained, "You don't know that we will not need it and if you are right then there is no issue but if you are wrong then what? The war would have continued, the orcs would have been dead and a dragon would be ordering giants to attack the humans. Or, assuming that would have resolved itself, in order to unlock his master, most of the population would be at the mercy of the dark lord's whims." Anna took a small pause and continued, "I'm not interested in rushing to my death especially with all that I have to lose but while we did lose some of our lifespan it's better than having lost all of it which is what would have happened."

Alex looked at Iris, "I guess I get it. Iris pretty much told me the same thing in a way."

Anna smiled at Iris, "Makes sense." She then looked at Alexandria, "I'll talk to him about it, but get ready and let us know when you can because we will probably be asking you to reapply them just in case."

A bit shocked by her comment Alexandria nodded in approval. In the end she had wanted to help her close friends but now she was wondering if that had been the right thing to do.

## Chapter 4

A few weeks passed and Rosamia and Adam were enjoying a morning breakfast together in a common room that all members shared. Rosamia looked around, "So I guess it's just us again this morning?"

Adam nodded, "Seems like it, the others are already at it I guess."

Rosamia let a small sigh escape, "I know this will sound silly but I feel wrong about this a bit." Seeing as Adam was unsure what she was talking about she continued. "It's just that this is my mission in theory and yet it seems they are working harder at it than me. Again it's silly to think of it this way, but I feel I should be doing more."

Adam shrugged, "Meh, I wouldn't worry too much about it. It's not like we're doing nothing. Look at me, today I'm heading to see Mike and Anna and fill in the blanks that Helram has on the Crusaders. It seems they are going over all major powers and people who have had a large influence on our history. How they got there and also how they lost it. I'm sure that you have had to do the same with the priesthood."

Rosamia smiled, "Yes, I've done that as well. Still I was surprised that Helram, the leader of the warriors, was the person in charge of that information and not Kilor."

Adam slowly shook his head, "I was not so much surprised by that, I mean know your potential enemy and all that. The dwarves are very cautious and it would make sense for him to know who our major powers are and what they are up to

if you think about it from a tactical side of things."

Rosamia thought about it for a little while, "I suppose. It's sad to think of it that way but I guess you're right."

Adam wanted to change the conversation a bit seeing as he did not like where this one was going, "I take it you're visiting Alex and Iris today?"

Rosa smiled, "Yes, as you know I've been going over there for the last few days. Alex is currently looking at everything she can on what she calls 'life magic'. Essentially any magic that deals with taking of the caster's life force to accomplish something. Because of that we are looking at the Valkyrie spell and trying to figure out its details. I'm not really sure why she is focused on those types of spells mind you. While I was curious I got the feeling that they both did not really want to talk about it, which made it hard for me to ask."

She took a sip of coffee and continued, "It was especially harder after I made the request while she was at it." Adam looked at her with a questioning look, Rosamia gave him a small smile and explained. "I asked them if they could look into the cleansing spell with me. A thought occurred to me, you know how the dark clerics channel too much energy and then eventually that becomes too much for them? Well why is that not happening to me as well? I mean I am channeling the same energy as they are and yet I'm not affected."

Adam thought about it for a second, "That's a good point; I guess I would assume that using that spell it's different somehow."

Rosamia nodded, "That's what we are all thinking actually, but we would like to know why as well. And that part got Alexandria really interested, I'm thinking that if we figure it out that maybe she thinks she can apply that somehow to power other spells that require a lot of energy." Her



optimism then vanished, "Unfortunately, we are seeing that the dwarves have limited knowledge of holy spells, which is understandable seeing as they are not able to use that type of magic. Plus, while Alex has a lot more knowledge than she should it's still limited and Iris mostly has what we told her, so all in all it's a pretty hard task."

Rosa looked at Adam, "Oh I'm sure you know but while she was doing her research it seems that she found the enchantment spell again, also Mike and Anna had it reapplied to their new blades. I'm stunned that you did not ask for it as well, considering the first time you saw its power."

Adam nodded, "I thought about it when I heard, but then I also thought about how they were when they lost it. That part appealed to me less. I would rather use magic I control than magic that was applied for me. Also, you are teaching me more about my own power, which is helping my overall combat strength." He took a few minutes to recall when he was told the news, "At the same time when Iris told me about it I could tell she was glad that I had not asked to have it applied. I'm not really sure what that was about and I did not have time to ask her at the time."

Rosamia wondered about that comment, "I guess these are things we will have to ask about later when there is more time." She looked at the time, "Hmm, I should get going. I mentioned I would meet up with them soon."

Adam nodded, "Same here, I guess this is goodbye for now. See you tonight?"

Rosamia nodded as she was already getting ready to go.

She did not have any issue finding both of them in the old library. During their time here, Kilor had explained that each section had one place where you could find a large table and

chairs. Once found, Alex and Iris had pretty much moved in to this little section. Currently the table was filled with books, including some on the free chairs. Alex and Iris were debating about something when Rosamia showed up, "Did you leave this place yesterday?"

Iris nodded, "No, no we did not. As we were about to leave Alex stumbled on a certain spell that was used against the avatar last time and, well, it took on a life of its own." She turned to Alex with a questioning look, "We did have a nap at one point, right?" By the looks of it Alex could not recall if they had taken a break.

Rosamia sat on one of the free chairs, "Now I'm sorry I asked about that spell." She looked at both of them, "You know, breaks are allowed."

Alexandria shrugged, "We know, it's just a lot to go over and we both don't want to waste this opportunity if possible." A thought popped into her head, "By the way, we think we have an answer for the cleansing spell, essentially that's just how it works."

Rosa was puzzled by this, "I don't get it, how can that be?"

Iris turned to Rosa, "I know it feels like that answer is just something we are telling you but there is a reason for it. When you asked us about it, you went on the principle that because the dark cleric overloaded on too much energy that you should too." She quickly turned to Alex and then back to Rosa, "After much research we realized that the question was wrong in the first place."

Alex continued, "The dark energy is based on the world magic, essentially the dark lord created a way for 'people' to use world magic more easily. Light magic is essentially tapping in to that same conduit if you will that was created for the dark energy. That's why you were right in saying that

any spell they cast so can you. Now for the clerics, when they turn into this large shadow form, we assumed they burned out because they used too much power and their bodies could not handle that well. That was true but at the same time it was wrong."

Iris jumped in to continue the explanation, "The spell they use to turn is a life channeling spell it seems. From what we understand, they turn and it takes from their lives and then it stops. They channel more energy to heal or attack and it takes even more from their lives. Eventually they come to take more energy and they can't and that's when you have the result you have. We are assuming that in the past, during the dragon wars, the dragons found a way around that by something called a 'link spell' of sorts. That part is fuzzy because it seems it can only be done with something that is eternal in life, meaning dragons or dwarves only. Plus it's a one for one, so when the time came around again there was no real way that this one dragon could perform this link... or so we were told."

Rosamia nodded, "Okay, that's interesting but how does that link to the cleansing spell?" Alexandria nodded, "So keeping in mind how that spell works, when you do a cleansing spell or we should probably call it an energy transfer spell, you are in fact stealing the energy that was paid for by the cleric. Remember it's not the energy that destroys them but the fact that they can't pay for more. So when you ask, why does it not overload me when I use the same amount, we have to answer it does not because you don't have to pay for it because it was already paid for by someone else. Once paid, life energy is turned to magic energy that can be used to fuel any spell, and then you transfer or steal that energy and use it without

using your own."

Rosa thought about it for a while, "I think I get it, so in theory the same thing can't happen no matter how much energy I take. What was dangerous before was that if you did not use all that stolen energy the dark lord could reach you and slowly corrupt you from the inside."

Alexandria had a big smile, "You got it. When Iris stole too much, for some reason she instinctively knew to get rid of it right away." She turned to Iris, "This was probably due to the fact that she was almost fully corrupted before we saved her, so in a way she probably subconsciously knew that keeping it inside would be a bad thing." She turned to Rosa, "As for you, it could be when you cleansed her. In a way you would have been the first priest in a long while to have close contact with that energy and maybe part of you realized it."

Rosamia was very impressed, "That makes a lot of sense, it's very situational but it does add up and answer a lot of questions." She smiled at both of them, "Thank you so much for taking the time to help me figure it out."

Alex shrugged, "Actually helping you helped us understand a whole lot more because we were using something we had experienced or seen. It also helped us ask questions to Kilor that we probably would not have because I would have focused my attention mostly on arcane or should I say world magic."

Iris chuckled at that one, "And with that, this brings us to today."

Rosamia looked at her again with a puzzled look, "What do you mean, what's today?"

Before she answered, Kilor showed up and started to answer the question, "The many questions eventually led me to talk about 'the

book'. Essentially this is the book given to us by the lord of light."

Rosamia was shocked, "Wait, you mean to say that you actually have a book that was written by the lord of light?"

Alexandria smiled, "I figured you'd be interested." The look on Rosamia's face clearly showed that interested was an understatement.

Kilor smiled and motioned for them to follow him. As he led them deeper in the library he explained the situation a bit more. "While the book was given to us by the lord, we don't know if he wrote it because the book itself is blank cover to cover."

Iris was curious about this, "So he gave you an empty book, is that not... odd?"

He nodded, "In this case not really. When he gave us the book he told us that one day the content would be made clear to us, that day had simply not come. Currently the book is locked away in the deepest section of this library, permission is also required to see it."

Rosamia looked at Kilor, "I take it that seeing as you are leading us there that we have permission?" He simply nodded.

Iris was more cautious than curious now, "Okay so let me wrap my head around this. You have a book that you can't read given by the lord of light. Once the right people show up then the content will be made available and we have been given permission to see this book." She looked at everyone else, "Am I the only one that thinks that this is just a bit... odd and maybe a bit too convenient?"

Alexandria shrugged, "Yes and no, I mean the book was given to the dwarves and basically they have been out of touch for many years now so it's not like there have been many chances to see if

there is someone that could unlock its mysteries. I mean it could be super simple for a non-dwarf or it also could be made for that one person." She looked back at Iris, "Personally I hope we can see its content. I'm not even a priestess and I'm curious as all heck."

After about twenty minutes of walking around the library, they finally made it to an old door at the edge of its walls. Kilor opened the door using a magical key and then made his way in. They all looked around; the room was about ten feet by ten feet. In the middle, the book was on a large pedestal. There was nothing else in the room. Alexandria looked at Kilor, "Can we just open it?" As he nodded in approval, she could tell that he too was nervous about this. She reached out and opened the book to its first page to discover that it was empty, she turned a few pages and it was the same for all of them. Discouraged she turned around, "Well that's disappointing..." She then realized that Iris had a worried look on her face and Rosa was simply silent. She had a big smile on her face, "What did you see?"

Iris looked at Kilor who had a very interested and focused look on his face. "I can't tell." She looked at the first page again, "I can see something is on the page but I can't read it, it's all blurry." She turned to him again, "But I can confirm that there is something on it, what is odd is that it seems to be the same something on each page." She then turned a few pages to explain better, "It's seems like whatever is written on each page is the same thing over and over."

Kilor pondered this for a moment not really sure what to make of it. Alex was still smiling, this was getting very interesting and also Rosa had still not said anything. She moved closer to her, "And do you see anything?" Rosamia released a heavy

sigh, "Iris is a bit wrong, from what I see there is only one word written over and over on the page and on every page." The dwarf looked at her a bit nervously, "... and that word is?"

Rosamia took in a big breath before answering his question. Something inside of her told her that as soon as she said it that things would get out of hand again, the implications of the word written were very major. She turned to Kilor, "The word is... Rebirth." As soon as the word escaped her mouth Kilor's and everyone else's eyes went wide as the book started to glow. After a few seconds, the book disappeared and in its place a glowing ball of golden light floated. The ball then moved and shot itself directly at Rosamia's chest and disappeared in her body. Before the others could ask anything they saw that her eyes now glowed golden, after a few seconds Rosamia spoke but it was not her voice.

"You have met the necessary requirements that have been placed on this book, this means that the time has once again come. Before the power of rebirth can be used, certain tests will need to be performed. During this time I will stay in this vessel and learn and evaluate until you reach the end or until you no longer meet the requirements to continue. The first location will be given to this vessel, assuming this form is truly needed once again I pray for your success."

The voice then stopped and Rosamia's eyes returned to their normal sky blue. Kilor was in tears, "It's been... so long since I have heard that voice..."

Iris wondered about his comment but let it go to check on Rosa as Alex was currently doing, "Are you okay? How do you feel?"

Rosamia took a few deep breaths and calmed herself down, "I'm okay, at least I think I am. I'm

just feeling a bit odd right now." She closed her eyes and put a hand over her chest, "I can still feel it inside of me, it's so warm and... powerful."

Kilor looked at her, "Is it still talking to you? Can you still hear the voice?"

Rosamia nodded, "I can't, but I know where he wants us to go."

Iris was cautiously curious, "And that would be where exactly?"

She smiled back, understanding her concern, "The desert it seems."

Kilor nodded and started to leave the room, "I'll get a map so you can point it out."

Alexandria looked at him leave, "He seems more shook up about all this than you, Rosa."

Iris jumped in, "I think it's because the voice we just heard was the voice of the lord of light."

Alex's eyes opened wide in shock, "Oh... okay, yeah I can see why now." She turned to Rosa, "Are you sure you're okay?"

Rosamia smiled, "I'm not possessed if that's what you mean or I don't feel like it. But it is a bit uncomfortable, I feel as if someone is watching me but inside my head so I can't ignore it. Once I show the location to Kilor I think we need to get everyone together and talk about this."

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About an hour later, the group was sitting in their common room. As Rosamia explained the situation, it was hard to ignore the constant worried looks coming from Adam but now was not the time to go over that. She continued her explanation, "Essentially it seems that we need to go to the desert again at a specific location. Kilor said he will make arrangements for a small portal to be opened for us to make it there and back. Our



time will be limited but something tells me that this first task will be quick but hard." She then looked at everyone to try and figure out their reactions.

Iris was the first to speak, "I realize that we can't ignore this, but am I the only one that feels uncomfortable with all this? I mean even if this does come from the lord of light... I don't know maybe it's just me."

Adam chuckled, "Oh no, It's not just you. I'm pretty sure we are all a bit unsure about all this."

Alexandria shrugged, "Well I mean sure, I can't even imagine what type of tests we will have to do in order to reach this goal. Plus from the sounds of it reaching the goal itself could have major implications given the current world situation." She turned to Rosa, "How do you feel about all this? I mean given that you are a priestess and all that what's your view on this?"

Rosamia laughed a bit at that question, "I have no clue. I have spent all my life believing that the lord was there with us guiding us, only to recently be told that this was not the case. And now I have to wonder, rebirth... what does it mean? Is this a way to bring him back to this world? Or something else that will allow us to bring back those who are gone from this world like the dark lord did recently but with no strings attached?" She slowly nodded, "I really don't know what to make of all this, the implications of both and the impact and responsibility that this carries is a lot to think about."

Not knowing what to say to help, Adam turned to Mike and Anna, "You two have been really quiet about all this, what are your thoughts?"

Mike shrugged, "I agree with Rosamia. We need to deal or follow this through assuming we can. I also agree with Iris, this whole situation

make me very nervous for some reason. Which I think is natural considering what little information was given." He looked at Anna, "That being said I still think we need to try and see where this leads us."

She nodded and then a thought occurred to her, "Going with the assumption that at the end of this the lord of light may be back, would that mean that the same thing could happen to the lord of darkness?" She realized that her question had just created a large silence.

Mike gave her a small smile and broke that silence. "Even more reasons to follow this and see where it leads. Rosamia, did Kilor mention when that portal would be ready for us?"

She nodded, "Yes, it should be ready tomorrow morning."

Alexandria jumped at that and looked at Iris, "We are already close to midday. Iris would you mind helping me close out a few things before we leave again?"

Iris stood up as well, "Sounds good. I think the best thing I can do right now is to not think about this and whatever you want me to do will help me do that."

Anna chuckled at that one but at the same time given the mood it was not a bad idea. She looked at the others, "Let's do the same if we can. We need to get supplies again and if possible see if there are better ways to deal with the desert this time around."

As they started to leave Adam looked at Rosa. Even if it was the lord of light he was still not pleased about the fact that Rosamia had been chosen. Chosen people rarely returned to their normal life after the fact and he realized that this is what he was more worried about. Rosa smiled at him to try to lessen his worried mood. She stood

and started to drag him out and follow the others who had already left. As she was in front of him there was no way for him or her to notice that once again her eyes had glowed golden for a few seconds.

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The next day Kilor came to inform and escort the Lights Templar to the location where the portal had been created. As he led them to a section near the training compound he explained the situation again, "The portal is already opened. It should put you about a half hour's distance from the location given. The portal will stay open for a maximum of two days or until you return, so please keep that in mind. Also it's small so as long as you don't use it multiple times there should be no harmful effects." The dwarf's mood then changed a bit, "I may not be in a position to ask but I would appreciate it if you could keep me up to date on this, considering the possible outcome."

Alexandria smiled, "That should not be a problem or something you need to worry about." She then reached out and gave him a few rolled up scrolls, "Also if you want to take your mind off things while we are gone, here are instructions to create an item that will allow us to keep in touch. I was going to do it myself but ran out of time." Kilor took the instructions and smiled.

As they got to the location they saw that Helram and a few of his men were guarding the open portal. Adar was also present. As the group made some last minute checks to make sure nothing was missing, Adar moved next to Kilor and faced the group. "I hope you have a successful mission."

Mike nodded, "Thanks. I hope so as well." He then checked to make sure that everyone was

ready, as they stepped in the portal he turned for some final words. "With any luck when we come back we will have more information we can share with you."

As they all disappeared in the portal, Kilor looked at Adar, "I find it hard to believe that all this will have nothing to do with us? How can it not?"

Adar smiled, "Here is what we know. Assuming they succeed in this it will cause a lot of future possibilities to merge, after a while something will happen that will undo that."

Kilor was puzzled, "That is very vague considering everything at hand."

Adar laughed, "It is but the reason why it's vague is because it affects us very little and because of that there is very little information found. We are free now and this stays the case for as long as the spell will take us." He paused for a second, "That being said there is a task that we will have to perform in the future. Miss Alexandria made copies of certain spells and took them with her." He saw Kilor's reaction and calmed him down before he continued, "Don't worry this was expected but still we will have to make sure that when the time comes that we recover those copies before they fall in other hands."

This still surprised Kilor, "But you are okay with her using them, I find that odd."

Adar seemed unconcerned, "The spells she took are above what she will be able to perform properly in the time that she has. We have already looked ahead to confirm." Kilor thought about that comment, he had warned the humans about the issues of using prophecies to dictate future actions. He wondered if they were not currently going against that warning themselves.

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As they stepped out on the other side of the portal the Lights Templar were once again in the desert, but this time they were a bit more prepared. Rosamia looked around and then pointed due south, "By the map and what I was shown in my head we should head that way." She turned and cast a protection spell on everyone. It was still early but the heat would climb quickly. "The spell should last longer than before given the current temperature, but still let's try and stay hydrated as much as we can." They started walking with the typical formation of Anna and Mike in the front, followed by Rosamia and Alexandria in the middle and with Adam and Iris in the rear.

Mike turned and looked back, "Alexandria did you have a chance to update the Council on what is happening?"

She gave him a playful grin, "I told you not to worry about that..."

Mike cut her off, "Sorry that's not the reason I asked. I was more wondering what Solanar or Lithius had to say about all this."

Alexandria's expression immediately turned back to normal, "Oh... ah, nothing much really, just to keep them up to date on anything new."

Anna cut in, "I guess everyone is on the same playing field on this one." She then looked at Mike, "One step at a time I guess."

After about half an hour walk Rosamia looked around, "Guys, we better stop. I think we're here."

Adam looked around. From what he saw they were just in the middle of the desert and there was nothing but sand dunes around. He turned to Rosamia, "Are you sure? How can you tell?" She did not have to answer. Her whole body was glowing with a golden glow. After a little while she stretched her hand outwards and a glowing golden

pulse originating from her body reached out and hit everyone and then continued to the distance. Adam had no clue what was going on but when the pulse had hit him it had felt like nothing had happened; still he took out his weapons and went into defensive position. As he looked around he noticed everyone else had done the same thing. He was about to ask Rosa if she was okay but never got the chance as she started speaking using that other voice.

"This will be a trial of strength and combat. To win you simply need to survive."

Rosamia's eyes went back to normal and she regained full control over her body. She took out her spear and got ready as well. Iris was glancing at her surroundings, "Are all of these going to be like this?"

Rosamia shrugged, "I don't know, this time no extra information was given to me."

This did not help Iris at all, "Any clues on where our target is?"

Mike pointed in front of him, "There it seems." In front of them a statue was growing from the ground. This statue look humanoid, a long sword was sculpted with ancient armor they had never seen before.

Alex looked at it closely, "A golem. Well that should be simple." As soon as she said it she regretted it. All around them more statues started to grow from the ground, and then even more behind the ones that had completely sprouted from head to toe. As they looked around they realized they were completely surrounded by these golems and that their numbers easily reached the hundreds.

A few seconds after all the golems had stopped growing out of the ground they all moved their arms holding their weapon and pointed at the

Lights Templar, they then started to advance.

Before Mike charged in he shouted simple orders to everyone, "Let's try and protect this circle, Alexandria try and clear as many as you can without draining yourself too much. Rosamia you are her shield everyone else fan out and protect your section as best you can."

He did not wait for them to acknowledge anything. He trusted everyone on the team to follow and if they did not then he knew they would have a good reason so he had no worries. Mike moved closer to his first target and powered his enchantment, the blade glowed pink as he slashed at his target's midsection. The sword, with the enchantment, sliced through with only mild resistance and then his target fell to the ground and collapsed in a pile of rubble. As he dodged a golem attack, he checked the body of his first target, it seemed as lifeless as a pile of stone.

*'Good, at least they don't come back like those reborns.'* He again dodged another golem's attack coming at him, but this time he used his momentum to slice at another target, and then continued with a vertical slash to cut away at another arm, finishing with a thrust targeting the head of another. Overall, they were easy to kill, but they had the numbers.

Anna powered her blade as well and then moved in. Her first target used a typical vertical slash to try and cleave her. Anna move away easily and sliced at her target's leg; unable to hold his balance it crumbled to the ground. She then ducked to avoid a horizontal slash of another and once again she slashed at this target's leg. As she rose from a crouching position, she slashed at the target in front of her. She then shifted her weight and spun around to cut the arm of another that was trying to cut her down. Back again in a normal

position she parried another blow by hacking off its hand. *'These things are incredibly slow – that's going to work in our favour.'*

There was only so much that regular blades, even the ones given by the dwarves, could do against stone. Adam sheathed his blades and used his enhancing abilities to add to both his speed and strength. His first target was coming at him using a horizontal slash. Adam moved closer to him and grabbed his arm and then, using his ogre level strength and momentum of the golem, threw the golem at the others, knocking a few out in one blow. *'Maybe I should have asked for the enchantment after all. Oh well, no point in thinking about that at this time.'*

Iris had also sheathed her blades. While she still had issues about casting both arcane and holy at the same time, she had no issues flip flopping from one to the other. She started with a holy speed boost to make her incredibly faster than her targets. As she got close to one she simply touched him for less than a second, soon after, the touched target fell to pieces. She was using the same spell that Alex had used to clear the derby back in Cagan. The only difference is that she was not finishing the spell properly and so the stone that she touched simply crumbled into pieces. But this allowed her to cast it in a very quick manner. She kept moving around the battlefield, touching her opponents and seeing them crumble a few seconds later all the while focusing almost all attention on simply avoiding their slow attacks. *'It's a good thing that these things are cheaply built otherwise I would not be able to do this so easily.'*

Rosamia charged up a holy lance attack spell and aimed at the first golem that was moving closer to them. As her spear tip connected the spell released and the force of it destroyed the golem



and sent its pieces flying backwards at other golems, which also got destroyed from the debris. While she powered the spell again she also threw some holy energy bolts at one that was coming close to Alex. Normally these bolts would not be enough but if focused at a weak spot like the knee, it was enough to topple the moving golem and make it crumble under its own weight.

With another holy lance ready she targeted another group. During this time Alexandria was powering a spell of her own. When it was ready, she moved forward and gave time to Rosamia to get behind her. With only golems in front of her, she stretched her arms and hands in front of her. Not even a second later lightning jumped from her hands to two targets in front of her, and then for each the lightning jumped again to another two behind them and then again. Rosamia looked ahead, the spell had destroyed about fourteen golems and damaged many others around them. Alex's spell being cast and Rosa's spear being ready again, they flipped positions and repeated the process. As Rosamia looked at Alex and cast another chain lightning spell she thought about how a long time ago she had called her a 'magical princess', Rosa gave her a small smile as the name still fit perfectly. Rosa then realized something odd, "Alex, look at the sky – it seems to be darkening. Are you doing that?"

Alexandria had no clue what Rosa was talking about. She looked up and her eyes went wide. That was no natural event; a large spell was being prepared. She canceled her current spell, not having much choice but to waste the energy, and moved more in the middle while shouting at everyone. "Get around me *now!*" She then created the strongest shield she knew that would not drain her right away and got ready. As everyone

disengaged Mike wondered what was going on. Before he had the chance to ask Alexandria about it a white flash blinded him for a second. A large lightning bolt dropped from the sky and landed right in the middle of Alex's shield. The blow of it was strong enough to cause a force feedback back to her that made her drop to her knees. Adam looked up, "Is there going to be another one of those?" Alexandria looked up as well as she stood, after a second she cast the spell once again giving Adam his answer.

As the second bolt crashed again on top of them and Alex was once again on the ground Mike shook his head in disbelief. Alexandria was by far the strongest caster he knew so for her to be knocked around like this required a certain power level that very few could match. "Iris, back her up. Everyone else there are only half of them – form a circle and protect the middle."

Iris moved to the middle and cast the shield instead of Alex to give some time as she had already covered them twice. Alex looked up, "Don't hold back – put as much into it as you can."

Iris nodded and put more power into it, "Can it be as bad as holding back a dragon's breath attack?" Before Alex could answer the bolt came down, and while Iris's shield did hold it immediately shattered right after the hit and sent her on her knees as well. As Alex took over for the next attack, Iris shook her head trying to recover. "What the heck is powering that spell? It's the strongest thing I've ever felt."

Alexandria slowly nodded, "I don't know but whatever it is it's stronger than anything anyone in the Council can cast."

Rosamia had the least issues holding back the still attacking army of golem. With her holy spear throwback effect she was able to destroy a few at

once, giving her time as the rest moved closer. Adam, still using strength and speed augmentation spells, was also able to hold them back fairly easy. This did not hold as true for Mike and Anna. Blasting their target could help but they would have to put a lot of energy into it and with the new information on the enchantments there was a bit of hesitation to go at those levels even if they should be safe. Instead, Mike opted to use physical strength. As he slashed one of his targets and it lost its balance he pushed himself into it causing it to topple on others close by. In the case of Anna she used her speed and timing. The lightning spell was dropping consistently at a certain interval. When it was safe she charged and slashed at as many limbs as she could. When the time came she pulled back under the shield.

Overall, the golem situation was in hand but everyone questioned how to deal with the lightning. After about ten bolts, the golem stopped and the dark cloud parted. Alex looked at Rosa and tried to catch her breath, "So ... is it over?"

Rosamia nodded, "I don't know, if I have to guess I would say no."

Iris was kneeling on the ground trying to get some of her stamina back as well, "Fantastic..." she then realized that her boots were covered in sand as high as her ankle. She raised her head and felt a strong wind in her face accompanied by a lot of sand. As the rest of the group huddled together she had to start shouting as the wind and sand was getting worse. "Is this one of those storms that the dwarves warned us about?"

Rosamia shook her head, "I'm not sure but I'll create a physical shield to block the wind. If I don't, pretty soon it will be strong enough to blow us away." Before she could start the spell Alexandria stopped her, "Just give me a second

before you do that." Alex knew she didn't have much time but she did not need much for this spell. She put both hands on the ground and then finished the spell. As she did, a large amount of sand was flung upwards and all members of the group suddenly fell in a hole that had been created from under them. As Rosa recovered from the sudden fall she understood Alex's plan and covered the top with her protection spell. This would have her only hold back the sand and its weight and not the winds as well.

As Rosa held the shield everyone else took the time they could to catch their breath. Currently they were all kneeling in a hole that was about four feet deep with an unnatural sand storm happening above them. Adam looked at everyone, "Fun test, I hope we don't have tons of those."

Alex gave a low chuckle, "I just hope we survive this one."

Anna smiled at her, "We will, we're not done yet."

Rosamia suddenly cut her off, "Get ready, the sand is piling up more meaning that the winds are probably dying down. I'll modify the shield's form so we don't get buried by it, but watch the side as that's probably where it will all go." The group slowly stood upright as Rosa modified her shield and moved so as to not get trapped in the sand that was now filling the hole. They realized the storm had stopped and the weather was back to normal.

It did not take long for all of them to realize their new situation. Somehow golem had once again reappeared all around them. Now there were more than two hundred of them and they started right at the edge of the hole leaving no room at all for any of them to move. Alex shouted another plan, "Rosa, Iris – strongest shield you can create –

don't spare anything. Everyone else huddle around each other."

Everyone did as told but as Iris and Rosa powered a shield, the sky once again darkened but this time with a reddish hue. Adam looked up, "Is there going to be another bolt?"

Anna shook her head, "I don't think so, but for some reason that cloud pattern is familiar."

Iris looked up, and then looked at Alex. "A meteor spell, seriously?"

Alex could not respond because it would interrupt her casting but she did smile. Mike had a concerned look, "Ah I'm sure that she will make sure not to make the spell stronger than the shield, right? Last time that spell packed a very large punch."

Iris shook her head, "She has to. I mean there is no way she has that much energy left." As Iris finished and looked up again she simply shook her head. Last time a very large stone had been conjured, this time it seemed that Alex was going for a much smaller rock but instead of one it would be four. Where power could not be used numbers would be.

The golems continued to attack the physical shield that had been created. It would take them a long time to be able to break through. This was something they did not know so they simply continued to attack because those were the instructions they had been given. So they ignored the four flaming rocks that were coming down on them. Alex had aimed them so that one would land on the four sides of the rectangular hole she had created earlier. As they landed four large explosions occurred all around the group. The only two that could somewhat feel its effects were Rosa and Iris as the blast drastically and very quickly reduced the shield's available power.

Once the dust settled they canceled what was left of the shield, which was almost nothing, and looked around. Alex smiled at her handiwork, "Not bad at all."

Mike had to agree. Because of her plan less than a hundred golems were still in one piece but most of them were heavily damaged. In one spell she had dropped the enemy's strength by a considerable amount. Mike powered his blade, "All right, let's finish this." Everyone got into their old positions and continued the same attack pattern as the last time. The only difference is that this time it was Alex backing up Rosamia, as her only means of attack left was using the same trick that Iris was using by touching them and dismantling their form.

Alex touched what seemed like the last golem, as it fell on the ground she looked at everyone. "I'll ask again, now are we done?" Rosamia was about to shrug as she suddenly lost control of her body. Instantly her eyes turned golden and the other voice could be heard.

"Congratulations! You have passed the test. When it can be found, a new location will be given to this vessel."

Adam shouted at the sky as Rosamia regained control of her body. "Oh come on, you have to be kidding me. That's it, no explanation no nothing? How long will this go on? *Say something!*" Everyone waited but nothing happened. Mike gave everyone a weak smile, understanding Adam's frustration. It really was not the test that he hated or the hoops but the fact that Rosamia's body was being used as it was. Thing is, that was a frustration they all shared.

Anna gave Adam a look that told him he should shut up, "Let head back for now. Currently the only one really suffering because of this game

is Rosa so the least we can do it is not complain about it." Rosamia simply smiled at that comment, there was no way she was going to tell him what was actually happening.

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They made it back to the Dwarven city. After having updated everyone on what had happened and also what little they had learned they took a break to eat and then went back to the tasks each was performing before any of this started.

During the night, Rosamia woke up violently from her slumber. Getting any sleep had been really hard in the last few nights but this time had been the worst so far. She went to the kitchen they all shared and figured she would get something to drink. As she did she realized she was not alone in the room. Visibility was low due to the only light source being from outside, but Rosa could still see Anna giving her a weak smile. Anna got closer to her and also grabbed a quick something to drink. "Issues sleeping?"

Rosa thought about it for a little while, "A bit, nothing to be concerned about."

Anna chuckled at that comment, "You know it's far too late for that and we are all concerned."

Rosa took a sip and then shook her head, "Is that why you were keeping an eye on me?"

Anna shrugged, "I would be lying if I said no, but this is mostly between me and Mike. We are just worried about you and if there is anything we can do to help we are there for you, and we do mean anything."

Rosa took a deep breath and smiled at Anna. "Sadly there is nothing that you can do. This, I'm not sure what it is, is always with me and I can always feel it. At night, and please don't tell this to

anyone, it takes the time to review everything that has happened to me and everything that I have seen and experienced. While that is happening, I'm stuck, forced to see it all as well but on top of that I'm also forced to relive the same feelings I felt at the time." She took a moment and continued, "Having gone through the news of losing my parents to the war, was one thing. Going over the massacre that occurred in the town from the dark cleric was another."

Anna reached out to Rosa and hugged her as hard as she could. "You're right there is nothing we can do for that but we can promise you we will do everything we can to finish this as fast as we can." She let her go, "Also I promise that I will not tell anyone about this, including Mike. But please if this gets worse or something new happens..."

She did not have to finish as Rosamia nodded in approval. "I will, at least the next little while should be fine if I remember correctly." She stopped as a familiar feeling of loss of control was happening again. Anna looked at Rosa's now golden glowing eyes with a serious look on her own face, "So where to?"

The glow disappeared and Rosamia closed her eyes to see the picture in her head that was now forcibly being displayed. "It seems we need to head to a small kingdom in our land." She opened her eyes as the picture disappeared, "The one near the main farmlands it seems."

Anna was puzzled, "Weird. Why go there? Hmm, well I guess we'll find out soon enough."

Anna had a concerned look on her face, "I know this is a stupid question to ask but are you going to be okay? I can stay with you if you want."

Rosamia nodded, "It's all right, for now I'll be fine. I'll try and head back to bed and see if I can rest up a bit more." A thought popped into her



head, "When we're traveling and the time comes where we need to rest can you keep an eye on me? There will be more moments that will cause me issues and I don't want to the others to see."

Anna nodded, "I'll figure out something. Don't worry about it."

Satisfied, Rosamia left to go back in her room. Anna finished her drink and went back herself to try and figure out a plan.

## *Chapter 5*

The next morning the news about the new location had been updated to all parties. Due to the dwarves and elves involved, the Lights Templar group had decided to meet with everyone at the mini coliseum to figure out the next move. This time things were very different as only Adar, Kilor and Helram were present from the dwarf side and there were no spectators. From the elven side Lithius was present using the pendant communication device created for Alexandria to report for her Council duties.

After some introductions, for Lithius's sake, Adar pulled out a map. "Now considering where you will be going, we can move you like we did before but you will not be able to come back for some time once you leave this time."

Iris wondered about that, "Is that because all the markers are all gone now?"

He smiled at her, "You are correct, we can open portals but there is a limited distance to them. The spell that we will use to send you away has a much greater distance but is only one way. Also, we have spent years fortifying this place so that no teleportation magic from the outside can reach here. The only way around that is by using the markers, so for you to come back a new marker would need to be created and those take time." He looked over at Alexandria, "I just figured I would let you know before you continue on this journey."

She nodded, "I understand, but this time it's not the same. This time I can still communicate with Kilor using the new pendant and he can do

the same. I'll admit that it would be fun to have a way if it was needed but after seeing the library I understand even more why those precautions need to stay active."

Adar smiled at her, "I'm glad you understand, as for your journey..." He pointed at the map, "the closest we can bring you is here. If you wish, we could make the preparations and send you off in a few hours."

Mike looked at the location, "Hmm, looks like it will take us about half a day to reach the city from there. Given the time, we will probably have to camp on the way seeing as the gates there will probably be closed by the time we arrive." He looked around, "Is that okay with everyone else?"

Anna shook her head, "I think we should wait a bit and start this journey tomorrow morning if that is okay. This way, when we get there after the half day's walk it should be midday, which will be a great time to enter the city more inconspicuously."

Adam stepped in, "I disagree. The longer we wait the more Rosa has to stay as she is. Would it not be better to move as quickly as we can?"

Rosa looked at Adam but before she could say a word Anna responded to his question, "True but that last test took a lot of power and there is no guarantee this second one will not be the same or worse." She turned to Alex and Iris, "Can you confirm that you two are back at a hundred percent after only one night's rest?"

They both looked around trying to avoid Adam's gaze, Alex answered, "Well I can't say that an extra night would not hurt." Adam looked at Mike as if he wanted him to give the marching orders anyway.

Mike nodded, "I personally have no objections to this assuming Adar is also okay with it." Adam

looked defeated and frustrated. Mike shrugged, "Look, I get it, but at the same time Anna's plan makes sense, why go half strength if we can avoid it? Also, the way I see it the only person that should be allowed to veto this decision is Rosamia." He turned to her as she nodded, "I'm great with tomorrow, and Alex and Iris are not the only ones that would need more time." She grabbed Adam's hand to reassure him; this calmed him down. She then smiled at Anna as a silent thank you, as she had figured out the real reason why she had suggested the change in plans.

Adar had no objections. This way worked better as they would not have to rush anything for the preparations for the casting. Before the meeting was finished Lithius turned to Alex, "Seeing as you will be coming back here is there anything you would like me to help you prepare for?"

She thought about it for a while, "I can't really think of anything, there is still so much we don't know about what is currently going on. Still, just in case, can you update Bernard from Calculus? If we need help with anything he will be the closest to us."

He nodded in approval and turned to the dwarves, "It has been an honour to meet with you. Thank you for approving this."

Helram chuckled, "No worries elf, it has been a while for us as well and who knows, because of these humans maybe next time we can actually meet in the flesh."

Lithius smiled, "I can only hope," and with that he terminated his transmission.

Alexandria took back the pendant and placed it around her neck. As the meeting was over and the three dwarves started to leave, Iris looked at her friends. "What now? Should we research this

city that we are heading to?"

Mike shook his head, "No need, the city in question is called Capiro." He then turned to Anna for a moment and continued, "It's a place we both visited a long time ago when it was just the two of us. We'll fill you in on the details on the way. It will give us something to talk about during the long walk plus it will give everyone more time to relax before the journey."

Alexandria took Iris's arm and smiled, "You know what that means." Iris let herself be dragged away and mumbled to herself, "Books and more books and even more books..."

Adam looked at Rosa, then turned and followed Alex and Iris, "I'll go with them to make sure they don't go overboard." He turned to Anna, "They will need their rest after all." She just smiled his comment away and let it go.

The next morning all the preparations had been made. Just like the last time a few dwarves were around a rune circle that had been created on the ground. After some quick goodbyes, the Lights Templar took their position and the casting began. When they reappeared on their side around the location that had been mentioned they all took a moment to recover from the effects of the spell before starting on their journey.

After about an hour's walk Adam figured that now would be a good time as any, "So about this city that we're going to, what should we know about it?"

Anna chuckled, "You should all be very careful, especially to the people you talk to and what you talk to them about."

Alexandria was confused by her statement, "Wait, what? I thought that Capiro was just the governing body over the farmlands of Ager. Why the ominous warning?"

Anna slowly nodded, "Yes, you're right – that is their main function, if you want to call it that." She paused and looked at Mike before continuing, "I think that because they represent the main body that pretty much controls the main food supply over most cities it gave them a lot of power. And because of that it seems it's gone to their heads."

Mike laughed at that, "Interesting way to look at it and a good way to summarize it."

She shrugged, "It's sad to say but that's how I see it."

He smiled and continued the explanation in more detail for the others. "The city is separated into three sections. The first one is the governing body. They are the ones that control everything from rules, laws, trade and also which section a new family would be assigned to. The second section is mostly the working body – the inns, shops, and other services. As for the last one..." He looked at Anna, "It's harsh but can I say that the last section is where the impoverished are sent?"

She took a moment to recall the environment from way back when, "That sounds about right really but that may be putting it nicely."

Iris chimed in, curious about what they had just mentioned, "What do you mean by impoverished? Also would not all cities have that issue? It can't go right all the time, plus sometimes you make a stupid mistake that costs you more than you thought. It's at that point that you should pick yourself up and try and resolve the problem."

Mike cut her off, "Yes, you're right but that's also where the problem lies. In Capio once you are assigned to a section that's pretty much where you stay, and not just for you but for your whole family. It has happened where you can change up from one section to the other but those cases are very rare."

Anna smirked at that, "How did we switch roles here where you are the one who is optimistic?" She then turned to the others, "Anyways, yes he's right but he should also mention that no matter how well you do you would never be upgraded to the governing body unless you were deemed not a threat to the current members. And the only way that would happen is if you essentially gave control to a current member."

Rosa thought about it, "If I understand correctly then things are pretty one-sided over there and there is not much room for second chances."

Mike nodded, "That's the issue really. Those in power stay in power and make sure, by any means, that things stay that way. I think it's the main reason why the city does not have a big population. If you're in the first or second sections then you are okay, it's if you drop below that it then becomes a nightmare."

Adam was curious, "You mentioned that both of you stopped there for a while. I was wondering what you did there. By the sounds of it I don't see where you would fit in."

Mike chuckled, "Yeah, when we showed up and mentioned that we would stay for an extended period we were categorized under the 'other services'. Power struggles between the main bodies is a twenty-four hour thing over there. Essentially, we helped with services that the normal guard could not."

Adam laughed, "Oh that's rich! Both of you were essentially hit men then?"

Anna looked at Adam, "I would love to disagree but in the end that's pretty much what we were. Because of the type of jobs we accepted we mostly worked for a particular person and that's where we

learned how the city really worked. Overall, I can't say that we did anything that we regretted but I think it's fair to say that it was not an overall fun period in our lives. At least maybe something good can come from it depending on what we need to do over there."

It was still a bit of a shock to Adam, but a happy one in a way because all this time he was a bit frustrated by these two. They always seemed to know what to do for some reason, like they were perfect and while he knew that was not the case it was nice to actually hear it. It was a confirmation that there was a time in their lives where they did not know everything and were simply trying to figure it out. He would never admit it but it gave him hope that maybe the same thing could happen to him as well.

A large part of the rest of the trip was spent asking various questions on their time there. Normally, it would be Alexandria who would bring the endless supply of questions, but this time it was Iris and Adam who took the lead. Most of the questions were random things that would probably have nothing to do with why they would be going there, like the type of jobs they did and how much time they spent there. Mike and Anna could have brushed some questions off but it was like she said, they had done nothing they were ashamed of. Also, they got the feeling there was another reason why they were asking and because of that they answered everything they could. As a bonus, this helped pass the time for the long way ahead.

As planned, by midday they finally got to their destination and what they saw at a distance surprised all of them. For a few seconds they stopped moving and took in what was in front of them: two transformed dark clerics were rampaging in the city. Then all of them started



running as quickly as they could. Mike looked at Rosamia, "Is this part of the test?"

She had an angry look on her face, "I don't know, but does it matter?"

He nodded, "No, not at all, but it does add a lot more questions."

The guards at the main entrance had been disposed of. Currently, two dark clerics were attacking near the entrance. It seems the Lights Templar had arrived at the start of the event. They all took a second to take in their environment before jumping in. By the looks of it the event was a massacre. Alex was reminded of the attack she had witnessed at the Crimson town a long time ago when all this started. There were a lot of bodies around and because of the poor housing conditions there was very little shelter that could be used against their shadow energy.

Adam scanned around, "Not that it will matter but where are all the guards for this place? All I see are commoners."

Mike nodded, "They will fortify the first and second section first, the entrance houses the last section and they see very little need to protect it especially against something like this."

He was about to give out a battle plan but Rosamia cut him off, "It does not matter, I will take the one on the left. Adam and Iris, stall the other on the right or kill it if you can. As for the rest, try and help the others." It was not how Mike would have split the group but there was little time to argue. Rosa, Adam and Iris went at their targets as Anna, Mike and Alex pulled back.

Alex was still looking around, "I'll create an environment where we can actually help. Lead everyone you can to those sections. I'll join you after."

They nodded in approval and split off, one

going to the left and the other to the right. Alex put her hands on the crumbled parts of houses that were everywhere. After casting her spell the materials reformed themselves and created two walls and a roof around her. This would create a mini shelter for everyone to take cover in. She created a few more around the same location. Now the next task would be to do the same on the other side. She then kneeled and put her hand on the ground, this next part would take a bit more concentration. As the spell was completed, large walls made of stone started to grow from the ground, while there were gaps between them the row of wall started from her location and went on until it reached the other side. They had to be thick enough to hold a blast if it was directed at them and also wide enough to cover a few people hiding behind them if need be. This row would allow them to move people from one side to the other while still being protected. Now the last step was to create some shelters on the other side and join Anna and Mike.

Finally, after all this time Adam was on the attack against these creatures, now he had a way to hurt them. He channeled his holy magic in his blades making them turn glowing white, and started slashing at his target. As soon as it connected, the large pool of black energy that was the cleric's transformed body took in the white energy and absorbed it. And, just like the fight with the dark lord the energy combined and corrupted the other, forcing the cleric to call up more to replace what was used up. Iris followed a similar pattern but with the added bonus of her arcane magic you could see her stepping back from time to time to avoid the cleric's attacks. While she moved away she took the time to channel some fireballs and throw them at her target before

charging back in with her blades. All in all for their parts they only needed to draw its attention. They had successfully accomplished that task but there was no way that Adam was just going to sit and wait on Rosa. He didn't know if he had enough power but he was going to try his best to take his target down.

The fight on their side was going as expected but the same could not be said for Rosamia. Currently she was walking very slowly towards her target, a calm rage could be seen as she blocked all the blasts with a shield she created. Obviously, she was also stealing as much of the cleric's energy as she could to drain him that much faster. She slowly nodded her head as she recalled what had happened to her village when she was very young and also the explanation that had recently been given by her friends. *'We did not even have to fight back all we had to do was wait until they burned out, that realization makes the sacrifices made all the more tragic.'* Now that she was close enough she powered her spear and charged in screaming.

Anna, Mike and Alex had regrouped and now faced a familiar problem. Mike looked around, "It seems all the people we could find are behind the shelters you created and should be fine for now. The only issue now are the ones buried by the debris. This is Cagan all over again." He turned to Alex, "Alexandria, can you flip with Iris and bring her back here?" Alex nodded in approval and as she left, they all turned to hear Rosamia's screams as she attacked her target. Alex was very worried because the last time she saw her best friend like this was a very long time ago and she was scared for her then too.

Anna looked at Mike, "Go help her snap out of it again."

Mike was confused, "I thought she had dealt

with this pain a while back. What am I missing?"

Anna nodded, "Let's leave it at something happened recently that reopened that old wound. Ideally, the same thing you did back then should work again." There were a few pieces missing in her explanation but Mike was the last person who would question her on it. She had given him enough to deal with the situation and that would be enough.

The switch had been made and Iris made it to Anna's position. As she arrived, Anna gave her a small smile, "Sorry to pull you out like that."

Iris smiled as well, "Nah, it's all right, I'm not doing that mistake again. I've learned from the last time. Here is where I'm most needed and where I'm most needed is where I can do the most good." She looked back to Rosamia and then turned back to Anna, "Still I'm also worried right now. I've never seen her like that."

Anna was unsure what to say, "I've promised not to say anything and at this time I would still like to keep that promise if that's okay."

Iris nodded, "I won't lie and say I'm okay with that answer, but again that's not a mistake I'm going to repeat." She paused for a second, "Still, please if there is anything..."

Anna cut her off, "No worries there, if it becomes too much then I'll ask."

Iris figured that it would do for now. "Okay, now to give myself a large headache with that tracking spell and help find those who need our help."

Getting close to her had proved easier than Mike would have guessed. Both of them were locked in combat. The cleric was raging mad because everything he did seemed to do nothing against his target. Rosamia seemed to now be ignoring everything around her while letting her

rage build up from a past wound where she could do very little but watch as those around her were killed. Anna was right – this was the same as the last time. Unfortunately, this time around the collateral damage that was caused by the fight was greater. All the houses around them were destroyed and he could see people who needed help. He had to snap her out of it quickly. As he got close enough for her to hear him he recalled what he had told her the last time. "I'm pretty sure that the spirits of those who sacrificed their lives to save you are crying right now seeing you like this again."

Rosamia turned and looked at Mike. Her eyes were full of rage; what was unexpected was the fact that they were also glowing golden. Mike thought that maybe this was not exactly like the last time after all. Rosamia forcefully closed her eyes, the cleric was still trying to blast her out of existence but her last shield was still holding and he was not the true enemy, this time she was her own enemy. Mike tried to take the pressure off Rosamia while she collected her thoughts by using his enchantment but it did nothing. The cleric was so focused on Rosa that he would not let her go until she was destroyed.

Rosamia lifted her head and looked at her target and screamed out some orders, "Mike, Adam go help out with the damage. Alex, get ready to help me finish this off." They were all confused, even Adam had to pause for a second. Mike looked at Rosamia and could see her eyes were back to normal. He nodded and did as he was told now that his task was complete.

While both Mike and Adam disengaged, one more willingly than the other, the cleric fighting Rosa was past furious. "*You dare*. You think it will be that easy to finish me off?" He focused all he

could once again on Rosamia. As the blast connected and the smoked cleared the ground around her had been heavily damaged but no damage had been made to her. She nodded her head slowly and whispered, "*Enough*, I've had enough of this."

She took a few more seconds and then said two more words, "Holy wrath." It's at that point that a pillar of what seemed like black liquid magma shot up and engulfed the cleric's large shadow form completely. Everyone paused, even the other cleric, as they all heard his screams coming from inside the spell's area of effect. Once the spell dissipated so too did the screams. The dark cleric was now the shape of a normal human but engulfed in a small smoky black shadow; his main body was now glowing white. Rosamia turned to Alex, "Please can you take him up before he uses up what little he has left of his life and explode."

Alexandria did as she was told but was shocked, "All this time you were using your own power to block him weren't you?"

Rosa let a small sigh escape, "And all the while I was stealing his power I was simply storing it, because of what you told me there was no fear of it overloading me like I thought before. I used it all on that last spell." She then turned to the other cleric who was currently rebuilding his energy and casting a shield around himself for protection.

As his comrade exploded in mid air the last remaining cleric looked at Rosa, "What are you doing to us? *What are you?*" Rosa approached him and as she did she started stealing his power; power paid for with his life essence. "It would have been much better if you both would have stayed hidden, at least then you would have continued to live. As for your other question, I'm not sure anymore, but I do know that I am the perfect

person to deal with all of you." Having not enough time to steal as much power as the other, her spell hurt him but did not incinerate him. Still with the combined efforts of her and Alexandria throwing every manner of fireball and lightning bolt at him and Adam and Iris's attacks earlier it took very little time.

As the clerics form started to show the similar white cracks that would soon mean his destruction, he did something unexpected, he canceled his spell and returned to normal human form. Rosamia looked at Alex with a questioning look. Alex shook her head. "It should change nothing but may buy him a bit more time." They both turned back to see the cleric now in a kneeling position coughing out a lot of blood.

"You think you know everything... Well I seriously doubt that." As soon as he finished Alexandria saw a jet of black energy coming out of his chest aimed at the both of them, there was no way that any of them would be able to cast a shield to protect them. Yet as the blast came so very close a golden shield appeared in front of them. Worried, Alexandria looked to Rosamia, "How... I mean did you?" Rosamia started to nod, she had no clue where the shield had come from as well.

They both turned their heads as they heard Iris scream at them, "I'm so glad I made it in time! When Mike and Adam joined us and explained what was happening I looked back and saw what he was about to do." Now that Iris knew that her shield had protected both of them she turned to the body of the cleric, "I guess they don't explode when something like this happens?"

Alex was also pleasantly surprised, "I guess that explosion is caused when they die and there is nothing left to hold their forms. In his case, he got rid of it before the time came. Still, to be able to

use the power even when he was not in the form is interesting to say the least."

The others joined with the rest of the group. Rosamia looked at all of them. It was easy to tell they were all worried, again. "I'm sorry everyone for worrying you but I'm fine now, I just got lost in all of it I guess. Also before you ask I have no clue if this was part of the test or not, I'm not being told anything at this time." She gave them a smile, "In any case there is something more important to do now and that's helping those who need it." She looked around her at all the hurt people and the damaged and destroyed houses. "There seems to be a lot of work to do."

As they started to get to it, approaching horses could be heard. They turned to see about fifteen cavalymen coming in their direction. Anna looked at Mike, "This is going to be a problem."

Mike nodded, "Yes, it will. How about you deal with the team and I'll deal with them? Keep in mind that I may have to do or say things the group may not like." As he moved ahead to meet the person who seemed in charge he could hear Anna's words, "Oh, I figured as much."

As Mike got closer the cavalymen stopped and one of them ordered his horse to move closer. "We are the city guard and will deal with the situation from here. Before we take over you will tell us who you are and what your business is in our city."

So many things popped into Mike's head that he wanted to say but none of them would help their current situation. "We are here to ask a favour of someone, his name is Eadgar Goodwin. As we came in we were attacked by those things and defended ourselves. May I ask who I am speaking to?"

The person in question was armored in a half plate as well, but from the way it looked it was



more there for decoration than usefulness. The same could be said for his weapon. The hilt of his sword was encrusted with tons of flashy jewels and had a shape that would probably hurt the wielder if he tried certain manoeuvres. As Mike was evaluating him, the person was trotting his horse around him probably to try to assert his power.

"I am the captain of the guards of the fair city of Capio. My name is Colten. Asking for something from Mr. Goodwin will be costly I assure you, still that is his business and none of mine." He paused for a moment. Mike tried not to react, so far things were going okay. After looking around at Mike's teammates Colten continued, "But what is my business is what I overheard while we were coming to deal with this issue. I cannot allow you to simply help these people. First, you will need to help those that deserve the generosity that you will be giving them. Once done then these people can be helped."

After hearing this, the other members of the Lights Templar all wanted to jump in. Before they could Anna stopped them by given them a look telling them not to interfere. Mike thought about it for a little while, there was no way he was going to do as he was told but he still needed to play along. He looked around and then at the captain, "Hmm, you know now that you mention it I think that we will skip the helping altogether and cause no more interference at all with your business. In the end you are correct in that the favour we will ask will probably cost us a lot, so there is no need to dwindle our physical resources any more than we already have. That being said I think we will head to an inn, rest for a bit and then see if we can set up a meeting."

The captain was still trotting around him. There was no reason for him to believe that Mike was lying but at the same time there was no

reason to believe that he was telling the truth as well. "You do have that option and I'm glad you agree that things should be left in our capable hands. Also because I feel generous today, it would be my pleasure to escort you personally to an inn where you and your group can stay during your time here. Think of it as payment for helping us out with these invaders. Not that help was needed but as I mentioned I'm in a good mood today."

Mike gave a quick worried look at Anna while the captain was still prancing around him. Anna whispered, "It's never easy in this town." Without turning she moved in front of Alexandria to block her as much as she could with her body and continued to whisper, "Alex, if you can quickly and secretly capture the details of the cleric."

Alexandria did not really have time to think about it, she took out a small orb and put an invisibility spell around it and then whispered another spell and let the invisible orb go. Due to the invisibility spell and the fact that it was midday and that the sun was out in full force there would be no way for anyone to notice, unless there was a very good mage in the ranks of the captain's cavalry, which Alex seriously did not think was the case.

Figuring he had stalled long enough, Mike responded to the captain's offer. "I see no reason why we should refuse your generosity, many thanks."

The captain had a big smile in his face, "Excellent, you and your people are to follow me immediately."

The captain took some of his men and left the others at the location. They surrounded the Lights Templar and escorted them deeper into the city. During the walk, Anna got close to Mike and whispered as low as she could to make sure that only he could pick up on it, "I'm with Rosa." Mike

had to think about it for a few seconds but then figured out what she meant. After a few turns and about ten minutes of walking the captain led them to an inn called The Captain's Chambers. Mike tried his best to hide his reaction to the name. Colten dismounted and as another member took care of his horse, he led the Lights Templar inside.

The inside of the inn was typical with a lot of table and chairs. To the side, stairs led to the second floor and also a bar was connected to the stairs. To the other side was a large fireplace with a large mantel with a banner on it. The banner had a symbol of the head of a lion with red jewels for its eyes. What was worrisome was that everyone at the inn wore the same armor as the guard members that accompanied the captain. Clearly their movements would be watched and the captain was not hiding this fact. Colten escorted Mike to the innkeeper, "The rooms here have two beds each, so how many will you need?"

Mike shrugged, "No more than is needed – three will be fine, so two for the women and one for the guys."

Again the captain smiled, "Excellent." The preparations were made and the groups were escorted to their rooms. While it was a bit of a surprise but at the same time somewhat expected with Mike's answer, Anna and Rosamia took the first room, Alexandria and Iris the second and Mike and Adam the last.

Adam walked in the room and as soon as Mike closed the door, he turned to face him. Adam looked a bit angry but he was pleasantly calm about it. Mike smiled at him and whispered. "Let's sit and wait for now." It took about ten minutes but eventually they could both hear a voice inside their heads and that voice was Alexandria, 'Oh my God, is this a giant pain. What the heck is going on

and are we really going to leave the people like we did?'

Mike tried hard not to chuckle too loudly, 'Can everyone hear us Alexandria?'

'Yes, we should all be connected, but keep in mind when we are like this it's very easy for surface thoughts to pop up so keep your thoughts in check if you don't want to share with the group.' Shortly after, an image of Adam popped up in everyone's heads.

At that point Adam chimed in, 'Hey, why did you target me again?'

Again Mike had to stop himself from laughing. 'Let's do this quick then. First, I have no intention of following what I said to the captain.' Mike swore he heard someone sigh in relief after he said that but could not tell which of the members had let it slip. 'That being said we have to be extremely careful with our next steps. They have a very low tolerance for people who don't follow those in charge here. Ideally we will go over the plan, go down and eat and talk like regular people and then come back up for an early night. During that time, Alexandria and Rosamia, ideally you are to make yourselves invisible until you reach the people in the first section. Once there, if you can hide your appearance so much the better. Then help as much as you can but don't be seen helping otherwise that will cause issues. Can you do that?'

Rosamia answered first, 'It will not be easy that way but that should work from my end. Alex?'

'I have no issues with it if you are okay with it. I'll make sure that no one is able to detect us. Heck, if I can sneak around the Council members without them noticing I'm sure no one here will be an issue... Please ignore that last part.'

Before Mike could continue everyone heard Adam, 'I don't like it.'

Seeing as there was nothing else after that Mike continued, 'Next is Anna and me. It was not planned but let's try and meet up with Eadgar after all. It will be good for our story and I'm sure that the captain will tell Eadgar and probably a few others that he should be expecting us. So not showing up would be a bad idea. Also you still have the spare set with you, right?'

Anna was a bit confused, 'You want to go that far?'

'I'm not planning on doing anything bad and I know it's very lame but in case something happens I don't want it to link back to Julia if we can.'

Anna smiled, 'I understand, and yes I still have it. I'll change after this. I take it that we will head there in the morning?'

While only Adam saw it Mike nodded, 'Yes, that would be the plan.'

Iris joined in after that, 'Do you have anything for Adam and me to do or are we supposed to wait it out here?'

Adam jumped in with 'I'm not doing that'.

Again nothing followed so Mike continued, 'Anna, you got my message right?'

'Sure, but I'm not sure on the end results. Alexandria were you able to get details of the cleric after all?' A laugh could be heard inside their heads, 'Of course I did, I love using these little orbs for things like this.'

Mike smiled, 'Good work Alexandria. So then the final part of the plan is the hardest one. Adam and Iris go out and find them.' This time it was Adam who smiled, maybe he did it because only he could see how serious Mike's look was added to the tone in all their heads. Iris then reached out to grab the orb, 'How much time do we have?'

Mike thought about it and a few numbers popped in everyone's heads, 'Sorry about that, a

maximum of three days and two nights. After that we need to leave, unless something else comes up.' He continued after a random thought of worry appeared from Rosamia, 'Again, sorry about that. Ideally, Anna and I are the only ones that will be visible. Everyone else will be officially staying here at the inn resting due to the long journey, unofficially stay as hidden as you all can. If anything comes up don't use the pendants unless it's extremely necessary. We will try and update ourselves here like this when we can.'

Iris jumped in, 'I'm not sure how that will be possible for our cause but we will figure something out.' Seeing as no one had any issues with the plan the communication was cut.

While Anna was changing she figured that now would be a good time to ask a few questions even if they would have to be vague, "So are you okay? I mean with everything."

Rosamia smiled, "I will be, it was just too many things at once and it was all too fresh in my head. I'm okay again."

As Anna took out the spare set of clothes, she looked at her. "Nothing new happened?"

Rosamia chuckled, "Not really, I am finding that even with the lack of sleep it does not seem to be hurting my casting for some reason. Typically, I would have issues focusing, which is normal but now no problems at all. It's actually easier, I'm not sure why. By the way thanks for keeping this between us. I know that the others have asked and that they are still asking. But I'm just not ready to talk about it. I'm pretty sure I couldn't answer most of their questions and that would just cause more concern."

Anna gave a weak smile, "If that's how you feel then I will keep my promise." It took a bit more time but she finished changing. Rosamia looked at

her, the brown shirt and green pants had been replaced with a dark grey. Also the symbolic red cape was removed from her shoulders. With her armor that was just silver it made her look less open and more sinister. Anna shook her head and answered the question she figured was in Rosa's head. "It was not our choice, and at the time there was no real reason to argue about it." Rosamia just chuckled a bit at Anna's obvious discomfort. Shortly after they went down to eat with everyone as would be expected of the group.

The next day, both Anna and Mike made their way to Eadgar Goodwin's mansion. As they were walking Anna looked around, "So you think they suspect something?"

Mike shrugged, "I'm sure they do but I'm pretty sure they have no details at the same time."

Anna chuckled, "I guess the only thing odd was when you visited all our rooms before turning in, giving time for Alex to make the necessary preparations to make sure no one saw doors open on their own as they go in and out of the inn."

Mike thought about that, "Yeah, I hope the captain does not ask about that. I'm not really sure I can say anything that will not get me in trouble with all of you later."

Anna gave him a small smirk, "Now that makes me wonder about the excuse you would use."

He took another moment and saw there would be no way he could properly answer that one, so he figured that changing the subject would be the safer course of action. "By the way do you mind if I ask something?"

He was being cryptic but she figured out the reference, "I would rather you didn't."

He gave her a small smile, "All right can I at least know if she is really okay?" As soon as he

asked her, he regretted it as he felt a symbolic punch to his shoulder.

She gave him a stern look, "Why would you assume that if she was actually not okay that I would keep it to myself?"

He slowly nodded, immediately throwing in the towel, "That's not what I was implying I swear, I'm just like everyone else – wondering."

Anna sighed, "I know, thing is that she is thinking the same right now and knows about as much as we do. So talking about it at length serves very little purpose. In a way it's like this quest we're on. It's important and may have an impact but what else do we really know? So do we sit around asking the same questions and come up with only more questions or do we wait until there is more information and then try and figure it out?"

Mike nodded, understanding the point she was making, "One step at a time again?"

She smiled, "Sounds about right."

In a few minutes they would arrive at the mansion. Already, Anna could see the very large white house with elaborate colonial balconies. "Is there any point in talking to this person, besides for a cover?"

Mike thought about it, "For our quest, not at all. Actually there is very little need to talk to him, but I'm thinking that maybe we can try and get information and help our worried friends about the ongoing situations about the people who need help."

Anna nodded, "Yeah, he would know what will happen to them and maybe at the same time we can see if there is a way to help them out. You're right – that will please everyone and maybe make this meeting worthwhile."

They were about to introduce themselves to the guards in front of the gates as one of them



interrupted them. "The master has been expecting you, follow me inside." They both looked at each other, surprised and a bit worried at the same time. It was not like they had announced when they would show up or anything so being instantly greeted like this was a bit off putting. They passed the lovely flower garden that decorated the front of the mansion. Once at the doors the gate guard passed them to the inner mansion guards to continue their escort. Eventually they were taken to a very large room with two large couches next to a fireplace. Between the two couches an exquisitely large wooden coffee table could be found and above them a golden chandelier. As Mike continued to look around the room that the guards had left them alone in to wait for Eadgar, he had to conclude that things were still going pretty good for their old contact.

After about half an hour of waiting Eadgar finally showed. He was a well-rounded man with short black hair and a small goatee. He motioned for them to sit down as he himself sat on the other couch on the other side of them, "My apologies for making you wait. There were things that I needed to take care of." He paused and looked at both of them, "My, it's been such a long time. Imagine my surprise when I was told that you happened to be here again and also wished to speak to me." As he finished speaking a maid came in the room with a tray with a few cups and a pot. She poured what looked like tea in each cup and gently placed one in front of each of them. As she left, Eadgar took the cup in his hands and looked at them but this time with a very curious look on his face, "You two have been very busy since you left. I never dreamed you would end up where you are in constant contact with very important people. There should be no more interruptions. So, I have to

know what brought you back here?"

Anna started to answer his question, "The reasons we are here are more because of what attacked this place yesterday."

Eadgar wondered on that, "You are currently hunting down clerics? Interesting. How did you know there would be some here? Can you track them down somehow?"

Mike chuckled at that, he knew that he was fishing for information and figured that the truth or at least part of it would make for a funny explanation. "Sadly, no we can't track them and this time we got just got lucky and were around when they started attacking. I guess you could say that it was like we were guided by the divine and were at the right place at the right time."

While Eadgar did not like that explanation Anna found it funny considering their circumstances. Eadgar paused for a moment before he continued with his questioning, "Right place and right time, hmm, convenient... So what next? I do appreciate the visit but tracking down clerics is not one of my specialties."

Anna looked at him, "After the attack some of our members were wondering what was going to happen to the people here. While there is no way for us to know we figured that you would have a good idea."

He had a big smile on his face, "Not exactly the same story I got from the captain but then again his information is rarely reliable and typically self serving." He took a sip of his tea, "I must say I am very pleased, while we did leave under good terms it good to know that you still think of me as a contact you can come to. I hope this means that the other way around is also true?"

And there it was, Mike felt stupid that he had not seen this coming. "Well, it's true that no

bridges were burned as you said but at the same time we cannot be at your beck and call as it was before anymore. Plus the assistance we can offer may be more limited." Mike was worried, because Eadgar still had a big smile on his face.

"Oh now, no need to mention this to me, of course I completely understand your current situation. Still, let me worry about how limited your assistance truly can be. Take this request for example, I will gladly help you with the information you wish but in exchange there is a problem I would like for you to take care of."

Anna looked at Mike and then back at Mr. Goodwin, "I'm pretty sure that Mike was clear on what he said."

He waved at her, "Ah my dear, always thinking the worst of me and yet have the tasks that I asked of you two not always followed your rules? This time is no different." He reached in his inner shirt pocket, pulled out a sealed envelope, and handed it to her. "Here is the information on this person. I will warn you that he is currently at the top right now so he is very good. It seems he filled a void you two left, but in his case as long as the money is good there is no job he will not take. If you take care of him then you should have the information you seek. What you do with it afterward is up to you I suppose."

It was clear to both of them that Eadgar already had the information they wanted but obviously he needed to find a way to somehow capitalize on it. They figured this person was somehow causing trouble for him but if he was the best there was currently it would be hard for him to be dealt with, until now. It was not the first time they had dealt with a killer for hire and probably would not be the last. Still, this was not territory they wanted to revisit. There was a quick nodded

between the two of them and then Anna picked up the envelope. "We will see what we can do. Let's hope information will be worth it."

As they all stood Eadgar was still smiling, "I'm sure it will be."

After that, they made their way back to the inn to see about the content of the letter. As they approached the doors to their room in the inn, Alexandria opened hers and motioned for them to come in. They both sat on the bed across from her and after a quick spell were able to hear her in their heads. 'I had a spell placed that would alert me when you came close. I figured you would want an update on both us and Iris and Adam.'

Anna nodded, 'That would be great, but should both of you not be resting considering your nightly activities?'

Alexandria smiled, 'Well Rosa is the one mostly doing all the work and is currently sleeping, as for me I'm just there to make sure that she's not spotted so it's not really much of a drain on my end. Anyways, there is not much to report so it should be quick.'

She explained that they were still healing the wounded, they were also helping with relocating some of the families that had lost their homes. As for the other two, it seems that the trail of the clerics was leading them away from the city. Currently they are not too far but are still trying to figure out the most likely spot they came from.

Mike was happy about the news, the last thing he wanted was to stay in this city trying to find other clerics that were in hiding, assuming there were others. Once she was finished Alexandria had a questioning look on her face, 'So was visiting that contact of yours worth it?'

Mike chuckled, 'We're not sure yet, seems he wants us to get rid of someone first.'

Alexandria was stunned, 'What?'

Anna smiled and took out the letter they had been given, 'We don't have much information ourselves, just that he is a hired killer. That being said let's see if there are more details in this.' She opened the letter to find a map with three red circles around houses with a time next to it, she looked to see if there was anything else but that was the only thing in the letter. Anna handed the map to Mike, 'I guess these are going to be his locations for the next little while.' Mike looked at the times, 'Also it seems that the closest window that will soon open for us is in the next seven hours. Should we get this over it sooner than later?'

Anna nodded, 'It's probably for the best, plus when we are done it will be around night time, which could be better.'

Alexandria was still stunned, 'I'm sorry, it's just hard to see you both like this. Personally, I think the sooner we get out of here the better. I read about this place a long time ago and while the facts are true there was a lot that was left out, most of it all bad.'

Anna switched places to be next to Alex and took her hand, 'We are sorry about this too. This stop was never planned but as long as we keep playing this role you two can help people that need help while the focus is mostly on us and that's worth it.'

Alexandria slowly nodded, 'I know, I guess I'm just frustrated by all this. I mean we still don't know why we're here and what we're supposed to do and all this undercover work just does not feel right to me. It's just not how we work.'

Mike chuckled, 'I guess you're right on that one. Just give us a bit more time. I think I have a plan that's forming up in my head about all this.'

Alexandria gave him a mischievous smile, 'A Mike Lights Templar plan or a Mike bounty hunter plan?'

He stood up, 'Don't worry, it's a Lights Templar type of plan. Anyways we should let you rest. Anna will check in on Rosamia and then we can go eat. Let's try and meet up when we get back from our mission for another update.' Alexandria smiled and the communication spell was terminated. Anna left to go to her and Rosamia's room and Mike just went downstairs directly. After a few hours had passed and Anna had never made it downstairs at the inn, Mike prepared a quick something and went back to his room and waited for the appointed time.

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Their window was fast approaching and both Mike and Anna were on their way to the marked location. Mike looked at Anna, "Still can't ask?"

She was currently finishing the sandwiches he had prepared for her, "Nope sorry, but I have a question. Do you really have a plan? I mean I see pieces but I don't see how you can do anything with them at this time."

Mike frowned a bit, "I don't actually have a plan right now."

She was shocked, "So you lied to her?"

He shrugged, "I prefer to call it a future promise. I don't have anything right now but at this time even I can tell that the group morale is pretty low, and I figured this would buy me a bit of time to figure something out. Plus she was right, ever since we arrived here it's felt wrong somehow and that needs to change."

As they arrived at the house she turned to him, "So you're really hoping that something comes

out of this I guess then."

He nodded, "Yes, I am. How do you want to approach this, stealthily or boldly?"

Anna reached for the door handle and noticed it was unlocked. She gave him a half smile. "Well in that case let's start the change now."

They entered the house and noticed that it was very empty, the first floor had a small living area and to its side were a small kitchen and eating table. There was no one around. As they listened they heard footsteps from the upstairs room. They slowly made their way up the stairs and could see that a light coming from the other side of a door. Mike looked at Anna and whispered, "Who is this guy? I mean it's not like we are hiding the fact that we're here, so why is he still here?"

Before she could answer, a voice was heard from the other side. "The reason is simple, I don't run away from ruffraff. Now, why don't you come in so we can finish this."

Slowly they opened the door. As they stepped in, they noticed the person sitting in front of them at the end of the bed. He was wearing simple leather armor with some daggers around his belt. He also had his long sword at the ready. The other thing that got their attention was some papers that were being burned in a metallic bin. Mike instantly reached out for the bin to put out the flames as Anna guarded his back.

The man made no move to stop Mike, "So they sent two to kill me this time. I don't think it will make much of a difference." As much as she was not a fan of his attitude, Anna did realize that this person had some level of skill in the way he positioned himself. "We don't have to kill you, we are mostly looking for information."

The man laughed, "Oh sure I'll answer any question you want but while this will sound cliché

I will then have to kill you afterward."

Mike instantly took the bait, "Okay, what is your current mission?"

The man was stunned for a few seconds, he never expected them to actually ask a question. Still he was confident they would pose no threat so he figured why not. "My mission is the papers you currently hold in your hands. I am to go and kill some people that are down on their luck in order to free up the real estate they are currently occupying for some other use than the current one. It's going to be an easy mission but I was asked to do it as quickly as possible."

Anna was still looking at the assassin but targeted the question at Mike, "Is that true?"

He looked over what was left of the papers, "Seems like it. Also, it seems that the section in question is near where the attack took place so it's probably around where they are as well."

Anna nodded, "Any way we can convince you not to take this mission?"

The man shrugged, "And why should I? I get discredited and my employers just get someone else to do the job. I see no reason to do that."

Anna was disgusted, "Even if it's to save your own life?"

This provoked a reaction from the assassin as he slowly stood up, "You are not prepared for me, all my targets die after only one hit. You will be no different." As he aimed his sword at her she got ready as well. Mike started to move but then noticed that Anna was slowly nodding her head, "I'll deal with this one, I will have little remorse over someone that is so easily willing to kill innocent people. Plus if you deal with him the fight will take too long."

Before Mike could react to her comment the assassin laughed, "Oh that is rich." As he said



those words something happened to his body. It was quick and hard to notice but seeing as they both had seen it so many times there would be no way they would miss it.

Anna cursed, he was a Crusader or an ex-Crusader and he had just used a spell to speed himself up. That explained why his targets only needed one blow. Not exactly knowing where he would strike, Anna took an educated guess and swung her sword in order to block a strike aimed at her heart. She was rewarded with a sound of metal on metal and an ex-Crusader that took a step backward wondering how she had blocked his move.

"I did not know there were ex-Crusaders. I know of the exception, but I thought that he was one of a kind." The man shook his head as Anna repositioned herself so that he would be facing her side. "True there is only one of us that is officially an ex-Crusader but unofficially there are more of us than you think."

Again he charged at Anna, this time the only logical target was her head. Just as the last time she swung her sword to meet his, but this time she used the enchantment and also swung as if she was going to hit at something. The blow once again connected but this time, with the enchantment active and the power put behind the blow, when his sword connected with hers it shattered in two.

The ex-Crusader was no longer impressed. He threw down his blade and took out two daggers. This is where Anna realized she would have to finish it. With his speed and new weapons he would no longer be interested in the one-hit kill, which would make it much harder to predict his next blows. Because of this Anna went on the attack with a forward strike that she figured he would block and block he did with both of his

daggers. As she saw the smug smile on his face, she released the enchantment.

Due to the spell that modified his movements he was able to realize what was happening but he was still not fast enough, so as he dodged to his left, his side still got hit with a mini explosion. As he reached out with his other hand to start healing the wound Anna spun around and aimed her blade at his neck. The fight was immediately over.

Anna let a deep sigh escape, "I know that all life is equal and all that and killing an orc or giant should be no different than a human but it's always demoralizing to do it when it's your own race, even if the reasons are justified. I guess it's because you always expect better from the race you belong to."

Mike looked at her, "What an idealistic way of thinking."

Anna smirked, "Says the person who wants to fix a broken world." She then nodded, "Just to let you know I think that I've just had enough of this as well, so what next?"

Mike smiled, "Well that's simple, I fulfill my future promise I made to Alexandria." They pocketed the papers and placed the dead assassin's body on the bed and covered it with a sheet. Eadgar's men would know what had happened and would deal with the rest. Currently nighttime had fallen and they both left the house and made their way to the targeted establishments that were on the partially burned papers.

They were almost at the location when Anna quickly looked over to Mike, "You do realize that us being here will probably attract the attention of a certain captain of the guard."

Mike double-checked the paper they had taken and started to look around, "Hmm, with what's probably going to happen next that's probably not

going to make much of a difference." He deeply sighed after actually seeing the targeted location. Mike counted that about eight houses would be affected by the zone, "This is going to be harder than expected."

Before Anna could respond they both heard the voice of Alexandria inside their heads, 'What's going to be hard and what are you two doing here?'

Mike looked around but could not find her, 'Something has come up. Can you also link us to Rosamia?'

'Just go about two houses down and I should be in range for this type of communication.'

Both did as directed and soon enough Rosamia could also be heard, 'I was told that there will be a change in plans?'

Mike explained the situation and the houses that would be targeted.

Instantly Rosamia commented, 'And they are just going to kill them? That's...' Soon after, random images flashed inside their heads, none of which were pleasant. 'Sorry about that, but situations like these simply infuriate me to no end. Living beings are not toys you simply get rid of when you are bored with them. That's not how it works or how it should work anyways.'

Mike figured they all agreed, 'Still, do we know how many people are in those houses in total?'

Alexandria tried to remember from her last visits, 'I think about forty people all in all.' After some quick math Anna was a little bit stunned, 'About five people in each of those little houses, seems a bit cramped.'

'I was told that I could not do anything that would be visible but no one said anything about modifying the inside of the houses. So while Rosa was helping them I made some renovations, it's still a bit cramped but liveable now.'

The numbers concerned Mike, 'Alexandria, I'm assuming that relocating them to other houses will be out of the question, right?'

'That would not work. I mean if I could rebuild the houses that got destroyed by the clerics' attacks then sure but without doing that these people are pretty filled to capacity.' She paused for a moment, 'We are doing something about this, right?'

Mike smiled, 'Yes, we are but it's drastic so I don't know if it will work. These people are targeted for death if they don't move so at the same time I'm not really sure how much of an option they really have. That being said, Alexandria can you contact Bernard? I need to pass along a message to Kyle who in turn needs to get the Guild's approval.'

Alex was wondering where he was going with this, 'I don't think Calculus will just willingly take that many people like that. The last time was a bit different because it was people in their territory but this time that's not the case.'

Anna answered, 'I'm pretty sure the target is not Calculus but a certain no-name town next to it.' She turned to Mike, 'But that has issues as well of food and protection.'

Mike nodded, 'Yes and this is the plan. Ideally, we move them to this new town that is being rebuilt. I'm not sure what the food situation is but assuming Helena was able to finish preparing the grounds as she wanted there could be enough. Housing will not be an issue considering how many survived, which leaves us with defence. With Helena's plan we can assume the Guild will agree to them staying if the final problem of defence can be resolved. Now inform them that at the end if no solution is found then we will personally take care of it. That should be enough to convince them.'

There was silence for a while after he had

mentioned that. He could see that Anna had a shocked and puzzled look on her face and assumed this was the case as well for the other two.

As Anna thought about it, this was something that was mentioned in the possible plans they originally had talked about but issues had still been found and she could not see where now would be any different plus there was something else that needed their attention at this particular time. She looked at him, 'Is this another one of those future promises? I mean, what about Rosa? We need to resolve that and we don't know when the Guild may decide to change their minds forcing us to do what you just mentioned.'

Mike took a deep breath, 'Rosamia, you mentioned that whatever is inside of you mentioned that it would stay there to guide us until we reach the end or if we are no longer eligible, right?'

'That's how I recall it, yes.'

Mike nodded, 'Okay, so currently we are on this tangent of a quest that we know nothing about and have little direction on. While there is promise of something significant I think we can all safely agree that the main focus at this point is not the quest but Rosamia's continued well-being.'

Rosamia was now concerned, 'So we just give up?'

'Not really, coming here let us stop two clerics and possibly save forty people so no matter what this is it was worth the effort. But after that what do we do? We keep looking to see if we can find something that maybe our goal? Or we take a chance, maybe Adam and Iris have a lead and we go there next or we move on to something else. I mean are we even sure that we will get a sign when we do what is needed to be done? Maybe it's done

already and we just don't know. Who knows – that could be the test.' He paused to gather his thoughts and continued, 'The way I see it, if we do as I'm saying and that causes us to fail then whatever is in Rosamia goes away and we don't know what this was all about. Okay, that could have consequences but staying here and dealing with all these questions with no answers is slowly driving all us mad right now.' He looked at Anna and smiled, 'So maybe what we need is a change of pace, instead of obsessing over something we have little control over.'

She smiled back at him, 'I can't argue with that, how about you two?'

Alexandria was the first to jump in, 'Nope, no arguments on my end. Rosa?'

It took a while longer for Rosamia to answer, 'The truth of the matter is I don't know, currently I'm so blinded that I'm not sure if my decision would be the right one. So because of that I'll follow the one I made when all this started, I'll believe in all of you and see where that goes. I'm sorry for being like this, I really am.'

Mike looked at Anna who knew a bit more about what was really going on.

She shook her head. 'There is no need to apologize, none whatsoever.' She turned to Mike, 'All right then, let's do what we do best and that's butt into other people's business.'

Mike could feel a bit of Alex's happiness leak into their thoughts, 'Good then Alexandria, I'm sorry to say that I need you to do most of the work on this one in order to coordinate everything. Also seeing as I don't know what situation they are in can you contact Adam and Iris? Obviously they need to get back here as soon as they can.'

Rosamia then stepped in, 'I'll stay here and inform everyone. It will be hard to convince them to

move from their homes but I'll figure out something.'

Anna joined in, 'I'll help you with that.' She saw that Mike was about to invite himself as well and cut him off, 'As for you, I think it will be better if you prepare for another battle. There will be no way that we will be able to move these people without anyone noticing meaning the captain of the guard will surely come and pay us a visit.'

Mike understood, 'All right then, I'll head back and prepare our things and wait at the inn. When you are ready let me know and I'll buy you the time you need.'

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Over the course of the night, Mike was constantly impressed with the capabilities of everyone in the group. It was hard to imagine anything they could not do given a task they truly wanted to accomplish. Turns out that Alexandria had been permitted to bring forward the request herself to the Guild. After some convincing the request was approved. Also, seeing as walking from city to city would be impossible for some of the people, a magic gate would be created to transport them to Calculus. From there, the people and extra supplies would be transported to the town. As for Rosamia and Anna, while they were not able to convince everyone they needed to leave they did manage to convince about thirty of the forty. At that point, hiding what was going on was now impossible but because of that they were able to find others who were interested. While the ten were not interested in following they had no issues moving to a new place inside the same city. Overall, the new total number of people transferring would be about fifty, which was more than expected but that also freed up the zone that

had been targeted.

Overall, it had been a long night, Mike had changed back into his regular Crimson clothing and was currently trying to figure out how he would stop the guards that will eventually show up on his own. Eventually he found his answer as Adam and Iris showed up at the inn. He followed Adam to their room. As they got in Adam sat on the bed, "Iris is going to freshen up and then we were told to help you out."

Mike looked at Adam, it seemed he had rushed to get here. He assumed he had continued his tracking a bit farther than he should have. "So let me guess, you're not a fan of the plan?"

Having heard the question Adam did something unexpected, he shrugged it off. "I'm actually okay with it. Don't tell Rosa but I want that thing out of her as soon as possible. At this point I'm okay with us not being eligible anymore."

Mike was stunned, "Part of me is thinking I should have known but hearing you say it so bluntly makes it all too real."

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By the time Iris and Adam were ready to head out the sun was starting to rise. They figured they should make their way to the others. There was no way to know when the captain would show up but show up he would. When they got there, the whole place was abuzz. No longer was anyone hiding in the shadows. Heck, the gate had been created right outside the section that had been marked off where everyone could see it. As early as it was, people were already moving through the gate with what few belongings they had.

After about half an hour, Captain Colten and twenty of his men finally showed. Mike, with Adam



and Iris following from the rear, walked over to meet him.

"As captain of this city I cannot allow you to kidnap its people. Stop this instant."

Mike chuckled, "These people are willingly following us, and there are no rules that state that people cannot leave this city if they so choose. Also this mission is part of a job I have with someone else, and I am not willing to let them down by not fulfilling my obligations by having you try and stop me."

The captain took offence and pulled out his dazzling sword. Before he could order any of his men, Mike pulled out his sword as well and purposely made it glow as brightly as he could.

"Are you sure you want to do this, captain?" As he said it Adam pulled out his two swords and then the skies turned dark.

Iris stepped forward with lightning dancing in her hands, "I *strongly* suggest you reconsider."

As the captain was figuring out his odds, Alexandria stopped and looked at what was happening. Anna gave her a mischievous smile, "Planning on using that at your next negotiations?"

Alex's face went red, "No, not at all what I was thinking. Still I bet it would be fun to do at least once."

Anna chuckled, "Come on there are still tons of people to help out."

Alexandria continued her work as the captain sheathed his sword and looked sternly at Mike.

"Clearly I need to confirm your claims before any action can be taken. We will withdraw for now. I suggest you halt your activity as well until things can be cleared up." He turned his horse and ordered his men to follow him.

Iris canceled her spell and the skies turned back to normal, "Do you think he'll come back?"

Mike nodded, "Not anytime soon, there is no benefit in us fighting and he now knows it's not going to be a battle where he can push us around. Still, let us try and not overstay our welcome just in case."

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After everyone joined in on the efforts a few hours passed and the last person walked through the gate. Alexandria turned to her friends, "Do we join in on this free ride, too?"

Mike looked at Adam, "It's up to you, did you find anything?"

Adam slowly nodded, "We confirmed that the clerics had just arrived in the city as we got here." He looked at Iris, "With the help of arcane magic and a holy tracking spell we think we may know where they came from but we're not sure if there are more. Still, I think it would be worth checking it out just in case."

Mike turned, "Well Alexandria, there you have it."

She smiled, "All right, let me contact Bernard to let him know and then I'll close the gate from this side."

Anna looked at Mike and then at herself, "While she's doing that, I'll go change as well in one of the empty houses and conveniently forget these clothes here."

A little while later she came out wearing her custom Crimson outfit as Alex was finishing the spell to close the gate. As everyone was now ready, Mike looked at Adam. "Take the lead and take us away from this place." As they left the city, Mike wondered if they were doing the right thing. As he looked around the morale of the group seemed to have picked up as more smiles could be seen on mostly everyone. Mike smiled himself and took that

as a personal sign even if it was less flashy than the other.

## *Chapter 6*

*M*ike started to look around after a few hours of walking. He did not think he was wrong but he figured he would confirm it just in case. "Hey Adam, why does it feel like you are leading us to the farmlands of Ager?"

"That's because that's where we're going."

After Iris realized that this is where Adam was dropping the conversation, she continued for him. "After using every means of tracking we realized that Ager is the only place that makes sense to check out. It's probable that they are not actually at the lands but they should be close to them. Once we get there we should be able to track them down assuming there are more of them." She paused for a bit, "We are sure that's where they came from but not if there are more. So it's possible there is nothing there and this could all be for nothing." She turned to look at Rosa and then everyone else, "I just figured I would warn you before we go farther."

Rosamia gave her a small smile, "It's all right, whatever we are doing has not affected anything as far as the presence inside of me is concerned. So far nothing has changed." She then thought about it for a bit, "How long will it take to get to Ager?"

Adam turned to answer her question, "About a day and a half at this rate to get to the edge of Ager. We will have to camp out once for sure and once we get there it will be late."

After a bit of time had passed Anna noticed that Rosa had slowed down and was now in the rear, she matched her pace to get closer to her. "I take it you're thinking about tonight or is there

something else?" Rosa had a sad look on her face. Anna grabbed her hand, "Whatever you want me to do just let me know, in the end it's your call."

Rosamia studied Anna's expression, "But you think I should tell them, right?"

Anna had a half smile on her face, "I would be lying if I said no but I understand also if you want to try and keep this to yourself considering the personal pain you're experiencing."

Rosamia looked ahead, "Hmm, I feel like I have to always jump every time these days. Maybe I feel like that because I've recently been seeing everything all over again." She looked at Anna, "Can I ask you a personal question?" Anna simply nodded.

"I had forgotten but at the start of all this I was a bit cold. I said that it was because I understood where you came from and was just uninterested but now that I see it again... I guess it's because I was a bit envious. I mean how are you so sure of yourself and your actions? Is it because of him, that you know there will always be someone by your side?"

Anna was shocked; this was not a question she had expected from someone like Rosa. "Hmm, that's a hard one to answer. Having Mike around does help, I mean yes, there are moments where it's just too much. We all have those, so yes having someone to share those with helps me to be able to deal with them and also helps not to fear taking chances because you know you will not be alone to face the consequences. Still, that said, looking back I've been like this for a long time now even before him." She took a moment to try and explain, "Like you, I've had a bad hand. When my parents died there was no one and nowhere for me to go. It took me a long time to realize but eventually I saw being in a hole cursing at all the wrong things that

happened does not really help you live and I wanted to live. So I did the only thing I could do, I picked myself up and I tried my best and that's pretty much what I have been doing from that point on. Since then I've learn so much about myself, what I hate, what I like and what I want and that's helped guide my decisions. They may not be the right ones but at least I know for sure that they are the right ones for me. And now look where I am and what has been accomplished, all those things help me keep trying and aiming as high as I can." Anna turned to Rosa, "I'm not really sure if that answer helps your question, mind you." A small smile then appeared on Anna's face, she could see that Rosamia was currently lost in thought.

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Time passed and Rosamia realized night was upon them. The group was figuring out the order for who would stay on watch. She could tell that Anna was glancing at her from time to time, possibly waiting to see how she could be of assistance. Rosamia took a deep breath and reminded herself that she trusted these people implicitly, it was just with reliving everything it was all a bit of a jumble in her head. Still she stood up and faced everyone, "So for tonight, I figured that I would warn you that I'll have a really bad nightmare and will wake up from it." She turned to Adam, "When I do, it's important that you stay away for a bit, Adam. I'll be fine after a while but when it happens I'm pretty sure I will not want to talk to you at that moment."

Adam looked around to see if everyone was as confused as he was, "What... I don't get it, what do you mean?"

Alexandria then moved closer to Rosa and grabbed her hand, "What's really going on, please

tell us."

Rosamia looked at Alex's sad eyes, and sighed heavily. "This presence inside of me is going over all my memories when I sleep. When it does this, it forces me to not only see but feel at the same time. So essentially it's like I'm reliving the same moment again as if it was for the first time." She paused and looked at Adam, "Tonight it should take me to when we joined you playing decoys during the General's plan during the attack on the Portal Tower." She gave him a sad smile, "I guess you now understand why I said that seeing you when I wake up will probably be a bad idea."

Adam could not believe what she had just explained, "This has been happening every night?" He turned to Anna and approached her, "She has been suffering like this and you did not say anything?" Anna's gaze turned serious but she did not say anything. At this moment, she realized that Adam would not listen to anything she said even if it made sense. Adam shook his head and was about to mouth off at Anna but Mike stepped between them.

Adam threw his arms in the air, "Of course you take her side."

Before he could continue he was jerked around by Mike who had grabbed him. Very silently Mike slowly whispered to Adam. "Actually I'm on your side, but for you to realize that you first need to cool down quick, then I suggest you take a long look at Rosamia and ask yourself if mouthing off like this is actually going to help her or not. I'm not sure but I'm thinking you want to change for her. Well, this is one of those times that will go a long way to proving it." He let go of Adam.

Adam turned to see Rosa with her head down slowly shaking it. He figured she was questioning if she did the right thing by telling them and that it

was all on him for acting the way he just did. That realization took all his anger away. "I'm sorry Rosa, I know my outburst didn't help any. It's just that when you told me what was going on and to stay away... I lost it. I want to help you, that's all I want to do, it's just that I don't know how and that frustrates me to no end."

Rosamia looked up and gave him a small smile, "In this particular case there is nothing you can do. Still, thank for being open like you did there. It does mean a lot."

Defeated, Adam returned her smile and sat down.

Alexandria still had a very concerned look on her face, "Does that hold true for all of us? Is there nothing we can do to help you out?"

Rosamia nodded and looked at Anna, "Not really, the only thing that seems to help is when I wake up if someone is there to remind me of where and more importantly when I am. I'm very confused when it happens when I'm reliving bad moments. Having someone there to remind me of what is currently happening helps me out of my confusion faster. Also considering what tonight will be it's probably best if tonight that person is Anna."

Anna nodded, "I'll be right by your side the whole night."

Rosamia smiled and turned to Alex, "Then, if you can, for the next night take her place?"

Alex traced the events in her head, "After the first Portal Tower attack came..."

Her eyes went wide, "Wait you don't mean that you will relive Valkyrie and your dea—" Tears fell from Alex's eyes and instantly she hugged Rosa as strongly as she could.

"Yeah... I'll be there for you... anything you want."



Rosa put her hand on top of Alex's head and smiled, "Thanks, Alexandria." After a few moments of silence Rosamia looked at everyone, "There is something else as well that I would like to add."

Iris shook her head, "God, it's doing something else to you on top of that?"

Rosamia chuckled, "No, this has nothing to do with it, I just want to let you know how sorry I am."

Adam turned around, "What can you possibly be sorry for?"

"After a lot of thinking I realize that everyone in the group has been acting a bit odd these days and well that's what I want to apologize for."

Iris tried to reassure her, "But that's not your fault at all."

Rosamia nodded, "Part of it is, because of my request to Anna I'm sure everyone has been concerned but at the same time was respecting my wishes not to ask and that's slowly been eating away at all of us. That was something I could have avoided, but did not because I figured I needed to figure out how to deal with it first before I told anyone. I'm seeing that doing that was a mistake on my part and I'm sorry."

Iris thought about her comment, "Hmm, well maybe you have a point there but I think in this case we are all a little bit to blame."

Rosamia smiled, "Maybe, still I just wanted to apologize for the part that I caused."

The rest of the night passed a little bit more normally with more standard questions. It was noticed that during some nights large portions of time were being reviewed quickly and a lot of the slower moments were related to the dark lord and his minion's tactics. Why that was, no one had any idea. Still, when mostly everyone was sleeping a few hours before daybreak they all suddenly woke up to hear Rosamia scream, "*Adam, noooo!*"

Instantly Anna looked at her eyes – they were full of tears, "Rosa, it's all right..."

Rosa cut her off, "Oh Anna... It's Mike, I think he's dead and Adam..."

Anna tried to stop her by putting her hand on her cheek and started to wipe away her tears, "He managed to survive, it's all right everything is okay now. Remember, we are married now. You were there both times. Try to remember that dress that Iris made for me the second time."

While this was happening Adam stood as far away as he could, his fists clenched so hard that pretty soon he thought his nails would break his skin. It's then that he felt it, arms wrapping around him from the back. He heard Iris, "Try to remember yourself, you have both move past that moment and now you have people you can depend on and that no matter what we are all not alone anymore."

Adam calmed down when he heard the words he had spoken to Iris what felt like so long ago, "Thanks, Iris." He felt her move her head on his back.

"Uh-uh, I'm just glad I'm able to help you as you helped me back then."

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When morning came, Rosamia was back to her normal self just as she had said. To give time for Adam to patch things up with her, Iris had taken the role of leading the group on the trail for the clerics. They had been walking for the better part of a day, as they moved forward she had modified their trajectory a few times. Currently they were approaching a field and in the far distance she could finally see what looked like a house. She turned around and saw that Anna and Mike were

fast approaching her. "Looks like we're getting close to the town at least."

Mike chuckled at her comment, Iris looked at him puzzled only to see Anna looking at her with a smile on her face, "It's nothing, we made the same mistake about a year ago when we first got here due to the list Alex gave us." She pointed at the fields, "Officially, we have arrived in Ager."

Iris was still puzzled, "Okay sure, but one house at a distance is not a town, I guess you mean we are on the borders of it?"

Anna nodded, "In a way, yes. But at the same time most of the town is like this." As the rest of the group arrived Anna continued her explanation, "Each family is given a plot of land, and for each plot you have a large house or many small houses. Next to it, you will have another large plot of land. Only in the centre do the houses cluster up a bit more. From what we have seen last time it's the families that are on the edges that have the most land, they are also the biggest and most self sufficient." She turned to Mike, "I would say the largest one holds about forty people and the smaller one in the thirty range?"

Mike nodded, "Sounds right. Also to clarify the term family also includes extended family and also long-time friends."

Iris looked around, she had expected lots of plots of lands but she had also figured there would be a hub town centre. While she was mildly surprised it did mean that tracking down their potential targets would probably be easier this way. "Okay, so do I keep tracking or do we go stop at that house in the distance?"

Iris looked up at the sun. It was a little bit after midday, "Considering that it will be night soon, I would suggest the house." They all nodded in agreement and let her lead the way.

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After an hour of walking they were finally getting close to the house. From this point, Iris could see how large it was and agreed that a good forty to fifty people could easily live in it. She turned to check on everyone behind her to discover that most were acting normal except for Mike and Anna, who seemed a bit concerned as they kept looking around.

"Am I missing something? My tracking spell and my own abilities are not spotting anything so we should be fine."

Mike turned to face her, "That's part of the problem, actually. These lands are big and while there are a lot of people there is still no real time for them to not be doing something to the lands while it's still light."

Now Iris was concerned as well, "So essentially there should be people out here then."

Anna nodded, "Let's just continue to the house and see if something is up. Maybe once we get there we can get some answers." Mike and Anna took the lead and the group continued onwards.

As they got closer to the house, they could see that there were people present, about five, but it seemed they were on guard and they were also armed with swords. Cautiously the two continued forward. The people on guard suddenly reacted as they saw them. From a distance they could hear them shout, "Holy jeez there are two of them coming. Ralf, get out here. We will need your help."

Alexandria stepped forward, "What the heck is going on? That's not the welcoming I was expecting especially after you two have been here recently."

Mike did not turn, "I was thinking the same thing. Still, keep in mind we did not visit every house so it's extremely possible they don't know of us."

The group still moved forward towards the house. From this distance, it was clear to see that the people there were in a defensive position and saw their attackers as being the Lights Templar group. Eventually someone came out of the house. He was tall and middle-aged with some white streaks in his brown hair. He wore no armor and also had no weapons. He pointed at Mike and Anna, "Stop right there you two. Come any closer and I'll take care of you like I did the others."

Both Mike and Anna looked at each other extremely confused, "We mean you no harm..."

The man immediately cut Mike off, "I don't care what you have to say, just go away."

Everyone in the group was confused by what was happening, but then Iris took a step closer. "Please stay calm, I'm Iris and behind me is a Crusader named Adam, next to him is a priestess called Rosamia." She then pointed to Alex, "And here is a member of the Council of Astrum, Alexandria." She turned back to the man, "Like they said we mean you no harm, this has to be a misunderstanding." They were too far away to hear but it seemed that the people on guard were having a quick private chat.

Without making any sudden moves Alex cast a quick spell, "Hmm, this is not good. It seems they are wondering what we are doing with Crimsons. The way they say the name there is a lot of hatred behind it. Oh it seems that that guy who came out is called Ralf, and he's going to try and get us to leave to prove we really mean them no harm."

Mike smiled at Alex and turned to Iris, "You did great back there. Take our weapons and make us stay behind as you take the lead and figure out what is going on."

Iris was still a bit confused but there was no time as Ralf once again addressed them, "Look if

you are serious about meaning us no harm then just go."

Iris nodded, "We would like to know what is going on. Our group just got here ourselves..."

Ralf nodded and again pointed at Mike and Anna, "No way, not with those two there, their kind are too dangerous."

Iris sighed, looks like there would be few options left. "Okay, tell you what. We will take their weapons and leave them out here with more guards if that will help the situation. Please, we really mean you no harm and just want to know what is going on. If that's still unacceptable to you then we will leave as you asked." When she was done, Mike and Anna slowly unbuckled the belts holding their scabbard and handed their weapons to Iris. The group of defenders once again started talking amongst themselves.

Adam got closer to Alex, "So what are they saying now?"

Alexandria had a disappointed look on her face, "I think that we should get used to the idea of sleeping outside tonight."

Before anyone could ask any questions Ralf turned to them again, "Look I'm sorry but you just need to go. We just can't take the chance given all the other attacks by the Crimson. So ... just go... please..."

Iris lowered her head in disappointment and motioned for the others to start walking in the opposite direction. After a few minutes of walking, she gave back the weapons to both of them, "I'm sorry, looks like I was unable to convince him."

Mike smiled, "There is no need to feel sorry about anything, I'm pretty sure there was nothing anyone could have done. They all seemed way too spooked to even want to listen."

Adam looked at both of them, "So what did

you to do while you were here that scared everyone like that?" Rosamia gave him a small poke in the ribs and a teasing smile. He shrugged and looked at her, "Aw c'mon, they know I'm joking and so do you. Still joking aside, they really are afraid of Crimsons for some reason."

Rosa added, "What's also weird is that we are here because of clerics not Crimsons, so what's really going on here then?"

Mike was wondering the same thing, "Let's head to another house but this time one whose family will remember us. Maybe we'll get some answers there. That being said if we walk there it will take a while. Alexandria, Iris would it be possible to help out with that like the last time?"

Iris nodded in approval and Alex shrugged, "If it will allow us to sleep inside then by all means let's go for it." The spells were cast and in the air the group went.

After looking around, Anna pointed at a house that would have been a few hours distant from where they were. "That should be it. Just in case, let's land next to their field so we don't spook anyone more than we already have." As the group flew to their destination they realized that most of the other lands did have people working on them but from time to time they did see a lot of empty fields. They landed a few minutes away from their location but it still did not take long for them to be spotted by one of the people working.

He was pointing at them half in fear and concern, "Oh no, oh no! Why now of all times...?" As they got a bit closer the worker suddenly relaxed, "Oh thank God, it's you two. We were all hoping you'd be back. I take it that you came to fix this issue?"

Mike stepped forward now also recognizing the person they were talking to, "Actually Alan, we

have no clue what is going on here and pretty much stopped by because of a fluke really. Still, we are curious and if there is something that we can help with..." He looked at all the other group members, "I'm pretty sure that we can handle it."

After some introductions, Alan started to escort them back to the house and filled them in on what was happening. "A few months back this place was visited by a group of Crimsons. Now after you two most of us did not think twice about it but then they started to make demands for food and also threatening people around them. At that point, we started to ignore them but that made things worse as they started attacking certain families. Things started to go bad quickly after that."

Adam shook his head. This all smelled like the old protection racket. "So how many are we talking about?"

"Hmm, about six, I think. But here is the other thing; it's not just them that's the issue. It seems that everywhere they go the lands of the people they visit got sick pretty much right after they leave."

The group all wondered what he meant but Alexandria was the first to ask, "What do you mean by sick? If I look around – everything seems fine now."

Alan gave a small chuckle at that, "Yeah, on the surface things seem fine but they are not. If you look closely at the crops, they are dying. Now we have ways to help with that but it seems every time they visit all that effort is undone."

Alexandria thought about that for a few seconds, "Normally I would say that maybe there is a spell of effect at play but the Crimsons can't cast, right?" Both Anna and Mike agreed with her statement.



Rosamia turned to Mike and Anna, "Maybe that's why the trail of the clerics led here. Is it possible they're working together?"

Mike thought about her question, "Normally, I would say no. Crimsons of old would not want to work with others like that and for the new Crimsons I don't see that they could do something like this without Julia knowing. But still, given all that we have seen I would have to now say that it's not impossible." He turned to Alan, "Given the situation, did anyone not go out and ask for help from someone? I mean sure Capio is not the most lawful city but I don't see any of them standing still when the main source of their livelihood is being jeopardized."

A sad look appeared on Alan's face, "We tried that but everyone who left never came back. A lot of our family was lost this way and during the attacks. Currently, there is a meeting with the leaders in town to see if there are any options available to us. We will probably know what comes of it tomorrow."

As everyone considered the implications of what Alan was telling them they were finally approaching the house. It's then that they saw an older woman waving in their direction, "Alan, what are you doing back so early, are you already done?"

As they got closer they were able to see the person better and when Anna realized who it was a big smile appeared on her face and she started waving back, "Hey, Kara!"

For a short moment, the tall black-haired woman paused when she saw Crimsons but then her worry vanished as she realized who it was. Kara stepped down from the porch of the house and walked over to greet her guests with open arms, "Anna, Mike I'm so glad you're back."

Anna reached out and gave her a hug as she

got close, "I'm sorry, Alan told us what happened. Had we known we would have come sooner or at least sent help."

Kara broke the welcoming hug and looked at Anna with a smile on her face, "I know dear, I know. What matters now is that you are here." She looked at the rest of the group, "And you brought friends?"

Kara escorted the group inside. The house was huge; as soon as they entered they were greeted with a large foyer. To the left three large kitchen tables that could seat probably around ten people each and to the right were the sleeping areas that were two stories high. From the looks of it, it seemed that they were getting ready for supper as people were running around placing utensils and other things on the tables. Kara motioned for them to join them, "I'm sure you're hungry and we can do the full introductions while we eat." Almost an hour later more people entered and seated themselves as portions of food were served to them.

The Lights Templar all noticed that every time someone new entered, for a split second when they saw Mike and Anna their first reaction looked like they wanted to run back to where they came from, but that reaction stopped and big smiles appeared on their faces as they realized who they were. As the meal started, Kara introduced the family that was currently present, "Here you have Bridget, Cheryl, Brianna, Anita, Sharlene, Ashley. Then you have, Julius, Lucien, Vincent, Philip, Patrick, Chris, Julian, Jon and Alan you already know. Andrew is with the town elders and there are about ten more working the fields trying to fix the land due to the dying crops."

Anna did a mental count and realized they had probably lost about five members.

During supper there were a lot of random

questions by everyone, mostly focusing all on one thing and that was getting rid of the bad people so they could get back the lands that belong to them. The Lights Templar assured them that they would not have to worry anymore about those people. As supper was finishing and people were leaving to go and do their final chores for the day Kara stayed with the group. "You are welcome to stay as long as you need." She paused for a while, "We should have enough free rooms."

Mike looked at Anna, for everyone else it seemed like they were having a quick silent conversation, and then they both quickly nodded. Mike turned to Kara, "I have to ask, are all crops affected by what Alan told us?"

Kara shook her head, "No, only a small portion really – ours and two other houses around us. That being said almost everyone is being harassed by what I'll call fake Crimsons."

Mike smiled and then both Anna and he stood up, "That's good news actually as it probably means they're hiding in this section."

Iris stood as well, "If you're planning on tracking them down during the night then Adam or I should go along with you."

Mike shook his head, "Nope, the rest of you stay here and protect everyone. They could just as easily come around and attack while we are gone. Plus, I want Alexandria, Rosamia and you to see if you can help out with whatever they are doing to hurt the crops. I mean if it is magical as Alexandria first thought then you are the best people to try and figure it out."

Adam looked at the others and then at Mike, "Okay but should I not join still? There is very little I can do to help with that."

Mike nodded, "True but I still want you to stay here." He turned to Kara and Alexandria, "Ideally, I

would like it if both of you can somehow get the others around to get in touch with you if these Crimsons show up while we are gone."

Adam chuckled at that, "I get it now, so you go hunt them down and if somehow they get flushed out then we can head to their location faster than either of you could."

Mike smiled and Anna added, "There is also the added bonus that both Iris and you have fought Crimsons before. So, if it comes down to a fight then you two should be able to handle them with very few problems and still keep this place defended with Alex and Rosa here, depending on how it goes." She smiled at Kara, "We will make sure to end this one way or the other."

As both her and Mike made their way to the door to the house, Alexandria ran in their direction and silently asked Anna a question. "Ah, for tonight with Rosa... should I do anything?"

Anna gave her a warm smile, "Don't worry about it – just be yourself."

Alex was still worried, "That's not really the answer I was looking for."

"I know, but given tonight and how things happened I think that answer is probably the best one I can give." With that said Alexandria let her go. Kara then showed them all to free rooms they could use for the night. "It will probably be best if you take a look at the land and crops with Alan in the morning, so for now rest up while you can."

Adam took a different path, "I'll go keep watch for the night and then I'll rest up early morning, that way everyone can sleep soundly."

Very late in the night Rosamia woke up crying her eyes out, "No, no, no, Richard why? Oh Alex I'm so so sorry. How will I ever pay you back for what you have lost?" Alexandria sat next to her, as Rosamia grabbed her and continued crying. Alex

had now figured that she had woken up when she had gotten the news that her father had used most of his life energy to restore Rosamia, using the spell that Alex herself was about to cast before he forcefully stopped her.

Alex never saw how Rosamia reacted to the news because at the time, she was unable to. She had locked herself in her house avoiding everyone and the situation itself. Looking back now, she regretted what she did and started crying herself. "It's okay Rosa, he did it to save me... and you did that to save everyone else." She paused for a bit, "I'm just so sorry I was not there when you were told."

Rosa nodded, "I hope you know that if I could take it back and never cast the spell in the first place... I would in a second."

Still crying Alex blurted out, "I know... I know..."

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Adam was standing outside near Rosamia's room as he saw Iris approach him, "You should be sleeping."

Iris shrugged, "I did for a while but then woke up and figured I would check up on you." She looked at the room, "Hmm, Alex cast a spell to make sure no noise would escape the room. I guess she wanted to make sure no one would wake up during the night because of..." She stopped talking realizing that Adam was paying little attention, "I guess it's really hard for you to know that she gets weak like this every night."

Adam smiled, "Actually, you have it wrong there. I'm sad for sure but I don't see her as being weak at all." He turned to look at Iris's puzzled expression. "Now that we know, she could probably ask Alex or you to help her try and magically forget

or to put her in a deeper sleep of some sort. Instead she decided to face all the moments in her life all over again, good, bad and also the traumatizing ones." He took a moment before continuing, "I'm starting to deal with my issues and inner-demons but there is no way that I would want to face them all over again like that. I'm not sure I could find the courage that she is finding to be able to mentally come back from that night after night." He saw that Iris understood how he viewed the situation and smiled, "So yeah, not weak at all but very very brave and strong."

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It was midday the next day and Alexandria was taking a break when her pendant activated to have Anna show up. "Hi, just checking in. How is it going on your side?"

Alex thought about it, "Well, turns out I was right and there is a spell that's active but it's on the land not the crops. Thing is that it's a holy spell not arcane magic, which confirms that those Crimsons are in fact working with the clerics. As for the spell itself, from what Rosa told me it's only a partial spell and there is another part to it she has yet to figure out. As for the current that is active it seems like it's a reverse protection spell on the land. Essentially, it's 'protecting' the land so the crops do not get their normal nutrients from it, causing them to die. Indirectly, the people have figured out that if they manually add more nutrients eventually things start to get better, the reason that is happening is because essentially doing that is weakening the spell because it has to work more in order to do its task."

"So, the power of the spell is being diminished by their constant attacks on it then."

Alexandria smiled, "You got it exactly. Unfortunately, the sad part comes in when they show up again and then repower the spell, which negates all their hard work." Alexandria looked to the side, "Currently, Rosamia and Iris are doing their best to remove it, but they can only do sections at a time which is making the progress very slow." She turned back to Anna, "As for me I created flare stones that Kara's family is currently passing around to the other houses. If anyone shows up they are instructed to just throw the stone in the air and that will create a flare effect we will be able to see night or day."

Alex had a very concerned look on her face, "The issue with that is will they trust us enough to use it? Kara figured that if it was one of them who went over it may help out in that matter but still it makes me wonder."

Anna nodded, "Then you have done all you can, it's up to them to choose to take the help and it's not on you if they decide not to." She knew Alex already knew this but hoped that being reminded would help ease her conscience a bit. Seeing as it did very little she moved on to their update to change her focus a bit, "As for us we visited the hideout the bandits used the last time. Unfortunately while we did find evidence they had been there it also told us they had moved to another location. We think we have found their current trail but it's leading us back into the farmlands that Kara's family owns. We think we are getting close, which made us wonder about something. Is there a way you can reach our location quickly?"

Alexandria gave her a big smile and pointed to the pendant, "In theory with this, assuming you hold one of its pairs, you can easily find the location of the other the same way you two used to

with your original rings. So if you need us it will just take me a little while to find out where you are and then we can teleport to your location."

"That's good to know. I'll contact you when or if that time comes." Anna then remembered something, "By the way, before I head back to Mike, how are you doing?"

Alex let a small weak chuckle escape her, "I take it that you are referring to last night." Alex gave Anna a warm smile, "I'm fine, we both are. While it was happening I guess we both realized that we never dealt with those feelings we caused each other during that time, her with my father and me by avoiding her and everyone else. In a way now that we both have talked about it the only leftover feeling we still hold on to, not so secretly, is the shame that it took us so long to approach the subject and that something like that was needed to break the ice." Before Anna could interject Alex raised her hand to stop her and continued, "But don't worry about that, now that the ice is broken we don't plan on leaving things as they are. We both want to move forward but this time without subconsciously or maybe a bit consciously pushing it aside."

Anna was glad for many reasons but the main one being that no matter what happens at least this event has helped in some capacity to heal or at least start the process. "I'm very happy there was a positive outcome from this. Thanks for sharing it with me." Anna smiled and then turned to look the other way, "Well I should head back, we will contact you again. In the meantime take care." And with that the magical floating head of Anna disappeared. Alexandria wondered about what Anna said, while it's true that something positive had finally occurred she wondered how it was going to end. She put those thoughts away, '*It does*



*not matter, no matter what we will pull through somehow, I just know it.'*

It had taken Mike and Anna a lot longer than expected but at least they had not missed their timing. They rushed to get to a possible location for the group to hide and they found them as they stepped foot on Kara land once again. There were six Crimsons and one cleric, as soon as they found them both of them ducked below the crops to hide. Anna reached for her pendant, "Alex, any time now, they are right in front of us." As quickly as the communication magic took place she terminated it and focused on what was in front of them.

Mike turned to her, "Shall we?"

She nodded in confirmation and they both stood. Instantly, all Crusaders went into a defensive position and surprisingly the cleric moved behind them. This had both of them worried. One of the Crimsons pointed his sword at them, "We wondered if you two would eventually show up, I mean you are Julia's lap dogs right?"

Anna was furious, "At this time she knows nothing of this, and the sad part is that she will blame herself for your stupid actions."

The man looked at his brothers at arms and laughed, "You can't stop us. It's impossible even for you two."

Mike smiled, "First mistake." As if on cue the rest of the group teleported behind them, Mike still looking ahead gave the order. "Alexandria, Rosamia you take the cleric. Everyone else deal with the ex-Crimsons." As the order was given, everyone on all sides rushed in.

Three Crimsons attacked Mike and Anna, one on him and two on her. To make it fair they both attacked them without using their enchantments. When Mike blocked the incoming hit holding his

sword with both hands he realized that this one was stronger than he was. The Crimson continued his assault with a thrust directed at his stomach. That was not a blow that his armor would protect him against so Mike parried by attacking the incoming weapon knocking it away from its target. "Why, why abandon the code as you did? Do you want to undo Julia's work so badly that you would stoop so low?"

The Crimson chuckled, "You know nothing. While there are some that have banded together to do just that we are not a part of them. Their eyes are still closed, but soon we will open them like ours have been opened." As his sword was knocked out of position due to Mike's parry the Crimson tried to tackle Mike and reposition his blade at the same time. Mike dogged to his left and continued to move left as the Crimson continued his attack with a horizontal slash of his sword. Due to the position of his enemy, Mike was able to counter with a hit of his own. The enemy was still quick enough to minimize the damage to his back, but the first hit was still his.

Two of them had moved to Anna and she did not appreciate the look they both gave her. One of them dove in with a sword thrust, "Not that it matters now but I'm still happy that we can finally destroy you. You poisoned us and destroyed us from the inside." Anna was able to move away but then quickly realized that the other jumped on her new position, she blocked the overhead swing with her sword. As soon as she did the Crimson pulled back once again on the defensive, "We have perfected our teamwork; it's only a matter of time."

Soon after, Anna saw what he was referring to. The first Crimson would always be on the attack, his moves were quick and decisive but also extremely by the book, which made him a bit easy

to predict and avoid. The issue was the other, who would always pounce right after her dodging or blocking a move. Anna was able to avoid his attacks as well but all this was making it so that she could not get one hit in herself. This was the teamwork they were probably boasting about. Still, it did not worry her in the least. She could have powered the enchantment and used it to break their weapons but instead she played at being their prey for a while longer. Anna was interested in showing them one final lesson before the end came for them.

As the attacker once again repositioned himself, "How long do you think you can..." He stopped and looked down at the sword tip that was now piercing through his chest. He turned slowly to see that Mike had attacked him by stabbing him in the back as he avoided the blow of his own target. Mike did not turn as he pulled out his sword, "When you are done help me out with this one, he's very persistent and strong."

Anna turned and gave a wicked grin to her last attacker, "That is true teamwork. I figured I would show you before you perish." Shaking off what had happened, the Crimson charged at her with an overhead attack. Anna used her blade to block and as the blades connected she used her momentum and pushed his swing, making him go off balance a bit. This bit was all that was needed for her to perform a combo using a vertical slash to his side and then a thrust motion to stab at his chest. He dropped to the ground and she joined up with Mike.

Only one had targeted Iris, and she did not know how she should feel about that. Her attacker was approaching her in a very sloppy way. "I think I remember you. You joined in as soon as I left I think, and you think that you are done with your

training already? Pfft, seriously you being here just strengthened my resolve."

Iris stared at him. Clearly he did not treat her as a threat whatsoever. Mentally she pulled back her emotions and a desperate need to jump on him and prove him wrong. Instead she managed to keep her cool and bait him back, "Oh, you mean your resolve to kill innocent and sometimes defenceless people? I'm so glad that I had the new training then. It seems the old one had flaws in it." She realized that saying so had managed to push some of his buttons as he charged at her with a wide horizontal swing.

As she moved away he spat in her direction, "You know nothing of the burden we are taking on, and you are all fools in thinking you are doing the right thing. Once I kill you then you will see how wrong you are, how wasteful your life really was." Normally that would have done it for Iris, but there was something odd that she saw as the Crimson spat his nonsense. Sure there was rage behind it but there was also a lot of conviction, like a man who had seen something and realized a new truth for himself. Once again she calmed herself and tried to see if she could learn more.

Adam was simply standing defenceless as the two Crimson's circled around him. "So Crimson's versus Crusader, now we can see whose skills are better." Adam did not take his bait, if that was truly what he was interested in then this battle would have been one on one. Adam then spotted a signal and both Crimson's attacked with a thrust manoeuvre, one of them aimed in the front and the other in the back. He supposed that the plan would have been to limit his movements in order to prepare their next attack or to skewer him. Both outcomes missed in a blink of an eye as Adam moved away. He had noticed that the others had,

for some reason, decided not to go all out against these fools. During a certain raid in Calculus with Julia and Rosa against reborns he had learned how dangerous that could be and he would not repeat the same mistake.

As the Crimson's tried to flank him once again Adam charged at his targets. His first attack was aimed at the chest of the smaller of the two; to his surprise the man was able to block it. After looking at the expression on his face, Adam realized that the block had been a fluke on his part probably due to this person's natural speed and combat experience. Adam continued his charge with his other weapon and brushed off this minor setback. This next target was big and strong and wielded a much larger and heavier sword than the other. Seeing as the man looked right handed Adam aimed to slash his right abdomen, while the hit was not deep enough to kill it did hit. Adam then turned and prepared another charge, this time he aimed only at the smaller one. As he charged in he purposely slowed down his first attack aimed at the Crimson's heart. He responded as expected by blocking the blow with his weapon, Adam then drove his second blade at full speed at the target's tibia. The weapon pierced through the leg guard he was wearing and shattered the bone. Adam let go of the weapon as the Crimson fell down to his knee. As the Crimson screamed in pain. Adam twisted around to avoid the swing of the other Crimson.

Obviously, Adam twisted to the right, forcing the Crimson into using a horizontal right swing for his next attack. This caused the side wound to worsen, and the blow to weaken in strength and speed. When the Crimson tried to move past the pain and reposition himself, Adam got behind him and stabbed in the back with his remaining

weapon. Adam let go of his second weapon and grabbed the falling Crimson by the top of his armor. His other target was still in the same spot but had positioned himself in a defensive way.

Adam looked at him, "I have to admit that you people are tenacious." He then pushed the heavier Crimson in order for him to land on the other. Seeing as there was no way for the pinned down Crimson to move the thrown body landed squarely on him and toppled him to the ground. Adam approached the mess and pulled out his sword and then stabbed downward with as much strength as he had, finishing the two with the same blow. He picked up his other blade and looked around. Anna and Mike were a few seconds away from finishing but Iris was still at it. "Iris, stop playing with your target."

Hearing that Iris's target chuckled, "She is not playing she's having difficulties that's all." Iris dodged the attack and positioned herself behind him. Throughout the match, she had been holding back her actual speed, so as the target turned around she jumped at him with both blades. The first one was aimed his chest which he barely parried by pushing her attack to the side, the second used the momentum of the block to create an upward slash to his head, which he was unable to block and died instantly. Iris nodded, "I was not playing or having difficulties, I was trying to get some information that's all."

Adam got closer to her, "Hmm, well was it worth it?"

She sighed, "Sadly, I'm not sure."

For some time now, Alex and Rosamia had been looking at the cleric that had yet to attack. "So he has not transformed yet..."

Rosamia nodded, "So it seems."

Alexandria faced the cleric, "Should we give

you more time to... prepare? I mean what's the point of just standing around?"

The cleric laughed, "The point is that in a few moments all this will be destroyed. Do you have any clue what that will do to everyone around?"

Rosamia was puzzled, "Why do you think we will allow you to do that?"

He chuckled, "Stop me? My my, my... it's too late for that. You can't stop me. My only regret is that you made us speed up our timetable and my brothers are not here to see this happen."

Alexandria looked at Rosa and then the cleric, "If you mean the other clerics in Capio, well you would have waited a long time for them to come back because they're dead." She pointed at Rosa, "She took care of them."

He was baffled, "One single priestess against two dark clerics, how gullible do you think I am? Still I do know who you people are and do believe that you did somehow kill them." His face now showed anger, "At least I'll be able to avenge my brothers then, so that's an extra bonus." He then extended his hand in the direction of Rosa and a jet of black energy shot at her. Rosa raised her hand and a glowing shield appeared and blocked the blow. Right after, the cleric fell to the ground.

Alexandria once again looked at Rosa, "So, that's it?"

With a concerned look on her face Rosa answered, "So it seems..." Which made no sense to both of them. Cautiously, they approached the cleric. With a closer inspection they realized the cleric was near death. Rosamia got closer to him, "I hate to do this but I'll heal him just enough to heal some of his wounds, get ready just in case."

Alexandria looked at the cleric more closely and nodded, "Will do but I'm not sure it will make any difference." Rosamia still cast the spell and

then saw that Alex had been right, no change occurred to him.

Rosa looked at Alex puzzled, "Could it be that last blow was all he had left?"

Alex shrugged, "It seems like it, but if that's the case what was all that boasting about?" When she finished her sentence the cleric started to convulse. Both of them looked at each other, "A death spell!"

They both moved back as the spell activated upon the death of the caster. Suddenly, black liquid was coming out of his body and seeping into the ground. Both started to cast a detection and identification spell in order to figure out what was happening. Alexandria got some of the information being that the spell was of a different type, still with what she had learned she quickly pieced the puzzle together. She turned to Rosa, "Are you seeing the same thing I am?"

Rosa nodded, "Yes, but I don't know how to stop it. Can you burn it all up?"

Alex looked at her wide-eyed, "Ah... not like this. It's growing too fast and I would have to incinerate everything around this location – that takes time." She then looked behind her, with a magical detection spell. "It's already almost taken this section, it's just too fast."

The rest of the group arrived next to them, when they looked at the cleric they realized the crops around him had all died. As they looked around they saw this was starting to happen all around them. Anna figured this was part of the second spell that Alex had mentioned that was missing earlier, "Any way to stop this?"

Alexandria shook her head, "Not really, I mean yes, but we need time. Currently the spell is infecting the crops that were already near death due to the anti-protection spell on the land that



was killing them. When the crop actually dies the spell jumps to the next."

Mike stepped in trying to understand the scope of the spell, "Is it only going to affect the land that was affected by the anti-protection spell?"

Before Alex could answer Iris jumped in, "No, I see it now too. The anti-protection spell was used as a catalyst to weaken the crops for this second spell. Now that it's started like this it will just keep jumping from crop to crop until it can't reach the other and with the way things are placed here..."

Mike nodded, "The way they are placed here the whole town will be destroyed, removing all the crops in one shot creating a massive cut in this place's ability to feed most people everywhere." Anna turned to Alex, "You said that you could stop it, how?"

"The only way I can stop this is by removing the target, essentially burning all crops around so that the spell can't jump anymore and then incinerate the dead or dying ones. But in order to do that it needs to stop growing for a while." She looked around, "In a few minutes all of Kara's lands will soon be done for... I'm sorry but this time I don't have an answer to this one, well none that I can use anyways."

Rosamia looked at Alex and Iris, "I think I can give you the time you need, it's a long shot but I think it will work. I'll cast a stasis spell. In theory the crops are living things and the spell should halt or slow down time enough for you to create a zone where it will not be able to jump anymore."

Alex looked at Rosamia wide-eyed, "Ahh... I guess that could work... but uh, how are you going to cast it? The spell range needed is..."

Iris jumped in, "I'll help her out, maybe both of us can do it."

Rosamia disagreed, "You need to help her

create that zone. I'll need to be constantly feeding the spell power in order to hold it for that wide of a range and can only do that for so long, so both of you get ready and do your work fast."

Rosamia took a large breath to calm herself and then started the casting. Mike moved closer to Alex and whispered, "Can she do that?" Alexandria shook her head from side to side confirming that the plan should fail. Rosamia closed her eyes and focused all the energy she had and then reached deeper to find more. When she was ready she turned and unleashed a stasis spell. Only Alex and Iris were in a position to confirm what was happening, but by the look on their faces it seems that Rosamia was somehow doing what she said she would do.

As the spell finished Alexandria could not believe it. She moved closer to Rosa who was still focusing on keeping the spell active, as she looked at her she understood how she had performed the 'miracle' spell. Quickly she pointed to one side of the land, "Iris you take that side and I'll take the other. Ideally, we reach in the middle... Just hurry, the sooner Rosa is done the better." Iris had a few questions but kept them to herself and used a flying spell to go to the edge of the spell on the side that had been indicated. Alexandria turned and did the same.

This left three members looking at each other with very concerned looks. They approached Rosamia and looked at her as Alex had. Adam instantly cursed using every word he knew. Anna wanted to reach out to Rosa but did not want to risk canceling the spell she was currently focusing on. Rosamia's eyes were glowing bright golden, when the initial shock of that was gone they all wondered what price would have to be paid for the help that was currently being given.

## Chapter 7

A good half hour had passed in order for Iris and Alex to return. When they did, Rosamia stopped channeling energy in the stasis spell. She smiled and then dropped to the ground. Adam instantly went to her side and cast a healing spell not knowing if it was needed, as he realized that her breathing was normal he stopped. He turned to the others, "She just passed out. I'll get her back to the house so she can rest properly." Adam lifted her up and started walking.

Alex looked at Adam leave, "I hope she wakes up okay, I mean this is not the same as last time right?" Anna reached out to Alex and hugged her, "No it's not the same, there was no Valkyrie and her life is not being drained away. So don't worry it's not like the last time at all." Alex was holding back the tears, "Okay, you're right. Yeah yeah, it's just like when I closed that portal and needed to rest for a bit."

Iris reached out to Alexandria as well, "Let's finish up here and then we can make sure that she wakes up, okay?" Alex slowly nodded and as Anna let her go she followed Iris. Before leaving Iris turned to Mike and Anna, "It's probably best if you two head back as well. It will take us a long while to get rid of the dead crops. At the same time, inform the family to stay in the house at all times until we are done. The last thing we need for someone to get caught in an incinerate spell radius."

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It took the rest of the day to accomplish their task.

When they arrived at Kara's home they both looked exhausted. Kara looked at them, "Will you want food?"

Alex shook her head, "We will check up on Rosamia and then head to bed." She paused and looked to Iris and then turned to Kara with a sad look in her eyes, "We are so sorry for what happened. I promise you we will figure something out but it will have to wait until tomorrow."

Kara figured out what she was talking about and gave Alex a small smile, "Don't worry about that right now. The attacks will stop and all the other lands are safe and that's as important. Worry about your friend and once things are resolved then we can talk." They both smiled and slowly made their way to Rosa's room.

Rosamia was still unconscious. Both Mike and Anna were sitting on small stools and Adam was next to Rosa holding her hand just staring with a worried look on his face. Iris first stepped in, "Still no change?"

Anna nodded, "No, but Adam reconfirmed with his spells that she is just unconscious so maybe it is like Alexandria mentioned."

Alex stepped in, "Hmm, well if that is the case then she should be like that for a few days. We should take turns watching her..."

Adam cut her off, "No I'll stay with her. This time I'll be here when she wakes up."

Alex wanted to tell him that it would be physically impossible but she just did not have the heart to.

Mike stood, "All right then, Adam we will leave her to you and check up on both of you in the morning." Seeing as no one wanted to argue they all left and did what they were told.

The next morning the group figured they would head in together to convince Adam to take a

small break. As they got to the door they heard a voice, "I'm telling you I'm okay, it's fine now." Alexandria looked at everyone else, "But that makes no sense..." She turned and opened the door to Rosa's room. There they all saw Rosamia sitting in her bed with Adam next to her still holding her hand.

As soon as Rosamia saw them she gave them all a warm smile, "I take it that the long shot paid off?"

Alexandria jumped on the bed and gave Rosamia a big hug. Anna took Mike's hand. They looked at each other and smiled; she had pulled through and seemed normal. Iris moved and kneeled next to Adam and Rosa and took hold of both their hands, "We figured you would be out cold for a least a few days, what happened?"

Alexandria gave Rosamia some breathing room as she once again gave them all a warm smile, "I'll tell you what I told Adam. As I was casting the spell, I knew that the range of it would be a problem so I dug down and used everything I had. Once I reached the bottom I realized that there seemed to be more that I could use, so I grabbed that as well. The rest of my time was spent in a haze trying to maintain the spell. The only other things I remember is when I saw both of you return I figured I could stop the spell. When I did I just dropped." She looked at Alex, "I guess now I know how you felt when you collapsed as well and you're right it's not a very pleasant experience." Alex smiled, half-baffled but too happy to care about it.

Mike looked at everyone, they were all so happy and so was he but there was something they were all avoiding. He checked for a sign from Anna and when he saw none he looked at Rosa, ignoring Adam's gaze. "I hope you don't mind me asking but are you sure that's all there was to it? The reason I

ask is while you were casting the spell your eyes glowed like they do when that presence takes over."

Rosamia's reaction of utter confusion was a surprise to all. She took time to think about it again and go over the events she remembered. "No, I have no clue what that means. I know what you are asking but not this time, there was no price there was no deal and there was no hidden spell. Actually if you had not mentioned it then I would not have known at all."

Iris looked at everyone, "It could be possible that it decided to help out just because. I mean the presence is linked to the lord of light so it could be possible, right?"

Rosamia was worried, she had hidden so many things from them but this time it was as she had said but would they believe her? Her worries were washed away when she saw Mike and Anna smile at each other and then look back to her, "I guess Iris may be right. Still, just in case it's something you are not aware of please let Alexandria and Iris check you out, again just to make sure."

Rosamia smiled and nodded, "No problems here, I would not mind the confirmation as well." She paused for a second, "But first can we get something to eat? I'm really hungry for some reason."

Anna smiled and then turned around, "I'll go see if that can be arranged." Mike followed her out.

Alex gave her another big hug and then reached out to Iris, "Let go help out if we can."

Rosamia looked at Adam. During the whole time he did not say a word or react to anything. She let go of his hand and then reached out to wrap her arms around him. As she felt his warmth she could hear him whisper, "I'm so happy you are still with me."

She smiled and gave him a kiss on the top of

his head, "I'm happy too. Now come on and let's go join the others otherwise they will start worrying again."

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As they sat down Rosamia realized that a special breakfast had been prepared for them seeing as most of the family had already eaten at this time of day. Currently at the table were the rest of the group including Kara and her husband Andrew who was also now present after coming back from attending the group meeting. Rosamia looked at both of them and wondered what would happen now, "I'm sorry for what happened to your land... It just never occurred to me that a death spell would be used to trigger the other spell and because of that..."

Andrew raised his hand to tell her to stop, "From what I was told you being here saved the region. If not for you, in a matter of time all families would be in a worse situation than we are now not to mention the cities and towns we could not feed anymore." He turned to his wife, "Also, now that they are gone we are safe again and don't have to fear that other members will be killed due to those people." He looked back at Rosa, "That's a pretty important thing too if you ask us."

Rosamia gave them a weak smile. These were good people who had sheltered and fed them and it was sad they had taken the biggest hit in all this and there was little they could do to help.

Iris turned to Kara and Andrew, "What are your plans for now? Can nothing be salvaged?"

Andrew thought about it, "We are still assessing the damage at this time but from the looks of it we lost two-thirds of our useable land. Now eventually a part of the land will recover from what we are seeing but that will be in a few years

and will still leave at least half that will be unuseable for an undetermined period." Iris looked at Alex, seems she was also feeling a bit guilty after hearing that.

Kara smiled at both of them, "Again don't worry about it, you did what you needed to do." She took Andrew's hand, "We will figure out something, I mean we can still stay here but we will probably need to split up the family in order for it to work out."

Anna was shocked and so was everyone else in the group, she turned to Kara with a very concerned look on her face. "It's that's bad?"

Again Kara smiled, "It's not as bad as you all think. We are all farmers and these are the only lands that we can farm on so when I mean split the family it mostly means some of our members will now go and help the other houses that need help. This happens often, mostly if a family gets to be too big for the land they take care of or if another family is having issues growing."

Andrew nodded and turned to everyone, "It's not like they will all be leaving and we will never see them again and while this will be sad for us it does have to happen in one form or another." He looked at his wife and smiled, "But truthfully, we still have to talk about it."

Anna got closer to Mike and whispered, "Don't you think that maybe their problem could be resolved by another place we are already meddling in?"

Mike smiled, "I was, actually, but at the same time I think I may be asking too much again."

She nodded, "I say go for it, no harm in asking."

Mike turned to Andrew and Kara, "You know, what you said is not really true by the way. There are other lands that grow crops that are not here



that could use help from an expert family."

The couple looked at each other, and Andrew nodded, "You must be mistaken."

Mike then informed them of this town that was also growing food to help with the protection of it, the information seemed to puzzle both husband and wife.

Andrew explained, "What's odd about what you say is that people from Capio send people from time to time across the land to see if other sections could be used but they always return empty. How big are we talking here?"

Mike shrugged, "Not sure – about half of what you had for sure, but that's not saying it's the maximum size that can be used."

Kara looked at Andrew and then to Mike and Anna, "Look I realize where you are going with this but there is a lot to consider..."

Alexandria gave a small chuckle, "Sorry to rain on the possible parade and I really hate doing this, but once again we need Calculus's approval for this. There could be political issues involved here that the Guilds may not want to deal with..."

Iris turned to Alex, "What's going on? Is someone trying to reach you?" Alexandria nodded in confirmation, which puzzled Adam. "How many ways do mages have to communicate with each other? And do you really need that many?"

Now finished with the short message Alexandria smirked, "It's not that many really. It's more the same two base spells that have been transformed and combined to increase its distance, amount of information and other factors." She then turned to everyone else, "In this particular case it's an urgent message from Bernard from Calculus. Seems that the head priestess Jessica needs to talk to us. He mentioned to use a certain communication spell that would allow us all to

hear and to use it as soon as I could."

Mike smiled at that, "That sounds perfect once we get in touch we can also ask about asking the Guilds if they would be..."

Andrew cut him off, "It's okay. Like we said, we will figure something out."

Anna looked at Mike and then the couple, "Please understand that we are not trying to force you into doing anything you don't want to. If the Guilds say no then it's done, but if they say yes then maybe you can check it out and see if it's a better option. We are only being so insistent about it because we think that maybe it would be a good choice for you considering how things are here now. But in the end this is your choice to accept or not. We just want to try and give you another option. Considering what happened I'm sure we all feel that it's the least we can do."

Andrew looked at Kara and they both smiled and slumped their shoulders, "We told you that you have nothing to feel guilty about, but still you're right. This could be a good option for us considering the situation. So if it's not too much trouble..."

Alexandria smiled and cut in, "No trouble at all, I'll make the request myself." She then looked around and moved some plates around to clear the middle of the table.

Mike was wondering what she was doing, "Are you going to contact him now?"

Alexandria shrugged, "I might as well, for him to contact me like this is... well odd. I'm sure you'll understand what I mean soon." She then took out a white chalk from one of her pockets and started scribing on the table. Andrew and Kara started to get up when Alexandria stopped them, "You two may as well stay, I mean you will be the topic of conversation at one point." She then turned to

everyone, "This version of the spell is very basic, meaning that it will only be sound that will travel from one place to the other. So if you say nothing then no one will know you are here."

Once she was done with the marking she said the incantation for the spell, as she finished the markings glowed and then lifted themselves off the table and then disappeared only to have a small white floating glowing ball appear in its place. "Bernard, are you there?"

"Oh ... ah... Miss Alexandria, oh my, that was very quick. I'm so sorry to have contacted you this way. Normally I would have been more formal about it and followed the proper procedures for contacting someone such as yourself but lady Jessica was very insistent..."

Alexandria took a deep breath, she had known Bernard now for a few years and as many times as she had insisted that he drop the formalities he never did. He was a good guy but he always insisted on putting her on a pedestal, which was something Alexandria hated but also realized that it came with the position she held. "It's all right, Bernard. We were just talking with some new friends about a possible future when I got your message. Now is Jessica around or can you relay the message?"

"Ah well, I do know of it yes, but if it's okay to make you wait a few seconds then I can go get her. She is still in my tower and has not left yet."

"Then please go get her, waiting is fine."

While he was gone Iris wondered about something, "I've never met Bernard, you have talked about him here and there but never mentioned how nervous he sounds when he's talking to you." Iris gave Alex a little grin, "Is there something that a concerned sister should know about?" Alexandria wondered what she was talking

about because she had no clue what Iris was trying to imply. She then realized Adam was smiling and giving her winks.

Her eyes went wide when she understood. "Oh no... God no, I mean he's just hung up on formality that's all. Because of my position, relationships are a big problem so I tend not to think about it at all and would like to keep it that way."

"Miss Alexandria, I'm back with Lady Jessica, did you say something while I was gone?" Alexandria could see that Adam still had a big grin on his face. She picked up the first thing that was close to her, which was part of a loaf of bread and threw it at his face. She gave him a serious glare as he caught it with his hand. "No, you missed nothing, Bernard."

Jessica's voice could then be heard, she sounded a bit anxious. "I hope Bernard is in no trouble, I was the one who forced him to do it so..."

Alexandria cut her off, "He's not, no matter what he has told you I've told him that he could contact me anytime if it was important."

There was a small pause and then Jessica continued, "Well, I still want to apologize then because this is a personal request really and could put you in trouble if you decide to help."

Rosamia was now worried, "Just tell us what it's about. Given our past I don't see that we would not help, personal or otherwise."

"Hmm, that's the reason I'm hesitant about this but it needs to be done and you are the only people I know who can help. Essentially a dear friend of mine told me that the Crusaders posted at the Portal Tower have gone silent."

This made worried looks appear on everyone's face, Adam's in particular. "Have they been attacked by someone?"

"It's the other way around actually. It seems

that anyone who comes close to the tower is being attacked by the Crusaders supposedly guarding the tower. Now this friend swears to me on her life that there has to be something happening to them. You see she is very close to one of them and there is no way he would do something like that."

Mike shrugged, "So you just want us to check it out? That's not an issue at all."

"There is more, and this is why you have to hurry. Because of their action a certain branch of Crusaders have been sent."

Rosamia shook her head, "Oh no, don't tell me that the High Order approved the Enforcers to go out and deal with this?"

"... They should be there in about three days. Rosa, there are about forty Crusaders posted there and you of all people know what's going to happen to them. Most people I know are tied to the Order so they can't help with this, nor can Kyle."

Mike and Anna were confused, "Rosamia, who are these Enforcers? This is the first we have heard of them."

Adam answered for her, "I did not mention it because they are very small but essentially they are the group of Crusaders that deal with issues that Crusaders cause. They are sanctioned to deal with the issue as they see fit. Overall they are fair but if it's true that they have attacked people then chances are they will be sentenced to death right then and there."

Mike looked at Anna, "Well I guess that leaves us very few options then. Alexandria is it possible to magically transport us to Calculus? Otherwise, I don't think we'll make it in time. Once there we can grab horses and we should make it before they do."

Alex turned to the glowing ball, "Bernard, can you activate another gate spell from your end in

about one hour?"

"That should be fine."

Jessica then added to Bernard's confirmation, "Thanks, I'll let my friend know that her request is in good hands and I'll also prepare the horses. Will you need anything else?"

Anna looked at Andrew and Kara who were still sitting silently at the table, "Actually while we do this would it be possible to get a meeting set up with the Guilds? We have another request."

Jessica sounded curious, "I can ask Kyle but the Guilds are very busy these days and are still finalizing your last request. What is this one about if you don't mind me asking?"

Anna provided the details of what had happened and what they were requesting Guild approval for.

"Hmm, it was very fortunate you were there at the right time. I don't see that there would be any issues with someone going over and checking the lands. I'm pretty sure the Guilds would be very interested in knowing the outcome of what is found. I think that they were told by Capio that the land would have limited use but I don't know the details. I can ask Kyle to help out with that while you are helping me if you wish."

Anna turned to Andrew and Kara again, Andrew nodded his head in confirmation. "Sounds like a plan. I guess we will see you all in about one hour."

"I'll make sure everything is ready and thanks again."

Alexandria then cut the magic to the spell and the ball simply disappeared. Mike stood up, "I suggest we all get ready, this maybe a complicated one as well."

The hour passed quickly, first Alex and Iris gave Rosamia a clean bill of health, which

reassured everyone. After that they were informed that Andrew and Alan would follow them on their trip. They mostly mentioned that at this time they are more interested to see if Capio was lying to everyone somehow. Alexandria gave the specifics to Iris for the gate spell while she worked on something else.

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When the time came, everyone was ready at the front of the gate. Before walking in Alexandria pulled out two glass orbs and gave one to Andrew and the other to Kara. "If anything happens and you need to contact the other person simply break the orb and say a quick message. That message will then be received by the other orb which will start glowing. At that point again break the orb and you will hear the message." They both thanked her.

Rosamia approached Alex, "Can you do that with all spells now? I mean you did it before with that flame enchantment when we attacked the avatar and now this."

"Sadly, no I can't. Kilor started to show me the particulars of how to do it properly. For the flame enchantment the duration was very small and also after a while the spell effect would disappear and render the vial useless. This version is like the dwarves' so it's permanent. It's a tricky and very draining thing to do properly actually. But the idea is to use the item at a much later time so you should recover from the energy loss. So far I can only do it with minor spells."

Anna hugged Kara and said her goodbyes and stepped through the gate with Mike, the others waved at her and followed after. Andrew gave his wife a kiss and mentioned that he would be back soon. He and Alan then stepped through the gate

and as soon as he put his foot down he was on the other side in what looked like a stone circular tower.

He was then introduced to Bernard and Jessica who informed everyone that she and five members of the city guard would personally escort them to the town and back. Anna made sure that Andrew and Alan were okay with everything and then they set off to the Portal Tower.

Using the spell to speed up the horses the group made good time and would get there much faster than expected, which was good considering that the same could happen with the Enforcers. As they set up camp Mike approached the group, "I think we may want to switch things up a bit when we get there, plus maybe figure out a plan of attack if we have to fight forty Crusaders. Obviously, I think that Adam should take the lead but I wonder if Iris should stay with the group. Assuming that they all speed up magically we will be at a big disadvantage and may need Iris to defend us."

Adam thought about it, "They most likely will speed up and if we make it inside there will be very little room to use spells."

Anna jumped in, "Can the same spell not be used on us as well? I mean you use it and it's also used on the horses, right? So it's not like you can't cast it on others."

Iris nodded, "While you are right that it's the same spell being used, it's limited to livestock when cast on others."

Rosamia nodded in agreement, "Still, I think that you should join Adam in the front Iris, I'll stay with the group and help with the defence." Adam was puzzled, "Wait, I thought you had issues with that spell?"

"I know, but for some reason I'm pretty sure that everything will be okay now."



Alexandria broke the silence that followed that comment, "Hmm, while there are ways I can help I think that the best will be to create walls made of ice to block their paths as much as I can. If that is not an option I can create it around us to limit the ways that they can attack us."

Mike nodded, "That sounds like a good plan. Alexandria, Anna and I will stay on the defensive and Adam and Iris will go on the attack. Rosamia will be the swing person who helps whichever group needs the most help. Also, Adam, it's safe to say that we should all do our very best to try and not kill any of them."

Adam smirked, "That was the plan all along..."

Mike smiled at him, "I'm sure it was. I was just restating the obvious, in case."

The next day they finally arrived at the tower. So far, they had encountered no one along the way, which was puzzling. As they arrived at the entrance of the tower there were four Crusaders posted as guards. Adam motioned for everyone to wait, quietly he voiced his concern. "Something feels off. Can any of you detect anything?"

Alex went first with a simple detection spell covered with another spell to hide its effects, "Hmm, looks like you are right but whatever is affecting them is not arcane but holy and not one that I know so over to you, Rosa."

Rosa smiled and cast an identification spell, her smile then disappeared. "Oh this is much worse than we thought. They are possessed and it's very late in its course."

Alex was a bit nervous as Anna when she heard the news, "Ghosts again or something else? Please say something else."

Rosa focused on the spell a bit more and then terminated it, "It's demonic in nature." Iris and Alex looked at each other with concern while the

others were just confused on what that meant, because of this Rosamia explained. "Basically, the spirit of a daemon possesses you, first it will influence your choices and then you will lose control. As long as you are not further than that, the person can be healed." She pointed at the entrance again, "And if you are further than that, then that happens and there is no healing from that point."

The group all looked at the entrance where they saw an eight-foot full muscled red daemon walk and join the ranks of the other Crusaders. He was equipped with a flaming two-handed sword that he wielded as a one-handed.

Mike let a deep sigh escape, "Seriously... okay new plan. The attack group stays the same way and the defence group shifts to attack that thing. Rosamia it's probably best if you stay as was previously planned as well." They all acknowledged the plan and charged in.

As expected the Crusaders used their magic to speed up, Adam did the same but also boosted his strength as well. The first crusader approached him blade aimed at his chest, Adam parried the blow with his right blade and then flipped his other weapon and hit his target on the head with the pummel. With his strength modified, the helmet flew off and left the Crusader wobbling. Adam instantly attacked again at the base of the neck dropping his target on the ground. As he made sure that he was simply unconscious Adam checked the position of the others. What he saw made him smirk as Iris had already dropped two Crusaders.

She had enchanted her swords with lightning leaving very few ways for the Crusaders not to be shocked unconscious especially wearing all that metal. She quickly turned in his direction and gave

him a quick smirk, which basically told him that this time it would be him that would be left behind.

Rosamia saw that the other group was about to attack the daemon and the leftover Crusader had decided to head in her direction, which made him her first priority. As expected he aimed for her chest in order to perform a quick kill and move to the next, normally blocking a blow like this would be beyond her but with the magic of speed things were quite different. She used her spear to block the blow and then continued the momentum to attack him with the other end of the weapon aimed at his head. The Crusader blocked the blow with his free arm and then swung at her head to punch her. Rosa avoided the blow by stepping backwards and then counterattacked with the tip of her spear in an upward swing, which the Crusader avoided by stepping backwards. The Crusader then went in an attack position and charged at her again. At that point, Rosamia's holy spear spell had finally charged up, she aimed it at her target and let the spell go. He tried to move away but was not quick enough and got hit by the spell and was flung backward so hard he could not to stand up again.

Mike moved in first with his blade glowing pink. He did not know anything about this creature and was not about to take any chances. His first strike would be to the creature's side, he swung as fast as he could to gauge the daemon's reaction speed. As the blow was blocked by his flaming weapon, Anna jumped in behind him and tried to slash at his back. As the daemon turned around she only managed to hit the arm he used to block the blow. They then moved backward and let Alexandria send a lightning bolt directly at his chest, which he was unable to avoid. The daemon just stood there focusing. Anna and Mike looked at each other and pulled back even more next to Alex.

"Alexandria, something is odd it's getting much warmer around him."

Alex's eye went wide and she yelled, "*Rosa!* Protect the others."

Within a few seconds large flames erupted all around the daemon hitting everywhere at once. Mike and Anna hid behind Alex's magical shield, while the others had moved behind Rosa who was doing the same. As the flames continued Alex looked at the two next to her, "No worries, the shield will hold and eventually it will end."

Anna looked to her side as she saw an unconscious Crusader being incinerated by one of the flames that landed on him. "The issue is that we may not be able to wait."

Mike agreed, "Alexandria, can you get us closer to him?" She did as was asked and they slowly advanced near the daemon. When they got in striking range of the daemon's sword, he stopped his flames and prepared an overhead strike aimed at the middle of the shield. Instantly, Mike and Anna both charged forward and both landed a blow in the daemon's chest and released the enchantment. Two large holes appeared in his chest, he fell to the ground and then his whole body burned up leaving nothing behind.

Mike looked around at the scorch marks everywhere, "Well, they live up to their names. Does anyone know of a faster way to deal with this issue? Considering how far Rosamia mentioned the possession was I would hate to have more Crusaders turn while we are in the process fighting our way up every floor."

Rosamia thought about it, "From what I understand from my time as a member of the High Order there may be a way. If we are able to find the first person who was possessed, who is probably a daemon himself now and defeat it then we should

stop the possession spell that he has on these Crusaders. Mind you stopping the spell will do very little for those that have turned."

Mike nodded, "Okay, that's our target then. Ideally, once the spell ends the Crusaders around may start attacking the daemons that are next to them, which will help us out. Any idea where he would be?"

Rosamia pointed upwards, "They are very egotistical. I'm sure he is currently on the top looking at the future kingdom he thinks he will rule at one point."

Adam led the group onto the first floor, "Let's take the secret passageway then. It will lead us to the middle of the tower and then we can take the other that will lead us to the top."

As they made their way up, Anna turned to Rosa, "So if the lord of light created all of us and the lord of darkness created dragons and giants, how do daemons fit in?"

Rosamia simply shrugged not knowing how to answer her. A smile appeared on Alexandria's face. "That's simple really, the answer is ego."

Iris continued Alexandria's brief explanation, "We stumbled on that while looking at life magic. It seems that certain people or creatures, in the dragons' cases, figured that they too had reached a level where they could do as the lords of light and darkness had done and create a new being. Goblins and ogres were created by dragons and daemons by high members of the Order. Their goals were to try and create an angel it seems."

Adam smirked, "Seems like they failed on that one."

Alexandria nodded, "That's pretty much the case with all these creations, there is something wrong with all of them at their core. I guess there is something missing and if dragons can't figure it

out I don't see how any of us will any time soon."

The rest of the climb was spent in silence as they could hear movement coming from the floors they passed. Eventually they made their way to the door that led to the middle room of the tower.

Before Adam charged in Mike turned to Alexandria, "If there are two daemons on the other side can you occupy one of them?"

Alex looked at him with a confused look, "*Suuure*, send the five-foot-something beautiful blonde woman alone against an eight-foot daemon. I mean what can go wrong?"

While Mike looked confused, Iris raised her arm with an innocent look on her face, "If she does not want to I'll do it."

Alexandria smirked at Iris, "You have your job I have mine, don't worry, Mike, I'll be fine. Actually, I'm more worried about you two with no magical shield to protect you."

Ignoring the banter Adam waited until everyone was ready and then opened the passageway. In the room he counted six Crusaders and as guessed two daemons. Luckily, the passageway door was behind them so they should be able to knock out a few Crusaders before the real battle began. He let Iris go first, she instantly charged at two targets in front of her and hit them with the flat of her blade, that was once again enchanted with lightning, they spasmed for a second and dropped to the ground. Two Crusaders had now turned and were coming at her, she swung her blades at both of them letting the lightning spell fly at them. They tried to block it and succeeded but the lightning simply traveled to their weapons and then to them, dropping them as well on the ground in a matter of seconds.

Adam and Rosamia took the last two Crusaders as Mike and Anna charged at the first

daemon across the room leaving the closest one to Alexandria. Mike swung his enchantment at his target, which was blocked with his massive sword. The sword shattered and while the blast did hit the daemon in the chest, most of the energy had been spent causing only a wound that seemed to disturb the daemon very little. Having his complete attention Mike continued his charge nonetheless and tried unsuccessfully to avoid the massive hands that were now trying to catch him. Right as he was about to get a hold of Mike, Anna sneaked by and landed a strike on the daemon's side. The enchantment blow caused the daemon to reel backwards.

Meanwhile, Alexandria slowly walked to the eight-foot muscle-bound daemon, "Sure, no problems at all." The daemon charged at her with his blade, she then reacted and cast an ice spell at his feet instantly stopping him in his tracks. The daemon looked at his feet and then at Alex and started to laugh. This set Alexandria off, "Seriously, *laughter?* Well, see if you can laugh after this one." She channeled more and more energy and then launched another ice spell at her target, which he tried to block it with his sword. It had little effect as the spell covered the whole daemon in a giant cone of ice. Alexandria got close to the daemon popsicle, who was already channeling his flames to break out of the spell. "Hmm, let's apply another layer just in case." Afterward, the ice was so thick you could not even see what was inside anymore.

Mike and Anna had backed their target to the wall. At this point, it was only a matter of time before they could land the killing blow. Seeing this for himself the daemon roared in anger and the air around Mike and Anna started to warm up very quickly. They moved backward as quickly as they could as Alexandria rushed in with a lightning

spell that hit him square in his chest. With his other wounds the daemon finally fell and disintegrated.

Iris looked back only to notice that Alexandria's ice block was now glowing white. Not having time to think she just reacted and dropped her weapons and extended her hands and created a shield as wide as she could to protect everyone, Crusaders included. The daemon broke free of his ice prison and sent waves of fire everywhere in anger. As the flames landed on Iris's shield, diminishing its energy rapidly, she closed her eyes, "Please hold, please hold..." Soon after she felt a hand on her shoulder and turned to see Rosamia.

"Don't worry I'll take it from here." Soon after, another shield appeared but this one was wrapping itself around the daemon stopping the flames entirely. Iris looked again at Rosamia, whose eyes once again glowed golden.

Rosamia focused all her energy on the shield, she would not let anything escape. Seeing as his tactic had little effect, the daemon started to move toward Rosamia. She looked to both sides to see that Iris and Alexandria were ready with lightning dancing in their hands. She smiled and let the shield drop, as soon as it did four bolts of lightning hit the daemon. He instantly fell and disintegrated.

As everyone checked to make sure that everyone was okay, Iris realized that Rosamia's eyes were once again normal and as the last time she seemed not to have realized that it had happened at all. *'Oh Rosa, will you truly be all right after all this?'*

They resumed the climb using the second secret passageway and eventually reached the floor below the top of the tower. In a rare occurrence, the floor was empty; Alexandria took the time to prepare five ice spells in order for her to be able to



cast them on a whim. They all figured that this next daemon would probably be very hard to take down considering how much power his minion displayed. As the group took the last flight of stairs they all felt a warm wind. When they reached the top they realized what was causing the sudden heat wave.

This daemon was a foot taller than the rest and also had large bat-like wings attached to his back and his large sword had runes etched all along its blade. As if that alone was not enough he also had a large fire shield all around him. They could all feel its heat. There was no way to approach him normally without being burned alive. The daemon just stood in front of them unmoving, waiting.

Adam thought about anything that he could do but nothing came to mind, "There is no way that I'm fast enough to get close to that thing and survive..." Alexandria put her hand on his chest and muttered a spell and then a shimmering light shielded Adam all around his body.

"There is a limit for the shield to cancel out all magic directed at you but it should hold for a while. If you see the shimmer again disengage as fast as you can."

Adam nodded, he could see how the spell had taxed her and he was not about to let it go to waste. He boosted his own speed and strength and charged in at the daemon. His target just stood there and did not move an inch as Adam used his blade to slash his abdomen. The blood that leaked out of the wound bubbled, *'Even his blood is not safe to touch.'* Adam prepared his next attack. As he was about to strike the daemon's back it turned with a speed faster than him and blocked his attack. Adam counterattacked with his other blade and that was easily blocked as well. He then

understood why that first attack had been a free one. From the corner of his eye he saw that Alex and Iris had powered a lightning attack spell. He quickly disengaged.

When Adam moved away Alex and Iris let their magic loose and it shot in the direction of the beast's chest. As the beast swung his sword to block the incoming magic, the sword runes activated. When contact occurred the lightning attack bounced off the sword and then hit the tower walls, whose magical protection absorbed it. Alexandria was not impressed.

Mike and Anna took their turns by moving around the target and launching energy blasts at the daemon from as many different directions as they could. Unfortunately, between the daemon's speed and the time it took the energy blast to get to him he was able to block every blow. Mike and Anna regrouped with the others as Rosamia cast a holy wrath spell. The beast twisted his sword and planted it on the runes that appeared on the floor next to his feet. The holy fire appeared but it had no effect. Mike looked at everyone, "I think it's obvious but we need to get that sword away from him or somehow drop that fire shield. Is there any way it can be dispelled?"

Alexandria nodded, "No, he is constantly regenerating the spell and plus with that sword I don't think that any targeted spell would even work on him at all." She turned to Iris, "I think that I can minimize the fire shield effect but I'll need Iris's help."

Rosamia looked at Adam, "We will take care of removing that weapon of his."

Adam was puzzled, "And we will do that how?"

"I'll provide you an opening to do as much damage as you can. When he switches to you then I'll strike."

Adam was still puzzled, "And you plan on being that close to him how?"

Rosamia created a protection shield all around her. "Let me take care of that." She turned to the others, "When the time comes strike with everything you have."

From their facial reactions, she figured her eyes were glowing golden again. She had figured that it had happened here and there but throughout all this time she was in full control. The only difference was that she felt more powerful plus now she understood how to use the same spells that she knew but in a whole different way. Rosamia walked toward her target. To get his attention she used a simple spell, a holy magical bolt. She did not even know if the spell would tickle something like him but she launched it anyway. He blocked it with his sword as he did any other spell and grinned at her. She smiled and then ten holy bolts appeared around her, she launched them all at once. As she approached her target she created another ten and launched those, for every step that she took another ten bolts was aimed at him. There was no way that the daemon could block all of them and about half were able to hit him.

Rosamia had been right about the damage as none of them caused any but the sheer fact that they were reaching him when he did not want them to was enough to enrage him. He charged at her with his sword. Rosamia had no intention of entering in a combat of strength with this beast so she focused her efforts on dodging his attacks and at the same time continued to pelt him with holy bolts of energy, which she slowly started to increase in power.

Alexandria was impressed, "If this continues I'm going to lose the pet name she gave me." She

turned to Iris, "So you understand what I want to do?"

Iris nodded, "I think it's a good idea. If we magically cool the air around him his sword can't counter and it should help to lower the effect of his fire shield." They both started to focus on the spell and constantly feed it power in order to counteract the daemon's own constant fueling of his shield.

Adam was watching from the sidelines and did not enjoy a minute of it. Rosamia was taking a large risk at being the bait and he did not like it. Still the time was now, the beast was enraged enough. Adam charged as fast as he could. In order to help Rosa's plan he aimed his first strike at the underside of his shoulder joint. His sword strike hit perfectly and the daemon roared in anger. Ignoring the beast's rage Adam used his second blade and stabbed at the abdomen again, his blade piercing the daemon's body a foot deep.

Rosamia had officially lost the daemon's focus and now he could only attack properly with one hand. The daemon swung at Adam and as this happened, Rosamia powered a spear attack and waited for the right moment. Adam had been pinned down and was forced to block the sword blow coming from the daemon. At that time Rosamia launched her attack aimed at the beast's wrist, the spell connected and the daemon dropped his sword on the ground. When that happened Rosamia backed away as fast as she could and Adam grabbed the flaming blade and moved away from the daemon as well.

The beast was now in full fury. Alexandria turned to Iris, "Go and help Mike and Anna, I'll keep this up for as long as can." Iris did not question her, even if she wanted to, and went to the other's side.

Mike turned to Iris as she approached them, "I

know I may be asking a lot but can you do the same thing as Rosamia did with the shield?"

Iris had to think about that one, "I think I can especially now that the temperature is lowered a bit but we have seconds and then I'm sure the shield will drop." They both nodded in confirmation. Iris enchanted her two swords with lightning and then focused on a shield, as the shield appeared she ran at the target with Mike and Anna next to her. When they got close enough Anna and Mike stepped forward and planted their sword in the creature's chest and released a point blank enchantment blast. For some reason the beast had focused his anger on Iris. This pleased her as it would leave an opening for the other two to attack. The daemon tried to hit her square on her face. She was sure that her head would have flown off her body had she not crouched to dodge the blow. Iris knew she had little time so in her position she launched her attack, flipping her two swords and attacking the femur on each side. As her shield started to break, she commanded the lightning enchantment to release and then she pulled back leaving her weapons behind.

The impact of those attacks reeled the daemon backwards, his blood oozed from the serious wounds on his body and blood splattered everywhere. Some of the flaming blood landed on Mike, Anna and Iris as they disengaged, Rosamia instantly went to heal the damage caused. The daemon looked around to see that Adam was still holding his sword. As walking would be problematic now he opened his wings and started to hover and turned in Adam's direction.

Alexandria cut the spell to counter the fire shield that was still around the daemon. "Not going to happen." As she prepared a large spell, everyone could see through the open arches that the sky

outside was starting to go dark. While casting her spell she waved her arm and launched her already prepared spells at the daemon's wings. The ice spells tried to encase the wings in ice, but the flames were still too hot for that to happen. Still, it forced the daemon to land on the ground for enough time for Alexandria to finish her channeling. She outstretched a hand at an open archway and the other at the beast. Lightning flowed from the sky to Alexandria's open hand, traveled to the other and landed squarely on the beast's chest. Alex poured all of the spell's power in a constant bolt of lightning that lasted for about five seconds. When it was done the beast dropped to the ground. Clearly he was near his end but his shield still stood.

Adam tossed the daemon's sword in Alex's direction, "Your turn to babysit this."

"Adam, I can't even touch that thing without a shield..." Adam ignored her and sprinted at the daemon, when he got close he pulled out Iris's blades and then stabbed both of them in the back of the daemon with so much strength that the tips pierced through the other side. At that point, the shield that Alex had cast on him was starting to shimmer.

"Time's up I guess." He disengaged from the beast and joined the rest of the team.

Mike looked at the large creature that was still alive after all that punishment, "Anyone want to have the final blow?"

Rosamia took a step forward, "Let's see how many it will take at this point." Rosa cast a holy wrath spell that bathed the dying creature in holy flames. It took three before the creature finally disintegrated.

Adam picked up his weapons as did everyone else, "It's dead right?"

Alexandria shook her head, "Not really." The flames had finally subsided on the sword and she could in theory pick it up but instead cast a spell around it. "As long as this blade still holds its spirit inside of it, it can still possess someone else and this will start all over again. I've put a containment spell around it but I think that I need to immediately send it someplace safer. The Council hates having things of power like this floating around so I'll send it there for now." She reached for her pendant, "Lithius, I'm sending you a gift. As soon as you get it destroy it. There is a daemon spirit trapped inside the blade so please be careful."

"I'll prepare the necessary measures immediately."

When he terminated the conversation, Alex once again focused on the pendant and cast a spell. Once it was done, the blade started to hover and then flew off in the sky with amazing speed. Alexandria turned to the others, "Now that that's taken care of, I guess we need to deal with the leftover smaller daemons." They were all very sore and also drained but they could not just leave it off to the Crusaders. Alexandria reapplied her instant spells as they all started the downward climb. "You know Adam, I'm starting to hate this tower as well now."

Adam laughed, "You have no idea how I agree with you."

While going down there were six more daemons to deal with, but the Crusaders that had not completely been possessed were back to normal and were all fighting like their lives depended on it. This helped make short work of the leftover daemons but once everything was done only about twenty Crusaders had survived.

Everyone was currently grouped on the first

floor and a Crusader approached the Lights Templar. He extended his hand, "Hi, I'm Lieutenant Henken and I would like to thank you for saving my men."

Mike shook his hand on behalf of the group. Alexandria then looked at the lieutenant, "So I have to know what happened? I mean how did a possessed sword end up here of all places?"

Henken looked at his men and then turned back to the group, "It's a stupid story really, a traveling caravan asked to stop at the cathedral while some terrible weather passed. Being merchants as they were, they tried to sell some of their items while they waited. A few items were sold, including that sword in question. At first, it was just the soldier that started sparring with others in order to get used to the new weapon. But eventually there was a group that formed. The rest of us tried to stop it but then were surprised when we realized we were too late and he had already transformed." The lieutenant bowed his head in shame, "At that point he overpowered us in a matter of minutes, and once captured the magical possession was in effect for all of us."

Alexandria had a very serious look on her face, "Hmm, that's horrible really. Would you or someone be able to describe this salesman? There are consequences for selling items like these and in this particular instance I would rather he not get away with it."

The lieutenant nodded, "Yes, I'm pretty sure that can be arranged."

Iris smiled, "Well at least we were able to finish this up before those Enforcers show up, and once that is done then we can give Jessica the news." Iris noticed that the lieutenant and some of his men had very concerned expressions on their faces, "What's wrong?"



"Are you saying that the Enforcers have been dispatched already for this issue?" Iris nodded in confirmation. Henken slowly shook his head from side to side, "Hmm, well I guess that cursed sword really did kill us all after all."

Anna stepped in, "We can explain the situation, I'm sure we can convince them not to take the punishment to such a severe extreme. I mean you were controlled by some outside force."

Henken let a mild chuckle escape, "That will not matter to them." He turned to Adam, "I'm sure you understand." Adam nodded, "Yes, if not for the fact that I was very fortunate and had very important people defending me I would be in prison still, and all I did was abandon my post. They attacked people, I'm not sure there is anything we can do."

Anna shook her head, "That's insane. I'm sure there is a way. Heck, only recently we met up with an ex-Crusader that was a mercenary for hire. You can't tell me that he can exist and that there is nothing that can be done here."

Henken gave her a small smile, "I thank you for wanting to try and save our lives again, but those types of situation only happen during large events when all the bodies can't be found and sometimes certain people go missing. Those cases are very few."

It was clear to Alexandria and everyone else that this was still not something that Anna would accept. An idea popped into her head. "So what you are saying is that all we need is a body count?" She then turned to Iris, "Iris and I will take care of that." Alex turned to the others, "While we do that you guys can figure out where we will hide twenty Crusaders."

As she left Mike smiled, "I have an idea actually." He turned to the lieutenant and his men,

"We will fool the Enforcers into thinking that you are all dead. Sadly, that will mean you will have to leave the service and can no longer be Crusaders. Still, your skills can be of use somewhere else. There is a town west of here trying to rebuild itself after the damage caused by people coming back as new living beings. Currently they are in great need of a defensive force. They will provide food and housing. If you want to agree with this then there is no reason that you all cannot start fresh in that town. What do you say?"

"Let me discuss this situation with my men."  
He then turned and joined the other Crusaders.

As they talked Rosamia nudged Adam, "Do you think they will go for it?"

Adam shrugged, "I'm not sure. That depends on them. What I do know is if they don't go with this plan and the Enforcers get here they are as good as dead."

It took a while but eventually the lieutenant came back, "It seems that we will take you up on the offer to save our lives. But I and four others will stay to meet with the Enforcers."

Rosamia was disappointed and curious, "Why, honour or duty?"

Henken thought about it, "Hmm, mostly duty. But not duty to the Crusaders but to my men who serve me."

Adam nodded, understanding what Henken's plan was. Anna on the other hand just could not see it, "Please explain because I still see you are throwing your lives away and there has been far too much of that already."

Henken had a bleak look on his face, "You are the Lights Templar correct? The group that killed a dark avatar, dark clerics, countless orc and orges, and yet could not save one Crusader from a daemon." He took a quick moment before he

continued his point, "In this case the issue is your previous successes. So we will tell them what we told you but that fewer of us could be saved as the daemon's fire raged on and burned my men alive as they attacked you. We need to stay, that is the only way the Enforcers will not question your story."

Anna could not believe it, "You are already convinced that this is the only way. Well you still have time to think about it, please reconsider and value your lives more than you currently are."

Time did not seem to change the five's decision. While they waited, Mike explained in more detail the town that they were going to now live in. Anna sat and watched as Iris and Alexandria took creatures that they could find and magically transformed them to look humanoid. Once that was done they proceeded in heavily burning the remains to hide any imperfections. Rosamia sat next to Anna, "It should work. It's not like the Enforcers are going to perform any investigation if the count matches and the explanation comes from one of their own."

Anna sighed, "I don't doubt that but I still don't agree with what those five have planned. A person should always fight and never give up, even if you are seconds before the end."

"For what it's worth I agree with you but I can also see where he is coming from and also agree with his decision, even if it's a sad one."

Anna was very puzzled, "How?"

"He sees this as a sure way to save his men and also give them a new lease on life. This way the result is guaranteed. Any other way and there is a good chance that the desired result may not happen. Is that guarantee not worth the sacrifice?"

Anna looked up at the sky, "I understand sacrifice quite well and I do understand the point

of view you are trying to explain, but in their place I would still take that chance. I also realize that they are not me and that it's their choice to make, but it's still my choice to think that they are making a big mistake."

Rosamia reached out and hugged her, "That it is."

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Much later, a group of thirty Enforcers arrived. Lieutenant Henken explained the situation and what had happened as he had explained the new story to the Lights Templar. The Enforcers counted the bodies and went over the locations of where the daemons had been killed. Throughout the minor investigation most of them gave Adam glaring looks, he chuckled every time. "Look away, you can't touch me anymore."

After a while the five Crusaders were rounded up, Rosamia looked at the lead Enforcer as he was about to pronounce his verdict. "Adam, I'm very happy that you are not a part of this anymore." Adam grabbed Rosa hand, "I am too."

The Enforcer stood in front the Crusaders, "For your crimes committed against the normal population your own lives will be terminated. We will let the families know of this shameful act and the price that you paid for it."

Anna interjected, "You do realize that they were completely controlled and could not stop their actions even if they wanted to? And if you do realize it are you also going to tell that to the families as well?"

The lead Enforcer glared at Anna, "We are trained to resist corruption, their weakness or ignorance is *not* an excuse. Now please, you people have already intruded in our affairs. I suggest that you stop before things get worse."

Anna responded with a glare of her own, and then Mike grabbed her hand. She looked around, she could tell that all she needed to do was the first move and all of them would follow her without question. But then she saw the Lieutenant's face and the faces of the four others. She closed her eyes and stood down. Anna had realized that there was no point in saving people who did not want to be saved. She felt Mike's arms around her and took comfort in his warmth and that of her teammates as that was the only comfort she would find in this situation as the Enforcer ordered the five Crusaders to a swift death.

## *Chapter 8*

*T*he Lights Templar and the fifteen ex-Crusaders were finally getting close to making their arrival at the town. It had taken longer than expected as most of them were on foot. Ideally, supplies from the cathedral or tower itself were planned but the Enforcers had been ordered to stay at the Portal Tower until new Crusaders arrived. This made it impossible to ask without arousing suspicions.

As they left, the Enforcers cursed their luck because of where they would be forced to stay for a while. It seems that the Portal Tower was also referred to as the cursed tower due to all the bad things that seemed to happen around it. Mike wondered about that. In a way, because of the magical protections imbued in the walls of the tower, it was probably one of the safest places built in this region and yet it was looked at as anything but. He wondered if that would ever change or if once branded like that there was no way to change anymore. He shook his head, Anna would tell him that as long as there is life then there is the option of change. He looked at the fifteen ex-Crusaders, no not ex-Crusaders or Crusaders anymore but warriors, living people and wondered if they would be able to change as well.

Adam brought him out of his head as he got closer to him, "Ah, I just want to let you know that while this is a good plan and they said they were going to follow, there are probably going to be a few that will take off eventually."

Mike had a small smile on his face, "Yeah, I figured, but if only six of them stay then I think we'll be good. I mean the defence required is to go

against bandits and wild animals, I'm sure that six will be more than enough." Mike turned to Adam, "You think that's a safe assumption?"

Adam agreed, "I think it is. I'm sorry I just figured that I would let you know in case. I mean there would be consequences if the Crusaders realize they are still alive and if they figure out who helped them."

Mike shrugged, "You are right about that but let's try and deal with that issue when or even if it becomes one. These people wanted to join and help defend the defenceless; sadly, they got a bad hand and this happened to them. They then had a choice to live or follow a last order and they chose to live. On this one I'm with Anna and would rather believe that their decision to live is the right one to take, no matter what the future consequences of that will be."

Adam looked at Rosamia who was walking ahead with Iris and Alex, "Hmm, I guess I should be the last person to say anything about this, all considering. Sorry I brought it up."

Mike chuckled, "No need to apologize at all, you're just looking out for the safety of the people you care about. Nothing wrong there."

After a few more hours they finally arrived at the town, which seemed very busy. When they entered it a lot more houses had been repaired and there were now a lot more people than when they had previously visited. After only a few minutes they could see Helena, Alan and someone else walking in their direction to greet them. It did not take long for the new person to break stride and start running towards one of the Crusaders.

"Anton! I was told that you had made it out alive by Jessica, but after she told me what happened I feared the worst. I'm so glad that you are still alive."

Anton reached out and hugged her, "Oh Maria, I'm also glad to see you again I did not think that I ever would. Things will have to be different now I guess, and I'm sorry about that, that's assuming you are still interested?" She smiled back at him, "We will figure out something, let's just be happy that you are alive for now."

Helena and everyone looked at the exchange, "Well I'm glad that worked out in the end." She looked that the warriors in front of her and gave them all a warm smile, "I've been told that you are all warriors looking for a new beginning. Well, you have come to the right place as this town was pretty much recreated because of that. My name is Helena and I would like to be the first to welcome you to the town of Denuo. Now when time permits I would like to go over a lot of details with all of you, I mean there are so many of you that if you want to try your hand at something else you definitely can. But before we do any of that let me escort you to your new homes."

She led them to a section in town where there were places available. The houses were big enough to handle a small family and considering that they were all alone these houses would be fine. "Now I know that some of these still need work, so when you have picked let us know and we will all pitch in to finish up the repairs." Helena then looked at the Lights Templar and smiled. "Now while you take your time to decide I need to talk with our special guests here. As soon as I'm done I'll come back and make sure that you are well taken care of." She then gestured towards Maria, "In my absence if you need anything please ask Maria as I've filled her in on the answers to some of the questions you may have."

Once again they all sat at Helena's very large table and she served them all a cup of tea and then



sat down next to Alan. She had a very big smile on her face and then bowed her head in gratitude, "I cannot thank you enough for helping us as you did. Never in my wildest dreams did I ever think that we could get to where we are today in that short a time. Thank you so much."

Mike smiled, "Please, we are just happy that it all worked out."

Anna looked at Helena as she raised her head, "The reality of the situation is that we should be thanking you. If not for you taking that first step in trying to recreate this town then a lot of people would probably have ended up forced to live in a bad situation or even dead. We may have helped in getting you there faster but really it's because of you that it happened at all."

They could all see that Helena was glowing with happiness but at the same time she was currently speechless.

Rosamia was so happy for her. "By the way – Denuo? I take it that something happened with the Guilds if this place has a name once again."

Helena regained some of her composure, "Yes, there has been a lot that has happened in the last few days actually and a lot of it is also due to Alan and his family."

Alan looked at Mike and continued Helena's explanation. "You were right, the lands here are fertile and quite large as well. The Guilds of Calculus requested an immediate answer on our findings as soon as we had them. It's at this point that they requested our aid in a plan of theirs. Obviously this news means that something slipped up when Capio inspected these lands or there maybe something else in play. Because of our situation the Guilds asked if we could move here and with our help slowly figure out if there are other places where things may have slipped up.

Depending on the results, actions will be taken." Alan took a moment before continuing, "But we need to be careful about all this. I mean Capio inspects these lands with the help of the people of Ager so if there is something it maybe more complex than we think. Also, there is no way that Calculus can make a move without more information and proof. I mean it's true that all this could have been a mistake. They do happen from time to time." Alan turned to Alexandria, "With the help of the mage Bernard and those orbs you gave my parents, a family decision was made and we agreed to help out for many different reasons," he briefly turned to Helena who nodded her agreement.

Alexandria and Iris were very happy to hear this news. There was still some guilt attached to having burned down their lands in order to destroy the spell. At least this way the whole family had a better chance given what they had left.

Helena smiled and finished the explanation, "Once that was agreed there was no way that the Guilds would allow for this place not to continue, but there was still the issue of defence which was resolved with the news that you sent them about these warriors. Which is another thing that interested the Guilds – having access to Crusaders is an interesting idea for them. That being said they are currently at work trying to create new identities for them to properly hide them from the Order. At that point, the only thing required was a new name for this place. I figured that Denuo would be a good name as it means 'a second time' in the old tongue."

The group was quite pleased with the results. Alexandria turned to her friends, "Well I must say that this is all great news overall, I can't say that I saw this going in this direction as well..." She then

stopped as a blue floating head of Lithius appeared in front of her using the pendant's magic.

Alexandria quickly turned to Rosamia, "You know you are right that is a bit awkward when it happens." Rosamia laughed at her comment.

Alexandria turned back to the floating head of her friend from Astrum, "What's up, Lithius?"

"Pardon the intrusion, I wanted to let you know that the sword has been destroyed. Thanks to the information you gave in your report from the battle the destruction of the item was preformed with no issues and very quickly. We are also tracking down this vendor you mentioned. Luck would have it that he was a registered traveling vendor who often stops in Newport so it should just be a matter of time."

Alexandria replied, "That's great news. At least now we will be able to make sure that something like that does not happen again, well at least from that item anyways. Thanks for the news."

She thought Lithius was done but then he suddenly continued, "There is something else that I think you will want to be aware of. Miss Julia requested some extra supplies, a group was supposed to pick them up and then meet up with her but the group never showed up. I would investigate further as Julia is very precise and punctual with everything but unfortunately I have another matter I need to attend to. I was wondering if you could follow up in my stead."

Before Alexandria could answer, Anna moved next to her and made sure the pendant magic would pick her up and answered for her. "We will be glad to do so Lithius, and many thanks for letting us know." He simply bowed his head and terminated the communication.

Helena looked at all of them, "I guess you will not be staying long after all."

Mike nodded, "Seems like it, sorry about that."

"Oh it's all good, but please stop by again when you can. I would love to show you what this place will look like once everything is properly set up. In the meantime, use my house to relax before you leave. I'll go and talk to our new members."

Alan stood, "I need to head back to the fields. There is a lot of work to be done and not a lot of time to do it. See you all again soon, hopefully."

Anna smiled at both of them, "Thanks and we will come back as soon as we can, we promise." As they left Anna sat back down, "I realize that a small break would be good after all that walking but, it's Julia so..."

Alexandria shrugged, "Meh, time to help the helper the way I see it. Plus there is no way that any of us would not help her if she needed it anyways. But there is a bit of an issue, from what Lithius mentioned only those other Crimsons knew where she was in order to meet up with her. It's going to be tricky to find her."

Adam wondered about that, "What with all the communication and location spells you're telling us you can't find her?" Alexandria was flustered by his comment, "It's not that I can't find her it's just that it may take time and will probably not be an exact location." She turned to Mike and Anna, "Julia is like you two. You are pretty much magic dead as the gene within you is so dormant that it may as well not exist. Tracking people like you using magic is actually pretty hard. All I'm saying is that it will probably take me a few hours to get a general location."

It's at that point that Iris tried to make a comment, but she was avoiding eye contact and also was acting very evasive. Anna wondered what the issue was, "Do you know of some other way Iris?"

"I may have another way..."

Alexandria had a very stern look on her face for she had seen Iris like this a few times in the past. It reminded her of herself when she had done something she was not supposed to. "Iris, what did you do?"

Iris had a pleading look on her face, "It was a long time ago and I had a different mindset back then... Now in order to 'bump into' Julia I may have put a magical mark on her to find her easily."

Alexandria slowly shook her head, "Ooooh Iris, and you left the mark on her?"

"I'm sorry, I just have not been in contact with her since to remove the mark. I mean she moves a lot for one person, and I made sure to put all the protections around the mark as you showed me so others would not see it. Eventually I guess I just forgot about it... I'm sorry."

Everyone save for Alex were trying to hold back their laughter, Anna calmed herself. "We are sorry Iris, it's just that we can see you easily doing something like that, especially back then. Still from what you are saying this mark will allow us to locate her pretty quickly?"

Before Iris could respond, Alexandria, who still had a very serious look on her face, answered the question. "Oh, it will not be an issue at all now. Heck, depending on where she is we could maybe directly teleport to her location so accurate of a location this spell will give you."

Alex turned to Iris and dropped her tone, "Look, I get it okay? But the fact that you forgot and that she did not know about the mark itself could have put her in a dangerous situation. Even with precautions if there is a mage strong enough he could blow past them. It's one of the reasons I warned everyone about these pendants when I first gave them out." She pointed at Mike and Anna,

"But I do understand what you are saying because in a way I did the same thing to these two as I did not let them know when they got their pendant, so yes I get it."

Iris finally looked at Alex, "No, you are right and I'm sorry, I was just not paying as much attention back then and well..."

Alexandria gave her a small smile, "Again, it's all good, just make sure to apologize to her when we see her. So where is she now?"

Iris focused on the mark and then released the tracking spell, "She is in the forest that helps hide the Crimson town. But she is pretty far from the town, in fact she is a few hours away from the port city of Navis."

Rosamia was puzzled, "What would she be doing there?"

Mike wondered about it too, "I'm not really sure, but she did mention that she had Crimsons here and there. Having some at a hub city like Navis would make sense. So it's possible that she is on her way back from checking up on something and was supposed to meet up with the others along the way back. Anyways, we can ask her when we meet up with her, but Alexandria I'm thinking that teleportation will be out of the question."

Alex nodded, "In a forest with that distance, very much so. But we can always teleport to Newport and then take some horses from there." She turned to Iris, "Will that be fast enough to catch up to her?"

Iris checked using the tracking spell again, "It should be, she is moving incredibly slowly for some reason."

That statement had Anna worried, "Well whichever way will be the quickest then, I mean if she is moving slowly she could be hurt."

Alexandria nodded, "Well, because of the marking spell we may have a better option then. In any case teleporting to Newport should be our first move."

Mike stood up, "Let's tell Helena that we will be leaving immediately then we can go and see if we can be the ones that help out Julia for a change."

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Julia was on her horse slowly trotting away next to a small wood caravan being pulled by two other horses. The caravan was being driven by a woman she had only recently met after being introduced by one of her Crimsons. Her name was Alison, she had short brown hair and blue eyes. Alison's primary trade was midwife but after that affair with the reborns this had changed more into the role of foster mother. Inside the caravan were five children about the age of seven and two older ones around eleven, next to Alison was another young one. His name was Ben and he had pleaded with her to ride in front with her. Julia noticed that Ben was looking around a lot and seemed to be getting anxious again, meaning that the question should be coming up soon.

Ben tugged on Alison's coat, "Why are we going so slow? Won't we get there faster if we go faster?" Julia held in her laugh as Alison rubbed her forehead and cringed a bit. Alison turned and gave Ben a small smile, "Now Ben, I explained this a few times already, we are going through a path that's not used often on top of that we are in the forest so we are going this slow in order to be extra careful." She saw that Ben was a bit frustrated by her answer. Alison figured that he just kept asking the same question in hopes that eventually the answer would change but that was not going to be

the case for a while to come.

It's at that point that Alison looked around and turned to Julia, "Ah, not that I want to keep asking the same question myself but should they not have arrived by now?" Had the situation been different Julia would have laughed at that comment given how she had almost asked as often as Ben had asked his question.

Unfortunately, in the case for Julia, Alison was right. "In theory yes the others that I ordered to help with the escort should be here by now. At this point I'm not too worried because they are not that late and there are many reasons why they could be late. So please don't worry too much about it. I'm sure we'll be hearing the horses any time now." Alison understood what she was saying but was still nervous, but there was also no point in arguing or focusing on the 'what if' as well as it would serve to possibly put the children in an uncomfortable position. So, partially as frustrated as Ben, Alison focused her attention forward and patiently waited.

After a little while she noticed that Julia was slowing down and was focusing ahead, "What's going on? Do you see something?" Before she could answer Alison figured she was now seeing what Julia had picked up on. In front of them was a small group of people on foot, two were wearing the same type of armor as Julia, plus a Crusader and a priestess, then two others that she could not tell. Alison started to command the horses to stop just in case but then noticed a big smile on Julia's face, "Do you know these people?"

As Julia waved at them she answered, "You could say. We go way back and also you could also say that you will probably have the best escort possible with them around." As the group got closer Julia made the introductions, "These are the



Lights Templar, and they are the group of people that closed off most of those portals during the war and also the first group to have stopped those dark clerics that were attacking." She pointed at each of them, "Meet Anna, Mike, Adam, Rosamia, Alexandria and the newest addition to the group, Iris." Julia turned to Alison, "And this is Alison, she is a foster parent who I'm escorting to our town from Navis." Julia again faced the Lights Templar, "Considering that my men are late I'm pleased to bump into you guys. But if you don't mind me asking, what are you doing here?"

Anna answered her question with a concerned look on her face, "About that, we were told by Lithius that they never made it and because of that he asked us to look into it and well that's why we are here."

Julia's sudden joy at seeing her friends quickly changed to concern after hearing the news. She had figured that they were simply delayed but from this it meant something happened on their way to Newport.

Alexandria jumped on the seat in the front forcing little Ben to scootch over. He instantly complained. "Heeyyyyy..."

She looked down at him and smiled, "I'm sorry it's just that we traveled here so quickly that I'm a bit pooped. A young man like you does not mind sharing his seat, right?"

"I guess..."

Again Alex smiled, "So what's your name and what do you do?"

"I'm Ben, and what do you mean? I'm a kid!" He continued in a mocking tone, "And what do you do?"

"Ah, well I'm a powerful mage from the city of Astrum. I'll let you know that I'm very important there."

"Pfff you're lying, you're way too young to be that powerful and I know that powerful mages are all old."

Alexandria laughed at that, "You're such a fun little boy... well if you don't believe me watch this." Alexandria then started to cast a spell. Alison was worried when she started but said nothing seeing as neither Julia nor the priestess walking beside her mentioned or did anything. Once the spell was cast small little glowing lights of different colours bounced around in her hands and then they moved all around her some of which landed on Ben. As soon as they did the light popped out of existence. "That's so coooooool, but that does not mean you're powerful. You need to do large fireballs for that."

"Hmm, looks like you got me. I guess you're right... Still you want to see something else that's cool?"

"Yeaah."

Rosamia got Alison's attention as she noticed that she still had a worried look on her face. "Don't worry about my friend, she actually was not lying at all and would never hurt any of these kids. I know saying so may not mean much seeing as we just met but you have my word on that."

Alison was shocked, she had met a lot of priests and priestesses in her time but most were a bit more commanding than this one. "Well you are a priestess traveling with a Crusader so I will believe you."

Rosamia gave her a small smile, the instant reaction that both Adam and she got because of what they wore always fascinated her. Depending on the person's experience it went from instant trust all the way to disgust. Thankfully, in the case of Alison it was more on the positive, "Thank you for that." Rosamia looked at the caravan, "If that is

the case do you mind if I ask you if there are people inside that may need assistance of some kind?"

"There are only kids in there, and the only issue was one had a cold that is on its way out. So nothing serious." Alison gazed ahead, "Even if it there was there is no way that I could afford your services anyway."

Rosamia hated to be reminded of that, she slowly shook her head. "In that case then I'll go check it out and see what I can do, also you don't have to worry about any amount. I'll never charge for any services of those kinds." Alison watched with a shocked look on her face as Rosamia headed to the back and got in the caravan. She had known nice priests who helped out here and there for free but she also knew that they were very rare and only for dire circumstances because getting told on would mean quite a penalty from the Order. And here this person was going to risk it for a child getting over a cold? Alison turned to Julia, "Who are these people?"

Julia laughed, "They are good friends Alison, who try and help others as much as they can and typically ask very little in return. In a way they are kind of like you with all these kids you took in."

The journey for Alison's escort slowed down a bit because most of the Lights Templar were following on foot but at the same time it did not feel like it took as long. Alexandria was busy occupying Ben with tons of wild stories of things they had done that sounded impossible. Still, the boy was glued to her every word. From the back, she could see that Rosamia was also busy occupying the others and healing them even if all they had was a small scratch after having played around. The Crimsons stayed together on her left side and the Crusaders and the one called Iris

guarded the right. Things had not gone as planned but at least now Alison was no longer worried about the journey.

After many hours, the pleasant traveling changed as everyone suddenly stopped and went on guard. Alexandria grabbed Ben's hand and whispered to him, "Now Ben, some people on horses are coming our way, just in case don't let go of my hand okay." Ben looked a bit worried given Alexandria's serious tone, but he nodded and squeezed her hand.

Six Crimsons on horses then appeared in front of the caravan, one of them pointed his sword at Julia. "On behalf of the Crimsons of old we are here to stop you, Julia. Once we get rid of you we can finally join the right path."

Julia dismounted and took out her spear, "You have got to be kidding me, so I take it that you are the reason why the others did not make it?" A wicked smile appeared on his face, Julia was disgusted by his indirect confirmation.

"It's time you people woke up and realized that the old ways died when our town was brutally attacked. And if it was not for the same people around me today who came to our aid we would probably all be dead. Why can't you see that and realize that we need to change as well?"

The leader of the other group seemed unphased by her comments, "You know nothing. We have learned a great deal from that attack as you mentioned. We don't plan suffering another blow like that one, but under your command this is what will happen again. It's only a matter of time really, because you and the people behind you have all been blinded and have made the wrong decision. With this attack, we plan on fixing that mistake."

Mike thought that his comments were odd and

very familiar at the same time. "That's twice that we have heard this. What mistake are you talking about?"

The leader turned to him, "In your case you have made many. You had so much potential back then if only you had not wasted it by joining up with *her* then when the time came you could have been a brother at arms. What a pity." He dismounted, "Originally, the plan was to just get rid of Julia but seeing as you are all here we figured that we would fix up all these mistakes in one shot."

Julia looked around mildly puzzled, "So there are six of you, and seven of us... are you really sure that you are up for this?"

The other five Crimsons dismounted while the leader responded, "We have come to see if you have any honour left and wish to challenge you to a duel to the death. No magic, no tricks, our skills versus yours."

Now Julia was really puzzled after a quick glance it seems that she was not the only one. "And who would participate in this duel?"

"That's easy, as I said your skills versus ours. Or in other words you and your Crimsons versus me and my Crimsons."

Before the others could answer, Alexandria started yelling, "And how is that even fair or remotely honourable?"

The Leader stared at Julia, "Her comments aside, do you accept?"

Julia turned to Anna who shook her head, "Personally, I think they're fools, but I'll follow your lead."

She turned to Mike, "I'm with Anna, whatever you decide, I'll back you up." Julia then faced the Leader, "Looks like we accept your challenge, flawed as it is."

As soon as the duel was accepted, the battle started. The attacking Crimsons split their forces and attacked two against one. For Anna's challengers one of them wielded two swords and the other smaller one was using a single blade. Not wanting to put herself in a bad position where she could be flanked easily Anna continuously moved around from position to position in order to keep the other one guessing where he should best attack her. The dual wielder sprinted at Anna with a horizontal slash followed by a thrust attack with his other blade. As she dodged the first blow and blocked the other with her sword she realized she had lost track of the other.

As she looked around, the Crimson in front of her attacked her again with another thrust and then an upward slash. Wanting to keep her sword ready for a potential attack from the other Anna avoided the first and barely avoided the second. The next surprise was when her attacker repositioned himself before simply continuing to press on his attacks. It's at that point that Anna realized what was happening. In a way, this was similar to the other two Crimsons she had faced in Ager with the difference being that the smaller one waiting to pounce was hidden behind the bigger attacker. When the time came for his attack Anna would in theory have less time to react as she would not be able to see the start of the incoming blow. Because of this she figured that playing this a bit more defensively would be the better strategy.

Julia's attackers were unexpected. She had thought that the leader of the group would have faced her but instead she was facing two of his men. She wondered if this was meant as an insult in order to anger her so that she would make a mistake during battle or if it was simply a poor evaluation of her skills. While she stood there, she

let the two flank her and get over-confident. Both her targets wielded a classic long sword. When they finally figured they had the upper hand they both charged at Julia, one from the front and the other from the back. Julia figured that she would play a game of chicken and see who would flinch first. She then thrust her spear forward aimed the chest of the target. Because of the reach of her weapon she would hit him first provided that she did not move, leaving her open for the other one's attack.

Judging from their charge speed, the one in front was faster and he should meet the spear tip before the other could attack her. As expected, he stopped his charge and tried to deflect her spear with a thrust of his sword. Before he could, Julia pulled back the spear in a quick motion and used the butt of the other end to hit the other one coming at her from the rear square in the stomach. As he stopped and doubled over, she spun around and proceeded to give the hunched over Crimson a blow on the back of his head with the metal-lined shaft of her spear. As he dropped unconscious she turned to face her other attacker.

Mike had the pleasure of fighting the leader of the group and another very muscular Crimson who immediately proceeded to attack him with a very large axe. He dodged the blow to realize that the strength of his attacks would cause issues if he tried to block them with his sword. In order to even up the odds Mike counter-attacked by targeting the wooden shaft of the axe, the blow was stopped by the sword of the leader who then disengaged and let his partner resume his attacks. Mike dodged the blows and kept his weapon ready in case the leader decided to take a shot. As Mike continued this annoying dance something made little sense to him, "You do realize that Julia is right there, right?

So why target me?"

"I simply want to give you chances to fix your own mistake and join us."

This odd recruitment only served to confused Mike more. Why him only? "That's not going to happen but if you want my skills I'll let you have that." As soon as he finished Mike quickly disengaged and turned on the leader as the other continued to attack him. While the leader's skill at jumping in and out was good the same could not be said for his partner whose strong swings sometimes came close to also hitting the leader as Mike dodged the blows and continuously attacked him as well. Eventually Mike got lucky and scored a hit on the leader's side. It was not deep enough to kill but it did cause him some issues in maneuverability.

While the fight occurred, Iris was with everyone else guarding the caravan in case something unexpected happened. "I would just like to say that if something in this fight goes sour for some reason I will jump in and help."

Rosamia shrugged, "Of course, I was planning the same."

Alexandria was still holding Ben's hand. He was now engrossed in the sword fight in from him. She chimed in with her answer, "Same here."

Adam looked at all of them, "Was I the only one that was not going to do anything?" They all turned and stared at him with an expressionless look. "...But, but it's a duel to the death..."

Right after Adam said it, Ben raised his free arm, "Yeah, a duel!"

Alexandria lowered Ben's hand and slowly shook her head, "You think it's a guy thing?"

Iris shrugged, "Maybe."

Rosamia was still staring at Adam, "Please don't influence the child with ideas like that."



Adam raised both arms in a sign of submission, "Fine, whatever. In the end it does not matter. This is as far from a duel to the death as can be. Our team is holding back."

Anna once again dodged her attacking opponent but then she saw that he kept up his momentum to move out of the way. It was finally time for the other to take his killing blow. Anna then realized that the idea of the strategy was better than its execution as the attack did happen but was not fast enough to execute it in a way that she would not see it coming. The attack was a horizontal slash from her right. She flipped her sword and blocked it. While the blow had become predictable it still had a lot of strength behind it as he had swung with both hands. Still, the block with her sword using only one hand was enough to slow down the attack enough so that her armor could take the hit without her being wounded.

This left her with her free hand that she used to take a swing and punch her attacker square in his face. His nose broke and as he took the blow he closed his eyes. At that point Anna used her other hand holding her flipped sword and attacked him with the hilt square under his jaw. As he dropped to the ground her last attacker was rushing at her with both blades. As the blades were positioned one was going to be a side attack and the other an overhead. Anna twisted in place and showed her back to him and blocked the side attack with her sword. When she had twisted she had also moved in closer to the charging target. So for the overhead attack, she used her free hand to grab his arm and use his momentum to flip him on the ground. Once he landed she once again used the pommel of her blade and knocked him out using a blow to the top of his head.

Julia was very disappointed by her leftover

opponent. Without his other partner aiding him there was no way that he was able to even come close enough to her to perform an attack. While he was skilled he clearly lacked in experience when fighting opponents with weapons that had more reach than he did. She made a note of that and figured she would go over the training regimen when she got back. She also figured that this fight had gone on for long enough. Julia purposely created an opening for her attacker to take, which he did by rushing at her. While he was focused on his end strike, he did not notice that she had lowered her spear so that it would trip him as he approached her. The trip did cancel his blow but he managed not to fall to the ground. As he was regaining his footing, Julia spun around flipping her spear to have the shaft connect with his head. After a small crack was heard, he dropped to the ground. She figured that she had possibly given him a mild concussion.

After a while, the leader tried his best to disengage from Mike's attacks as he kept advancing on his position. Eventually, the muscular partner had gotten behind Mike and was about to try and hack him in two. Mike saw the attack and disengaged from this regular target by turning around and ducking at the same time to buy him enough time to swing at the muscular Crimson with the hilt of his sword between his legs. When the hit connected, the attack dropped and so did the muscular target. Trying to take advantage of Mike's position, the leader then attacked him with an overhead attack trying to stab him from above. Mike countered the attack using a low kick to trip the leader to the ground. As he fell, Mike got up and swung his blade using the flat of it to the leader's head, knocking him out.

Anna joined up with Julia and Mike, "Well that

was not much of a duel, so what next?"

Julia turned back, "Well I'm not going to execute them in front of kids, so I guess drag them back and perform their punishment later, I suppose."

Anna looked at the unconscious Crimsons and then back to Julia, "I know this may sound odd but do you need to do that?"

Julia was caught off guard, "Not really I guess, it's probably best in case they attack again but no there is no real reason... what do you suggest we do?"

Anna had had enough of killing for very little reason especially after what had happened with the Crusaders. She turned and faced the others – and the kids who had poked their heads out during the match to see what was happening – with a half smile on her face and shouted, "*To the victors go the spoils...*" As the kids cheered she picked up their weapons and took some of their horses and gave them to the other members of the Lights Templar. Understanding her actions Julia and Mike did the same with the rest of the weapons and horses. After a little while they all mounted up and continued the escort leaving the others behind.

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The journey continued at a much quicker pace after that. Eventually they stopped to rest for the night. Alison was putting most of the children to bed and before Iris was supposed to start the first watch she approached Julia, who was sitting with Anna and Mike. "Ah Julia... I'm not really sure how to say this but I guess I'll start with, I'm sorry."

Julia turned to Iris and was a bit confused, "Okay, I accept your apology... what am I accepting by the way?"

Iris was a bit more uncomfortable than she thought she would have been, still she forced herself to explain the situation. "A long time ago, I may have put a magical mark on you in order to be able to find you easily and as time passed I may have forgotten about it and left it on you. At least this helped us find you pretty quick, which was good, right?"

Julia stood up, and for a few seconds Iris froze a bit, she then gave her a hug. "If not for that today would have ended very differently, so don't worry, okay?"

Julia broke off the hug, "You know that explains so much. It's not that I was trying to avoid you back then but it did find it odd how you were always at the right place at the right time. Anyways, not that I know the consequences of this but I'm assuming it's best if it gets removed correct?"

Iris nodded, "In theory, it would be for the best, yes." She stood back, said a few magic words and then looked at her and gave her a small smile, "Consider it removed. I should head back to the others. Again, I am sorry about this."

As Iris turned to head back Julia sat back down with the others, "You know she has changed quite a bit. Personally I was stunned to see her stay with the caravan during the attack, I'm sure the Iris I knew would not have been able to do that. I'm very happy for her."

Anna smiled, "I think we all are, it did take the near end of the human race as an event to open up and then from what she had learned to change, but yes we are all very proud of her as well. Changing the subject, what are you doing out here escorting kids?"

Julia thought about it for a while, "Where to start, I guess it's all your fault really. I mean you

created a name for us out there again, so I had to continue and send troops around to continue what you had started. But then the issues became bigger and there was less and less that we could influence in other cities so in certain cases transport to our town was given as an option. By no mean do they need to join us if they don't want to and they can leave when they wish. In the meantime all we ask is that they pull their weight somehow and we will make sure that they are able to live happily."

Mike rubbed his forehead for a bit then looked at Anna with a dumbfounded look. Anna chuckled for a bit, which confused Julia even more, "What am I missing?"

Mike sighed, "When we started this new journey we wanted to do pretty much what you are doing but could not figure out the best way to go about it. Looks like this time it was you who beat us to the punch in a way."

Julia smirked, "Hmm, I'm not so sure. There are a lot of issues right now." Her gaze turned a bit sombre, "Sure we are helping but it's not enough and we are currently tapped right now. I'm not even supposed to be here because of everything else that I still need to do and that attack is not anything new. If not for the fact that there were kids involved... I would have had to ignore this issue and let them go, which is something that been happening a lot." She turned to Mike, "I may have beaten you to the punch as you said but really I probably should have waited a bit more to solidify my own base before I jumped like I did."

Anna was suddenly very worried about her friend, "You know you don't have to push yourself so much. You already do so much no one should blame you if you let go of a few things."

Julia gave her a small smile, "I would blame

myself. I know I would because many years ago I had a lot on my plate and then someone needed my help and I did not act and because of that she had to leave her home. I don't want to live with that again."

It did not take much for Anna to realize who she was talking about. The thing was that at the time there was nothing Julia could have done to help her not get kicked out. The Commander had made it quite clear that staying would have caused many issues for everyone. Anna stood and sat next to what was probably her very first friend and put her arms around her. "You have been there for me so many times, more than I can count. There is nothing that I would take back and there is nothing that I hold against you for what you did not do during that time. So please, please take it easier on yourself."

Mike looked at both of them and had a warm smile on his face, "Assuming you are interested Julia, I think that maybe we can make it so that we are on the same path again."

While Julia was confused Anna was surprised and turned to Mike. "I think I know what you're suggesting. While that was the best solution we came up with we still have that same issue. I thought you did not want to make the jump if that was still there."

Mike shrugged, "Oh you're right, but in a way the jump was already made or at least a version of it so why not go all the way is what I'm thinking. I think the plan could still work. It just may not last as long as we wanted. But is that a reason not to do it? Especially seeing as it seems that there will be no solution to the problem anyway."

Julia was starting to get a bit annoyed, "Okay, stop it... what are you two talking about? I mean if you want to join up with the Crimsons, you know

the invitation was always there. But as you said back then we are on different paths, how is it different now?"

Mike chuckled, "Sorry about that, at the start of this we wanted to help fix this world or more precisely help clean up the damage of the last few years and try and change the way certain things are. To do that, we needed to learn about a few things and then we got sidetracked by something else."

Anna continued the explanation, "One of the plans we came up with pretty much started with what you have. There are a lot of other steps involved and we can gladly go over them, then you can see if you agree with all of it."

Julia understood a bit more but still had many questions. "Well I am curious, so what is this plan of yours?"

As Mike was about to start what was probably going to be a long explanation he was interrupted by Alexandria, "Guys you need to come quick. The voice is about to talk again." Once again, Julia was left in the dark wondering what was going on. What she did notice was that both Anna and Mike got up and sprinted back to camp. As she joined them she saw that a few of the kids were awake again and were staring at Rosamia. Given that she was glowing golden all over Julia did the same. "I take it that this is the something that got you sidetracked?"

Anna simply nodded as the stranger's voice started speaking using Rosamia's body.

"Congratulations on passing the evaluation. You are now ready to face your final trial before the power of rebirth can be used. The final trial is located in what you call the Impregnable Tower. A word of warning that this last trial will have dire consequences. If you choose to accept then make

your way to the tower before six days have passed." Rosamia's golden glow was starting to fade.

Instantly Adam shouted at the voice. "Wait! What happens if we don't accept? What will happen to Rosa?" He never got an answer as Rosamia then returned to normal. After that the kids were jumping everywhere with tons of questions. While Alison had no clue what was going on she could tell from the look on the faces of the Lights Templar that it was something very important. She proceeded to calm the kids and try and give the group time for themselves.

After a little while as Alison regained some control Rosamia turned to Adam, "I'm sorry but it left nothing for me this time so there is no answer at all for your questions."

With that Adam held on to his emotions as much as he could having learned a bit from the last time. "Okay fine, but what evaluation is he talking about? How can we be done when we only did one trial? This all makes no sense."

Julia chuckled a bit, "I'll say! What have you guys gotten yourselves into this time?"

Mike agreed with Adam that this situation made very little sense, or did it. "All right, let's stand back and go over the whole situation, at the same time we can update Julia on the issue. Maybe going over it all will help clear this out a bit." The reality was that he did not think it would help that much but everyone was on edge and going over it all would give everyone time to calm down a bit and also think about it more. He proceeded to start with the book found with the dwarves, then the first trial and then the location that was given afterwards. With what happened there he explained their next steps and why they agreed to take them and what happened afterwards all the while not getting any contact



from the Voice.

Julia was a bit dumbfounded, "That's some sidetrack." She turned to Rosa, "Are you okay?"

Rosamia laughed a bit at that comment, "I guess I am. There are issues but so far I... we are managing."

Adam interrupted, "Still, the faster this is dealt with the better, even after all that recap it still makes very little sense." Rosamia was forced to agree with that one.

Anna was not so sure about the last part of Adam's comment. "I think we are overcomplicating the evaluation part of all this. Maybe there was no master plan of trials one, two, three and so on like we assumed. All this time it's been looking at Rosamia's memories so it should know who we are and what we are able to do. Also let's think about what we have done from place to place. First dark clerics, then more clerics, then a daemon corrupting Crusaders. Are all those things not things related to the enemies of the lord of light?"

Alexandria was catching on to what Anna was implying, "I guess that's one way to look at it, then looking at it from that point of view only when we agreed to help here did we really finally sidetrack from its mission or test." She turned to Rosamia, "And if that is the case then what is the next step? Continue on the sidetrack or deal with this final trial, which will have dire consequences... whatever that means."

Rosamia felt all the eyes of the group focusing on her. It seems the final decision would be left in her hands, which made sense. She took a deep breath, "I think we should make a go of it." Adam was shocked but she was surprised that he did not immediately protest, which made her smile as she continued. "What I want to know is the simple reason why was I chosen? What is this power of

rebirth? There are so many questions really and I think that it would be unwise of us to ignore all of them simply because we are afraid of what might happen afterward." She looked at Adam, "Yes, I am very concerned and afraid but I don't want to live with 'what if' questions, and I don't know I guess I just get the feeling that this is just too big to ignore." She then turned to everyone, "Don't you all agree?"

Julia watched as they all nodded, even Adam who seemed to hesitate for a bit. Julia then stood up and put her hand on Anna's shoulder, "Well you guys talk about it more while I take care of watch duties. From my point of view mind you, it seems this is something you need to deal with before anything else. If you want you can continue with this escort, and when we get to town then I can resupply you and give you faster horses. With that you will be fully prepared and should make it in time."

Mike nodded, "I think we will do just that. It will also give us time to see if there is anything we want to prepare before this final trial."

Julia smiled, "Then a plan it is." She paused for a moment, "Once you are done, please stop by again. I would like to know how things turn out. And while this may not be the right time for this but if you are still interested in talking about that plan of yours, I would be interested in that too."

Anna smiled and nodded, "One way or the other we will. You can count on it."

Julia left them to go make the rounds. While she agreed with them she also had a bad gut feeling about this. Something told her the consequences of this could be on the same scale as the lord of darkness avatar being freed from that prison of his. She hoped her friends would all come back from this.

## Chapter 9

A few days had already passed and the Lights Templar were just about a day or so from reaching the Impregnable Tower. So far the trip had been mostly quiet as everyone was already very anxious as to what awaited them. Mike looked in Alexandria's direction, "Did the others say anything about any of this?"

Alexandria had a bit of a gloomy look on her face as she heard the question, "Not really no. Actually, when I combined what they both told me it just made me worry more."

Anna was curious as to what could have been said to affect Alex, "Was the news that bad?"

Alexandria shrugged, "It was not one specific thing they said just... Well for the dwarves they said that they never built that tower, it just 'appeared' one day, meaning that it was probably built by the lord of light himself. In the case of the elves, the Council does know of the tower and has confirmed that no one has ever been able to get past the entrance floor. This includes elves as well. Heck, it includes Solanar as he tried a *loooong* time ago and failed himself." She let that sink in with everyone for a bit and continued, "I think you all know now why the news made me worry. I mean Solanar could not get in, okay sure we will probably have an edge as maybe when we get there this entity inside Rosa may clue us in. But at the same time given that it has not been the best guide so far I'm not sure we can bank on that."

It was a topic they had not thought of. They had been told to get to the tower within a certain number of days but there was no mention if there

was a time limit once they got there. That meant that they may have to solve the tower puzzle before they are able to reach the final trial.

Iris slowly shook her head, "No, something tells me that it will not be an issue. I mean we will find out for sure soon but just look at the book that started all this as an example. All this time all that needed to be done was to read one word and then all this happened. I think that the same thing will happen once Rosamia reaches the tower, there will be something that will guide us on how to proceed, something that only she can see clearly from some reason."

No one could argue with Iris's logic. As Rosamia thought about it that scenario was entirely possible and would explain why Anna and Mike saw nothing when they stopped there a while back. "I guess you're right Iris, let's just focus on getting there and then we will see. Still, if that is the case that puts more weight on why me? Why was I chosen or what requirements do I have that no one else does?"

Adam gave her a light smile, "I guess we will find out soon enough." She smiled back and nodded in agreement.

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They finally arrived at the tower with one day to spare. The tower itself was a fairly simple tower, there were no holes for windows and the tower itself was built using what looked like white stone. At the top were openings caused by window arches and from there they could see a bluish glowing light. Alexandria used her magic to see from a distance and maybe get a better idea, "That's odd."

Mike turned, "Can you actually see what's there?"

"No I can't, I mean the spell is working

because I can see the arches like I was a foot from them but inside is the same as when I'm looking at it normally, so... yeah, odd. I'm getting the impression that while the Portal Tower has lot of protections built in that this one is about to beat its socks off. I could try to fly up there and see..."

Anna immediately stopped her, "No, don't do that."

As Alex stopped she explained the warning, "The tower is protected against that too. The people here explained that the last person who got close got hit with something that canceled all their magic, and when that happened... well it was a long way down. Thankfully there were other casters around who were able to catch him."

Mike nodded as they were about to get ready to step inside the entrance, "Also all magic will not work as you step in, it's like a magic dead zone so don't be too surprised."

Iris looked around. At the entrance were a few people just sitting and waiting around. They scowled at them. From their point of view she could understand that. Basically, their group was just another in direct competition to be the first to make it up. Inside, things were a bit different. All around were groups of people huddled around tents and other camping equipment; it seems that some groups had made this place their new homes. She wondered how long these people had been here. There was also something else in the middle of the room that was odd but she held off her question about it as someone from one of the groups was approaching them. The guy had blond hair and an improperly shaven beard, he wore normal clothing and was equipped with what seemed like a rapier.

"So you came back with more people. You think that they can help you more than I can?"

Mike smiled at him, "Hawk, you're still here? I should have known. This person has been here for about ten years you mentioned?"

Hawk nodded. "Last time we were here he gave us the details for this place. We joined up for a bit to try and figure it out but after a while we left and gave it up." Hawk looked at the group, "If you're going to have another go at it do you mind if I tag along again as well?"

Mike pretended to think about it, "I'll have to talk it over with the group first." He got closer to Hawk and started whispering, "For old time's sake, give me about an hour. I'll see if I can convince them on how worthwhile your help would be considering that we would have to split the treasure even more because of it."

Hawk gave Mike a small wink and a quick pat on the back, "Thanks man, I knew you were good people when I first saw you two, and no worries I get how it is." Hawk then turned around and went back to the spot he had claimed for himself.

Adam looked at Mike, "What was that all about?"

Mike sighed, "He is what you would call a wolf in sheep's clothing. He's friendly to everyone here and will tag along with anyone and do anything if it means that he can find a way to get to a higher floor."

Adam looked at Anna, "I'm surprised you teamed up with someone like that."

Anna shrugged, "At the time both of us just wanted to take a look around and get some information on the place. He is very relentless, and as stupid as it sound will watch your every move like his name implies. Eventually, it was just easier to agree to join up with him. Thing is, this time around we can't include him or anyone else. Considering the last test I'm pretty sure that if any

of them join us they will just die during the battle."

Mike nodded, "Which will make looking around that much harder. Still, we do have a bit of time it seems."

Iris interrupted him, "Which is good considering that I think what we are looking for is right in front of us. There is an odd pattern on the floor in the middle of the room." She turned to Rosamia, "Just like the last time. I can't see it clearly but I'm guessing that you can."

Rosamia slowly nodded, "It's way more than just a pattern on the floor. Follow me but very slowly." Rosamia led them near the middle of the tower and stood and looked up and then turned back at the others. "As Iris mentioned there are Dwarven runes inscribed in a circle on the floor and inside that circle there is a glowing pillar that goes all the way to the top."

Alexandria took a quick look, "Okay, we are not seeing any of that, and I'm guessing no one else is. What do the runes say?" As innocently as she could Rosamia walked around to get a better look. As she rejoined the group she whispered, "It says, step forth vessel and those marked in your group and begin the final trial."

Adam looked curiously at everyone, "Ahhh marked! How the heck do we get marked?"

"I have no clue, it does not say anything about that."

Alexandria looked at the invisible pillar, "Well looks like Iris's hunch was right but it seems there still is a bit of a riddle to solve. I mean how can we mark anyone in a place that we can't cast in? I mean I guess we could go outside and then come back inside..."

Mike cut her off, "No, I don't think that will be necessary and I think that what Iris said applies again. I think we are over thinking it." He stopped

himself and looked at Anna who was laughing at his comment, "I know, that's twice now. In any case what I was going to say is that I think that we are already marked. Think back, what was the first thing that happened during the first trial? A glowing golden pulse hit us all."

Alexandria nodded, "I get it, we assumed that it happened as a signal that the trial was starting and in a way it was but it could have easily marked us all at the same time without us knowing."

Iris looked to her side quickly, "Well it looks like your 'friend' is getting a bit antsy over there. I don't think we have much time. So here is what I propose, if we really are already marked then I'll step into the middle. If anything happens then quickly follow me. That way we will have our confirmation and if I go I have the better chance of pretty much handling anything for a short time. Mind you I don't see that the trial would start without the vessel being present."

Mike did not like the plan, but he had to admit that it was very sound and would help speed things up as pretty soon he figured they would have to start answering questions they did not want to answer. "All right I agree, go for it and we will be right behind you."

Iris nodded in confirmation and took a step in. As soon as she did her body disappeared in thin air. Adam quickly reacted, "Let's go – now!" Mike looked back as he waited for all the others to first step in, Hawk was already running in their direction yelling as well. When Anna took the step Mike quickly followed and disappeared before Hawk could get close enough.

When Mike finally appeared on the other side, he saw that everyone was there with him. Iris greeted him with a small smile, "Well, that worked out okay."



He nodded, "Seems like it. Not sure on the greeting we will get on the way out but we will deal with that one later. So what do we have here?" He looked around and there was little to see. The room was circular as expected, its ceiling was easily thirty to forty feet from the floor. The room itself was empty, there were no windows, stairs or anything. All that could be seen was the white stone used to build the tower.

Alexandria took a few steps forward, "Seems like we have a very, very large empty room, but on the up side it seems that I can cast here."

Before anyone could answer her comment, Rosamia felt a pain in her head and then her chest. Suddenly she screamed as the golden ball that had entered her body left her and started to float in the middle of the room. Adam reached out for Rosa, "Are you okay?"

She took a few deep breaths and looked at the concerned faces of everyone, "I'm... fine..." She took a moment and did a quick mental check and smiled at everyone. "It's gone, it just left."

Adam was very cautious, "So you're back to normal?"

"Seems like it."

Alexandria started to cast a quick spell, "Let's check that out if you don't mind." After a few minutes a broad smile appeared on her face, "Yep, she is totally normal." As everyone started to rejoice at the news the voice could be heard coming from the direction of the ball of light that was still in the middle of the room.

"The trial will now begin. If you succeed in passing this test then I will see you on the top floor and if you fail then this will be your final resting place. Good luck."

Adam was worried like everyone else, "Alex, Iris is it possible for you two to get us out if we

need to?" Alexandria tried to focus on coordinates for a teleport spell but for some reason her mind could not come up with any. She turned to Iris who had a similar dumbfounded look on her face. "...Just give me some time and I'm sure I can figure something out."

Anna then pointed to the other end of the room, "Looks like time is up." They all turned to see a small ball of shadow float at the opposite end of the room. The ball grew and grew, eventually it took the form of the largest shadow dark cleric they had ever seen. Adam powered his sword with holy power that turned them white, "Well that's very unexpected and odd, but we should be able to take it."

Mike agreed, "Still let's be careful. There is no way that the last trial can be just that."

The group charged in with Iris and Adam taking the lead. Adam slashed at the target trying to corrupt some of the dark power and Iris used arcane fire on her swords in order to cause damage with every hit. Rosamia instantly started stealing some of his energy, as soon as she did something felt odd but the spell worked as intended. Once she had enough she redirected it at the target.

Alexandria tagged with Anna and Mike. She used delayed fireballs and exploded them in succession after throwing them in the wounds that would be opened up by both their enchanted sword slashes.

The cleric was being bombarded from all sides but Mike saw that he was also giving as much as he took. As the attacks continued, the cleric summoned a shadow-like tar on the ground that followed him as he moved around. This tar encircled him all around and caused anyone attacking in melee range to be drastically slowed down. Sometimes, the cleric also tried to blast them out of the fight with a cone of shadow energy

thrown at a specific target. Then when there was no specific target he targeted everyone with a shower of small shadow energy pellets that were thrown around everywhere. When this happened Iris, Rosamia and Alexandria stopped and created shields to protect everyone as much as possible. But the barrage was very frequent and there was no way to stop all of them all the time. As the wounds grew worse Rosamia, Iris and even Adam took turns healing some of the damage.

Mike saw this cleric as the super version of any they had seen. Overall, he used every tactic the others had used against them. While that made him dangerous it also made his attacks predictable. As well, all that energy spent should force him to burn out at a much rapid pace. The fighting continued at the same aggressive pace for a long time. Mike got closer to Anna, "This makes no sense, it seems like we are getting nowhere with all our attacks."

She agreed, "I think we need a new plan, let's regroup."

Mike ordered the group to disengage, as they moved backwards the cleric summoned pulses of shadow energy in their direction. Rosamia created a holy shield to block them, "Assuming he does not add more power or change his attack the shield should cover us for a little while."

They all huddled behind the shield, Mike looked back at the target, which was still casting those waves. "We must be missing something, that cleric should have exploded by now. Anyone see or realize anything that's different?" All but Rosamia confirmed that besides the fact that he was still alive there was nothing they had noticed.

Rosa checked on the shield, "I'm not sure if it means anything but when I try to get power from him, something is odd."

Alexandria was curious, "Odd how? Is there a protection or barrier that's making it harder?"

Rosa shook her head, "No, nothing like that. It's just that when I take the energy I feel something from the person I take it from." She looked at the cleric, "When I do it to him, I get nothing... it's like there is nothing there, which is odd."

Anna wondered what it could mean, "Could this all be an illusion of sorts then? Like we all think that all our attacks are causing no harm so it turns out that no harm is being caused."

Alexandria confidently stopped her, "No, there is no way, I have defences against that. And while I'm not thinking that my defences are good enough to stop that if it happened from a power like the lord of light, I do know they would be good enough to warn me at least. So I'm sure it's something else."

Mike continued to look at the cleric who was still banging on the shield the same way as it had started. He turned to the others. "Adam, Anna, Iris, with all your combat experience do you not find this fight weird?"

Iris shook her head, "I'm not sure what you mean."

Adam nodded, "I think I do, it's the attacks. They are all counterattacks. He is just reacting isn't he?"

Rosamia was confused, "Are you saying that it's like he's programmed or something?"

Adam shrugged, "I guess, I mean sure he's trying to kill us but I don't feel any killing intent coming from him... It's like you said, I get nothing from him too."

Alexandria stared at their target, "Nothing... nothing..." Everyone looked at her and then she turned with a puzzled look on her face. "Okay hear

me out, what is there is nothing? What I mean by that is when that appeared there was no body just a black ball that grew and channeled more power. Also, there is no taunting or anything really. I'm wondering if that is why both of you feel that there is nothing there, because that's all there is to it – just power."

Rosamia was trying to wrap her head around the idea, "How is that possible? I mean something is controlling that power, right?"

Alex nodded, "Of course, but then something must have been controlling that lightning attack during the first trial as well. Same thing could be happening here."

Mike thought he understood what she was getting at, "Okay so it's being controlled like a big puppet somehow. Is that the reason why it seems un-killable as well?"

Iris stepped in, "Actually that's probably the reason itself if you think about it." She turned to Alexandria to confirm.

Alex took a few seconds and then quickly nodded. "Yes, yes, that would be why. The shadow form is created using the cleric's life magic; the attacks are also powered the same way. When it runs out, then the form can't be contained anymore and it explodes. But in this case there is no body directly fueling it. There should still be a limit but there is no telling how big that is. It could take us hours or days before it runs out." She then had a very worried look on her face, "That being said, it's extremely possible that we can't kill it the way we normally would."

Mike nodded, "All right, new plan then. Alexandria and Iris you see how trapped we really are, while you figure that out we will keep him busy. In theory if we are attacking him he should leave you two alone."

The attack group charged in, all three of them went in melee range as Rosamia stayed back and used the shadow's energy against itself. At their feet, the shadowy tar substance reappeared, and from the looks of it the shadow was now preparing for an all around attack using the small projectiles. They grouped up to get ready as Rosamia got closer to cast a shield to protect them. As expected she could feel the shield being pelted with tiny attacks, she then looked past the shield and saw that the shadow form was powering up a bigger blow while the other attack was in process. Rosamia's eyes went wide, "All of you move quickly." They all left the shield as a large cone of energy dropped on their old location shattering the shield in an instant. While they ran away the small shadow bolts were still hitting them. They all tried to dodge as much as they could but there was no way they would escape harm. From that point on the attacks from the creature intensified. They continued to attack it to give the others time but from this point on Rosamia was forced to go defensive only in order to survive.

Anna got closer to Mike. He could see that she was hurt all around with wounds on her legs and arms. He then realized that it was the same for Adam and himself. Rosamia was not able to keep up. It's at that point that a barrage of spells were thrown at the creature, its attention moved to Alexandria as it threw a cone of shadow at her direction. As Iris created a shield to block it, Mike called for a quick withdrawal.

They all ran in Iris's direction. As they got close she turned to Rosamia, "I'll keep us all protected while you catch your breath."

Rosa thanked her, "I'm not sure what's happening to me, the last few days I felt so strong and more capable and all that seems to be gone. I

think that because it left me, maybe I was using its power somehow."

Mike gave her a smile, "Don't worry about it, I think that we are all glad that you are now officially back to normal even given this particular situation. That being said, Alexandria is there a way out of here after all?"

She had a fearful look on her face, "No, we tried everything we could think of. There is no way out of here. The only way I can use any type of movement spell is if I target another location in this room only. I can't even contact anyone on the outside. Currently we are trapped here."

Mike sighed, "Well, that's not good at all." He turned to look at Iris who was doing all she could to keep them covered from the ongoing now directed blasts. "Are there any other ways to kill these things that we know of?" As soon as he said it he wished he could take the words back.

Adam immediately moved next to Rosamia and cut her off, "No we can't use that, there has to be another way." He pointed at Mike's sword, "Maybe your enchantments can do it – you know, if you go near all out?"

Anna and Mike both looked at each other. There had been no time to explain what that actually did and when there was, there had been no point to bring it up. They could see that Alexandria was slowly moving her head from side to side, telling them not to do it. Adam did not understand the hesitation, "Come on, I know that this will leave you in a bad spot afterwards but it could work as one hit kills go. Plus it's much better than the alternative."

Mike gave a low chuckle at that one and then turned to Anna, "In a way he's right."

Anna gave him a weak smile and then turned to Alex, "Knowing what we know, would it work?"

Alexandria could not believe they were even thinking about doing this, "In theory maybe but there is no guarantee and there are really no guarantees on the outcome for both of you."

Anna reached out to grab Mike's hand, "Hmm, reduced time versus no time. Looking at it that way it's hardly worth debating." Mike agreed with her comment as she continued, "At least now we fully understand the cost. Still, no matter the outcome don't worry Alexandria you are not to blame for this." Alexandria dropped to her knees, as she saw them slowly walk next to Iris at the same time she saw the colours go to red and green to light green and pink to finish at white.

Rosamia went next to Alex, "The more I think about it, the voice did warn us about a dire consequence for this trial, so I'm not sure if even this will work." Alexandria closed her eyes as she was trying to hold back the tears.

Iris looked next to her to see Anna and Mike still holding hands and also white blades. Her eyes then went wide, "*Wait! What are you both doing?*" Iris could see them whispering something to each other and then there was a quick kiss between the two of them and they swung their swords. The energy left their blades and connected with the creature. At that point both Anna and Mike dropped to the ground. The result of the blow caused an explosion around the creature that covered all of it. When it died down the attacks stopped but the creature was still there. Iris quickly moved to Anna and Mike and started healing them. There was nothing she could do for the loss that they had taken but she could help with the shock that their bodies were currently going through.

Rosamia looked ahead and then turned to Adam with a sad look in her eyes, "It failed..."



Hearing that Alexandria then looked up, "No, no, no, *no!* But that can't be!" She stood up and shouted at the creature still just standing there, "*Was that not ENOUGH!*"

Rosamia moved closer to Alex, "I understand why you are mad but..."

Adam cut her off, "No, I will not let you do it."

Rosa looked at him what could she possibly tell him; before any words came out of her mouth Alexandria interrupted her. "He's right you can't do it, indirectly they already tried for you."

Rosamia turned, confused by Alex's statement, "What are you talking about?"

Iris helped Mike and Anna get closer. It's at that point that Mike explained the situation. "Alexandria found the original spell in the dwarf library. There she found out that as soon as the blade goes white or even partially white our life energy is used. So what Alexandria is trying to say is that in theory we already paid a portion of the cost that you are planning on paying with your spell." Rosamia's head dropped low. She wondered how much of their lives they had already lost after doing that move at least three times, plus Iris had used it as well.

Suddenly the creature once again started to attack and sent shadow pulses all around it. Iris once again went on shield duty to block the incoming attacks. This time the pulses were much more frequent. She would have to constantly feed the shield holy energy in order to protect everyone. Rosamia looked up at it. Now that it had resumed its attack after that type of spell she was sure about it. "Valkyrie is the only way out of this trial. That pause in his attacks actually confirms it as it's the only thing so far that has caused any real effect. Alexandria had it right, both swords together were just not enough. This thing wants a

whole life not a partial."

Adam was furious, "How? How can you be so quick to jump to that, after everything that's happened? All those times you told me I needed to live, was that all a lie to just keep me going? Fine then if I mean that little to you then what about Alex's father then..."

Anna shouted "*Adam*, you're going too far."

He turned to her, "I don't think I am. I mean does this make any sense to you?"

"Currently Rosamia is thinking that if she does this it will save us all and that it's a sure thing so because of that she is willing to pay the sacrifice regardless of what happens."

With a saddened look Rosamia faced Anna, "And in your case you figured that taking the chance that the swords would work was better than a sure thing because of the small hope that it could work out. Did we not have this conversation not a long time ago?"

Anna nodded, "Yes and I still stand that what the lieutenant did was wrong."

With small tears sliding down her cheeks Rosamia smiled a weak little smile, "But the rest all lived didn't they? I'm sorry but this is the only way. Iris is doing great but she can't hold out for long and you two are out, there are no options left if you all want to survive and I'll make sure that you will all survive."

Alexandria then stood next to Rosamia, "... But then... what about..."

Rosamia hugged Alexandria as hard as she could, "You will live after this and I know that he would want that above all else. I know you will be sad but this is not like the last time. I know you understand that or you will eventually. But please this time if you do try and save me it can't be at the expense of anyone, okay?" Rosamia let her go

and reluctantly so did Alex, then Rosa faced the one person she knew would not be convinced by any words. "Adam please let me save everyone. I know this will work and we will soon be out of time."

Oddly enough he was very calm, "No, I will not allow you to do this. If you are so insistent on doing it then tell me how to do it and I'll cast the stupid spell."

Rosamia slowly nodded her head, "Nope, not going to happen. Why should I, because you can finally do your duty as my weapon?"

He smiled at that comment, "You think that by doing this you are saving us all. Well maybe you are right about that for the others but not for me. If you do this I can guarantee you right here and now that a weapon is all I will ever be. This action will not save me but kill me in whatever next stupid combat I will find myself in. Recently things have started to change and I've been making an effort but that's only because you are around and only for you and you alone. The reason that is... is because I love you Rosamia and I will not live without you. Think what you want of me and in the end maybe all I am is a weapon, a soldier, and my duty as that is to protect others, especially the ones they love. I cannot let you do this, please I beg you to let me take your place."

Rosamia did not know what to think, she did not want to kill herself but she wanted to save her friends and she also wanted to save him. "Why? Why say that now of all times? Why do you think that it will be easier for me if you're gone? Do you think me so cold?"

He slowly shook his head and approached her, "No, your heart is forever more pure and warm than mine will ever be. And as much as I can face down anyone or anything with a sword you have

the power to face down life with your own strength and I don't, not without your help." He then put his arms around her and slowly and gently gave her a small kiss on her trembling lips and then whispered, "Please, let me do this for you and for everyone else."

She closed her eyes trying unsuccessfully to hold back her tears and whispered back to him, "Why for the first time in your life are you like this? Why could you not have continued to act like you normally do?"

He realized that he too was crying but he forced a smile anyway. "If I would have done that then there is no way that I would have a chance to convince you not to do this." She squeezed him as hard as she could, "Ff...ff... fine... I'll show you the spell."

It did not take long for Adam to understand it; in a way he was surprised at how easy it was but then Rosamia had learned it when she was so young so really there was no way that it could have been that complex. Adam kissed her one more time, "Thanks for letting me do this." She did not say anything but she did let him go. Adam then turned and made his way to Iris, "I take it that you got most of what's about to happen?"

She had been crying too, "I did and I want to say that you are wrong by the way, you have that strength in you as well you just don't see it yet."

He smiled, "Both of you always saw me in a better light then I ever saw myself. And you know what? Maybe you are both right about it and eventually maybe I would see it too, but do you think that would happen if she was gone?"

"I wish I could say that I did but..."

He cut her off by putting his hand on her shoulder, "Know that I am very proud of you Iris, you're like the daughter I never had and I will miss

you terribly. Now protect me for just a little while longer." She nodded in agreement and created the largest shield that she could.

Adam stood behind her and cast the simple spell. He felt a warm glow around him and then a giant pillar of light appeared. He suddenly felt the pillar of light lift him up and when he reached the middle everything turned golden.

The others looked as a humanoid figure appeared all clad in golden armor holding a long sword in his hand. He was as big as the shadow creature and his eyes glowed crimson red. He took his sword and swung at the creature. Rosamia, Alex and Iris huddled around Anna and Mike and all created shields around them to cover everyone. When the sword made contact a large white blinding light emanated from the explosion that followed it. Their shields all collapsed and everyone was flung to the wall of the tower and all passed out from the blow.

After a little while Rosamia was the first to regain consciousness. She looked around, everyone was still alive and the creature was gone. Stairs going upwards had appeared and a blue light could be seen from the floor above it. In the near middle of the room was Adam's body, she raced to him. She kneeled next to him and took his hand, it was still warm but it was getting colder. "A...Adam... Come on wake up. Please wake up."

He coughed for a bit and then opened his eyes and saw that the others were now around him as well. Iris was helping Anna and Alex was with Mike. He looked at Rosamia "You were right, looks like it worked and you are all alive as well."

Rosamia squeezed his hand, "I'll cast a stasis on you, and we will find a way. I'm sure we will."

He smiled and turned to Alexandria, "Hey magical princess, how much time do I have before

this eats me up completely?"

Alexandria could not help but chuckle, "Seriously, even now you're like this. I don't know Adam it all depends on how much life you had left originally. You probably have hours for sure but there is no way to tell."

He nodded, "Fine, that's perfect actually." He turned to Rosa, "So cast a spell on me, but not a stasis spell but a weight spell. You people are going to drag me up there one way or the other. I want to see with my own eyes and hear with my own ears why we did all this and it better be good." He then smiled, "The way I see it there is no way that you will refuse this request."

Rosamia could not believe his comment and wiped the tears off her face and cast the spell. Alexandria then cast a levitation spell on him. As they all made their way upwards in the glowing blue light Rosamia also hoped as well that all this had been worth it. Because at this particular time even if this caused the lord of light to be reborn she did not think that it would be worth the trade.

## Chapter 10

The climb up was very quick, which was a welcome change. When they got to the top they found as was expected from what they had seen so far, the room was all made of the white stone and there were arches all around that created windows to see outside. A glowing ball of blue energy, its diameter about forty inches, took a good portion of the middle of the room. What was unexpected was the creature next to the ball of energy. Right in front of them they saw a bipedal creature, which had a similar built to an elf but instead of skin, stone was carved up to look like scales that looked like the ones found on a dragon. For his face he had the long ears of the elves but his eyes were reptilian. Adam could not believe his eyes, "It's the avatar of the dark lord... what's going on?"

Alexandria blinked her eyes not believing what she was seeing, "...It's... It's only a construct, like those golems we fought before. But what it is doing here and why it looks like the dark lord's avatar is beyond me." At that question the creature moved and turned his head at Alexandria and then spoke. They all realized that the voice used was the same as the glowing ball that had used Rosamia's body.

"You are using the term dark lord as what the dwarves called him. I will use this as well for my explanations. I have been created to instruct whoever passed the trials on the spell of rebirth and also answer any questions you may have. As to my form, theoretically I was made to look like the avatar of light. Back in the past when he made his appearance during the fight with the dwarves, orcs and elves he figured that he would choose to

appear the same as the lord of darkness. This way they would all know who he was and what he represented."

Alexandria was a bit shocked and looked at her friends who seemed to be in a similar state. She continued with the obvious question they had all been waiting to know the details of, "Okay then, what is rebirth?"

"Rebirth is a spell created by the lord of light. Before leaving, he left the power and knowledge of his avatar self in this mass of energy. Once a proper vessel appears then the power can be infused in them, this process will destroy the current vessel but once finished they will become the equivalent in power and knowledge to that of the avatars."

Rosamia could not believe what she was hearing, but before she could say anything Adam protested, "Oh heck no, there is no way I'm letting that happen. I may not have much life left in me but I'll stop you somehow from doing that..." Rosamia, still holding Adam's hand, gave him a light squeeze. He stopped and turned to her and she gave him a light smile. "I am not prepared or willing to sacrifice myself for something like this."

The creature turned to her, "While you were the vessel and still are a candidate there are others in your groups that could be used if you so desire. As for sacrifice, yes your current self would be destroyed but it would also be merged with what the lord of light left. Together, comingled, you would both be destroyed and then recreated and reborn into a new being."

Iris shook her head, "That's still nuts. Why was something like this even created?"

"This plan was created as a direct result of another plan to trap the avatar of the lord of darkness in that structure. It was known that



eventually the avatar would be freed, as an option to do so was built into the spell itself. Once this happened there would be very little that could be done against it and so this measure was created to create a being that could fight against it when the time came."

Alexandria scratched her head in frustration, "You have got to be kidding me. Why not create a trap spell that did not have an option for him to be freed, instead of doing all this?"

"That was the original option chosen by the lord of light."

Mike was skeptical, "That's not much of an explanation. But ignoring rebirth and this 'plan', can you answer how we won against the avatar then? Because in a way all this was useless, as it was not needed in order to defeat him in the first place."

"Yes, I've looked into that memory and agree with your assumption that you got lucky. Essentially the spell had two parts. The first one was the trap itself, which you know about. The second was the hidden spell that was created in order to give the races time. Again the lord of light knew that darkness would escape at one point, so rebirth was created. But in order to be able to use rebirth, time was needed and so that was the function of the second spell.

While the avatar was trapped, the second spell drew all of its power from it, weakening it little by little and it stored that power in the runes that were all around inside the structure. Once freed, the avatar would need that power back, so he needed to stay in that position to collect it back from the runes. While this happened automatically, only a certain amount of runes would convert back to power during a given day. The option for him to leave was given but then he

would forfeit whatever power would be freed during that day and if he left earlier then he would have been weak enough for the races to defeat. In your case you forced his hand and challenged him when he was not ready but given how the fight ended if you would have been a day later or maybe even hours the attack would have failed."

Mike looked at Anna, "Looks like we really did beat the odds."

She nodded, "Seems like it, and it also seems like we need to do it again in order for us to find a way so that we can all survive this."

Rosamia had a light smile at that comment, it seems that Anna still had not given up hope and still was going to try and reach for that perfect ending no matter how small a chance there was. Rosa took a deep breath, she hated all of this but there were still questions she wanted answered and this thing in front of them seemed very accommodating. "You mentioned others could be candidates for the rebirth spell besides me. If that is the case then why was I the only one who could read that book properly? Why was I chosen?"

"In order to be able to reach this stage certain conditions had to be met – one of those being that the person needed to have lots of contact with the dark energy so as to properly understand its power. Another was that the person needed to be able to use holy magic to understand the capabilities that rebirth would give the chosen. Lastly this person needed to know at least one sacred forbidden spell used by holy magic, this would prove the importance of knowledge and a realization of the consequences of power."

Iris cut in, "So I guess that's why I could also see what Rosamia was seeing but not clearly because I was missing the knowledge of Valkyrie. Had I known it then I could have been chosen just

as easily."

"That is correct. Ideally, the original intent was that the vessel would be chosen for rebirth but a choice is also given to the vessel if he or she wants to appoint someone else for the spell."

Adam chuckled, "Well, before anyone gets any ideas I'm not volunteering for that. Sure I want to be saved but this is wrong."

Rosamia smiled, "This is wrong for everyone and this would not save you anyway. Sure part of you would be alive but..."

Alexandria turned to everyone and pointed to the ball of energy, "Wait! Wait, wait, *wait!* After everything are we just going to leave that thing there? I mean I agree with Rosa but, I mean..."

Mike chuckled, "Yeah, that does sound wrong as well." He looked at Adam and then back at the construct, "Barring the fact that Adam has very little time, I still want to put this off. There is a lot of this that makes very little sense, like we are still missing something. First, you have all these holes in the lord of light's plans. A trap spell that will break, a window that allows us races to stop the avatar but, just in case, this spell is created. But then we have conditions that maybe no one could meet and never be able to use the spell in the first place. Then you have the lord of darkness, who was so straightforward. Follow me and I'll give you paradise, otherwise you are dead."

Anna had a puzzled look on her face, "I agree that it's odd but where are you going with this?"

He smiled back at her, "I want to know the real reason, and I want to know the real players of this game we seem to be really playing. So let's start with how we do things – by an introduction. You said we were using the term of 'dark lord' so that's what you were going to use as well, but what's the correct name or real name?"

Everyone stared at the construct. "Using the closest word that your tongue has, the lord of darkness would be named Order and the lord of light would be called Chaos."

Mike was baffled, "That I did not expect..."

Rosamia was dumbfounded, "You did not expect that, what about me? This is worse than learning the lord of light was dead all this time. But how can darkness be Order? That makes no sense."

"Order favored rules, structure, and control above all things and Chaos favored choice and freedom. The dwarves associated the name lord of darkness because of the action taken against them. If Order could not control them then this could cause issues in his plans and issues are meant to be resolved. Whereas Chaos cared very little for this as long as there was still room for new choices to be taken."

Adam slowly turned to Rosamia, "It's up to you but I think that I'll take that stasis spell now, this whole things feels like a joke somehow."

Mike nodded at Adam's comment, "I agree with him." He then paused for a moment, "Now that this is known, so much is clear. Why was there a way for the trap to fail, because otherwise that would create an absence of choice. Why not just create a spell to destroy darkness, again same reason. Even this spell in front of us, the vessel is the intended target but another can be chosen. All decisions based on the ability to create future options." He then mockingly chuckled, "And then the words of the lord of darkness himself during the fight, 'Free will only leads to chaos. I plan to solve that problem once and for all.' Was that not dead on or what?"

Rosamia was demoralized, "When you put it like that it feels like all the sacrifices, the current

ones and the old ones have all been for nothing. That one way or the other all we were doing is playing a stupid game controlled by two different ideologies." She looked at Adam and then at everyone else, "...Was it really all for nothing?"

Anna shook her head, "I refuse to believe that, sure maybe it may look like we are simply aiding Chaos and his agenda. But we needed to take action and those actions saved many others. Just look at you, Rosamia. Back then you realized that the current method for fighting the orcs was not working so you tried to find another way. When you saw for yourself what the orcs were really about you joined in and tried to save them."

Rosamia was confused, "I don't get it. Is that not just following the idea of always making sure there is the option of choice?"

The creature interrupted and answered Rosamia's question, "Yes, that is why you made an excellent vessel and would be a perfect candidate for the spell."

While Mike thought that the interruption was odd for a construct Anna smiled and continued. "Sure you can look at it that way, but I don't. If Order had a plan where he would not turn life into a fake life like he was doing then we would not have gone against him. If Chaos had followed the same extreme with his plan where there was no order at all then we would have stopped him. The way I look at it we never fought for any of their plans but we fought for life, not just our own but of everyone who wanted to live and did not want to stop others from living. And by following this third path we refused Order's ideals and finally stopped him and that action alone goes against Chaos's idea as well because we removed his existence and his possible choices. And now, if we can, we will remove Chaos's final plan, stopping his existence

as well and also stopping this stupid idea of being played by the wills of higher beings. Our choices, our rules for our continued well-being that is the future we are aiming for and that is the future we will keep fighting for."

Rosamia took a moment to think about what Anna had said and then smiled, "Once again, thank you for the kind words."

Alexandria was now feeling inspired by Anna's speech and had enough of all this. "That's it, I'm done, no more of this."

Iris looked at her with a questioning look, "I know that tone, what are you planning?"

Alex smiled at Iris, "I'm going to try and live up to my nickname." She turned to Mike, "You mind if I take a crack at this creature and this spell of his?"

Mike shrugged, "As if you had to ask. If anyone has the best chance of figuring what we should do about it, it's you."

She nodded in confirmation and turned to Adam, "I know your time is running out and the last thing I want to do is waste it but..."

Adam cut her off, "By all means please go for it. So far this quest has been nothing but a pain and its punch line one sick joke."

Alexandria turned to the construct, "Let me go over what you said. The spell will comingle the energy and the vessel into one and a new avatar will be born, correct?"

"Yes."

"The avatars are like the dwarves and dragons. They can't reproduce otherwise I'm sure that Order or Chaos would have done so somehow. And if that is the case then does that mean they share the same ageless property as the dwarves and dragons as well?"

"Yes."

Alexandria gave herself a mental jackpot and pointed at the ball of energy, "In order to create something like that then the rebirth spell must need life energy to power it. So, in front of us is not magical energy but a portion of Chaos's life energy – enough to power the spell. In a way it's the same energy needed as the Valkyrie spell or the shadow form spell that the dark cleric used."

"That is correct."

It was now obvious to everyone present where Alexandria was heading. "Okay, so if that is the case and Chaos would surely not remove the options of choice from the vessel, could the vessel not choose to use the life energy in some other way than to power rebirth?"

The construct was silent for some time. Before anyone could ask if she had broken it, it finally answered her question. "Using any of the life energy here would prevent the spell from ever being cast, at that point no avatar could be created now or in the future without replenishing it somehow. Still this construct has been instructed to give this energy to the vessel that would pass the trials even if they refused the spell. So the energy belongs to the vessel to use as it sees fit."

Alexandria was ecstatic, "And this is how we save our lives, and Adam's, and undo the damage these two lords have done to us." She turned to Iris, "All right now let's see if I can teach you the spell to transfer live energy, seeing as I can't cast it myself anymore."

Iris raised both hands and gestured Alex to slow down, "Wait a minute, you can't just jump the gun on this. That spell took you hours to learn if you told me correctly." She pointed at the construct, "Also, why not have Rosamia ask him to do it for us? I'm willing to bet he will do a much better job of it considering the spell that he was

supposed to do in the first place."

Alexandria thought about it, "Maybe you have a point there."

Rosamia smiled at Alex, "So what are your orders?"

"Order him to transfer all the life energy in that ball divided equally amongst all of us using a life transfer spell. Doing that will give us back all that we lost and give us a large top off."

As Rosamia was about to give the command Mike stopped her, "Wait, before you give that order."

He then turned to the construct, "What will be the final effects if we do this?"

"Given the amount here and the number that you are, all your lives will be extended to a bit more than a normal elf's lifespan. Doing this will also result in having the life force of Chaos inside of you, which will result in a similar power boost that the vessel was experiencing when I was within her. For those who cannot cast holy magic it will reawaken the gene that is within you but the level of power will depend on how dormant it originally was."

Alexandria turned to Rosamia begging, "Please let him do this, please."

Anna then voiced her concern, "This is a pretty big decision. I mean we will live that long but everyone we know will not and there is also another issue." She grabbed Mike's hand, "We have already made a decision on this but for the rest of you if you care about having a future family this action will cause issues with that. Whatever gets decided we are behind it but make sure that's what you really want."

Iris thought about it, "Hmm, I've seen my whole village and family get slaughtered. Then I was tortured for a while and was about to give up



when you guys came along. You are my family now and that's all I need."

They all looked at Alexandria, she took a few moments to think about it. "I've lived my whole life with elves so this limited lifespan of mine has been an issue for a while now. Still, now that I actually think about it I don't know how important that is anymore. In the end I think that Iris has the right idea." She turned to Rosamia, "Forget what I said before. I was just reacting without thinking."

Rosamia smiled then turned to Adam who simply nodded, "It was never going to be my decision anyways." She chuckled at that and then turned to the construct. "Use a life transfer spell to transfer that life energy to all of us in order to return what was spent by magical means." Rosamia then smirked, "Once that is done, take our new total and add that amount on top for all of us." They all had puzzled looks on their faces as she continued, "The way I see it we will probably spend this lifetime fighting and cleaning up messes in front of us. I think that it's fair to ask to have another lifetime to actually enjoy it."

When the order was done, the construct pressed his hand in the ball of energy and then extended his other to the group. Runes appeared at everyone's feet and then a pillar of light engulfed them for several minutes. When the spell was done, the pillars disappeared and the ball of energy shrank by one-fourth its original size.

Adam took in a large breath, "I feel alive again. I know that Alex said I had hours but I have to tell you that it was getting hard there. But all that is gone. I now feel like I felt when I was in my teens." He looked at the others who seemed to feel as invigorated as he was.

Once again Rosamia felt like she had felt when she had the presence in her but this time there

was no one else but her, it was a very liberating feeling. She turned to the others and smiled, convinced she had made the right decision. Somehow, it seemed fair this way.

Once the initial shock was over Iris pointed at the energy ball, "So what do we do with that? Can we leave it here? I mean it's not like there have been many people able to get here in the first place so wouldn't it be safer here still?"

Mike nodded at that and turned to the construct, "That's a great question. Is there anyone else who could get here and access this power and how long will this tower's magical defences last?"

"The tower is a container for this energy, as long as there is some left then the tower will continue to function as is the case with this construct. Also only one key was created in order to do the trials. Seeing as you have already used it only the vessel and the ones marked are able to reach this floor."

Adam smiled at that, "Sounds good enough for me. Now unless there are other questions can we leave? While I'm happy that things turned out okay I think I've had enough for a little while."

Mike figured they all felt the same way, "Sounds good. Alexandria can you teleport us out of here now? I would rather avoid the people on the ground floor if we can." When she did not answer they looked over in her direction. She had both hands open in front of her and was focusing on something. They were about to ask her if something was wrong when a small flame appeared in one hand and a glowing white ball of light showed up in the other.

Iris's shoulders immediately dropped, "...I'm never going to hear the end of this one." Before anyone could ask what she was referring to Alexandria opened her eyes and had the biggest

smile they had ever seen plastered on her face, "Iris... Iris... *Look!* Both arcane *and* holy at the same time. Best gift *EVER!*"

She turned to Mike still with that joyful smile on her face, "So you said something about a teleport. That is not an issue at all anymore, so where do you want us to go?"

Mike shrugged, "I'm not really sure I guess the Crimson town would be a nice spot to rest up for a bit." He turned to Anna and gave her a mischievous smile, "Plus I think we should start our next step there."

Anna chuckled as she was the only one who knew what he was talking about. Alexandria nodded, "All right it will only take me a little while to get the proper location and then we are off."

Adam turned to Mike, "There is already a next step?"

Anna smiled, "We will fill you in on the plan once we are well rested then you can all tell us what you think." As she finished her statement Alexandria's spell fired off and they all disappeared. The construct moved next to the remaining energy and went back to its dormant stage. But before he did, final words were said to an empty room "That was an unexpected result..."

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About two weeks had passed since the Lights Templar had made it back. As they had arrived they updated Julia on the conclusion of their quest, then a few days had been spent resting and the rest talking about the plan Mike and Anna had come up with. After a lot of back and forth they all agreed with the idea and soon after, Rosamia, Adam, Iris and Alexandria all left to go to their designated locations.

As for Anna and Mike they now found themselves in the Commander's room where the Commander and Commander at Arms were also present. Julia looked at them, "So I guess that now I can finally hear this plan of yours?"

Mike nodded, "Yes, here goes. When we last talked we mentioned that you had already started, I mean currently you are accepting people from other places to try and give them a better life. Also you have small groups here and there still helping as much as they can with issues. No longer are you hidden and right now you are reaching out as far as you can. But I'm guessing that currently doing this is also causing lots of issues. The Crimsons lack authority in a way when they are at other places so that creates limits. And, I'm sure there are lots of limits for this town as well considering the blow it received a few years back. After the defeat of the Avatar we talked it over and all agreed that we want to help in some way fix some of the issues we have all created for ourselves as people and also help in general. But we have the same issues as you even more so due to our numbers. To fix that we want to help you and your efforts but that's not where it stops. We also want to bring in the Council, the Order and the Crusaders into this. We want to have a place where there is representation for all major powers and also have that place be a first step to breaking the walls that each organization has built around themselves."

Julia was still puzzled, "I agree with what you say, and I also agree that having a place like that in order to easily communicate with each power would be very handy. But why would anyone agree with this? I mean, what's in it for them?"

Mike smiled, "Ideally, this place would become a beacon of sorts for I want to continue what you have started there too. I want to be able to give

people the chance to come to us and live in this place if they have nowhere to go or if they feel there would be a better place than where they are currently. If they do so they will need to contribute but they will also have the option to join a faction as well."

Julia smiled, "Ahhh, there we go. That place will become a recruitment post for anyone there and if a faction is not present then they will miss out and possibly lose a body to another faction. I could see where that would be reason to join up in some fashion."

Anna nodded, "That's the idea that will be put in front of each faction, yes. Also, sections in the town will be created to start the basic training and test the newcomers, but that is where the hidden plan starts as well. Like we said, we want to try and destroy these walls that have been built. If someone joins the Crusaders currently then all they will know is what the Order tells them. But in this new place a new Crusader will also be introduced to Crimsons or even mages. At that point, they will at least have a chance to learn about the others and what they work for and their goals. As more and more of these new recruits join in they should be less closed-minded or at least may have already formed an opinion for themselves and not carry the opinion of what others are telling them. Once that first impression is formed, it's hard to break. In a way, is that not one of your main issues here?"

The Commander nodded, "Interesting, I'm guessing this place will be someplace else than here if you want to do all you described."

Mike nodded, "Yes, you are correct. We don't know where that place should be at this time as we would first like to confirm which faction we will have buy-in from. I mean it is possible they will all

turn us down."

The Commander focused his attention on Mike, "Why us? Why pick us to be the catalyst in this?"

Mike paused before answering. "The Crimson's were originally created to stand against powers that became harmful to others. In order to do this the Crimson's cut themselves out and became autonomous. When action was needed they came in and put a stop to it indifferent of where that was. Currently, there still are armies but the battles are becoming different and are not always fought with swords. The issues in Capio are a good example of that but they can't be resolved with a Crimson army marching in because then the Crimson's will be the ones abusing their strength. So, we have to learn a different way to fight and to do this we also need allies and we all need to learn more about one another. Once we are able to do this and as well keep our ability to fight then we will be able to keep doing what we were originally created for but in a way that fits this new era, because in the end we are still needed."

Mike looked at Anna and Julia, "That all said, there are many reasons why we would ask you first. Ignoring those, if you accept it creates a momentum. We figured that we would first get your approval to join in on this plan. Once we have this, Astrum should be easier to convince as you two already have a sort of agreement going. As for the Order, if both powers are outwardly visible then I don't see them being able to not join in. It may be for the wrong reasons at first, but with time maybe that could change."

The Commander smiled, "Please leave me and the Commander at Arms to talk privately about this. We will let you know when we have an answer." Mike and Anna both bowed their heads

and left the room.

As they stepped outside Anna looked at him, "So where do you want to go while we wait?"

"Let's visit a special place."

It only took a few minutes for them to reach the familiar little grove they had found a long time ago. The place at the time had been perfect, just a few minutes from the town but at the same time it allowed for a lot of privacy for them to train. The small clearing in the woods and the two logs were still present even after all this time. They both sat on the makeshift wooden seats. Mike just smiled at the current situation, "It's been a long time since we have been here... Looking back we really spent a lot of time here actually."

Anna chuckled, "We had to, I mean because of my exclusion there was a big lack of training that needed to be recovered." She turned serious, "So, you think they will go for it?"

Mike thought about it, "I'm thinking that they all will actually. The questions I have is will it work and for how long. That's what I would like to know."

"Hmm, that is an interesting question but here is another one, does it matter? I mean even if after a year it all drops and things go back to the way it is now. I'm pretty sure that there is a lot that we can accomplish in that year or even half year if it all fails quicker. So just for that I think it's worth it. Also, what is the worst that can happen? We get a lot of pissed off factions after us and we are left on our own. Would that be so bad?" She smiled at him, "So really, does it matter?"

Mike laughed, "I always wonder how you are able to do that, take questions that I obsess over and just turn them to nothing."

She tilted her head and gave him a half smile, "Face it we're great together and that's just how it

is."

He smiled back, "And I would not have it any other way."

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Far away, Rosamia was standing in front of the head church. While Adam had already gone in they both waited for the signal. Overall, she was not sure how she felt coming back here. There were so many bad memories but there were also good ones linked to new people she had meet. This made her wonder if she should not make a few extra stops depending on how things went. As she thought about it a blue translucent picture of Iris showed up in front of Rosa from the communication pendant she had. Rosamia smiled, "I take it by the look on your face that part one and two are both good?"

Iris nodded, "Yes, Anna contacted me and the Crimsons are on board with the plan. After a few hours with the Council they are on board as well. Alexandria is currently with Lithius going over some of the details right now."

"I take it that things went okay during the meeting?"

Iris shrugged, "It went as expected. I mean it's like we said, when Alexandria wished to quit the Council and was denied Solanar said it himself, they realize that the world is changing and they need to change with it. Alexandria's position is a testament to that need for change. Also, they probably have the least to lose. They try this and if it doesn't work out they lost how much of their overall time? Overall it's a sound plan and should help things out generally by giving everyone an option to change if they want to or to seek help if they need to." She paused, "Adam is not around, is he?"



Rosamia was curious about that one, "No, he's currently inside waiting for the signal to meet with the General, why?"

Iris was relieved upon hearing those words, "Solonar did make one request and it was approved by Anna and Mike but there is an issue with it. Basically, Solonar understood that we would need a place for this plan and he forcefully suggested one, that place being the Portal Tower."

Rosa was shocked, "I guess that makes sense... Hey wait, no, no, no, I see what you are doing here. You expect me to break the news to Adam, right?"

Iris only had a pleading smile as an answer for her. Rosamia shook her head, "Ahhh, tell you what if this meeting goes okay then I'll do it otherwise I'm passing that back to Mike. Mind you that is assuming they agree to meet with me at all; it may take time to convince them."

Iris smiled again, "Yeah, about that, I don't think that you will have any issues with that."

Rosamia did not like this conversation so far, "Why?"

"Well Solonar figured that he would help out again and sent a personal communication to the members of the High Order informing them that you would be coming and to set up a meeting as quickly as they possibly could."

Rosa closed her eyes and wondered if that would cause more harm than good. "First, he picked the place and then he arranges the meeting. I must say Solonar is very involved."

Iris nodded, "He seems very interested in where this will all lead. I can't say that I'm not in the same boat."

Rosa sighed, "Same here, it's just that I'm really not looking forward to this next step that's all."

"If you want I can join up with you but considering the last time I don't think they want to see me there actually."

Rosa smiled at that comment, "You're probably right and that's fine. This is my fight so I'll go and fight it."

Iris smiled, "Good luck." Her image then disappeared as the communication was terminated.

"Thanks, I think I may need it."

Rosamia waited a bit longer to clear her head and think about the possible strategies they had all talked about. When she was ready, she made her way inside. Instantly, the guards marched next to her, "You are to follow us. The High Order is expecting you now." Rosa followed the guards as they led her inside and then to that nice meeting room she did not miss one bit. As the guard introduced her arrival Rosa took her old seat that was still empty. She looked around to see only that the main three had shown up to this meeting. They were all glaring at her.

Catherine did not look amused at all, "So you forced your way back again. I hope you are proud of yourself. Now let's get on with this plan that you need to tell us. The head of the Council only said that we had to listen to this so go on."

Then the old priest Joseph added, "Hopefully this will be a better plan than the last one."

Rosamia sarcastically thought that this was a wonderful start, "Well, the last plan turned out pretty good for all parties considering, right?" Joseph just shrugged her off.

There was so much hostility and really for what? She wondered how they would react if she told them what she really knew. She then smiled, in the end it would not matter as they and everyone else would not believe her anyway. Still

there was a lot more hostility than she had planned. In theory, things had turned out well for both parties but at the same time they also were strong-armed into it. It was very possible that they felt like the same thing was happening again.

She turned to Joseph and then to the others, "You know you are right to be mad at me. Yes things turned out well for all of us but the way I approached it and me leaving could have been handled with more respect. Because of this I apologized to all of you." While Rosa did not necessarily feel that what she had just said was correct, she did agree that if she swallowed her pride right now things might go easier in the next little while.

Catherine cleared her throat, "We, being respectful people, will accept your apology. Thank you for finally giving it. Now about this plan..."

How much Rosamia wanted to tackle the hidden messages she had just given her, but again it would serve very little and would only make her play their little power game. She was tired of playing other people's games and now it was time for them to join Rosamia's game.

"Given the issues that the war caused and also the void that was created by the reborns to our race, there are a lot of people in need at this time. In order to help with this need the Lights Templar, the Crimsones and the Council have openly joined together to help with this problem." Instantly as she finished she could all hear them mumbling their displeasure and shook at what she had just informed them.

Catherine held her anger but some of it was still visible, "And how are we not supposed to take this as a direct challenge to what we have been doing for years? Are you saying that we are not fit to continue in our duties of helping the people

whoever they may be?"

Finally, something that had been expected, Rosamia smiled and started to answer her concern. "I know you would agree that in the end what matters is the fact that people are getting the help they need. That is simply what this is. We are not challenging the Order or the Crusaders in the tasks they are currently performing but want to help and maybe deal with tasks that are deemed inconvenient."

"For example, a lot of people lost homes because of the attacks. The mages of Astrum can quickly help with providing a new home for those especially if the base materials are available. There is also a lot of pillaging being reported from what Astrum is hearing from the little towns for all kingdoms while they themselves are in disarray from the same main issues. The Crimsons can easily help take care of some those issues, leaving the Crusaders to perform other more important tasks."

Rosamia paused to give them some time to absorb her information and then continued, "In the end we are proposing that we coordinate our combined efforts to help heal the many wounds that have been suffered by everyone. In the recent past most of the war defence was all left to the Order to deal with and that was wrong, because this was a problem for all and all should have dealt with it. Now we are in a time where we all need to heal, some more than others, and this time we all want to help you accomplish this as it should have also been done in the past. That being said we would also like for the Order and also the Crusaders to join in with this effort we are creating in order to better spend the available resources."

Rob, the typically more levelheaded priest of the three, was a bit skeptical. "Is that where this

offer ends?"

Rosamia nodded, "No, that is actually the beginning of it. In order to communicate properly and in a quick manner we are asking for a primary person for each faction to move to a common location. This new location would also be a place where those that have no more options can come to get help. Help will come in many forms but there will be a cost of contribution somehow that will be required depending on the skill set that the person has or wants to learn."

Rob cut in, "So assuming that a soldier of a town that got destroyed or if he is simply no longer needed takes his family to this new place he would then have the option of joining the Crimson?"

Rosamia nodded, "Yes, if that is what he wishes and is able to. Each faction will also have their section to train new people in a quick basic training to see if the person fits or not. Training can continue at this new location to eventually finish at the normal training centres that are already in place for each faction."

Joseph tuned to Rosa, "Given all this, where do you plan to put this new place?"

"It was recommended that the Portal Tower be used. This would help in many different ways, the first being that roads around it are highly traveled. You also have the fact that it frees the Crusaders from having to spend resources to defend it seeing as we will all be there. Also, assuming that you join in the cathedral that is near it would make a fine training place for potential priests or priestesses and Crusaders."

Catherine stared at Rosamia, "Seems that you have all this planned out. But you do realize that we will be the ones that are appointing who will serve as representative assuming we would join. We would not tolerate being dictated to by other

factions."

Rosamia shrugged, "Of course we realize this. Mind you, I'm sad to hear that as we were going to ask if you Catherine are willing to be in that position... If you agree, that is."

Everyone was shocked by the comment, Catherine being the most shocked of the three. "What? Why would you choose *me* for this?"

"Simply put this will be new for everyone and we realize that communication alone will be a challenge due to potential mistrust of the past. We plan on being open about all this to everyone. Who better than you to figure out if what we are doing is a lie and what better place for you to figure that out than by being there. Ideally, we would like for the General to be the person to represent the Crusaders – the reason being that a lot of people trust him both in the Crusaders and among the common people. We also believe that he would be a positive influence to new people who may want or are interested to join."

The three main High Priests all looked on in silence for a while. Eventually, Rob turned to Rosamia, "I think that you have given us a lot to think about. We will talk about this amongst ourselves and let *our* decision be known." Rosamia stood, bowed and then turned and left.

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When Rosamia finally walked out of the head church it was night and the stars were out. Adam was sitting at one of the benches, out of earshot from the patrolling Crusaders stationed here. As she sat next to him, he smiled with a relived look on his face, "Alexandria let me know to just contact her whatever time it was to get a quick transport back. Ah, I must say that I was getting very

worried. It took much longer than expected it seems."

Rosamia sat next to him and smiled, "Actually I have to apologize for that, it's my fault. The meeting took about as much time as expected but then I figured I would stop by and visit some others who after today I think I can actually trust and that took much longer than expected."

Adam was puzzled, "Recruiting already?"

She chuckled, "No not really. It was mostly going over what actually happened with me being kicked out without actually being kicked out and a few other things. And you, how did it go with the General?"

He shrugged, "As expected mostly. Sure he is interested especially now that he is stuck behind a desk, but he's not going to move unless he is ordered to. I mean sure there are issues but nothing world ending like the last time for him to make the call so to speak. So I guess it mostly comes down to you and how it went."

Rosamia sighed, "Same here in a way. I mean it's as we all figured, with the Crimson and Council joining forces in the open like this it's causing them to look at it as a challenge of power. So really do they really have a choice? Sure they could stay on their own or they could even openly go against us but then they would probably come out looking like babies throwing a tantrum and I'm pretty sure they don't want that. So yes, with the others being locked in they will join in some fashion. Now what that will be I have no clue."

He nodded and then looked up at the night sky, "I think I owe you an apology, seems I doubted you again and I really shouldn't have." Rosamia just had a puzzled look on her face so he continued. "Back when this started I questioned if you were doing the right thing in letting them call

the shots with your request. While you seemed sure about it, I can't say that I was even after what you had told me. But now it's hard to disagree."

Rosa smiled at that comment, "Hmm, I know. At the time of our conversation I was sure I was doing the right thing and now I'm simply baffled at what they are trying to do. Having a plan where all major forces join up together, no matter how it goes I can't see that we can't achieve my original goal. But with this we have a chance to change so much more. I mean what will first hold all this together will be the immediate needs caused by the recent damage and after that it's possible that it all drops there but there is also another possibility as well." She looked up at the sky and continued, "This place does so much good every day but there are also many wounds that need healing here as well. Maybe working with the Council and everyone else are the first steps to try to heal those. If that can actually happen, well I'm really not sure where that will lead."

Then a thought popped in her head and she chuckled, "It's so funny, after everything that I have been through I was really starting to doubt if we truly had any control in all this. But I guess in the end we do. It's like Anna said, it's just a matter of reaching out for it and believing in it. I don't know why or when I lost sight of that."

Rosamia then took Adam's hand, smiled and got up, "Anyways, we should head back. I'm sure there will be a lot of work headed for us soon, if not already."

"Yeah, I agree, I mean we still need to figure out where we will be doing all this from. That will probably be the first step I guess."

Rosa had a coy look on her face, "Funny you should mention that..."



## *Epilogue*

### **Iris's journal**

Six months have passed since the plan started and I can't say that we have had a moment's rest. In the end, all factions agreed and the representative for each faction turned out to be the ones we hoped for as well, so that was a great start.

But our first problem started with the people they brought with them. The General alone had about fifty Crusaders. High priestess Catherine came with about twenty priests and a few personal bodyguards. Julia and Lithius came with fewer numbers but they still ranged in the twenties each. Our first order of business was arranging the Portal Tower and its surroundings for all these people. Alexandria, with mages and other volunteers, took over that responsibility. Luckily for her the surrounding area has lots of base materials needed to solve that problem. As of now she is almost done with that task.

Now that we have access to the information from the Council, the Order and the Crimson on what is currently going on in the world it's easier to coordinate our efforts and send the right type of team to resolve the problems. More than anything this is where our efforts are being spent and also what is currently occupying each faction's representative's time.

While the Order is having issues adjusting to working with the Council, the Crusaders and the Crimson are easily getting along. I think this is mostly because Julia and the General also get

along great which makes thing easier during the meetings to figure out the priorities the groups need to focus on. Those efforts are being led by Mike and Rosamia. Originally it was supposed to be Mike and Anna but Catherine objected to the pair as it would make the group too Crimson oriented. I guess no one made a point to argue that with Rosamia it's pretty much the other way around where it's more Order oriented. Unless Catherine really does not recognize Rosa as a priestess or the opposite and she feels that the Order will have more control over all this because of it... which is not the case. After having a chat about it with Anna she said that in the end it turned out for the better. Rosamia knows a lot about the Order and also how Catherine thinks, having spent about a year as a High Order member herself, which is helping Mike and the others a lot to mitigate potential arguments.

As for the rest of us – being Adam, Anna and myself – we are busy dealing with the harder assignments and problems that we have been tasked to resolve. For the more political ones Anna takes over and for the more violent issues Adam takes charge. As for me I mostly back up one or the other that's in the lead and try and learn as much as I can from both of them. Other teams are also made and sent to help out everywhere. If the matter is urgent or practical, like a group of bandits seen heading to a town, magical transport is then given to the team in question to try and deal with the matter before it becomes an issue or to resolve it swiftly. Overall mind you the majority of the types of services are humanitarian in nature for many of the teams.

At this time the second phase will start up soon, and that's creating an environment where people are able to join us if they wish or to give

them an alternate safe place to live if they so desire. For some this has already happened so there is no reason to believe there will not be others in the future.

Overall, we are all pleased at how things are going. I don't think that any of us, let alone Rosa, thought that we would be doing this when she mentioned to us that night that this is what she wanted to do and asked if we wanted to help. From what we have seen already we have done more so far than what we ourselves could have done in about more than a year's worth of effort. So no matter what, for us, this will be a big mission accomplished very soon.

Because of this we are all having fewer concerns going into the next phase of this plan and that would be to make what we are doing here together a more important power than the original faction piece alone. The theory is that once we get there then it should take on a life of its own and show everyone that working together is the wiser course of action. Once that starts to happen we want to try to change certain things and rules so it ripples back to the original faction home base. Assuming we are able to do this then that change could even outlive us.

In theory, this plan and these stages may be able to help fix some of the issues that make this world seem broken if we continue down this path. It will be a lot of work but a lot of these issues have been created by us the people, so in a way there is no reason why people can't resolve these issues using our own power.

So far my life has taken many twists that I would have never thought possible, some really bad but others really good. If I look back now I can safely say that I am proud of what I have done overall. My goal and my wish would be to continue

to achieve that for myself throughout my whole life.

I'm sure I'll stumble at certain points or make mistakes that will make it seem impossible to reach my intended goal. While I'm sure this will bring me down I can't let that stop me. It's only when you stop that there really are no more options. So as long as I keep trying there is always a possibility. And the person that controls that is me and no one else.