

**Lights Templar**  
**Prequel - Book I**



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by  
**Michel Dupont Jr.**

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Dedicated to our continuing journey





Michel Dupont Jr.

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## Chapter 1

It had taken a few days of outdoor camping but the two had finally made it to the first little town near their old homes. They arrived at sundown so there was not a lot of activity but there was still what looked like a guard at the entrance. He wore common clothes and had a spear in his hands. As he approached both of them, they saw that he had a surprised and curious look on his face.

"What brings the likes of you two to our town of Silva?"

Anna looked at Mike and then the guard, seeing as how closed off the Crimsons had been for the last many years his surprise was very understandable. "While we dress like them we are not actual Crimsons. We are just stopping by for a little while."

The guard did not seem like he was going to stop them but you could tell the he still had a lot of questions on his mind. Mike figured he should jump in to hopefully clarify a few. "We... Ah..." he looked at Anna for a few seconds and turned at the guard again. "We were not allowed to make the cut it seems. Because of that we figured stopping here to figure things out would be the right step."

The guard then smiled. It was not uncommon for something like that to happen, it just typically happened a lot earlier in the process. He then nodded at both of them and invited them in. "Ahhh, sorry about that. Well Silva is not a big place but you are more than welcome to stay as long as you like." He pointed to a large'ish house not far from the entrance, "That place there is the closes thing we have to an inn. Pretty much everyone is in their homes at this time so it's

probably your best bet for your first stop here."

Both Anna and Mike smiled and nodded at the guard in thanks for the information as they walked in.

Mike looked around. While it was true that there was almost no one around, pretty much all houses had some form of light coming from the windows and smoke coming from the chimney. Overall this was an odd feeling for him. In all his time this was the first other town he had ever seen. As he turned and gave Anna a small smile he figured that this would be the first of many.

As they walked in the inn they saw that the place was mostly empty. Amongst the six tables that had been setup only one of them was occupied. The woman hostess behind what looked like a small bar counter greeted them with a warm smile and informed them to sit wherever they wished.

While they were in full mid spring outside, the last few days had still been very cold and uncomfortable. That being said they took the table that was closest to the low burning fireplace. As they sat down the hostess informed them that all they could offer at this time was a warm bole of meat and potato chunks mixed in a sauce with a side of bread, considering the stale rations that they had to eat for the last few days the meal offers sounded pretty good.

Due to their attire they once again they had to explain their situation. As the hostess left them Mike thought about that. "I suppose once we have time we should change?"

Anna wondered on that. It was true that it would make things simpler and that she had little attachment to the default Crimson armor and color, having already made some very small adjustment to it a few years back. But the same

thing could not be said for Mike.

"It's your call but I think that we should keep it. It true that with it we get odd looks, but once the initial question is answered everyone will probably understand and leave it at that." she gave him a half smile that also looked a bit mischievous. "Also after so many year of seeing you in it, you being something else would just look weird."

Mike smiled back and slowly nodded in agreement. While he agreed with her reasoning he also wondered if she knew that he was probably not ready to leave everything behind just yet.

Shortly after the hostess came back with their food, it did not take long for them to finish everything. While the food had been simple it had a nice homely taste to it, they both indulged and asked for seconds.

When both of them where full Anna took a moment and breathed in heavily. While it was disappointing on how it had ended with the Crimsons, part of her realised that because of it she was finally free. No more drills, tests, or having to endure the angry looks from the others she lived with. Still all this also meant no home, no income, and at this time no real goal. That was not the best place to be but it was still freedom and also those issues were something that could be resolved. She looked across from her to the man that had chosen to follow her on her exile. It had been a long while since she had been on her own like this and now she knew that she would be able to figure it out, still there was no denying that the nice company would be welcomed.

She gave him a smile, "So what's next?"

"I'm thinking sleep..."

Anna smirked at his comment, "I mean what is the plan now, no home, no work..."

Mike had to agree that these were things that

would need to be figured out, then a thought occurred to him. "Wait I'm the one tagging along, why I'm I coming up with the plan?"

Anna put on a lecturing tone, "Now now you know how it goes, I figured out the end goals..." she then gave him a mischievous grin, "And then you figure out how to get there."

Mike frowned at her comment, "I think that we need to rethink this a bit..." Anna cut him off smiling, "No need, this works well for us. So again what's next?"

He took a moment to think about it, "Well going with your general goal to help out I figure that we could try the simple route of sell-swords. Something that we are both good at and it allow us to help out the ones going unnoticed." He paused for a moment before continuing, "Also, as a backup plan, if that does not work out we can always travel around to different cities and towns. If we find one we like we can see about trying to make a home there and figure out what we can do there."

The backup plan of planting roots right away was not what she had in mind but the first plan she agreed with. "Not a bad first step, we can start tomorrow and ask around and see if anything is going on around here that we can help with."

Mike was not sure that his next question would be appreciated but he figured that he would ask anyways. "What do you want to do with the orbs? We should figure out what they can do at one point."

Anna was not really sure what to answer that one. He was right that they should figure it out in case but it was of very low priority for her. "Hmm, I would rather ignore them for now. I mean can we even do anything about them anyways? We can always keep a lookout for a Mage that we can trust and ask them, but I don't think that going on a

quest to figure it out at this time is the way we should go."

Mike figured that there was a bit more to it than that but it was also hard to argue the point. With no mage they would learn very little and it was true that they had other more important matters to deal with at this time. "Fair enough, plus he did say to use them if we needed extra power. That's not something we need at this time, so even more reasons to wait it out." He nodded agreeing with the situation, "Alright then, so let's go with my original comment of sleep then. The hard ground that we have been using these last few days have not really been relaxing so more time in a warm bed sound very good right now."

Anna could not agree more, "So true, and a nice warm bath would be a welcome change. Let see if that's something our hostess can accommodate."

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The next day when Mike came out of his room he realised that he had not been the only one that had indulged in the warm soft bed as he saw Anna come out of her room at about the same time. A quick chuckle could be heard from her, "I did not expect you to sleep in as well."

Mike was a bit embarrassed for the last few years he had been the one being adamant about their training and just a few days outside the routine and already he was starting to slip up. This worried him a bit, "Well it's not like I planned on waking up so late, it just sort of happened. Still, considering the time I suppose we should skip practice if we want to talk to people."

She grabbed his arm and started to drag him down the stairs, "Don't worry there is still tomorrow, as long as it's not habit one day won't

cause any issues." Anna then turned and gave him a smile, "Plus you are right that we should get a head start on trying to figure out if there is anything we can help with in this town, people tend to get more preoccupied as they see that the end of the day gets near."

They waved at the hostess and made their way outside. The town looked different with some shops now being opened. You also had people walking around now, overall it was a much smaller town than the one they had lived for most of their lives but it also had a different mood as well, here people seemed a bit happier for some reason. While still taking it all in Anna turned to Mike, "So who should take the lead on the first steps?"

He thought about it, Anna did have more experience than he did when it came to these things but at the same time he did not want to simply feel like a tag along for this new journey. "If you're okay I would not mind giving it a shot." She nodded with a smile on her face and motioned for him to take the lead.

A bit more than half the day had passed and currently they both found themselves back in the inn eating a late dinner. Mike's mood was grim. They had asked the guards in the town but found nothing. They had also checked to see if the town had any wanted posters only to also find nothing, lastly he had started to ask some of the shops if they had had issues transporting their wears but so far the same answer of nothing kept being told to them. As a first step it felt discouraging, but when he looked at Anna finishing her food he saw that she did not seem fazed at all. Not only was she not fazed now but also she was never surprised when the people they talked to told them the bad news.

"Okay what I'm I missing?"

She gave him a small half smile, "What do you mean?"

Now he knew that she was hiding something or that he had missed something, "I know you realise our current situation and yet you're not discouraged at all by today... plus the more I think about it I realised that not once did you chime in when I asked the questions nor did you ever comment on anything. I'm starting to think that something up."

"You're reading too much into it and before you wonder you did nothing wrong. We want to be sell-swords so the first thing we should check are guards, posters and such things."

"Fine but I think you're still not telling me something because you don't seem worried at all."

She shrugged, "Oh don't worry I'm a bit worried but I'm not overly concerned by it as you are." Anna gave him a reassuring look and tried to explain things so he could understand. "This is your first time like this so it's normal, when I was left alone it took me a while to figure things out but I did and I managed and back then I had less to work with than I do now."

He nodded, "You are talking before the Commander took you in right?"

"Yes, when both my parent died and there were no relatives to take me in things were really grim. But I figured it out and I'm confident in those skills I learned." A small smile appeared on her face, "Plus the resent experience with the Crimsons common folks will help out a lot."

"Alright, so I guess it's my turn to ask... what's our next step?"

She pointed her index finger in air, "First seeing as we can't help out like we originally wanted to we need to refocus. Our primary goal is not to find an enemy to fight but really to find a

place where we can eat and sleep. While the hostess here is nice and so is the inn, we can only afford it for so long."

He started to understand as she continued, "For now just think about that. Tomorrow we will try again but this time I'll take the lead." She noticed that he was now also finished with his food but still on edge. "There is nothing much that we can do for now, so in the meantime lets you and I deal with that practice that we both skipped out this morning."

While they did just that and it helped take off the edge that Mike felt, during the night he still worried.

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The next day came and after the morning practice Anna led him on the previous mission that had been started the day before.

While she did so Mike was simply confused, in principle she was doing the same thing he was. She had avoided the guards this time as nothing would have changed overnight and focused where he had left off with the merchants. What confused Mike was what she was asking them.

For a better part of the day Anna had gone from merchant to merchant but never asked them about issues with their trade or shipments, instead she focused on the wares that they were selling. She also stopped and talked to a few customers and asked how they were doing, sometimes when she felt like it she also asked what they would be doing with what they had purchased. Never did she ask anything related to see if they needed help or if they knew of any issues around the town.

Mike had no clue how this would lead to anything, yes it was very friendly and sometimes he felt it was bit nosy but overall no one seem to

mind. Heck most of the time they welcomed the questions as Anna seem to intently listen to their conversation and offer more questions that would only server to give an opportunity for the person to talk more about whatever project there where currently on.

Overall he barely did anything but smile and nod when Anna introduced him. This latest stop was the same, currently Anna was talking to the vendor that had this small outside shop. She seemed to be selling cloth bundles to make things with.

"Oh what nice patterns, "Anna then removed her glove and gently touched the surface of the pattern."It feels very nice too."

The vendor approached Anna with a large smile. "My family has been making these for many generations; I'm very pleased that you enjoy them."

Mike figured he would remove his glove too and see for himself. The patterns sold where indeed very pleasing and very varied, as for the feel of the material was very nice but a bit rough to the touch on direct skin. As if picking up on the same thought Anna asked her next question, "It does not feel like proper material for clothes mind you?"

The lady nodded, "Not these no, you are correct. We do sell those if you are interested but tend to leave them inside so that they don't get damaged in the outside weather. These are mostly used for cushions, drapes, blankets and other things of the like."

It's then that the vendor turned her attention to an old lady that was making her way to the shop. "Oh Jane great timing, I was about to let you know that your order is completed." She then paused for a few second while looking at her. Jane was in her mid sixties with full gray hair. While she was not out of shape for her age she was also not

the athletic type and also walked a bit slowly with a bit of an arch to her back.

"Hmm, due to your order I was going to send someone to drop it off to your house or at least help you bring it back. Sadly my sons are already doing another drop off... do you mind waiting until they return?"

Jane smiled as she approached, "That's fine, how long do you think they will be?"

While she was thinking about it Anna jumped in. "Well if you don't mind us we could carry your order to your home, that way you would not have to wait." She then turned to the vendor, "Also this helps pay you back for taking the time to answer my questions while there where others around."

Jane was clearly cautious; she then turned to the other lady. "Are they..." The vendor waved at Jane's concerned look. "Oh don't mind them, they are new here and are currently looking for work. Overall they seem like nice people."

This stunned Mike maybe a bit too much as the lady chuckled at his reaction. "This is a small town young man and you two are very new in it. That said we are all interested in what you are doing here and also the type of people you are."

Mike smiled and slowly shook his head; while he did he noticed that Anna had a small teasing smile on her face. He got it now, he totally understood what Anna was doing and why she had talked to as many people as she could simply to chat.

As Jane accepted Anna's offer the vendor lead Anna and Mike behind the large counter. There they could see that a large role of cloth had been carefully wrapped. "There you go, it should be no trouble for you two and thanks again for the help." When they both picked up the role at different end and started to head in Jane's direction with her

merchandise the vendor added something. "I'm sorry to say that you will probably not find the type of work you were looking for around here, still if you two are interested in odd jobs there should be plenty of those these days."

Anna heard her comment and nodded her head in a way that made it look like she was making a mental note of what had been said. Given what she had told Mike the night before finally all the pieces started to fit. The lady had been right, it's not what he had planned but then again it was a better plan to first figure out how to survive on their own and then look to their future. While he had an edge went it came to swords and fighting, he now realised how much he was missing when it came to living and being self sufficient. As Jane started to lead them to her home he also realised that life was about to take many turns he had never expected or imagined if this start would be any indication.

The role of cloth was about six to seven feet long, in order to carry it without damaging it Anna and Mike each took an end piece. Anna was in front with Jane and Mike was in the back, he could still hear what they were talking about but it would be a bit awkward for him to join in on the conversation.

"Do you mind if I ask what you plan on doing with this?"

Jane turned to the piece that they were carrying, "I simply figured that I would change the current drapes all around the house." She then looked at Anna and gave her a faint smile, "The current ones are a bit dreary and old, and the pattern on this is much lighter and more cheerful." As she turned ahead to continue the walk she also continued her explanation, "You see my son and his family is coming back to live with me so I

figured that I would try and fix up the place a little."

Anna looked at Jane, trying to get a sense on what was on her mind. After a little while she slowly nodded, "I hope the reasons are not that bad."

This comment surprised Jane, and also Mike. "No worries they are just having a hard time that's all. The trade that has been passed down from me to him is not as popular anymore." Seeing as both of them had a curious look on their faces Jane explained in more detail before they could ask. "For many years my family has made a living off of our herbalism skill in order to help those around us. That's not so much in demand these days especially in large towns and cities where my son used to live."

This helped clear nothing for Anna, "I don't get it, are people not always sick or in pain at one point? How could this trade not be in demand?"

At that Jane laughed a bit, "You would think so, but now with the existence of Crusaders the normal Order is now free to help the people with those issues. Sure the price is much higher then what we would charge but the effects are much quicker and also come with a better guarantee of success in some cases." She let out a sigh, "Currently I'm very old and have troubles of my own and can't take care the people here on my own, so my son and I talked and we figured that him moving back here and taking over for me would be the best thing for everyone. Priests do come from time to time but it's not common so the need is still there."

Mike could not help but comment, "That's too bad." Turns out that it had been loud enough for both of them to hear and also for Anna to turn and give him a quick smile. "I agree that is too bad."

Just because healing magic is now more common I don't see why this practice of yours needs to start not being in demand. I mean you never know they may not be able to offer their services anymore in the future... then what?"

Jane smiled at that comment, "I wish more people saw things as you did but given how long healing magic has been around and also how organized the Order is now after everything that has happen I don't see them closing their doors any time soon."

It's around that time that Jane started to slow down and an old house was now clearly visible to them. The house itself was fairly large as it looked like it had about six rooms not counting the living area and kitchen. Clearly this would be a large enough house for Jane and her son's family. What was unfortunate was its overall condition. Both of them where not experts but it was clear that the roof needed to be repaired and the outer walls also needed some fixing. The windows where still okay but the panels protecting them needed to be changed, overall the house was fine but had seen better days. And while replacing the curtains would help, it was at a very low priority given everything else that was quickly visible.

Seeing both of them in mild shock Jane chuckled, "This house has been in the family for many years and I'll admit that with only myself here there was little I could do for its upkeep. This is why I want to try and do as much as I can before they get here to help out. Moving from where they are now to here will be an adjustment, if they finally get here to see this I fear that I will bring the overall mood down even more."

Mike did not want to be too disrespectful but asked anyways, "How much work are you planning on doing before they get here, I mean given the

current circumstance?"

Jane smiled, "There are a few months before they make it here and the lumberjacks here have said that they would help out once their work was done."

"I know that we may be out of place asking this but if we offer our help with the repairs would you allow us to stay with you until your son and his family arrives?" Mike saw no visible indication of it but he somehow knew that this was what Anna had been waiting for when she asked.

Jane looked at both of them for a while and thought about it, "Hmm, not that you could not physically help out but I don't think that carpentry and house repairs are your strong suits."

Anna chuckled, "No your right about that, but we are quick to learn and you mentioned the help of the lumberjacks. If they take the time to teach us some things we can be of help for preparation work and other things while they are not able to be around." She then gave Jane an innocent smile, "The more work done would help things out right?"

While Jane thought about it more it took all of Mike's efforts not to laugh. It's not that what Anna was doing was wrong and what she said was right and they would help out as best as they could, but still it felt like she was playing her just like Anna had done on him a few years back when they had met.

"You're right that I would like it if more work on this place could be done before they arrived. Plus they agreed to help and they will but only if they can... Okay you have a deal." Then Jane smiled at the two, "Let's go inside and talk about the details more and also it seems like we will be in each other's live for the next little while so may as well get to know each other better."

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Mike was finishing readying himself in his room after morning practice had finished. He looked at his sword in its scabbard lying on a small desk. "Hmm, I guess I will not need you for today as well..."

About two weeks time had passed since the arrangement with Jane had been made. The deal was that they helped out with the house repairs until her son's family arrived and in exchange she had agreed to give them shelter and food. Seeing as she was a herbalist they also asked her if she could teach them some basic, considering their long term plans both of them had figured that it would be a good idea for themselves. Jane had agreed with that as well, currently they were just being shown the basic of recognizing what plant and herb was what.

For the repairs things were coming along good as well. A large part of the roof was now fixed and that was a great step in the right direction, but there were still issues to get to where they were now and this worried him considering what they still needed to do. The lumberjacks had agreed to give Mike and Anna instructions on what to do and sometimes one of the more experienced ones stopped by and gave them extra pointers. The issue with this was that originally Anna and Mike were only supposed to have helped with the repairs not actually take over for them. The issue that had come up was with their actual main work, currently things were going slow with their quota of trees that they were taking down plus there were other repairs that needed to be done. This caused them to have to postpone their job with what Jane had requested. Feeling sorry for the situation that was outside of their control they agreed to teach

Mike and Anna in order for some work to still get done. Unfortunately the troubles did not end there as supplies were also starting to lack.

He came out of his room and went downstairs to meet up with Anna who was already ready.

"Ready to go?" He simply nodded in approval as he approached Anna.

Jane was also there with them at the entrance of the house, "Just figure out if there is an issue, I know they already feel bad about this whole situation as is and don't want to make it worse if something did come up."

Mike smiled he knew full well that Jane did not want repairs to slow down, she was very anxious to have her son's family come back to live with her and wanted thing to be as comfortable as possible considering what they had been through. Still even with that on her mind Jane was a very nice caring person and would not want to put others down especially since they were already troubled by the issues that they had caused her.

"Don't worry Jane, like we talked about we just want to see if they know when we can pick up the next batch of materials. Whatever news they give us we will come back here and tell you and then take it from there." This seemed to put her at ease a bit as they left to go meet with the lumberjacks.

After having been here for a little while they realised how small this town really was. Most of the people often did a few other things then their main jobs. An example of this are the few men in charge of cutting down the trees were also in charge of processing the wood and the town repairs. Jane in her time also pulled double duties as herbalist and also gardener. It seems that everyone here had two jobs.

While they walked Anna kept looking at him with an odd questioning look. "You can simply ask

you know?"

There was a quick half smile and then it quickly disappeared, "You look out of sorts today. Like you're worried, or... disappointed."

"Well I am worried about the delays. While we all agreed to focus on the most important items seeing as it would just be the two of us, I have to wonder if we will be able to do even that if there is a lack of materials."

Anna was not convinced, "Are you sure that's what it is? At practice today you were a bit off."

As he took a deep breath and sighed heavily Anna wondered if she had asked too much. It was true that they had spent a lot of time together in the Crimson town but at the same time they were apart often and the time spent together was mostly training. Now they were partially living together and it was interesting to realise how little they really still knew about each other.

"You're still wondering if I have regrets for leaving with you right?" While she did not answer it was pretty clear that he had guessed right. He stopped walking and looked her in her eyes, "Look, please stop with that. Sure it's not the life I thought I would have, but I don't blame you for that. It was my choice and I would still make the same going back if I could." He then turned and started walking again, "It's just like you said, we have to start somewhere and that first somewhere is to first figure out how to live on our own."

Anna dropped it with that, main reason was that she was not sure if she wanted to pry more on the matter and also because they had pretty much arrived at their destination.

The building in question was very small and from the outside resembled a little house, if a house only had about two or three rooms. Around the small house you had a few outdoor roof

structures that had been built in order to protect some of the materials and also to give shelter to the workers processing the timber that had been cut.

They entered the small house where it's main function was for people to go to in order to make requests. The person manning the desk looked very worried and before they could ask anything he immediately lowered his head, "I'm sorry but it seems that there will be a delay with fulfilling Jane's order."

This did not surprise them in the least but it still explained nothing, Mike raised both his hands. "It's alright we figured as much but can we know what's causing the delay or if you have a new timeline when you will be able to fulfill her request?"

This question seemed to bring his mood down even more. "I think that you both should go talk to the guards before I say anything. We have been asked not to say anything at this time."

Instantly both Mike and Anna looked at each other. That comment was probably the worst thing he could have said in order to cause worry. Seeing their reaction he tried to explain more, "It's just some wild life causing issues. Still go see the guard to get more details."

With that they turned and made their way to the town's guard post walking as fast as they could. "I think I remember you telling me that you have dealt with wild life issues before, is there anything that you could think that would cause that much worry?"

Anna thought about it, "Maybe, keep in mind that the guard here are only three people and I'm sure you have seen their skills."

Mike nodded, "Yea, a bandit or two they could handle but more than that."

"That's just it, in the case of wild life sure they could handle a few wolves but if for some reason they got close to a den... Well that would be a big issue."

Given her previous experience and the person's worried look Mike wondered if that's what had happened. As they arrived at the guard post he figured that they would soon find out.

The mood of the guard on duty was similar then the person that they has just visited. The extra surprise was that there was a female sitting on one of the empty chairs available on the main floor away from the main desk of the guard on duty. It seemed that she had been crying and the guard kept glancing at her like he wanted to say something but could not find the words.

Mike approached the guard, "We were told to come and see you before we are able to get information on a new timetable for the material that we will need. We were also told that there is currently an issue..."

The guard cut him off, "Nothing to worry about we will handle it on their next outing in the woods."

This caused the women on the chair to sob some more, which made Anna curious. As Mike continued to ask questions to the guard she walked over and sat next to her. "Can I do anything to help out?"

While there was no response the women reached out to Anna to hold her and started crying again. Anna grabbed her as well and tried to comfort her.

That outburst caused a heavy sigh to escape the guard. "She just lost her husband, he was with us when we escorted the lumberjacks in the woods as there has been a lot of wolf sightings in the area lately. Last time we went over an accident

happened as they were a bit more ferocious than normal and the casualty was..." He then looked at her, "I'm so sorry Vivien, I swear we will deal with those animals and then we can do a proper ceremony for your husband."

Anna and Mike were on their way back to Jane's house a few hours later after spending most of that time consoling Vivien from her loss. It was not hard to see that Anna was very frustrated by the experience. "I don't get it why don't the guards want us to help? It makes no sense."

Mike chuckled a bit at that, the reaction was not at the situation but that Anna who had been so good at reading people all this time just could not understand this one. "Pride"

She then stopped, "What?!"

"They want to avenge their fallen comrade and plus they would be asking for help for something they should be able to handle."

Seems his answer frustrated Anna even more. "That's stupid, they may need help and we can give it. It should be that simple."

Mike could not help but smile, "Because it's the right thing to do?"

Saying those words snapped her out a bit as that had been the reason she had given him for helping out the villagers in the Crimson town that had been ignored.

"Exactly." She signed deeply, "Fine I get that you get what I mean but what will we do about it?"

Mike shrugged, "Talk to Jane first and then see where we go from there."

After arriving at the house Jane was already worried as the trip to ask information had already taken much longer than planned, and after having lived with them for a while she also knew that they were not the type to dally around unless there was a reason for it. They all sat down over some tea

and explained the situation to Jane.

"That's horrible. I hope that they can deal with it after all that's happened."

Anna took hold of her cup, "About that, would it be okay if we went on a little excursion in the woods?"

It was clear to Mike that Jane was not pleased by Anna's request so he figured he would come up with a quick plan. "I think what we want to ask if it's okay with you if we join in on the guard duties when they go in the woods for a while." He turned to Anna, "With our training we can stay out of site and if it looks like they can handle it then we stay hidden and none are the wiser."

Anna agreeing with the plan continued, "And if they need help we can jump in and make sure everyone makes it back alive." She then looked at Jane to see if she would be okay with that.

Jane thought about it more, "I appreciate that you are asking me about this and I agree that the plan sound good, but I do have one question. Why do you think that the guards did not want you to join in the first place?"

Mike answered the same answer he gave Anna, "I had assumed pride. Pride in the work they do and also for their fallen comrade."

She nodded at that, "True that's probably a big factor but also keep in mind that if you jump in on something that they should be able to handle, what happens then... especially when you leave this place, as I'm assuming that will happen eventually."

Both Anna and Mike where silent at that comment, it's true that they could probably deal with the treat pretty easily given their training but what happens when the people that are supposed to protect everyone don't think they can anymore or worst yet when the people they protect don't

believe in their capabilities to do so anymore. It would be okay if they both stayed here for the long term but that was not the plan.

Seeing as they had no comments to her own, Jane continued. "Look, do what you need to do to keep them alive as that is more important. But if you can also keep what I said in mind while you do it." She then paused and gave them a warm smile, "While I have not known you two for long I do see that you are good people and will do your best, that's all I ask."

Jane then stood, "Now while I prepare a nice lunch I take it that you will both need to prepare as well?"

They both nodded, "Yes we will need to figure out when they next plan on going in the woods and also where they were attacked." Anna then continued, "Once I'm there I should have a bit more information with what they will be dealing with and then maybe a better plan can be figured out then."

With that they finished the tea and headed out. While still trying to only focus on the task at hand Mike felt shameful, because in the far back of his head he knew that this meant that they would be starting and that his years of training could finally be used. The shame was caused because the happiness he felt had been at the cost of a person life and after having met the wife of that person it was hard not to feel anything but shame.

It had taken a while but they had gotten the information that they had needed. Now they knew that the next outing would happen early the next day and they also had a general location of where the attack occurred. Currently they were both looking for clues on what had happened after having finally found the spot.

Mike was thrilled sadly and was feeling a bit of

a rush due to the situation. He tried to rein in his emotions which he thought he had been successful at until he saw that his hand was holding the hilt of his sword ready to draw it in case something happened. He heard a small chuckle and turned to see Anna motioning to come next to her.

"You are way too on edge."

She still had a mild smile on her face and all he was currently feeling was a bit of frustration. It was odd that with all the amount of training he had he was feeling like this. He could see that even with Anna's experience she was a bit on edge as well, but was handling it better than he was.

"I know... I'm trying to control it but I have to admit that I'm a bit anxious and, I'm sorry to admit, nervous it seems."

She reached out and grabbed his shoulder, "You will be fine, trust me. Plus you are doing way better than I was way back when."

He smiled at that, "Maybe it's because I'm not alone."

Anna shrugged, "It's possible but I'm still not worried." She then pointed to the ground, "This, mind you worries me." As he looked down he saw blood splattered everywhere and a lot of paw prints.

"Okay that's odd no body? I mean would they have carried it back?"

Anna quickly shook her head at his puzzled look. "No, the only reason why they would drag anything back would be because there was a den nearby but here is the thing not everything would be gone. It's pretty clear that this is where he was killed due to all the blood around but there is nothing else."

Mike nodded understanding what she was getting at. "Even if there was a den, there should be something like a weapon or torn clothes as animals would not care about that stuff."

"You got it."

As she was looking around Mike thought of something. "Is it possible that he somehow survived longer than they thought and was able to move away?" Before she could answer he answered his own question, "Hmm, no if that was the case there would be a trail of blood and currently there is just a pool of it. So it's got to be something else then."

"How about we keep looking around maybe we can find something that will clear this out a bit more."

They each looked their own way to cover more grounds. After a while Mike found something odd hidden on the edge of where the attack had taken place. Seeing as she had noticed that he had not moved for a while Anna moved next to him, "Find something?"

"I don't know." With one hand he pushed the bush even more and with the other pointed to the ground where you could see some footprints.

Anna was puzzled. They were humanoid footprints but they were small like the size of a growing teenager not an adult. "That makes even less sense, I didn't see kids with the crew and it's not one of the soldiers."

Mike nodded, "I agree but it does maybe explain the lack of body. If there was someone here that was not a part of the crew maybe they are the ones that took the remains."

She thought about it, "Clearly they were trying to stay hidden so it's possible no one saw them, but there is no way that the wolves would not have seen them."

"Hmm, so you're saying that they must be working with them. Is it possible that they are trained wolves and it's not a den after all?"

"That's possible but I have no way to prove or

disprove it." She then turned and looked around, "What I do know is that now I know they will need our help so we need to follow them."

Mike agreed with that, "Wolves and something else. I guess during the fight we will have to be extra careful." He then stopped himself, "You know this could work out for us after all."

Anna had a questioning look on her face, "How is something unknown going to work for us?"

"Clearly whoever is behind this assuming they are in fact controlling the wolves want to stay hidden. Assuming there are not a lot of wolves and the guards can take care of them, maybe we can take care the this hidden person and no one needs to be the wiser. This would allow the guards and others to think that they took care of the issue without our involvement."

She smiled, "There is a lot of assumptions in that plan but why not."

He returned her smile, "I'll try and think of better ones in the future."

Anna then had a teasing smile "You better; I mean I can't do all the work here."

"Har har... Anyway let's head back, I think we learned all that we can from this and tomorrow we need to make sure that we are a few steps ahead of them if we want to follow them without them noticing us."

"Sound good." She then turned and had a half smile, "So tomorrow will be your first battle, you sure you will be able to sleep properly tonight?"

"Again with the teasing... I'll be fine, you said it yourself." She then nodded in agreement and they then started to head back to the town.

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So far things were going well; they had managed to

be able to follow the lumberjack crew and the two guards that had accompanied them without being seen. As they proceeded with their work, Mike and Anna scouted around to see if they could spot this mysterious attacker or the incoming wolves. After a while they linked up together in order to communicate if they had found anything.

Worried Mike turned to Anna, "It's been a while now and still no attack, could we have been wrong? Or is today not the right day and we will have to do this again the next time?"

It was impossible for her to have an answer to his question but she also realised that he knew that as well. "Hmm, it's possible that today is not the day but seeing as there is no way to know we should still stick around and do another pass."

Mike nodded in agreement and they both went out their separate ways again.

An hour had passed and they were side by side again, "This is odd..." Mike had a curious look on his face as he was wondering why she thought that. "My experience with wolves tells me that they should have attacked by now, unless they really are not going to."

"It's possible that they are not, I mean it's not like the animals are on a clock of sorts."

She gave him a quick smile at the comment, "True but something tells me that we have to be here today, as something will happen again." A puzzled look appeared on his face and before he could ask she answered him, "Don't ask me it's just a feeling I have."

Not sure what to think about that answer Mike started to wonder if he had missed something or if Anna could be wrong. Before he could start to focus on his inner thoughts his focus was broken by a scream.

"OH CRAP their back!!!"

This got the attention of both of them and they sprinted closer to get a better look.

Currently the two guards from the town had moved into position between the wolves and the lumberjacks, who were now in a circle formation holding their axes ready to defend themselves if need be. The plan was that if there were only a small number of wolves that they would let the guards take care of them. Still looking at the scene that was unfolding ahead Mike wondered if that plan would still be possible.

"I count five, can the two handle that?"

Anna was worried as she did not see how could keep Jane's request. "Not without injury I'm thinking." She quickly glanced at him, "We need to head in."

"I agree, you go help them out and I'll do a quick pass to look for our hidden enemy." As he started to move she quickly grabbed hold of his cape to stop him. "Wait you don't know what you're going to find and plus my tracking is better than your so should we not flip the roles?"

Time was of the essence so he just bumbled his thoughts out, "True but with the unknown enemy we are pretty much on equal footing on experience, where as with the wolves and trying to keep everyone else alive you have an edge over me. That's why I suggested it that way? If you think otherwise I'll flip... but I don't think I'm wrong here."

Anna nodded to confirm and let go, as soon as she did they both moved as quickly as they could. Part of her wondered if he was trying to push her from an unknown danger and if that was the case she would have no part of that. But the logic was sound, she figured that she would let it go for now and see if this was a pattern that emerged and confront it then if that was the case. Putting all

those doubts aside Anna focused on the task at hand.

As she charged into position next to the guards everyone was surprised.

"We told you that we had everything under control."

She positioned herself between them and right in front the growling wolves, "That was the idea but there is more to this than just the wolves it seems. Plus I did not think that you would disagree with better odds considering their numbers." The guard simply grunted as the wolves attacked.

The first attack was aimed at Anna, a wolf charged at her maybe thinking that she was easier prey. She also saw that there was another right behind him adding to the attack probably to limit her movements and forcing her to be hit by the second if the first one missed. Wolves often attacked in a pack that was common knowledge but they also attacked as a group. This helped create more intimidation and fear in their prey and allowed them to create a way to attack the target multiple times in one charge.

Anna dodged the first attack and with the second she blocked it while counterattacking with the flat of her blade. She did not put all her strength in the attack but enough to hurt the wolf and send a message to the others. As the wolves that attacked her got into a flanking position with the others standing on the other side Anna shock her head.

"Tsk, that just confirms everything."

Not taking his eyes off the attacker one of the guards questioned her. "What do you mean?"

"As I said there is more than just this attack. The fact that there is no hesitation with any of them after that blow proves it. Wolves don't simply attack for sport and these don't look that famished.

Meaning that they are not hunting but attacking, and if that is the case then someone or something is behind that attack."

"Any clues to who or what?"

"No, but that's what my partner is currently trying to figure out."

Mike was trying to go as fast as he could while still trying to make as little noise as possible.

'They have to be around here, they have to be...' He then stopped, 'Ahhh there we go.'

In front of him where two small creatures with light greenish skin, they were armed with short swords which had already been drawn and had hard leather armor as protection. The armor was a bit in tatters but would still protect them. Their long nose caused their face to look like a cone pointing forward and they also had odd glowing red eyes.

This was the first time Mike had seen a goblin in real life but the description given fit them to a 'T'. Now that the original plan was out the window and that the town guards knew that they were around there was no reason to think about fighting these creatures stealthy. Luckily they had yet to see him so he figured that his best plan of attack would be to spook them.

He charged the first goblin as fast as he could; the blow connected but to the goblin's blade that he had been able to put up as a quick reaction helped block the blow. The strength of the blow did cause him to go prone but the other goblin was now reading an attack on Mike.

He had two choices, make a final attack on the one on the ground and quickly try and parry the swing that was coming or back off and go on the defensive and focus on the incoming attack. Due to the lack of knowledge on how quickly they could hit Mike went on the defensive.

As the goblin attacked, Mike regretted his battle decision. The attack was a simple overhead swing which would have been good but it was also much slower than anticipated. With his training he would have easily had time to go ahead with the first plan after all, which was even more regretful as he saw that the other goblin was now standing once more.

"On the up side I'm not as nervous as I thought I would be, still this is frustrating."

On Anna's side things were going well. In total three wolves had been dispatched, two by her and one by a guard, leaving only two in front of them. These should have ran off by now which only serve to cement her thoughts that they were ordered to attack and where not simply hunting. What worried her now was that she did not know who was behind it and also that Mike had yet to show up. She knew that he would not freeze in his first actual battle if he found something and she also knew how good he was but would that be enough, and that is what worried her.

As if on cue Mike then came out in the clearing were they all where and he was not alone. Currently he was on the defensive against two goblins. The guards and the lumberjacks all paused for a second when they saw them. Goblins so deep in this territory would not be impossible but very rare considering the current blockade that had been recently put up by the Crusaders. Sensing an opening the two left over wolves attacked an open guard, Anna rushed in and dispatched it with a horizontal slash across his main body but there was nothing she could do about the other. The other pounced knocking the guard on the ground and scoring a claw hit on the abdomen, which thankfully his armor protected him from. The damage would have been much

more if the other wolf still had been able to attack.

Now with all their heads back in the attack the other guard attacked the lone wolf while his partner stood up again. 'This treat will be over soon, but what about the other?' Anna turned to Mike.

Mike had been playing being on the defensive for long enough as he now had a good idea on the strength and speed of his enemies. In terms of strength it was very little, but they had some amount of speed to their attacks. Also they, like the wolves, seem to be practiced at attacking as a group. Which would be very dangerous if they were a larger number of them.

Still his plan to lure them in the open for everyone to see and also to get a good idea on their capabilities had been a good one from his point of view. From what he saw all the wolves were taken care of and that everyone was still alive, Anna was now standing ready to jump in if he moved away from his attackers. He had no intention of doing that as an attack plan came to him.

Both goblins charged at him, one with a horizontal slash and the other right behind him with a piercing attack. Mike countered the horizontal attack with an upward strike with as much strength behind the blow as he could muster. This caused the goblin to lose his grip on his weapon and the momentum also caused him to raise his arms high creating a large opening. Mike, quickly as he could, repositioned his sword and stabbed forward at the goblin's chest. The hit was successful and the blow lethal, still there was one more the deal with.

The goblin was still coming at him, in order to defend himself from his attack Mike moved his sword with the goblin's now limp body still attached to it in the other's general direction. He

then used his foot and kicked the goblin off sending it onto the attacking enemy, who then fell on the ground.

With his dead ally on top of him the remaining goblin panicked as he tried to push the body away, but it was too late as Mike stood on top and plunged his sword downwards. As the second goblin was now dead, Mike pulled out his sword and turned to join the others.

Anna was the first to greet him, "So goblins where controlling the wolves?"

"Seems like it, still not something I expected for some reason."

Their conversation got cut as the two guards got closer and extended their open hands to them. "We have to admit that we were wrong and happy that you two joined us after all. The wolves we probably could have handled but the goblins on top of that would have been too much. So thanks."

They both return the handshake, "Think nothing of it, we just want to make sure that everyone was safe and would have held back if we had not seen that there was something else behind the attacks after all." Mike was not really sure if that would have been the case, but seeing as the guard did not argue his comment and seemed appreciative let his white lie go.

"Well thanks again. I'm sure that from here we can take over, and you two can return to town if you wish. Once we get back we will let the Crusaders know about the fact that there are goblins around these parts. Just in case it's information they can use."

Anna nodded, "Sounds like a plan." She then waved and smiled at the lumberjacks group who where now relaxing a bit now that everyone was feeling more safe again. "See you all back in town then."

With that both Anna and Mike left everyone to do their respective jobs, for the guards to clean up and for the lumberjacks to get more base materials.

After a while Anna noticed that Mike was a bit tense, "Something on your mind?"

"I'm not sure; I really did not expect goblins where we are."

She cut him off, "Well that makes sense considering how deep we are and where the Crusader blockade is but some are bound to make it past them and with only two of them I could see that it could happen."

Mike then turned to her and stopped walking, "That's just it, was it only two?"

"What makes you think there is more?"

Mike sighed, as that was what had brought about his cloudy mood. "That's just it, nothing is making me think that just... I don't know the question popped in my head." He took a moment and then continued, "Truthfully I'm wondering if it's just me looking for another enemy."

Anna thought about it, "Hmm, how was your first real combat by the way?"

Mike mood cheered a bit up, "Overall good. I saw that I was a bit too precautions but that's not really a bad thing at this time, but yea, overall you were right that I was worrying too much and should of had more confidence in myself."

She then smiled, "With that comment I think you are thinking too much about it again with your previous statement. Maybe it's worth thinking that there was more than two. It's too bad that we could not ask them."

"Would they even understand our language or us their?"

Anna shrugged, "On that I have no clue, still that means that we will have to do a few patrols

just in case to scout the area around." She sighed heavily, "Well let get back to town and let Jane know that everything is all right. In the afternoon we can try and get more information on the area around and then figure out the possible best places to go check out."

"Sound like a good plan, we can also ask the guards as I think they will be a bit more cooperative now."

She nodded, "Seems like it." She then paused for a moment and then continued walking. "Still let's not forget that we also have other duties."

Mike knew what she was referring too and also why she was bringing it up. While it seems that she was convinced that he was not only looking for another target she also wanted to make sure that he did not get lost in this little side track. "I know, but there is only so much that can be done while we wait for more materials. So why not do what we can in the morning, scout during the mid day and do what we can in the afternoon."

Anna shook her head and smiled, "Wow looks like we will be getting a lot of moving around in the next few days. Still I guess we should get used to it now."

Mike returned her smile as he matched her pace back to town.

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A few days had passed since they had helped the town guards with the attack. During that time Mike and Anna had returned to the location to see if they could get any more information on where these goblins had come from. Clues had been found but the trail was relatively cold, still they continued on their quest and asked the guards and also some of the town folks about the area where

they thought the goblins had come from in order to help limit their area of search.

Work at Jane's house was also slow going but that situation was mostly out of their hands until more materials could be produced. After a quick update before they had left it seems that was a problem that would soon be resolved. This was good news for Jane but bad news for the extra task that they had taken on, as pretty soon they would no longer have the free time to go scouting.

"You think that we will find something?" Mike then turned to Anna as they covered another possible section in the forest. "Or should I say, you think I was wrong in thinking that there was more?"

"Maybe, still I don't think it was a waste of time to check like we did if that is what you are thinking."

As Mike slowly nodded in agreement and continued with the search Anna was puzzled by his reaction. "If you don't mind, why the moping? If you are wrong there is nothing bad about that, especially in this case."

He stopped what he was doing and thought about it, part of him wondered if he should explain what was on his mind but in the end he figured that if he could not thrust her then he was truly doing something wrong. "We are starting this new life, together in a way, and I'll admit that I feel lacking. I'm afraid that because of this I'll lead us down the wrong path and that will cause issues for both of us as a whole. With the results that we have found, I'm starting to wonder if our time would have been better spent doing something else to advance and not feel like we took a step back I guess."

Anna was surprised by the openness of the comment and also by what had been said. "Wow...

okay." She thought about it herself and then a small chuckle could be heard. She immediately looked at him, "Sorry sorry, that was not meant because of your comment it's just I never saw you as the type of person to obsess about what ifs like that. I mean especially after what you gave up to follow me and all the time we spent training together before that."

Again he slowly nodded, "That was a bit different I guess. For the training I knew what we needed to do and how to get there. It was just a matter of doing it and dealing with the issues that came up. When I followed you, well that just felt like the right thing to do and I still don't question it. But this what we are doing and where we are going, there are so many unknowns and so many paths to take to get there good and bad."

"Okay I can see where you're going. Hmm, still... was this a step back? Will this decision make us reach our goal slower?"

She quickly gave him a half smile, "Does it feel like we did something wrong? As for time, when did we have a deadline? Or when did we agree to get there as fast as we could?" When she saw that he had no answers she continued, "All things at their own pace, plus it does not mean that we take it slow now that we will do the same tomorrow or later on. You showed me that one by me being at the bottom rank and finish up being able to beat one of the tops in a dual. With all that said, for now, I say that we both agreed to do this so let focus on that and not if this will pay off or not as much."

He returned her smile, "Agreed... thanks." She simply smiled back and continued with the scouting.

After a few more hours had passed they had finally found something interesting, small foot

prints like before that had been made by the goblins, but this time there were more of them and also these seem to lead somewhere. After another half hour of tracking they had finally hit pay dirt. They then split up and got as much information as they could and then slowly retreated back all the while double checking if they had been spotted.

"It seems like it was a wolf den at one point but it got converted somehow by the goblins."

Mike nodded in agreement, "Maybe the goblins found the den and won against the animals and from there trained them?"

"Maybe, still the entrance to the den is small and there probably is very little room inside. Also from the looks of the mini shelters it seems that the goblins are living mostly out in the open."

"Agreed, but that worries me a bit. Maybe they are not planning on staying there for long and if so where to next?"

"That's a good point but I'm more worried about their numbers. I counted five goblins and about four more wolves?"

"Same, and yes I'm worried about that too. But they are in the open and will not know our location so that's a big advantage."

Anna nodded, "True so we need to make it a good first strike in order not to waste it."

Mike was a bit stunned, "I guess it's already agreed that we will be taking care of this?"

She shrugged, "You said it yourself, it looks like they are not planning on staying so do we turn a blind eye and let someone else deal with the issue?"

Mike chuckled, "That's not going to happen and we both know that. Okay well in that case let's head back; I think we should still inform the guards in case, plus maybe we can borrow something to help us out."

"You have a plan of attack?"

A small wicked grin then appeared on his face, "I may have an idea."

Chuckling a bit at his reaction Anna then wondered on something, "So you still think that this was a waste?"

"All things in their own time I guess, I'll try and keep that in mind next time."

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Mike let the arrow fly and as it hit the target he frowned a bit, it was close to where he had wanted it to hit but not exactly where it should have landed. When he saw that Anna was approaching him he put away the bow and strapped it to his back.

"I've given some last minute instructions to Jane as we agreed." She then looked at the target that he had been aiming at and then back at him, "So are we good to go?"

"We have to be, if they move then we will lose them." He filled out his quarrel with a few arrows and grabbed the rest of his gear that was nearby.

As he finished fitting himself up Anna looked again at the target and shook her head ever so slightly. The aim was good and he was worrying about nothing again. Not that she had the chance to tell him that as he started to march off to their destination. Again she shook her head and followed.

A plan of attack had been figured, it had some random elements to it but overall it was pretty sound. In order to execute it they had asked the guards to borrow some bows and arrows. After a quick explanation of what they had found, the guards had little issues lending them the weapons. It had also been mentioned that if they did not

come back that the Crusaders should be contacted. While the band of goblins was small and while no one thought that they could take over the village they did now that they could cause a lot of damage and possibly many death before they were stopped. That was something that they all wanted to avoid at all cost.

It had been a while since they had used ranged weapons as they were not in the group that focus on it, still when training in the Crimson you needed experience with all types of weapons even if it was not the ones that the group specialized in. In order to reacquaint themselves they had both practiced for a while only to see that Anna had a better knack for aiming then he did, she had told him not to worry about it as the difference was minor but that had helped very little when he had told her that this minor difference could be magnified against a moving target.

All those thoughts now needed to be pushed away as they finally arrived at their destination. Mike took a quick peek at the den. "So far so good, they are mostly all relaxed and their numbers are the same as last time."

"Seems like it so we go with the plan then?" He nodded in agreement as she left to get into position while he moved a bit to find a better location himself.

They where two and there was a total of five goblins and four wolves. They were at a disadvantage if you looked at it in a pure numbers game, but they had the advantage of surprise and knowledge. They knew who their enemies were and their numbers, this was not the case for the goblins and because of that they worked that advantage in the plan.

Mike would stay in position and Anna would go on the opposite side of the camp. When she was

ready they would both attack causing the illusion of a force flanking the den. Hopefully this would give them time to get in a few extra shots and whittle down their numbers. If that did not work out they would still have some extra time as the goblins would need to spend time looking at both side to assess the situation.

From there, it's where the plan got more random. Depending on how the enemy would respond different strategies had been planned out. They could on mass attack one side, if that was the case then the other would pick off the enemy for as long as they could and then join in on the battle. While this situation was not the worst it was one of the least desirable as it would put a massive load on the person they would target. Ideally they would separate and attack both sides, keeping both sides busy. Depending on the numbers they could put down with their first attacks this would probably be the best case scenario. The worst action that could happen is if they zone out running away in different directions. While this would be safer for Mike and Anna, as they could divide and conquer, there was also no way to make sure that they could get them all and if they did not who is to say that the survivors would not regroup and start over someplace else. If that happened they had agreed to separate and do as much as they could but to return to the den after an hour of hunting, after that much time it would probably be too late to catch up to them.

Soon they would know how it would all go as Mike got Anna's signal, because of the sun's position they figured a quick flash of light from a glass surface would not draw too much attention.

The first targets where the wolves, due to their speed. Mike aimed and let the arrow fly. As he reached for another arrow he saw that he had hit

his target perfectly and so had Anna. The wolves cry in pain immediately got the attention of everyone at the den. The last two remaining wolves quickly scouted around and now were in full alert. As expected the goblins were a bit slower to react, so with that the wolves would still be their target for the second attack.

The arrow flew again and while Anna's hit Mike's did not. Unexpectedly the one he had targeted, that was looking in his direction, had suddenly changed position and sprinted away in the opposite direction with the other. With his companion down the remaining wolf continued to barrel down in Anna's direction.

Frustrated by his miss, Mike pulled out another arrow but this time figured that he would aim for the goblins as his old target was now moving way to fast. It's then that he let a quick curse out. The goblins had reacted in an unexpected way, they had taken their makeshift wooden covers that they had created to shelter them from the rain and used them as shields to protect them from further arrow attacks. This gave them time to get a better handle on the situation and protect them from reacting in a poorly made split second decision. Clearly Mike had underestimated their intelligence when he had worked out the plan with Anna.

Anna dropped her bow, confident as she was with her marksmanship she knew that she had better odds of fighting the left over wolf that was coming up to her really quickly with her sword. From the looks of it the wolf would try and pounce at her, with his size if he connected he would be on top of her and then it would be over quick. Originally she had planned on simply dodging his attack as best she could but seeing as she had time another idea came to her.

She unclasped her red cape and used it to cover her front and try and fake where her midsection was with the cape. The wolf pounce as expected and as soon as he reached her she moved away as quick as she could while letting go of her cape. The one wolf claws scratched her armor but besides that the blow had been avoided. As for the wolf, he had landed on his feet but still had his vision obscured by the cape. Anna very quickly took that time to strike at the beast and put him down.

As her target stopped moving she turned to see what was happening with the other enemies. It seems that Mike had continued to try and pin them down with more arrows. The counter to that was three of the goblins had started moving in his direction while still holding down the wooden cover. For the other two goblins, seeing as she had stopped firing arrow they were now running in her direction as fast as they could. "So they decided to split up after all."

They both charged at her with their short sword in front trying for a piercing attack. Anna had plenty of time to figure out where she would move in order to dodge both attacks. What surprised her was the fact that one of the two goblins had continued his charge for a bit longer after she had moved away. "Are they trying to flank me?"

Her question was quickly answered as the goblins positioned themselves to both sides of her. Two on one was part of Crimson training so this did not worry her too much, still she figured that she would play it safe in order to make sure that the others things she had been told held true. After about a minute of back and forth Anna had figured out that Mike had been right about their overall speed. They were slow and in Anna's case slower.

What had been wrong a bit had been their strength. They were a bit stronger then he had explained and because of that had been able to block her blows easier than expected. The other thing that was very off was the cooperation between the two of them. While one attacked the other often waited to see how she would react before it acted, this cut a lot of possible openings that she could have normally abused.

As things where now one of the goblins was once again charging at her, a bit recklessly, while the other waited. Normally she would dodge and counterattack but the last time she had the blow had been blocked by the other. In order to adapt a new plan formed in her head, figuring she could pull it off she moved in to connect with the charging goblin. Confident that he could overpower her due to his running start the goblin made no change to his charge, which is what she had hoped. At the last second she pivoted away from the blow and used that momentum to hit the goblin with the back of her fist with her free hand to the back of his head. This sent the goblin stumbling, and made the other pause for a second trying to figure out why things had not gone to plan as the last times. Taking advantage of this opening Anna thrusts her sword in the stumbling goblin's back. When she pulled it out, it fell to the ground no longer moving.

The remaining goblin was very nervous as he knew he had no chance alone against her, and so he ran as fast as he could to try and get away. That was not something that Anna could allow, she sprinted in a charge attack at the running target. When she got close the goblin turned to and block the blow but he did not have enough strength to compensate for her added momentum. Her blade struck true and her last target fell to the ground.

"Now to see how he's doing with the remaining three."

Mike was now out of arrows, as he switched his weapon the three goblins dropped their cover and charged at him. Moving away had been easier but even the goblins knew that this first attack would have missed; the main reason for the attack was to encircle Mike which was a move that had succeeded.

He went on full defensive as he blocked or dodged their attacks. In theory he could simply try and outlast them this way until Anna came back to even up the odds a bit more. The issue with that plan was one slip up on his part and it would be too late.

After close to a minute of blows being traded back and forth Mike noticed one of the goblins was hitting weaker than the others, his reaction time seemed slower as well. Now having found a weak link in the chain he moved to take advantage. During the fight he had counterattacked all of them when he could, now he only focused on the one. Due to this it did not take long for the goblin to lose even more strength, as the goblin in question moved away to avoid a blow Mike tripped him with his leg. When he fell to the ground, Mike then did a downward thrust targeted at the prone goblins chest. The hit connected and then the odds were more in his favour.

The two leftover goblins were furious which caused their teamwork to now fail miserably, not only that but they had also failed to see Anna coming from the back. There would still be time before she joined but it was only a matter little. As if subconsciously knowing that time was running out it seems that both goblins decided to try and finish it by charging headlong at their target.

Considering all the other attacks before, this

would be easy to move out of. When the time came Mike moved to the side of one goblin, avoiding the other. As he did he counterattacked the one next to him, to Mike's surprise he manage to be able to recover quick enough to block the blow but only just barely. Now that his target was close to being off balance, Mike once again used his feet to trip him up. Now unable to hold himself up the goblin fell and as he did Mike stabbed his sword in his body.

Pulling out the blade Mike turned to the left over target, which was now just standing there staring at something else behind Mike. Mike assumption was confirmed as he saw an arrow hit the goblins head.

"Sorry I knew you had him but..."

Mike cut Anna off with a small smile on his face, "No need to apologize for that, ever." He then turned and let out a large breath, "Looks like we succeeded in our first attack like this. Things did not go exactly to plan sadly."

Anna shrugged, "It was pretty close and I would say a worthwhile experience overall."

"I agree, now there are tone more things that I want to include and change in our daily practice."

She laughed at that comment, "Is that a fact, well if it helps us overall then I'm onboard." She then reached out and grabbed his shoulder, "But first there are other things that we need to do."

Mike nodded while they started to head back to the town, "Yea first we will inform the guards that will probably want to see this in order to report it back to the Crusaders. Then I supposed there is work to continue at Jane's."

Anna gave him a half smile, "Glad to see that you have not forgotten about that after all this." As he only slowly shock his head as an answer, Anna whispered to herself, "Looks like this will work out

after all." She then had a large smile on her face and joined up with him as they made their way back to their temporary home.

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A few weeks had passed and Anna and Mike were taking a break comfortably relaxing while looking at all the works that had been completed. So far the roof was finally finished and also the repairs to the outer walls. Currently fixing the windows and their panels was the only big job left on the list. They still had little things here and there but those were all the major items and there was still a bit more than a month before Jane's son and his family arrived. At this time there were all thinking that there should be no issues finishing everything before that happened.

"I have to admit when I first saw this place and then realised what we needed to do I did not think we would be able to make it."

Anna smiled sarcastically, "Oh ye of little faith, I always assumed that we would figure out something in the end."

With a sceptical glare Mike turned to her, "Always? Seriously?"

"Okay fine, when there was a material shortage even I was starting to wonder. But I still had hope that we would be able to do most of the needed work somehow." Anna then turned to the house, "Still to get here at this time was a surprise."

"Agreed, I guess the workers felt guilty about all the work they let us do when they promised Jane that they would be there for her. Also considering that she did pay them for it..."

Anna cut him off, "I'm not so sure money was that much of a factor here. From the looks of it

Jane has been keeping these people healthy for a long time now. They also all knew why she was doing all this; I just think that this was their chance to pay her back for all those years. When they couldn't and add the material problem that occurred, it just got to be too much. So yes I agree with the guilt part but not so much the other."

Mike thought about it and then nodded, "Maybe, in any case whatever the reason was they sure paid her back in full during the last few weeks with all the help that we got."

"I could not agree more." She then turned to with a puzzled look, "By the way there was a time where I was too busy and one of the guards gave you news about something, what was that about?"

"Mostly confirming things, they could not find anything at the den that indicated that we missed anything. Ah they also sent a report a few days after to the Crusaders informing them of the situation and what had happened." After a quick pause he then remembered the last bit of information that he had been told, "Also it seems that they wanted to let everyone know that it seems that a priest of the Order will be paying this town a visit soon. So if there is anything that we require that we should act on it when we can as they don't pass around too often."

Anna was a bit baffled by that last comment, "You think that the priest is coming over as a response from the news the Crusaders got? That feels quick don't you think?"

Mike shrugged, "I do, but it does make sense. Plus maybe they want to ask more questions while they are at it so that they can report back and a priest can do both." He then chuckled, "When I told Jane about it she cared very little for the visit."

Anna laughed at that, "I can see that given that they are her family's main competition. I still

think that's too bad so far we are both learning tones from her."

"I agree, sometime next month she told us that she would show us how to make salves that help with cuts and bruises. I know that should come in handy in the future."

Anna gave him a half smile, "You are expecting a lot of battles in our future I take it?"

"Yep." He then reached out with both his arms to the sky, "Small and big battles too."

Anna chuckled at that, giving their main goal to randomly help others she could not deny that it could happen. "I guess I can see that as well, still it could be a while before that happens. I hope that that's all right with you?"

He nodded, "It is. I learned a lot this month, thanks to you." He then turned to her and had a warm smile on his face, "Thanks for that by the way, I don't think I said it yet."

She returned his smile, "I'm glad to hear that and also again thanks for joining me on this. I can't wait to see what come next."

Mike nodded in agreement and after they smiled as they felt a nice cool breeze on their face. It was time to continue to enjoy their day off after this month's accomplishments.

## Chapter 2

Mike and Anna were walking on the main road of the town heading to the cloth vendor that Jane had purchased from the last time. "You know I did not figure that we would need more cloth for the last two drapes for the windows. When Jane went over it I thought for sure that there would be enough."

Anna chuckled, "Well in theory Jane's original calculation was only off by one window not two."

A sour expression appeared on Mike's face, "I said I was sorry and even offered to pay, why are you bringing that up again?"

Anna smiled and slowly shook her head, "We don't bring it up from time to time because we want to torment you on your mistake, it's just that we have no clue how you could have messed it up so much."

He scratched his head, "Yea I'm not sure how I did that as well, at least I'm okay if I help out someone."

"That's a good thing; still it's a wonder..." She then pointed ahead, "Speaking of wonder what is going on there?" Mike simply shrugged as he had no clue as well.

While they had arrived at their destination, not too far from it was a huge line up of people that seem to go on for a while until it stopped so far that it was impossible to see what was happening at the end of it. As they both approached the cloth vendor Anna once again pointed at the crowd.

"Oh that, that's the priest that has finally arrived. I'm sure that the guards told you about that right?"

Mike nodded while she reached out for the readied bundled of cloth. "Sure, does a priest always attract that much attention or is that something for here only?"

She handed him the product and explained, "They do attract a crowd normally yes, but this time it's special. It seems that this priest is very generous and is only charging a few silvers for his healing spells, which is a very good bargain."

Anna moved around to see if there was a way to see the end of the line, "I guess the price is normally very high if he is able to attract what looks like half the town in one section."

The vendor laughed a bit, "It sure is normally a single healing spell can go for a handful of golds, with so much of a price drop I can see why so many are taking advantage of it."

Both of them were stunned at the price mentioned. A handful of gold was about how much they both had when they had left the Crimson town, to spend all that for one healing spell seemed pretty extreme. Snapping out of it Anna smiled at the vendor, "Well thanks for the information as well as the product."

She smiled at both of them, "No problems and also thanks to both of you for helping out Jane so much from what I hear you are done with the repairs?"

Mike nodded, "Only two curtain left."

"That's fantastic, again thanks for helping her out."

They both thanked the lady and then made their way back to the house.

Anna was still a bit surprised by the news. "Wow that is a lot of only one spell."

"I agree, make me glad that we took the time and that Jane was willing to teach us basic herbalism skills."

"I know, still I suppose it's a good thing in a way that they dropped their price so much. I guess they did it to help out seeing as they don't drop by as often around here."

Mike chuckled, "I guess you could be right..."

"I take it you don't agree?"

Mike shrugged, "Personally I find it odd and question the reasoning behind it."

"Tsk, so cynical."

A chuckle could then be heard, "And you tend to be very optimistic, tell you what let's see what Jane says about it."

They arrived at the house a little while later and explained the situation as Jane prepared some tea. "So what are your thoughts on this?"

Jane sat down at the table where the others two were and served them each a cup. "Hmm, that's a hard one. The low cost is not the norm, that's for sure. But at the same time some priests have charged nothing for their services. Still I've been told that this is frowned upon from the Order." She thought about it more, "I think that the only way to answer your question would be to ask him personally." A small smile then appeared on her face as she saw the mild frustration that showed up on their faces when she had essentially decided not to pick a side in their little argument.

Taking a sip of tea Mike relaxed a bit and figured that he wanted to know more. "So these priests, can they cure anything with their magic?"

Jane nodded, "To my knowledge there is no sickness that they cannot cure. As for wounds, if they are in time and the wound is not that bad yes pretty much. The effects of the spell are almost instant and a wound closes up just as quickly. That said if too much blood is lost or if a limb is detached there is not much that they can do."

Both of them were surprised by this, "And how

often can they cast this healing spell?"

"Hmm, now that is a hard one. I think it depends on a lot of factors really. A large wound would take more power but casting a lot should also take its toll on their body. That's as far as I know about it mind you. Reason why I know so much is that for a while I was researching if there was something I could create that would help with the fatigue that they feel after casting a lot. I ask my son for help with this as there were priest around where he was." She took a moment as she recalled the past events, "Sadly nothing good came from all of it."

Anna saw the pain in Jane's current mood, "Sorry that the question drugged up some bad memories." Jane waved Anna's concerned look away, "It's all right, it was a long time ago and really the only issue was that it caused a lot of bad arguments between us and the priests."

"Well, as Anna said, I'm sorry still. But thank you for answering any ways, where we have lived for most of our lives there were no priests. While the Crimsons had information on them and what they were doing they had little information on their powers and how they worked."

Anna gave a sarcastic chuckle at that one, "If it's not of the Crimsons then they care very little."

As she said it she regretted it as it was clear to see that it had cause Mike some pain to hear that. Before she could say anything he stood up and walked to the bundle of cloth that he had carried over from the vendor. "I suppose you are right about that for the majority of them." He then turned around, "Changing the subject, care to help me with this before I have a repeat of the last time."

Anna took another quick sip of her tea and then stood up as well, "Sure thing."

As they made their way upstairs Anna moved closer to Mike, "I'm sorry by the way."

"I know it's alright, given your experience and how they treated you it's hard to argue your point."

A sad half smile appeared on her face, sure he was right and so was she in a way but it was still uncalled for especially seeing as some had helped her out and he, who had been one of them, more than any of them.

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"Are you sure you want to do this Jane? You really don't need to."

Jane then grabbed Anna's hand and held it tightly as they were about to walk in the inn. "It's alright I want to do this. We are all done and ahead of time, this is what I wanted but I never thought I was actually going to get there in time." She then smiled at both of them, "Let me pay you a nice supper to celebrate, the inn here cooks a nice steak this time of week I'm sure you will both enjoy it."

Anna nodded in approval and let herself be dragged in the inn, Mike simply followed behind them. He would be the last one to disagree with good food but celebrations were not his cup of tea, still he was sure that if he said anything that it would break the mood so he tried to keep it to himself.

When he walked in he then suddenly stopped, a few seconds later he realised why both of the others had stopped in their tracks and he also saw that the mood was suddenly broken without his help after all.

Anna looked around, the place was empty.

"Jane... is this normal?"

Jane shook her head, "Not that I come here

often but no I would think that this is not normal at all." She then saw the hostess approach her and turned to her with a concern look on her face.

"Sonia, what's going on?"

"I'm sorry but we are clos..." There was a pause as Sonia seems to be wondering something when she realised who had come in. "Jane... why are you here?"

Clearly something was wrong but Jane did not think that simply asking about it would help anyone so she decided to answer her question instead. "We finished the repairs and I figured that we would celebrate with one of your famous suppers, but if you are closed we can come back another time."

As Jane started to turn, Anna saw that Sonia was holding back on something. "You know I realise that you said that you are closed but given that we have nothing prepared would you have anything ready anyways? Even a simple meal like we had the first time here would do."

Mike was surprised by Anna's insistence and Jane was a bit furious, as she turned to give her a quick lecture she noticed that Sonia had suddenly relaxed a bit. Jane simply stared as she saw the hostess of the inn suddenly bow. "Well it would be a shame to turn away customers on such a happy occasion. If you are okay with that type of meal than I can have it ready if you wish." She then pointed at the free tables, "Sit anywhere you like." and then she moved in the back presumably where the kitchen was located.

When they had all sat at one of the free tables Mike turned to Anna, "I remember the food being good but... why so insistent?" Jane was wondering the same thing, "I was going to say something but she reacted in such a way that I was not expecting that I was left speechless."

Anna smiled and then it quickly faded away as she turned to where the hostess had disappeared too. "I think that we all agree that something is wrong here and I was going to leave it at that." She then stopped as a doubtful look appeared on Mike's face. "I really was going to leave it alone; it's just that I saw that she was more worried when you started to leave so I figured that I would give her a chance to think about it more." She then looked at Jane, "I think she wants to ask you something."

Jane looked back as well and then turned to Anna, "Maybe you're right but I still feel a bit uncomfortable forcing the issue like this."

If it was up to Anna only then her method would matter little, but she could see how this imposition was making Jane uncomfortable and even Mike did not seem too encouraged by this situation as well. She took a deep breath, "Look, I'm sorry... it's just that this felt like the right thing to do." She slowly shook her head and then started to slowly stand, "I'll go apologize and tell her that we will be on our way as well." While it felt wrong as she said it she could see that what she had just mentioned made Jane smile.

As she started to move away from the table the hostess came out of the back room. She had no food, which was of little surprise, but she did have a determined look on her face which quickly disappeared and changed to worry as she saw that they were all now standing up. "Are you leaving?"

Anna was about to start her apology as Jane cut her off, "Yes, we have talked it over and it would just feel wrong to intrude on you like we did..."

"No please don't go, not after I've made up my mind."

Mike turned to the others that shared his

puzzled look, "You have made up your mind on what?"

Sonia reached out and grabbed Jane's hands, "My daughter is sick, she is currently upstairs resting... It seems that she has the sickness that everyone else is having."

Jane's look changed and she was now all serious and also moving ahead of Sonia in the direction of the stairs still holding her hand. "What sickness are you talking about? This is the first that I hear of it. Also why hesitate for so long, why not tell me when you first could?"

Sonia did not seem sure on how to answer. "A lot of people have fallen ill in the last few days... and well... seeing as there is a priest around... we all... well..."

Jane was a bit furious, "Just because there is a priest in town does not mean that I'm closed. Also why is he not here then if he can cure then all?"

The hostess took a moment for that one as they made their way up the stairs. "He's supposed to as I've already given him the handful of gold that he asked for his services... but there are a lot of sick around and he mentioned that he may not make it tonight." As she got to the door, which they assumed was the one that lead to her daughter's room Sonia paused for a second. "I'm sorry Jane... She's my only child and well when you showed up tonight, I was not sure if I had the right to ask for your help given everything."

Jane slowly nodded her head and opened the door, "It's alright, I understand."

They all walked in to see a small child about eight years old in bed. She was in pain it was clear to see, she was also sweating a lot but she seems like she was also shivering as well. Jane put her hand on the child forehead and at the same time

reached and grabbed hold of her wrist. She then closed her eyes for a while and stayed silent.

Everyone else in the room looked to Jane and back to the child as they waited in silence as well. Finally after what felt like a long time but was probably less than a minute Jane turned to Sonia. "She is very sick, I'm willing to see if I can help and if the priest shows up then he shows up."

Sonia nodded with a look of relief on her face, "Thank you."

Jane nodded and then turned to Mike, "Can you go and get my medical kit at the house. I'll need some of the things in there in order to get more information on what is affecting her." Mike nodded and left the room as fast as he could.

While they waited Jane looked at the child more and tried to ask her some questions on where she was more in pain. Sadly the child was too much in pain to give her any answers let alone acknowledge her presence. After a while a knock was heard coming from the first floor.

Jane looked to Anna, "He can't be that fast." Anna nodded in agreement and followed the hostess downstairs as Jane stayed with the child.

Sonia opened the door and was suddenly happy when she saw that it was the priest, she then turned to Anna with mild nervousness. Anna did not have to think why she was feeling that way.

"Please come in, I'm glad that you could make it after all given the circumstance."

The priest smiled, "Well this is for a child after all; morally there was no way that I could leave her in pain. Plus that is not what the lord of light would want me to do as well."

Sonia smiled, "I'm so glad, thank you. She is upstairs..." She then suddenly stopped and then she turned to Anna panicking a bit.

Anna smiled and then looked at the priest. He

was wearing a light blue robe with a white shirt. He also wore a blue cape with a hood attached that was pulled down. The priest himself was about in his late thirties and had dark hair. He also had a small lantern attached to his hip. This was the first time Anna had seen a priest, it was not what she had expected for some reason. "I'm sorry to say my friend the local herbalist is currently in the room. I asked if she could take a look at her when I heard the news, as you said a sick child should not be ignored."

The priest gave her a warm smile, "I understand, but I think that seeing as I'm here now that she will no longer be needed." He then turned and opened the door to the room. Nope, not what she had expected at all.

As soon as Jane saw him she simply moved away, part of her hated to admit it but the priest would be able to help her much quicker than she ever could. Plus as long as the child was fine in the end what did it matter who helped her out.

The priest started with the same actions as Jane did when she first saw her. He then nodded and looked at Sonia while reaching for his lantern. "If you don't mind, I can heal her but with all the requests I'm a bit drained. This lantern gives off incense that helps me focus on my holy magic during these times."

Sonia nodded and then he lit the lantern. While he breathed in the smoke that came out heavily all the others soon covered their mouth and nose as much as they could. The priest laughed a bit, "I am sorry about that, and that is why I ask before hand... I am told that the smell is an acquired taste that needs getting used to."

Before Anna could agree with him she saw him turn and put his hand on the child chest. After a little while to focus it seems, his hand glowed

golden and then the glow moved from his hand to the child. It barely took a second and the child opened her eyes and was starting to breathe normally. While the priest was not what she expected the way he had healed the child blew her away.

The priest then took a moment to gather his strength and then turned off his lantern. He then raised his head to Sonia, "The child will be fine, now I will be off for some much needed rest. A home invited me to stay the night for all the help I gave them and I agreed, I mentioned that I would be back as soon as I was done here."

Sonia looked at her child that seems to be waking up from a long sleep she then turned to the priest, "Thank you again for this, let me escort you down."

As they left Jane smiled at the child and started to leave when Anna stopped her, "Should you not check her, just in case?"

Jane smiled and nodded, "There is no need for that, as he said she will be fine. The lord of lights magic is real and it works very well I assure you."

It was hard to argue, a little while ago this child could not move let alone react to those around her and now she was already getting out of bed as nothing had happened. She then felt Jane's hand grab hers, "Come let's leave and see if we can bump into Mike and let him know the good news."

Anna nodded and let her be guided out of the room as she smiled back at the little girl that was now smiling at her. '*Holy magic, that was very impressive.*'

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Mike work up and got ready for morning practice as he always did, seeing as Anna was taking a while he figured that he would brew a quick pot of

tea for when Jane woke up, which typically was very soon as well as she was an early riser. After a few minutes Anna had yet to show up, this had him a bit puzzled. "Are you sleeping in?"

Just in case, especially with what they had learned from the night before, he figured that he would check up on her. He got to her door and knocked, "Anna, are you still getting ready?"

He waited a bit, he did hear some movement so she was still inside but she did not answer. Now worried he figured he would check in just in case, "I'm opening the door..." Poking his head in the room he then got his confirmation.

While Anna was nowhere as bad as the little girl that they had seen last night, it was pretty clear to see that she was sick. She was still wrapped in her covers even while it was quite warm, plus her forehead was also sweating. She was now aware of his presence, "Seems like I got a bit sick during the night."

"A bit sick, you should stay in bed. I'll go grab Jane so she can take a look at you." As he turned to leave the room she raised one of her arms in a motion for him to stop. "It's alright I should be okay, I'll go down so that she can check up on me there."

Seems that she was being stubborn a bit, "I think that you should just stay, I'm pretty sure that she will not mind coming up the stairs for something like this."

With that said Anna was in the process of getting up. Mike sighed, "Fine, do as you wish. Still I'll head downstairs and let her know and prepared the medical kit. At least wait for me before you start going down the stairs in your current condition." She nodded in confirmation as he left her room.

When Mike was in the kitchen again he saw

that Jane was still no up, which worried him. He made his way to her room and again knocked on the door. "Jane, are you up? Sorry to bother you but it seems that Anna is sick."

He heard some coughing and shortly after she answered him, "You can come in."

As he opened the door he saw a similar situation, Jane was sick as well. She was much worse off than Anna, probably due to her age but still in a better condition than the child last night. "I guess I got infected when I touched the child last night." She then coughed a bit before continuing, "Still I would have thought that Anna would have been okay."

"Sadly that is not the case. Do you have anything that can help with these symptoms?"

Jane thought about it for a little while, "As soon as I woke up I was self diagnosing. From what I remember I know of something that will help with this but if I remember correctly I'm missing some ingredients for it." She paused again for a while, "Also I'm in no shape to prepare everything so you will have to do it as I guide you once everything is collected."

Mike wondered about that, "I know this will be a bit touchy but, should we not ask the priest? I mean if you had everything on hand..."

She chuckled and then coughed, "I'm sorry but I just can't do that. If this was fatal then yes I would put my stubbornness aside but this will only hurt a lot more as time goes and it will be for a while. The medicine will cut that down drastically."

It's then that Anna came in the room as well. Mike gave her a disappointing look, "I thought I said to wait?"

She shrugged, "It's not that bad and most of the dizziness is gone now." He still had his disapproving look on his face as he saw her make

her way to the free chair that was in the room so that she could sit. "I take it that you will also opt out of the priest services?"

Anna slowly nodded, "You are correct. I mean if Jane here is going to go without it how can I. Plus could we really afford his charge?"

It was hard to argue that last point especially if the symptoms would go away on their own eventually. He then shrugged and slowly shook his head in resignation, "Fiiine have it your way." He then turned to Jane who had a small mild smile on her face, "You mentioned that you are missing some things, if I go get one of the maps that we used can you point out sections where I could find what you need?"

"Yes, I should be able to."

Mike left the two alone while he went and grabbed the maps of the surrounding areas that they had used when hunting the possible goblin pack a few weeks back. Along the way he also grabbed a few books that had pictures of the different herbs and other things that could be used to make certain cures. When he made his way back in the room he saw that Anna was more slumped in her chair and that Jane had not moved at all.

He moved the small table that was near the chair Anna was sitting on next to Jane and put all the maps on top. "Jane, are you okay to do this now?"

She pushed herself up while warning him not to help her, "I have too, later will only be harder. Also if you can try not to touch Anna or me, as I mentioned I think that is how we contracted it."

It took a while but Jane pointed at some herbs and also some mushroom that could be found at two different locations. "This is what we will need, bring as many as you can. Also be careful, those

sections have lots of wild animal."

It was to be expected he supposed, while he nodded to acknowledge her warning he then saw that Anna was starting to get up. "You may need help so I'll come too."

"No you won't, that will be more dangerous."

Anna understood his serious tone and partially agreed with it but she was thinking that he was not thinking clearly. "So you think that you can take on wild animals on your own, wolves are one thing but..." He suddenly cut her off, "I don't care, I will think of something. I'm thinking that you being with me will be more dangerous than without. I'm not arguing this one Anna, you are staying."

It was clear to see that Anna was not pleased at all, before this argument continued Jane added a few choice words. "Anna I will be getting worse as time goes, Mike will be away for a few days. During that time stay with me and I'll show you how to do the medicine while we wait."

Now Anna was stuck, she had set her mind to follow but at the same time leaving Jane alone in a worsening condition would also be a bad idea. She thought about it some more and then sighed deeply. "Fine I'll stay here, but please be careful as you could wake up tomorrow and be sick yourself. I know what Jane said but I did not touch the child last night and I am sick today."

Jane was instantly puzzled, "What?! Are you sure?" Anna simply nodded.

While Jane thought about that Mike took some time to think as well on another matter. Then turned to Anna and broke the silence. "Look, if you do feel better and you have time there is something I want to you do. I want you to get more information on this sickness, how many people where in fact sick and who was sick. It does not

have to be exact just general numbers will be fine."

Both Jane and Anna were puzzled by the request, "Like I said I don't feel that bad so I should be able to do that while you're gone, still why do you want that information?"

"I'm just thinking about something but it does not add up so I was wondering if it would with that information, that's all. I'll explain when I come back." He then picked up the maps in question with the markers, once that was done he turned to Anna and gave her a serious look. "Please as much as you want me to be careful I want the same for you as well. Don't push yourself too much and don't feel like you need to do this request of mine if you're not up for it."

She gave him a small smile, "I'll be fine and I'll keep that in mind."

He returned her smile and then left the room. He would need to prepare for the trip and also there was another stop he wanted to make before he left town. Still he would have to hurry, he wanted to believe what Anna was saying but it was hard to, plus there was also Jane to think about. No matter what time was not on his side.

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He had already been walking hours after leaving the town, but he was approaching one of the two points that Jane had marked on the map. Seeing as this was a section that they had not really been too during their own side mission he figured that tackling it first would be a wise choice. Here it seems that he had to find some odd wild mushrooms, from what Jane had explained they were a vital ingredient in order for them to get better quickly. While the other item he needed to get would help the process a lot this one was more

important, which was another reason why he chose this place first.

With the caution of wild animals he dropped by the guards before leaving and asked if he could borrow one of their bow and arrows again. Mike was not as confident as he would like to be with the weapon but seeing as he would be alone any help would be welcomed.

As more time passed he was finally at his destination, now all he needed to find where those mushroom which from the looks of it would be harder than expected. This section of the forest was pretty dense so it was hard to find anything due to so many trees and bushes blocking the view ahead. Still this was an important ingredient so he needed to relax and take his time to find it, "Think only of the task that needs to get done and nothing else."

It took a while and at first he needed to confirm often with a copy of the picture that he had but he had found some. Unfortunately they were pretty small and wondered if it would be enough, because he was not sure he continued his search anyways. It's at that point that he heard a large growl from what sounded like a bear and it was getting closer. Not interested in taking on a bear Mike looked around to see if he could find a place to hide. His only option was up in the trees. "Do bear climb trees?!" There was little time to think about that question as now he was hearing something large approach his position.

He climbed one of the tallest tree he could find and perched himself in a way to be ready to fire an arrow downwards. It felt like he was waiting there a long time but really it was just his nerves making feel that as a large brown bear followed by two little ones where making their way passed him. Mike tried not to breathe and also not to move, this was

not an enemy he wanted to fight.

While the large bear moved slowly passed him the cubs suddenly stopped by the base of the tree that he was on. It was like they were smelling the area for something and then the unthinkable happened, one of the cubs started to climb the tree while the other one started yell. Mike aimed his sights at the cub that was coming up but everything inside of him was telling him that this was a bad idea. Because of that he held his position and did nothing as the cub moved upward.

After a while he was wondering if he was going to have to go with his bad idea after all as the cub kept getting higher. It's then that the large bear moved to the tree and then stood up on its two back legs and then stumped on the tree. The tree cracked and moved but withstood the blow. Mike held on to dear life dropping his aim and simply grabbed on to everything he could in order not to fall. While he had done so successfully the cub that had been climbing had not had as much luck as it fell to the ground. It started crying and then the larger bear growled at the cub in what seemed to be an attempt to try and scold it. After a short while the large bear moved back in the direction that they were originally headed with the two cubs following.

Mike waited a bit longer after they were out of sight and then climbed down. He still had to find more ingredients but just in case figured that he would look in the opposite direction that the large bear was heading.

This new direction was as fruitless as the one that he was originally on, but eventually he did make it to a clearing and hope that he could find better results there. The clearing was created by a large rock shape coming out of the ground below.

As Mike moved around it he could hear something coming from inside the rock formation. When he turned the corner he saw a large opening and inside two small cubs bears again. He froze instantly, *'Why would there be cubs here too, why are they not with the large bear as well like the other two?'*

He slowly moved backward in order not to draw attention, after seeing the other two cubs he figured that this would be in vain but the ones inside paid little attention to him. Taking control of his nerves he studied the current situation. *'These little bear are moving very little, could it be that they were sick somehow? This would be another reason why they are not with the others. Still this is not a place I want to stick around.'*

When he was about to turn the corner he saw that on the other side was a large patch of mushrooms, he took a moment to look at them and saw that these were in fact the one he was looking for but these were big and mature. *'Yep nothing is easy.'*

After spending so much time looking he knew that he could not pass this up. As he walked slowly and silently as he could he kept a close eye on the cubs to see if they reacted at all. Finally making his way to the patch he picked as up as much as he could and put it in his bag. *'Looks like this is going to work out after all.'*

Regret came as soon as he thought about it as the cubs started to move around. They moved clumsily but it looks like they had spotted him. Mike grabbed some more mushrooms as he moved backwards. Finally one of the cubs made it out of the small cave and then tripped on itself. Mike eyes grew wide as the little bear then started to cry and scream.

Taking that as a cue, Mike turned around and

ran as quick as he could in the opposite direction again. From the looks of it this would bring him deeper in the forest but if the cries were heard from the larger bear he hoped that it would take time to inspect the cubs before it tried to follow him or maybe would not bother after quickly looking around. Seeing as he had enough ingredients now there would be no reason for him to return.

Still not taking too many chances he ran as quickly as he could, after a while he slowed down when he saw a small stream to his side. Thinking that maybe the water could cover his scent he marched in for a while and then made his way on the other side and continued running.

After a few minutes more he was pretty confident that the bear was not following him. He stopped and tried to get his bearing with the maps that he had. Luckily the stream helped him find out where he was pretty quick; unfortunately this little run had left him very wet and also way off course for his other location. He dried himself out as much as he could but there was no way that he had the time to do it properly considering the time that he had.

"Well one down anyways, and it's not like I'm planning on sleeping in these wet clothes anyways." Now knowing that it was going to be a long and now uncomfortable end of day Mike made his way to the other location as quickly as he could in order to make up the time this little detour as added. He hoped that the other location would be less of an issue and also hoped that Anna and Jane were not getting worse too quickly.

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Anna woke up feeling much better, no more

headaches, no more dizziness and she generally felt okay. The only symptom was that she was a bit warmer than usual but other than that she felt normal. "Hmm, I wonder if I was just a bad night then."

She got dressed and went to check up on Jane, who was in worst shape then this morning. Anna wiped some of the sweat off of her and then applied a compress to the forehead to help with some of the symptoms.

When that was done she made her way to the kitchen table and got the materials together. Jane had gone over the procedure, overall it was fairly easy but time consuming and she would have to stop at certain sections in the procedure due to the missing ingredient that Mike was currently getting.

She worked as diligently as she could and prepared as much as she could as well, just in case. When she was done the sun was starting to set and Anna was feeling a little bit weak. It's then that she realised that she had not really eaten anything. The place was a bit of a mess due to all the work that she had just done so she figured that she would check up on Jane and then go get a quick something to eat at the inn. At the same time maybe she could get some of the information that Mike had asked for.

It felt odd walking in the middle of the town, sure most of the shops would be closing at this time but it felt emptier for some reason. Anna passed by the vendor that had sold Jane the cloth bundles and as soon as she did she was waved over. "I'm glad to see that you are okay as well."

Anna was puzzled, "What do you mean? I know that some people are sick but it is that bad?"

She chuckled at that response, "What do you mean what do I mean, it's been pretty bad these past few days. So far we have been lucky and none

of us had gotten anything but same thing can't be said for many others. I guess we should be happy that there is a priest around as I'm pretty sure that this is way bigger then what Jane could have handled."

Anna was shocked, I mean how could something spread so quickly. "That's odd and very unfortunate for many of the others. Do you have more information on who has been sick and who has not?"

She stopped and thought about it for a while and then a guilty look appeared on her face, "Look... ah, well we have been trying to stay away as much as possible. I mean even my husband was against me opening up today because of it. Seems everything is fine but considering that I sold nothing it was not worth the risk."

Anna slowly shook her head, "Its fine no one will blame you for doing that if things are that bad. I mean you have to look out for your family as well so it's perfectly understandable."

She did not seem convinced, "Thanks for that but still..." After a quick pause a smile appeared on her face, "Anyways where are you headed to?"

"I was thinking of going to the inn to grab a quick bite to eat, it's been a long day for me."

"I may as well tell you that you will not be able to do that." Seeing Anna's confused look on her face she continued with an explanation, "You see it seems that the hostess is now infected so they closed up shop in order to make sure that it did not jump to others."

Anna was now wide eyed, she was now sick too, that felt odd for some reason but given Jane's explanation it should make sense. "Hmm, thanks. I think that I'll still stop by to check up on them to see if everything is okay."

The vendor shrugged, "I don't see what you

can do, but I do thank you for doing that."

Anna walked a bit faster to reach the inn and when she did it seems that the inn was in fact closed. She knocked on the door a few times and waited, eventually a man opened the door. He was tall and somewhat muscular and very hairy. "I heard that Sonia is now sick too, how is she doing?"

He seemed to think about it for a while and then coming to some conclusion let her in and closed the door behind him. The inn was empty, but the fireplace had a low fire going. To the table next to it the little girl that seemed very happy the night before after being cured was sitting and holding her doll as tightly as she could. Anna did not even try to hide her worried look as she could feel the concern from both of them. "Is she that bad?"

The father sat next to her child, "No but this little one blames herself for it, even if I keep telling her that it's not her fault."

The child then looked up, "But daddy why can't we get mommy the same help you got me."

This was a good question that Anna was wondering on herself. The dad put his hand on the top of her head, "Now we told you that we just can't do that this time he can't help us anymore."

Before the child could asked the obvious question Anna jumped in and asked it for her, "Why is that, is he too busy? I heard from one of the vendors that this is now pretty wide spread, so is it too much for him as well?"

The dad took a deep breath, "Not really, it's just that the price is now way too high. Seems like his generosity is now gone and he is now charging the regular price that the Order would normally charge."

Anna was still confused, "But what, last time

the fee was a handful of gold are you saying it's more?"

The dad smiled, "Healing magic is expensive, and given how many he has to do he will need to report this to the Order. There is no way that he can report that he charged less then is agreed while he is doing that. I'm sure that if it's children maybe he would make another exception but for adults." As Anna processed this information and held back her anger at the whole situation the husband continued, "Seeing that this is the case I was going to head over to Jane's to see if there is something that she can do and then you knocked on our door." He paused for a moment and then had a shameful look on his face. "I realised that asking for her help after what happened last night is a bit..."

Anna then cut him off, "Jane would not care about that, she would help out. Sadly there is a bit of news on that front that you may need to know." The dad then looked at Anna and then his daughter, "Hey why don't you get our guest a glass of water?" While still down the child agreed and made her way to the kitchen.

Once she was out of earshot the husband looked at Anna, "Thanks, I guess that means that Jane is sick as well now?"

Anna nodded, "It happened this morning. Currently she gave me instructions on how to prepare a cure for it but it seems that we are missing some ingredients. So because of that Mike, my partner, has gone out to find them. He should be back soon and when he does come back we can drop some off to help your wife if you wish."

He did not have to think about it, "Thanks you and yes that would be very appreciated if you could do that." It's then that the daughter returned with a glass of water and handed it to Anna. She gulped

down the water like it was nothing while the father gave her the news.

"It seems that they will be able to bring us medicine to help out mom soon. So please don't worry so much okay." The child smiled a bit and nodded.

Anna then put the glass on the table and then squatted in front the child, "He's right you know. It's not your fault at all and the best thing that you can do for you mom to help her out right now is to stop feeling guilty and stop worrying. She will be fine I assure you." Saying so seem to help both the child and the father, and it was something that she could say after Jane had mentioned that this was not fatal in any way just very hard on the body.

The father then stood up and the child ran next to him, "Let's go and give your mom the good news." He looked at Anna, "Many thanks again."

Anna stood and blinked for a second, "Not a problem, I'll head back to the house and see if Mike's back with the missing ingredients."

He escorted her to the door and once again locked it as soon as Anna had walked through. As soon as she heard the door shut Anna felt a massive wave of dizziness and had to drop on the ground and sit for a while. "... So stupid..."

All the symptoms where back and with a real vengeance, "I need to head back... Mike needs to know how to finish everything..."

She stood up once again, it felt like the hardest thing she had done in many year. "Oh god I hope that I did not cause this family more problem because of this..."

Slowly she made her way to the house and only thought of making it there and somehow leaving the instructions. Every other guilty thought had to be pushed out of her head as she needed all the energy she could to simply move and she

would need to do way more than that in order for Mike to take over when he finally showed up.

"... I have to hurry... Please let me last long enough..."

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Mike finally made it back late during the night. Thankfully the last ingredient needed was easier to find than the mushrooms and there were no bears around, which simplified the process greatly. As he entered the house he noticed that the kitchen area was in disarray but the table had a lot of components that looked like there where placed in a specific order, there were also a few pieces of paper along with them which made him nervous.

He made his way upstairs to Anna's room and when he opened the door he realised that his concerns were validated. Anna was passed out on the floor of her room still fully clothed and shaking and sweating at the same time. Obviously she had overdone it and the stairs to get to her room had probably been the final nail in the coffin.

Mike removed the excess clothes and picked her up and placed her in her bed. There was no water bucket around or towel so that's something he would have to get. A disappointed look appeared on his face as he took a moment to look at her. He took a deep breath and then when down to see Jane.

She was in a similar situation but still better off than Anna from the looks of it. He changed her compress, she would also need to be wiped down but that will have to wait until he read what he assumed Anna had left him before passing out.

The papers where very difficult to read, it was clear to see that the more time went by the worse Anna had gotten. Overall, after reading it a few times he clearly knew how to finish the medicine

needed to help with this illness and also how to apply it. What he was still having trouble with was near the end there was some writing that had to do with the inn, sadly everything else read like gibberish. Seeing that he had wasted already too much time he let it go for now and focused on his next task.

Mike figured that finishing the medicine would take a few hours so before that he would spend a bit of time to wipe the sweat off of the two sick ladies in order to make them more comfortable while he worked.

The hours ticked by and he was finally finished and also surprised at how the ingredients needed to be used. The medicine was in two parts, the first and more important one was the liquid that needed to be swallowed and the second was a simple compress that would help with the fever symptoms. Mike worry was, given the ingredients in the liquid there was no way that it would taste good at all.

Ignoring all that he made his way to Jane's room as healing the healer first should be the priority, even if that decision felt wrong for some reason he ignored it and followed what would be more logical. Applying the new compress was no issue but the liquid was a bit problematic. Jane was in a lot of pain and not really aware of what was going on around her, she was also not cooperative with having a tube put in her mouth in order to pour the liquid in. In the end she did swallow and even as oblivious as she currently was she did react badly at its taste.

Mike made his way to Anna's room part of him knew this was not going to go well. Anna could be very stubborn, so was he, but generally speaking they could always talk it over and get some sort of answer that they would both be okay with. While

sick Mike feared that this stubbornness would be a bit of a problem. Again the compress was of little issue the liquid on the other hand was a large problem. She was not interested in anything being put in her mouth as he had even tried regular water. She needed this medicine that he knew but there were very little options left. He used his hand to open her mouth, while she tried there was little resistance due to her condition, and then poured the liquid in and closed her mouth and kept his hand on her mouth so that she would not spit it out. After a little while she did swallow, while he was not pleased by this process it was needed. He tried to make her comfortable and then left the room.

After everything he was tired and now it was very late, still there was something nagging at him. He kept looking at the paper that she had left him, "Why would she be so insisting about the inn? The child was cured right?"

Maybe it was guilt, curiosity or worry he did not know but he took some of the prepared medicine and made his way to the inn. It took little time as there was no one around and most people would be sleeping right now, but from a distance he could see a light from the inn. He moved a bit quickly and then when he arrived knocked on the door and waited. It took a while but eventually a man opened the door. The reaction he had on his face was surprise and then it seems that a weight was lifted off his shoulders. "So she was right you did make it back, I was hoping that you would have arrived sooner but I'll be the last to complain about it."

Clearly something had happened between this man and Anna unfortunately Mike knew nothing about it. "I'm sorry but, I'm not sure what you are referring too. Turns out that Anna is very sick and

was unable to explain much of anything. I'm assuming you need these?" He lifted his hands showing the medicine.

The man nodded, "Yes I do, my wife is now sick and well we can't use the priest help. Come in and let me explain."

The husband went over everything he had told Anna after Mike had gone over the details of how to use the medicine and him taking the time to apply it to his wife. Mike promised to bring some more tomorrow morning as soon as he could and then made his way back to Jane's house in order to finally get some rest.

The next day Mike first made the rounds and started with Anna who had seemed worse off the previous day. To his surprise she seemed to be bouncing back quickly, and was even able to realise that he had come in her room. "...Hey..."

He gave her a small smile, "You are looking much better, that's amazing."

"I don't really feel that good."

He chuckled, "Well you are about to feel worse as you need to take this." He pointed to a vile with liquid in it. "Its taste is really bad from what I have seen."

"...Fantastic."

She allows him to pour the liquid in and then it took everything she had not to simply spit it out. Anna then coughed for a bit, "Good lord that is rancid are you sure you did it right?" He simply nodded and tried not to laugh. She looked at the extra pot of water that he had used yesterday to try and convince her to swallow. "Can I get something to drink to try and wash it off?"

He gave her a glass and she drank it, from her reactions it helped very little. He then wiped her up and then started to leave the room, "Just rest for now okay." She said nothing as he left and did the

same to Jane. She was still out of it but looked better; he figured this was normal and that she would possibly heal slower than Anna due to her age. At least that's what he hoped was the issue.

Remembering his promise he made his way to the inn and gave enough medicine for the day. Anna had somehow prepared a lot and while he had done some as well given how things are going he would probably spend his afternoon finishing up all that he could from what was left.

After taking the husband's offer for a quick bite, Mike was headed back as he noticed someone else that he had not expected to bump into, the priest. It seemed like he was heading somewhere, Mike tried to catch up. "Hi there, I take it that you are really busy these days?"

The priest smiled but then it disappeared quickly, "You would think but I will be leaving soon as it seems that I can no longer help these people."

This surprised Mike, from what the man at the inn had told him there should still be a lot of others that are sick. Was it possible that he had healed them all already? "Meaning that the town is okay now?"

The priest slowly nodded his head, "I wish I could agree but no. Unfortunately there are no more families that can pay for my services anymore. The town leader has convinced me to stay an extra day after today in case someone changes their minds but after that I will have to leave. I will report this to the Order and if it's decided that help will be sent to this place then it's possible I return but this is all I can do."

His answer frustrated Mike and he could only imagine how Anna would react to the news. "Can't something be done?"

Once again the priest nodded, "I can't, and already I stepped over what I'm allowed to do when

I first arrived in order to help out." He then pointed to his small lantern, "Also there is only so much that I can do, if not for this I could probably not have done as much as I already have."

Mike was confused, "How does that help you out?"

"It gives off an odour that helps me focus my holy powers, I'm sure you can imagine how useful that has been in the last few days."

That was easy to imagine and yet odd at the same time, catching on to Mike's reaction the priest quickly added. "It's a family earldom that is passed around to the eldest priest of my family." He then stopped in front of a house, "Well this is where I'm supposed to be, take care and hope that this illness does not affect you as well."

Mike nodded and made his way to Jane's as the priest made his way in the house. From afar Mike could see that he had turned on the lantern that he had mentioned and from the reaction the smell looked pretty bad. He was too far himself to smell it and he had no intention too as there was a lot of work ahead of him and already.

When he got there he was mildly surprised to see someone sitting at the kitchen table. "I thought I told you to rest?"

She briefly smiled at him, "I am, I'm not planning on moving much so don't worry. It's just that I was trusty for some cold water and you were not around. I take it that you got my note about the inn's wife?"

Mike sat down next to her and picked up the piece of paper and showed her what it looked like, "Kinda got your message. Really the only thing I could read is 'inn' and everything else did not make much sense."

"Well I'm just stunned that was able to put that down at all, I was pretty out of it by then."

Mike then had a concerned look, "Why did you push yourself so much? Not because of what I asked right?"

Anna slowly nodded, "No, I got the information from Jane, prepared as much as I could and then took a nap. When I woke up I swear I felt fine, so I decided to get some information like you asked and then learned about the inn's family situation. At the end of that it hit me hard, it took all I had to leave you the instructions like I did." She then broke eye contact and glanced around, "Ah, how are they by the way?"

Mike was wondering on her concern. "Seems that the wife is doing better, she is not recovering as quickly as you are but she is recovering."

She now had a guilty look on her face, "No one else got... ill?"

Mike suddenly understood, "No you did not infect anyone from the looks of it. I can for sure confirm that and I'm thinking maybe not anywhere else as well."

It was easy to see that she was relieved by that but then she thought about it some more, "Did you figure out something?"

Mike took a deep breath, "I'm not sure yet I still need to think it over. I know you will be a bit annoyed by this but for now please gets some rest and then I can talk to you about it when I've had time to go over it myself."

Anna slowly nodded, "Fine, I'm just glad that I did not unintentionally cause harm." When she saw that Mike was holding back a chuckle she was puzzled, "Something funny about that?"

He smiled, "No, not at all. It just makes you more normal. So far it seems that you have made no wrong steps, sad to say but part of me is happy that I can be of help to you as you are to me here and there."

She somehow managed a half smile, "Funny I never looked at it that way at all but don't worry I'm sure I'll stumble here and there, same as you. But we will be there to catch each other right?"

Mike nodded in agreement and stood as he saw that she was doing the same, "Good, now on the topic of help. Help me up to my room and if you can bring me something light to eat later on. I think that I want to try my hand at food if I can."

He helped her up the stairs, "No problems at all."

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The next day Mike had finished up taking care of Jane. Now she was more or less fully aware, which was great news. He was about to knock on Anna's room before entering when he heard a noise.

"You can just come in."

Mildly surprised he opened the door to find Anna finishing up getting dressed. "I take it that you are feeling much better today?"

She smiled at him, "Don't worry I'm not going to overdo it at all. But I do feel well enough to leave the room and maybe get some air if I can."

Mike felt that this argument about her health had gone back and forth way too much over the last few days. He sighed, "You do look pretty good today so I'll let it go." She gave him a look that gave him the impression that even if he had not that it would have mattered little. Now fully resigned to the idea of her walking around he figured that he would take advantage of it.

"Seeing as you will be up then, do you mind taking care of Jane for this morning? She is fully aware when she is awake now and also told me that she would like to try a little something today."

Anna nodded, "Sure that's not a problem, but where will you be then?"

As he turned to leave the room he answered her, "I still need to deliver the medicine to the inn that was prepared yesterday. Plus there is a little something I would like to keep investigating if I can."

She chuckled, "Does it have to do with that mysterious idea that you keep telling me that you will tell me about but never do when the time come?"

She simply saw him wave as he made his way down the stairs. "That man needs to learn to share his ideas. Oh well it's not like that's a new thing." She then paused for a bit, there were a few times where he had opened up more when it came to these things but only when she had pushed. She wondered if she needed to do the same things again and then wondered if that's what she was going to have to keep doing every other time in the future. "God I hope not, that will be exhausting..."

She made her way downstairs and noticed that Mike had already left. After quickly checking up on Jane to see that she had gone back to sleep, Anna made her way outside to take in some fresh air on the front patio. It was a bit cold, which she assumed she felt like that because she was still a bit under the weather. Still it was nice and refreshing and the sun helped warm her up.

After spending a bit of time recharging outside Anna figured that she would help clean up the left over mess that got created from both of them creating those vials and compresses. Anna saw that he had already started that process but had not finished. After that she figured that starting that meal that Jane had asked about would be a good idea. The meal in question was a soup which mostly had broth and a few pieces of noodles and some small pieces of vegetables.

All this took a while but the timing was good

as when the soup was finished Jane had woken up. She had about half a boll but that was better than nothing. Anna on the other hand had two helping of it, seems that her apatite was slowly returning. After everything she was feeling a bit tired and in the spirit of taking it easy she figured that she would sit in Jane's rocking chair and relax a bit.

Not realising what time it was she suddenly woke up after hearing a noise on the patio outside. Anna looked around, "It's a bit later than midday, I guess I fell asleep..." She stood and looked around some more, "Still not back?" She peeked outside to see a person sitting on the patio. "Figures..."

After a short while Anna made her way outside and sat next to Mike who still seemed deep in thought. "So are you finally going to tell me?"

Breaking his current thought pattern Mike wondered if he should as he still was not convinced. He took a deep breath and then mentally convinced himself. "Okay, so this sickness, you got it and so did Jane but obviously I did not."

Anna shrugged, looks like he was not going to outright say it after all, "Sure that can happen."

He nodded, "Your right it can, but also where did this start? And how did it catch on so quickly if someone like me and the husband at the inn has yet to contract it?" He paused for a bit, then was about to say something before he stopped. After a while he continued, "Lest just say I've been trying to figure out an answer to those questions without any luck."

Anna though about what he had said but also on what he had not said, he had purposefully left out a piece why and what. It only took a little while and then she understood, "You think that the priest is the cause, but can't prove it? Okay I can

see where that would be a touchy thing to talk about but why are you on eggshells around me about it?"

He hesitated, "If I'm wrong... there could be really bad consequences for us."

She started to understand his reasoning, "Yea having the Order after us right out of the gate would be a really bad move so I understand double checking your facts before hand but still... was it because I was sick and you wanted me to focus on that?"

"There is a piece of truth there yes, but I also was really not sure. My mind is telling me that this is obviously the case for some reason, but I'm not sure everyone else will see it that way and I was worried that if I told you that you would be on board and if it backfired... well..."

She cut him off, "That it would be your fault? Please..." She looked directly in his eyes, "Look at me, do I look like the type of person that would follow along and when things went bad started to blame you for the actions that I agreed to do?"

"... No."

She then smiled, "Then stop thinking that way." She then nodded, "Right so you think the priest is the cause, why is that?"

A small smile appeared on his face and then he started his explanation. Anna listened and had to agree that it was very convincing but she also feared the same thing he did, would others who revered the help priests gave them see it that way? That was the overall issue with all this.

After everything was said there was a large moment of silence. The question on both their heads was should they act on this or simply let it go. Anna then suddenly broke the silence by taking in a large breath. "FINE let's do this..." She then looked at him, "You said that he would be leaving

tomorrow morning so there is still time. Just in case things go bad, let's pack things up here. Jane is feeling better, there is enough medicine ready so that someone else could take care of her if need be, plus the house repairs are finished as promised so there is really nothing holding us back from leaving if we need to." She then paused for a moment, "Still if we can let's not start something too big."

Mike smiled, "You're amazing you know that."

She then chuckled, "I think I just need to learn to butt out. I wonder if that will ever happen."

Mike simply shook his head not knowing what to answer.

It took a little while to get things but finally the two made their way to the house that the priest had been staying at. Turns out that the house in question was the house of the town's elder which they assumed made things easier and also more dangerous at the same time.

They knocked at the door and an older lady answered. "Can I help you?"

Mike nodded, "We are here to ask a few questions to the priest, would it be okay if we came inside?"

The lady nodded and let them inside to the kitchen where the priest and the elder were currently having some tea. "Please sit and let me pour you a cup while you talk."

The priest simply nodded as they nodded at him. He did not seem nervous or anything which did not help matters but also was not going to stop them as well. Mike looked him directly in his eyes, "I was wondering if I could get some information on this illness that suddenly started a few days ago. I was hoping that I could get your expert opinion on how you think this started and how it got to be everywhere so quickly?" He then quickly looked at Anna and then back at the priest, "Not being overly

knowledgeable in these matters we were wondering if you could help educate us."

There was a small pause and a bit of a twitch from the priest, it was small but it was there. "There are many ways that it could have happened, the most common and also most probable was that too many people came into contact with others that were infected."

Mike nodded at that comment, "Sure okay that makes sense and also what I was thinking but then I started asking around and it seems that a lot of people that were close to those sick did not actually get sick themselves. The same thing happened with me as I was in contact with a few that were ill and yet nothing."

The priest was about to answer something as Mike cut him off, "After talking to a lot of people that did get sick I realised that there was one thing that they all had contact with..."

At that the priest reacted but then quickly changed his facial expression to anger, it's then that the wife of the elder looked at Mike and was about to say something but then the elder grabbed her hand and then looked at the priest and then Mike. "Now now, I'm sure that there is an explanation for this and I'm also sure that this gentleman is not implying what you are thinking."

The priest was still angry but was also a bit twitchy and was also glancing at the door ahead; Mike was convinced that he was right as the priest pointed his finger at him. "I think he is implying that I am the cause of this. Now I will let this go as clearly after failing to be Crimsons you are trying to prove your worth, but if I hear any more of this I will be forced to bring you to the Order myself for punishment."

Mike quickly looked at Anna who in turned simply nodded, he then looked back to the priest.

"I think that there is a bit of confusion here, we did not fail at any tests in order to become Crimson. We were asked to leave, true, but we were not forced to nor were we kicked out. Heck even when we left the Commander of the Crimson even gave us a parting gift." It was easy to see that the priest was getting more and more nervous as Mike continued, "So yes, it's correct to say that we are not Crimson but again we did not fail at anything, and could in theory return." Anna held back on that comment, while it was true it would probably not be a good idea. "If you wish we can contact the Crimson and you can contact the Order and we can figure this out..."

It's at that point that the door to the house suddenly opened and the two guards stepped in the house followed by two other priests. Everyone was stunned, the timing of their appearance after Mike's comment was interesting but what was more interesting was the look of fear in the priest still next to them.

"Sorry to intrude elder but there are two unexpected guests that need to talk to you as soon as..."

The guard was interrupted as the fearful priest reacted by casting a spell. The spell pushed the table away knocking the elder, his wife, Anna and Mike to the ground. The two new priests started casting as well; they attacked the now obvious culprit with glowing bolts. These bolts made it close to him but then hit an invisible barrier and then disappeared.

Mike was now on his knees. Anna was still trying to get ready herself; her sickness was not helping her at all. The elder and his wife had sadly suffered the brunt of the attack as the splinters and the table itself had injured them. Mike was stunned that they were still fighting in the house

with people getting injured because of it. He reached for his blade and then suddenly cursed as it was not at his side, they had agreed to leave their weapons as to not appear as threatening. Because of that Mike grabbed the first thing he saw, which was a broken leg of a chair, and charged at the priest that was still defending himself from the others.

As he got close he then felt the priest made some gestures at him and then than Mike stopped as it felt like he had charged at an invisible wall. The force made him drop his makeshift weapon and made him lose balance, before he could get it back another force pushed him back and then he slammed on the wall of the house and dropped to the ground.

When this happened, the other two priests prepared more attacks with glowing white bolts aimed at the guilty priest but this time with more power behind them. He had barely enough time to block one with a shield but not the other as it hit him on his shoulder. The shock stunned him and while that was happening two more new bolts made their way to him and both connected. When they did the priest fell to the ground unconscious.

The two guards took their position around the unconscious priest while the other two tended to the wounded. "We are sorry that you got hurt over this; let us heal your wounds because of it."

The elder smiled in thanks, "Your timing was perfect but I have to wonder if this also means that this priest was in fact behind this illness of ours."

Shame came across the faces of both priests that were now healing their wounds. "It saddens us to say yes it is. We have been trying to find this person for a while now and set a trap by lacing some gold of some of the towns around here with magic. This was the third town that the magic led

us and the previous town was also infected with an illness."

Anna looked at both the priests, "It's good that this matter can be closed but what now, and also what about all the people that are still infected?" Mike, still sitting on the ground trying to regain his bearing cut in, "Also what about the money everyone paid him for his magic?"

The priest took a moment to think it over, that alone was not encouraging, but eventually one of them started to answer the questions. "Well we will bring this traitor to the Order where he will be punished for his crimes. As for the money as mentioned he has been doing this for a few towns now and it will take time to figure out who the money should be given to, but still once we do we will give it back. As for those still sick..." There was an uncomfortable pause and then Anna cut in, "You can't just leave them all like this, can you?"

As the priest once again looked at each other deep in thought it was clear to see the confusion on both Mike and Anna face. Confusion that was quickly turning into disappointment the more time went on. Finally it seemed that both priest came to an inner conclusion, "We will do what we can to help out those that have been affected."

Anna and everyone else smiled at their comment.

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A few days had passed and the priests had now left taking with them the traitor to the Order. In the end they had managed to heal everyone that had fallen ill. The money aspect was a bit unfortunate but at the same time understandable. Things were now returning to normal and generally everyone was very please about that. Currently Anna and Mike were enjoying themselves by

lazing on a hill top overlooking the town.

Anna took a deep breath and stretched out her arms, "Ahhhh it feels good to feel good again."

Mike smiled, "I bet I can't remember the last time I saw you that sick."

"Being stuck in bed is not my thing, I'm okay to relax here and there but I'm not a fan of being forced to do so."

He chuckled a bit, "Yea I noticed that." He then felt a small jab on his shoulder.

"Anyways, looks like things are back to normal here. No more unexpected attacks or unwanted visitors." She took a moment to look at the first town that they had stopped by on their probably long journey. "You know I'm happy that we stopped here and where able to do what we did."

Mike sat up and thought about it too, "I agree with that. We stopped some goblins from probably killing more innocent people, helped someone nice who in turn taught us some valuable skills and also helped with stopping a crooked priest. Which was very unexpected."

"Well we did not do much with the priest, I mean the others would have found him in time and during the fight it's not like we were that useful."

Mike shrugged, "But we did figure it out and if they had not shown up the results would have been the same, in a fashion. So I'll still take it as a win for our book."

Anna smiled, "Sure thing." She then turned to him, "By the way, our book? How many chapters are you planning on adding on this book?"

He smiled back at her, "I told you already, tones. Heck it will be a series." He let a small chuckle escape before continuing, "I mean how can it not be with you always willing to help anyone in need."

Anna jabbed him again, but this time she put

a little bit more strength behind the blow. "You make it sound like I'm doing a bad thing."

Still rubbing his arm where the blow had landed he smiled, "Not at all. It's like you answered me way back when, it's the right thing to do."

She returned his smile and then she turned back and looked at the town. "Hmm, on that note of right thing to do, you think that now is a good time to pack up and see what's next?"

Mike also took a long look at Silva, the first town that he had ever seen outside of his original home. "Yea I think it is. We will let Jane know tonight and leave in the morning?"

Anna nodded, "Sounds like a plan."

Later that day while they finished the meal that Jane had prepared, she turned to them and smiled. "Your leaving soon I take it?"

Mike was surprised, "We plan on leaving tomorrow morning... how did you know?"

"The extra helping of food was an interesting indication, but I don't know, there is also something different about you two tonight and I just got this feeling. You know you don't need to go right away if you don't want to. I got news that my son and his family will be here sometime next week so if you wish to stay and relax a bit, I mean it's well earned."

Anna smiled, "It does sound nice and we do appreciate the offer but I think if we rest for that long we will start to rust."

Jane understood her meaning, "I suppose. Still tomorrow let me pack you some food and say proper goodbyes before you leave."

"Of course..."

The next day rapidly approached as they spent the night saying their goodbyes to a few of the town's folk. Extra time had been spent at the inn now that Sonia was healthy once again.

When the morning arrived, Jane greeted them on her front patio and gave them a large bag of supplies. She then reached out and gave Anna a large hug. "Do take care, both of you." Anna smiled and returned the hug, "Thanks and you as well, hope you enjoy your time with your son and his family."

"I will thanks." She then turned to Mike and extended her arms. Anna watched and laughed a bit as Mike accepted the hug in a clumsy way as that had not been expected. "Don't let her throw you in too many wild situations." Mike looked at Anna who had a bit of a coy smile on her face, he then turned back to Jane, "I'm not sure I'll be able to do that actually, but ... I'll try, I guess..." At that both Jane and Anna laughed.

As they parted ways they waved at Jane and then at others that were setting up early on the main road of Silva, finally to give one final wave at one of the guards that was on duty at the entrance.

After a bit of walking Mike looked at Anna.

"So, where too next?"

She thought about it, "Well south lead us to the river that leads us to the farm lands and north lead us to someplace magical from what I heard."

Mike wondered at what she was referring to.

"You mean the city where all the mages live? Are we allowed to go there?"

Anna shrugged and smiled, "No clue, let's find out."

Mike returned her smile, "...North it is then."

## Chapter 3

A few days of walking on the main road in the forest had passed. Pretty soon the two would arrive near the clearing that linked up to a large plain that would finally lead them to the town of Newport. They had no clue how or if they could get into Astrum, the magical city, but Newport was the closes stop to that location so they figured that asking there would be a good first step.

Mike turned to Anna as they kept walking, "Mind if I ask a question?"

"Sure."

"Any particular reason you wanted to see the magical city over the farm lands?"

Anna chuckled mildly, "You waited that long to ask that one?"

Mike shrugged, "Not really, just had a lot of time to think and I realised that I never asked."

"Okay, well to answer the question, no real reason. I guess if anything I was impressed when I saw holy magic in action and that made me wonder about arcane. Does it work the same? What can it do that holy can't, and so on." She then took a moment to recall the event, "I mean you really should have seen it, one second that little girl was suffering and the next she was fine. It was really impressive."

Mike had missed that part but had seen the attack spell and also the defence one that had been used between the priests and he had to admit that it was pretty impressive to see glowing bolts being created from their hands and then going in the direction that they ordered it to. While he had lived

in the Crimson town they had never seen any magic caster, holy or arcane, so all this was a pretty big eye opener for the both of them.

Anna then smiled, "Plus you never know, maybe if we learn more about it we can see if we can cast magic as well." A stunned look then appeared on Mike's face as that thought had never occurred to him. Seeing his reaction she then continued, "Sure holy would be nice but I don't think that I would last long in the Order if what I've seen is any indication. Still that makes me wonder if arcane is the same and if not what the criteria for joining are?" She then looked at him, "It does sound interesting...right?"

Mike nodded back, "I can't say that it would not be practical that's for sure and yes now that you mentioned it I am interested to know."

Anna nodded as she turned and looked ahead again, "And that's why I suggested it. It may pan out to nothing but I don't see the harm in taking the time to try out."

"No I agree with you, and at worst we learn more about something we know nothing about and there is rarely anything wrong about that."

After a few more minutes of walking the two slowed down as something up ahead was finally visible.

"...Seems like a caravan got attacked up ahead."

Mike squinted, "It also seems that there is a person moving around. Should we take the time to investigate?" Anna simply gave him a half smile as a response. "I guess we stop then."

It only took a few more minutes of walking for them to get more information on the situation. Anna had been right, a caravan had been attacked. There were bodies lying around and the caravan itself was very damaged. As for the person he

seems preoccupied with the wreckage and was paying them little attention.

When they were finally in earshot Mike raised his hand, "Hi we are traveling sell-swords. Do you need a hand with anything?"

It's than that the man stopped what he was doing and looked at the two approaching him. He looked to be in his early thirties, he had a brown beard with nicely cut matching hair. He was equipped with a staff with a red orb on the top, and for his armor he had none. He had a long royal blue cloak with a white robe and nothing else. This seemed odd for Mike, he figured that he relied on his magic to protect himself. The other thing that was odd was the fact that the man was chuckling as they got closer.

"I must say that you two must be pretty brave."

Mike looked at Anna who seemed as puzzled as he was and then turned back to the man, "Why do you say that?"

"You just simply walked in and announced that you are all alone, while in a city or town that would be fine but in a situation like this." He then looked at the dead bodies and then the damaged caravan and then continued, "What if I was here to make sure that no one was supposed to see this?"

Clearly the treat was an empty one; if that was the case he would have simply started casting at them instead of taking the time to explain as he had. Still that did not stop Mike from being stunned by his comment. When he turned to Anna, she was simply chuckling herself, probably laughing at his reaction he figured.

Then the man started to rub his beard, "Still, sell-swords you say and yet you are dressed as Crimsons? I take it that there is a story there."

Seeing as Mike as still looking uncomfortable,

Anna answered his question. "There is, it's a bit of a long one and one that will have to wait. As you pointed out there are more pressing matters given our surrounding, do you know what happened here?"

The man looked around, "Not really I recently arrived myself. From the looks of it this caravan was attacked by bandits I think, or at least given the damage a group that attacks with swords so I'm assuming bandits. They also took all the things that were not damaged and left the rest backing up that assumption." He then turned to both of them, "I'm trying to recover something that this caravan was carrying. Luckily it's not in the damaged goods, but unfortunately that probably means that whoever did this took it with them."

Mike studied the wounds on the bodies and also the damage to the caravan, after a short while he agreed with the conclusion of the man. "Are you planning on tracking these people?"

The man thought about it for a moment, "That's what I was wondering on when you arrived. I think that I will, I need to recover that item as it could be very important to the future."

This made Anna wonder about the item in question but she was also concerned about the potential bandits attacking defenceless caravans. "If you want we can help you with that."

That question seemed to set off the man in deep thought. In a way it reminded her of Mike when you could sometimes see him mentally figuring out the pro's and con's of something. There was a long pause and the man was still thinking about it. Anna then raised both hands to get his attention, "Look if you don't need the help it's all good as well, I just figured I would ask in case you needed it stopping these people as you recovered your item. As long as they get stopped by

someone, that's all that matters to me."

Her comment seemed to send him more into deep thoughts, but this time around he seemed to have reached an answer. "I was told that I should have brought help with me before I left but I did not think that it would be necessary. Now I'm wondering if I should rethink that given the current situation. I will warn you that if you follow me on this it could be very dangerous."

Mike looked at Anna who simply nodded. "We assumed that and are willing to take the risk if you are as well."

The man thought about it again and then after a while reached out his open hand, "Okay then let's see where this takes us. My name is William and as you probably figured out I'm a mage of Astrum."

Both of them nodded and grabbed his hand. "I'm Mike and this is Anna and as I mentioned before we are traveling sell-swords, nice to meet you William."

Anna then made her way to the other side of the caravan and saw tracks leading to the forest, "Should we start tracking them now or do you need to prepare for anything before we do?"

William took another look around, "No let's head out now, the quicker I find the items the better. Once we get a chance I'll send something to Newport to inform them of what happened here so that the bodies can be taken care of."

Anna nodded and then turned to Mike, "Shall I take the lead?" Mike looked at William and then back at Anna, "Sure why not, I'll stay close to William then." With that Anna headed in the forest with the other two following her a few meters from behind.

They had been following the tracks for a while now, from those tracks they had figured out that

the group was about five or six and where in fact humans. It was assumed that with William's magic they should get over the disadvantage in numbers. The issue in the back of Mike's head was if they could trust this person so easily given the lesson that they had learned from the priest in Silva.

Still looking at Anna up ahead Mike figured that maybe he should try and get information from their new traveling partner to help with that small nagging feeling. "If you don't mind me asking, what is this item that you are looking for?"

"It's a book."

This puzzled Mike for a few second, "...A book? I take it that it's magical in nature then?"

William chuckled mildly, "Not so much, no. The book was written by a mage that had some interesting theories on how to cast magic. It's more theory than anything; there should be nothing magical about it." Seeing that Mike was more puzzled he explained more, "The way you cast a spell has been the same since elves first casted the first spell. There is nothing wrong with that but it does create limitations. This book may help to find ways around those limitations; at least that's what the mage that wrote it was boasting about."

"Okay I think I can see why that would be important but all this due to some mage's boasting?"

"Well it was actually confirmed that he had managed somehow."

This answer confused Mike, "If that is the case why send only one person after it? Or better yet why transport it using a regular caravan?"

William nodded, "Good questions. The main reason why, is that while this mage's finding could change everything it could also change nothing. What he found is impressive but was also figured out by others before him, the issue with that was

that the cost was always impossible to pay on an ongoing basis. At this point in time most people have stopped caring about it and have resolved themselves into thinking that there is no way around the problem. Still this time may be different and because of it I have been sent to verify this."

The story given did seem to make logical sense to Mike a bit more; it still did not tell him everything but did help put some pieces together. While thinking about it William then looked at Mike, "So given the road that you where on, I take it that you where heading to Newport? Mind if I ask why two Crimson's, now sell-sword would head there?"

This time it was Mike that mildly chuckled. "For the Crimson part we were asked to leave due to a difference of opinion between the Crimson's. Given our skill set becoming sell-swords seem to make sense. Then after encountering magic for the first time we got curious and figured that we would learn more and what is the best place for that."

William nodded, "The magical city of Astrum of course."

"Yes, now seeing as we don't know how to get into that magically floating city we figured that we would stop at the town next to it and get the information we need." He then paused for a second to look at William, "...being a mage yourself I take it that you could answer that one?"

William nodded again, "That I could but it's not that simple I'm sorry to say. As you said that place is the best place to learn magic, there is no other in this world so its secrets are kept very securely as you can imagine." This created a look of disappointment in Mike's face, something William had seen all too often. "When this is over we can talk more about, its best if I explain to both of you together..."

William then stopped talking and walking as Mike moved his arm in front of him, signalling him to stop as he did so himself. "Anna is slowing down, she may have found something, let's wait here for her signal."

This time it was William that was confused, he looked ahead but without using magic could not tell how Mike knew this. "How can you tell?"

Mike simply smiled as they both saw Anna return slowly back to where they both were standing.

"It seems that I've run into a dead end of sorts, plus there is a small group of two coming our way."

William wondered if now would be the time to take the tracking lead using his magic, "I can probably help find more track seeing as..." Anna then cut in, "It's not that there are no more tracks to find it's that there are now too many, it's like this place is often marched around by people."

Mike then nodded, "I see, so you are thinking that the two coming our way is a small patrol then and that we have just stumbled on their route. That would also imply a camp of sorts and way more than five or six possible bandits."

William did not like where this way of thinking was going. The idea was to get the book and head back; they had figured that a simple troop of bandits had ambushed the caravan when it had not returned when it was supposed to. This complicated thing in a way that he did not want it to be, "I think we need more information, if there really is a camp then we need to know about its location. I can get that information using magic but I will need at least one of the bandits alive in order to do so."

Anna looked at Mike and shrugged, two volunteers were coming their way so it would be something that could be done and getting this

information would help them figure out what they were walking into.

Mike nodded and looked at William, "We will go and stop those two bandits, can you stay here and defend yourself with magic if need be?"

"I can but if you don't mind I'll instead use magic to hide myself if the goal is defence only, if I use my attack spell it could attract a lot of attention of other patrols that maybe nearby if that is what these two are."

That made perfect sense to both Mike and Anna. William then proceeded in casting a spell that rendered him invisible, when he completely disappeared Mike turned to Anna. "I know you will not like it but can you take the lead on this one and I'll take them from behind?"

Anna released a deep sigh and then started to look for some kind of branch she could use as a weapon. Going head first did not bother her at all but the reason behind it did. The patrol was two and they needed to get close before they could potentially sound an alarm, in order to do that they needed to look less threatening and the best way to do that was if she attacked them by herself. This gender difference was something that the Crimson's trainers often warned everyone about, skill is what really matters not gender or age for that matter. What was truly stupid about that was that they had always underestimated her because of her outsider status, how could an outsider match a pure Crimson? In their heads it was impossible. This had frustrated Anna to no ends back then and in a way still did even if the reasoning behind it was a bit different.

Still there were ways to help with that frustration. "I get it, its fine. I'll do my part and you do yours." With that Mike nodded and they split up.

It did not take long for Anna to reach the patrol. They were armed with long swords and armored with leather armor. In her head Anna understood their puzzled look on their face as she charged at them with the stick that she had found.

Feeling falsely secure about their incoming enemy, one of the member of the patrol stood back as the other prepared an overhead swing against Anna. She almost wanted to laugh at their stupidity but instead felt a sense of confidence that the first part of the plan had worked perfectly, now it was time to execute the second part.

As Anna got closer the bandit started his swing, when he did Anna countered with all her strength but not at the bandit but at the long sword he was holding. His blade was double edge so when Anna makeshift club connected with it the club broke, but the blow itself did have enough strength to knock his weapon away. Desperate to not lose his weapon the bandit held on to it with dear life and somehow managed but in doing so left himself completely open. Seeing as her weapon was half of what it once was, Anna was able to easily flip its momentum from a right sided arc to a frontal thrust. While the bandit saw the wooden stick aimed at his throat there was little he could do to stop it.

Seeing as they wanted them alive, Anna pulled her strength back with that attack but it was enough of a hit for the bandit to start chocking. As expected he dropped his weapon, that only seconds ago he had sacrificed his defensive stand for, and reached for his throat. When he did Anna made a fist and hit him on the back of the head.

When the blow to the throat of his companion hit the other guard was reaching for a horn of sort but before he could bring it to his lips a hand covered his mouth and nose. The bandit started to

panic as his head was pulled back and he felt an arm wrap around his neck. When it was securely in place the hand holding on to his mouth moved away, somewhat able to breathe again the bandit felt less panicked but that was short lived as a massive wave of dizziness fell upon him. It only took seconds and then he fell to the ground unconscious.

Anna looked at Mike, "That was a nice trick."

He smiled, "Yes it was thought in advance hand to hand training that..." He then paused and his smile disappeared as he continued, "...Was offered to some of the students." Anna then understood very well why she had no knowledge of this, as this special training had probably not been offered to her considering her origin. Suddenly she was once again glad that this part of her life was finally over and that she would probably not have to deal with Crimsons ever again.

William then suddenly appeared, "Brilliantly done."

"Will it matter that they are unconscious, we forgot to ask beforehand."

William slowly nodded as he positioned himself on top of one of the bandits, "Normally yes but they have just fallen so it should matter little if I cast the spell now." Before any other question or comments could be asked, William did just that.

The spell it seems was an array of words that both Mike and Anna could not understand. Once it was done his hand glowed with a bit of blue and then he reached and touched the head of the first bandit. Once the physical connection happened William closed his eyes and focused. After about a minute the process was repeated on the other bandit.

"It seems that your assumption was correct, these bandits were on patrol and there is a large

camp up ahead. It's about thirty minutes distance from where we are."

Mike had a concerned look on his face, a large bandit camp could be an issue for just the three of them. "Are there any other details that you can share about the camp?"

William nodded with a sad look on his face, "Not really, I could only see many different faces that these two often talk to when they have the time. Nothing on exact numbers, but at least a good fifteen different faces showed up between the two of them."

These numbers were not encouraging. Anna then started to tie the bandit up and make sure that they would be out of commission for a while. "Well I say that we go to this base and see what we are up against, only then will we be able to make a proper judgment call on what our next step should be." She looked at the other two, "Does that sound like a plan?"

The both nodded in agreement and once the task of securing the patrol was done headed in the direction that William led them.

The path there had taken them a bit longer than thirty minutes as they had walked there at a slower pace in order to make sure that they did stumble onto another patrol. Once something that could be a camp was visible up ahead they all stopped.

William then looked at both of them and started to whisper. "I'll use my magic to scout the camp; there is little chance of me being detected by bandits alone. Once I have the information we need I will come back here and then we can go elsewhere to formulate a proper plan of action as Anna mentioned earlier."

He did not wait for them to answer as he started to cast the spell to turn him invisible, the

reality of the situation is that he was right and there was little argument that could be thought of against his plan.

After a while Anna got closer to Mike and started to whisper, "Beside the obvious you seems nervous about something."

He nodded, "I am, I wonder how much we can trust William. I have no real reason not too but..." Anna nodded as well understanding his concern. "In these cases you have to trust your gut on these things, what does yours tell you about him?"

He thought about it for a little while, "Hmm, you know how bad I am with that. Let's go with what yours it telling you instead." Anna smiled at that, "Mine is telling me that we should trust him. Sure he is probably hiding something but I think it has to do more about that item that he wants then any ulterior motives." She then shrugged, "At least that's what I get from him."

Mike then smiled, "Than I guess I'll follow on with that then."

It took a while longer for William to suddenly appear in front of them; already he had done this a few times but this time it had made both of them suddenly jump a bit. Somehow he had not only become invisible but also he had made no noise at all nor had he caused anything around him to move. Mike had no clue if their type of magic allowed them to heal wounds like the priests but it was easy to see that there were also big advantages to it as well even if it didn't.

"We need to talk; the camp is very large and has about a good thirty men in it. While it's not heavily guarded it does have numbers over us." He paused for a moment and then continued, "Look I will not force you to come with me, but I must get that book back. It will be easier with you, as much as I hate to ask you to participate in something like

this."

They both took a moment to think about it, the numbers where way too much for the both of them but it all really depended on what William was capable of, which they had little clue on. Anna then grabbed Mike shoulder and smiled at him. As she turned to face William he simply nodded in agreement. "We are with you William, but let think of a plan first and depending on its risks we can take it from there."

William smiled; while they still gave themselves an out to back away they were still willing to figure out something even with task ahead of them. Depending on how this went he would possibility have to re-evaluate the both of them. "Thank you, now lest move away and get a bit farther from the camp and plan and proper attack plan."

About half an hour had passed and a plan had been figured out. It relied heavily on William's magic but that was going to be a given considering the numbers that where at play with this attack. Currently the three where hiding as best as they could in front of the main entrance of the camp while William prepared.

From what Mike was seeing things where as described earlier, the camp defences was created with two side walls that had been created using cut down trees around. There where gaps between each truck that had been places so it was not a perfect wall but it would slow down a large forces if need be. For extra defence two small towers like shapes had been put in place at the back of the camp. From their current position they could see that they held at least two people each armed with bows for each tower like positions, they would be the primary threat but they were for William to deal with.

For Mike and Anna their first target would be the two main guards at the front entrance of the camp. Slowly they unsheathed their swords to get ready. It only took a few seconds for them to feel the signal of an ongoing gust of wind coming from the back of them and with that they instantly charged at their targets.

The wind had been created magically to help out against the arrows during the initial moments of the battle, the spell would vary the strength of it randomly making it harder to actually hit the target the archers were aiming at. As Mike took aim for the one on the left, two arrows whizzed by and one of them got caught in his red cape. It was easy for him to see that its initial target was his side but with the magic at play it had harmlessly drifted away, the spell was working but as William had explained they had little time before it would stop so they had to act fast.

Mike was now close to his target that was in full defence, already he arc his sword to defend against Mike's incoming attack. Mike decided to let him have the block and as both swords collided a grin could be seen on the guard bandit. Before the bandit could realise what he had planned Mike took a step back and shifted his weight, with his full force he aimed his heel at the bandit's knee cap. A crack could be heard and then the bandit screamed. While he was distracted by his pain Mike spun around to give his overhead strike some momentum and beheaded the bandit.

The wind defence had not been as successful with Anna which had caused her to have to dodge a bit more which in turn had caused a lack in momentum in her charge attack that had been planned for the right bandit guard. Still it had caused the bandit to get a bit of extra confidence, which resulted in him dropping his defence and

trying for an overhead attack in order to overpower Anna's blow and strike her down at the same time. Seeing as her charge had failed Anna had move to a faint by looking imbalanced in her charge due to the arrows. That plan had been successful and when the bandit's blow came it only hit air as Anna had quickly moved out of the way. Before the bandit could realise what had happened, Anna pierced her sword through his chest.

With both guards gone the two joined in the middle, again what they saw was as William had described. A group of bandits where more or less on guard in the middle, while others on the side simply relaxed. Behind those you had a large tent with a caravan and horses next to it, sadly there was no way to know how many where inside even now.

As the attack was underway, the eight guards in the middle approached Mike and Anna blocking the way. From the sides, the others that where relaxing where now getting ready to join in on the attack, by the time that happened they would be part of the second wave of attacks.

Anna and Mike's job was now to block those eight giving time for William to get rid of the archers. There was little time left for the wind spell and given what was coming at them it was hard for the two not to be nervous about the situation, if William could not do his part than this would probably be the end of them.

As if sensing their concerns William approached the two, "Plenty of time..." He currently had two small balls of lightning in each hand. He threw one at each tower, as it landed close to the archers the lighting balls caused a small explosion that hit both of them. They both twitched for a few seconds and then fell from the makeshift tower to the ground.

The eight bandits were almost on top of both of them but then the second queue came as the wind spell died down. As William had wished both Mike and Anna moved away from the center and split up to try and attack the side of the incoming eight, leaving the middle to William. Two bandits on each side went for Anna and Mike, while the other four aimed at William.

Anna looked at the two coming at her, the one in front to the right had seemed a bit rushed compared to the one a few steps to the left behind him like he had been pushed in the direction he was going. Because of that his charge was imbalanced and so he would be her first target. She quickly switched her weapon to her left hand and performed a swing starting low in an upward arc to the left. The move confused the right bandit for a second which gave the planned opening to Anna as she sliced his lower leg cutting one of the main arteries. As the blood started the flow down the leg at a rapid pace the bandit dropped his attack and bent down in order to cover the wound with his hands. Not able to ignore the left target Anna continued her now lower powered upward swing to block the high horizontal attack. When the blades collided she made a fist with her free right hand and bashed on the back of the head of the right bandit that was unsuccessfully trying to cover his wound.

There was little strength that Anna could put using only her left hand, it seems that the attacker had realised this and was now gripping his pommel with both hands and forcing everything he had on trying to overpower Anna. There was no way that she would be able to hold but at the same time she never had any intention to even try. When Anna felt that the attacker had put enough strength and forward weight into pinning her down

she dropped the block and spun backward causing the bandit to lose balance and drop forward. When she finished her spin she pulled her blade down and hit him in his now defenceless back.

Of the two aimed at Mike the first one was clearly faster than the second, his blades was aimed in a way that would try and hit his left side but his eyes looked to his right shoulder. This told him that he was probably going to try and perform two quick strikes in order to wound him enough to slow his movements enough for the other one to possibly finish him off. It was a sound plan but also one that he had trained against a lot.

Mike planted himself where he was and grabbed his sword with both hands, when the attacker's quick blow came close Mike used as much strength as he could and aimed at the attacker weapon. Seeing as his weapon was only held with one hand as soon as both weapons connected the attacker's weapon flew away and at the same time it caused him to become unbalance. This unbalance caused two things, the first is that the second attacker that was right behind him needed to slow down and also arch his weapon away otherwise he would hit his own partner. The second was that a large opening to his mid section had now been created. Mike leaned down and tackled the bandit in square in the chest, which caused him to fully lose balance and land on the other bandit. As a reaction the bandit in the back took his free hand and caught him in order for him not to lose balance himself. Mike, still holding his sword with both hands, pulled back and then stabbed forward with a powerful thrust that pierced both of them in the chest with the one attack.

William had already started casting his other spell as soon as he had launched his lightning

balls at the archers. The group of four coming at him were all close enough and would soon be on top of him. The other two had followed his instruction and had stepped away to the side, now that the spell was ready and that he was confident that the other were outside of his area of effect William moved both hands together and created a cone shape in front of him.

A roar of fire then appeared in the middle of his hands. The bandits in front saw it and tried to move away but with the ones behind them it was impossible to move away as a large cone of flame originating from William's hands engulfed them all. As the enemies turned to ash William moved forward and then Anna and Mike moved to his sides. The second wave was now ready and was starting to charge at them in a group of three on each side; on top of this about ten had come out of the large tent in the far back which left a total of sixteen bandits to take care of.

Mike quickly looked around him, "Should we follow the same plan again?"

"Sounds like a plan... Wait what are they doing?"

Mike turned his attention away for a moment to look. "Well that's good news, seems that only two of them in the middle are sticking around and the others are moving to the caravan. I guess they will make a getaway using the back entrance."

Anna smiled at his comment and could feel William's frustration. "Good for us maybe but what if that item is in the caravan and not the tent?"

His eyes suddenly went wide. "That could be a problem, but we should still be able to find them after the fact. Still, this is your book William what do you want us to do? Do we take the chance?"

There was very little time for William too way the odds, "Go after it, I'll cover you and meet up

with you later. Do not lose that caravan."

Both of them disengaged and raced forward head on to the two bandits from the group that had stayed behind. The bandits moved to defend their position but because of the sudden change in tactics the defence was weak. Both Anna and Mike used their strength and momentums to each overpower one of the guards, their blows connect and caused a fatal wound. Not waiting to see if they would try and get up again they continued to the leftover horses that where still present.

Mike tried to mount the horse but somehow his presence made the horse nervous and caused him to have unexpected difficulties. Anna on the other hand, on her horse, was already on her way speeding towards the caravan.

"Tsk, seems she has a knack for animals as well I guess." Finally getting control on his horse Mike followed her. It only took a few seconds after he had left the camp that he heard screams coming from it. He looked back to see large fiery explosion come from the camp. This made him wonder if William had been holding back during the attack. Having no real time to think about it he looked ahead again and ordered his horse to go a bit faster, he needed to catch up.

By the time that he did Anna was getting close to the back of the caravan, it's then that she urged her horse to go faster as she noticed that there was something coming for the top of the caravan. From her angle it was impossible for her to see that a bandit was coming up a trap door equipped with a bow already with an arrow ready to fire.

Now the options opened to Mike was that he could warn her about it but then that would give her position or he could go with another plan. He took out his sword and pushed his horse to go faster.

"...Ahhhhhhrrrr!!!" He screamed as much as he could to attract the archer's attention and it worked as he turned at aimed at his position.

"Okay now what?"

Crimson training did teach you how to deal with arrows being aimed at you when you only had a sword. During this training they told you that there is very little you can do about it but pray that the enemy has lousy aim. Still while you are doing that you could also angle your sword in a way to cover your heart and ideally use your other arm to block your face. The last part was not something Mike could do as he was currently ridding bareback and had to use his other hand to help stay on the horse.

While he secretly prayed the arrow was let go and then he heard a 'ting' sound and then suddenly felt some pain on his left shoulder. He quickly looked to see that the arrow had ricochet off his sword and had grazed his left shoulder, the hit was mostly a surface wound which was a better result as originally it would have landed squared on his scapula. As the archer was loading another arrow to try for another hit his attention was distracted.

Anna was now next to the back of the caravan which was good but seeing as the horse could not go faster it was also as far as she would get. She then took her sword and then stabbed the caravan's side; once it was firmly planted she kicked off her horse and grabbed hold of as best as she could. While she was trying to get a better grip on anything in order to stay on the caravan she heard Mike cry her name. Anna then looked up to see a grinning archer with a bow and arrow pointed at her at near range.

There was little time for her to go over her options so she shifted her weight on the one hand,

still holding on to the sword's pommel, and reached out to the archer's hand holding the bow, when she grabbed hold she pulled back. If she would have had a better hold on her position Anna could have possibly gotten enough strength to completely pull the archer over, still the move had caused him to lose balance and now he was more worried about falling off than aiming arrows at her.

Dangling as she was Anna could feel herself slipping, she needed to grab hold of something now and the only thing around her was the archer. She once again reached out and firmly grabbed hold of him while letting go of her weapon. Then as the archer was now panicking she started climbing up the archer body using her feet and the pommel of her blade still stuck to the side of the caravan. Finally on the top she was now in a position to kick the archer off the roof of the caravan.

Anna looked around, reaching for her sword was now impossible, as for Mike he was having the same issue of catching up the caravan as she did. This made her next step clear as she moved forward a bit on the roof and aimed both legs at the head of the bandit holding the reins of the caravan. It only took one hit for him to drop and also drop the reins, from there the caravan's horse started to go wild.

Seeing as there was another bandit next to the driver Anna had assumed that he would have tried to grab hold of the reins, turns out she was wrong as he took out a dagger and started to aim in her direction. Anna started to move backward as she then realised that another bandit was now climbing up on the roof from the inside.

"This is not the best position to be in..."

"...Jump..." As Anna heard Mike she thought that he was crazy. Sure the caravan had slowed down a bit but jumping would hurt a lot. Still right

now you had one bandit in the front that was about to stab her legs and another from the back that was aiming his short sword at her head. Out of options she rolled to the side and then jumped off.

After a few seconds of free falling something broke her fall but it was not the ground or a tree, which she had been half expecting, but Mike's body. "You caught me!?"

Mike had wanted to laugh at her surprised comment but right now he was trying to hold on to dear life to the horse's main in order not to fall off. Mike tried to grip more tightly but that simply infuriated the horse and he started to buckle even more. That was all it took for him to lose balance and for Anna and him to fall off.

When the ground broke their fall they also heard a large crash from in front of them. Anna moved away as she was currently still on top of him, "Are you okay?"

"Nothing feels broken or sprain, I think I'm mostly bruised. Which considering what just happened is probably the best outcome."

Now standing she looked at the caravan ahead who without a driver had been knocked out by a tree as the horses had tried to avoid it by going in separate ways. The horses seemed fine but the caravan and the people in it was a different matter. "Well we are still in one piece and we stopped the caravan so I would agree with that." From the looks of it there were still four bandits to take care of as they tried to get their bearings as they crawled out from inside of the broken caravan.

Mike was now standing as well, "Seems like it, still we need to strike now. Do you have your weapon?"

Anna nodded and pointed at the debris, "It's in there somewhere."

"Fine I'll take the lead then." Mike charged in a thrust manoeuvre that impaled his sword in one of the targets that was standing, he then quickly pulled out and stabbed downwards at another close by that was still on the ground. While there was only two left it seems that they had recovered and one of them already had an overhead swing aimed at Mike's head.

Before the blow could land Anna turned and squeezed in between them. As she did she grabbed hold of the bandit arm and pull to the side as she bent forward. The bandit missed his target and flipped over her to land on the ground. Anna went in a kneeling position and raised her fist and hit the bandit square on his face to knock him out.

While her back was turned to him the final bandit stabbed his sword forward in order to impale Anna but as had happen to his partner the strike never landed as the sword from Mike deflected it with an upwards swing. The final bandit was now open and Mike finished him off with a strike to his chest.

Anna then recovered her sword from the wreckage, "You think William is okay after we left him all alone back there?"

Mike recalled the large fiery explosion, "...I think he will be okay and will join up with us soon, probably after he has confirmed that the book is not still in the camp."

Anna smiled, "Well let's check the wreckage in case it was in the caravan after all."

He nodded, "Sounds like a plan."

It had only taken a few minutes and then they both heard a familiar voice, "Great you managed to stop it. It has to be in there somewhere as it was nowhere to be found back at the camp."

Anna raised her hand that held a book with a greenish cover, it was battered but still in one

piece. "Is this it?"

William took it and started to inspect the item, shortly after a small smile appeared on his face.

"Yes you have found it, this is great news." He looked at both of them with the same smile still on his face. "Thanks to both of you for your help with this, now let's head to a more safe location so that I can take a look at this in more details."

Mike was glad that the mission was done but at the same time a bit puzzled, "What about the rest of the items, should something not be done about those?"

"Well the three of us can't simply carry all of them around so there is little that we can do, still have no worries about that." He paused and a bit of a mischievous grin appeared on his face, "Something has already been arranged with someone else."

His last comment had both of them wondering but after asking a few times and simply being ignored they finally had to drop the matter.

After a few hours they had setup a camp for the night. They figured that they would be far enough not to run into the patrols if there were still around, still while they were eating watch times had been set to keep someone on the alert while the others slept.

As they finished their food William picked up the book and rose to his feet. He had been focused on the book pretty much the whole time, while they knew nothing of its contents they still wondered if it was what he had been looking for as the more he read the more and more his smile disappeared to be replaced by a very frustrated look.

"I will need to go and think for a while on what I read in this to properly figure out my next steps." He then paused and looked at the two of them, as if evaluating them. "Not to be rude but I will want

to be alone for this, so I'll be stepping out of a while and come back when I am done."

Anna was worried and Mike seemed very hesitant, "Are you sure that's a good idea I mean we all agreed that there could be bandits around still..." William cut her off with a gesture, "There is no need for concern..." odd words were heard and then William disappeared and then they simply heard his voice, "And soon they will not even hear me, I will be fine. Please stay here until I come back."

Mike waited a while and then shook his head, "That person is very secretive."

Anna chuckled, "You will have to be able to let that go otherwise you will have issues in the future. Trust takes time and also it needs to be started by someone, so let's be the ones this time around that goes first."

"I guess, it's just that I get the feeling that he is hiding something pretty big for some reason."

She looked ahead and nodded, "Hmm, I get that too actually but I'm thinking that this thing has to do with magic and if that is the case..."

Mike had a disappointed smile as he continued her thought, "Given our current skill would probably not understand it unless explained. I guess you are right and will have to let it go."

Anna stood and then started to prepare a place for her to sleep. "There is no reason for us to question his intentions so far so let's keep going as we are and hope that he opens up more as we go." A thought then occurred to her, "That is assuming we keep going, I mean he has the book so we could be done here once he comes back."

Mike wondered on that one, as he very much doubted that would be the case considering William's reaction to the book as he read it. Still

time would tell if he was right or not.

William had only walked a few minutes away from the camp, what he was doing pained him as he knew that those two could probably be trusted but given everything at stake there was no way that he could take that chance. With his spell of invisibility still active and a few others to cloak him more from anything around he sat on the ground and started casting another spell.

'Lithius can you hear me? Did you get my request earlier?'

It took a while but then a response came inside William's head, 'I'm here...What should I call you?'

William smiled, 'My actual name will be fine. There is no one around powerful enough to listen in on this conversation.'

'That is good to hear Richard, as for your other question, yes I did get it. A troop will be on their way to get the remaining items that you left. Still we do wonder if anything will be left once we get there as it will take us some time this time around.'

'Have no fear, I've protected the items. I very much doubt that anyone would be able to move then that is not from Astrum.'

'Again good to hear, I suppose that only leaves one matter then. Did you find it?'

There was a bit of frustration that came over him, 'I did but there is an issue. The book is what we were looking for but at the same time it's not. While it was written by the mage and does detail some of his results the key points are missing, what is there is a map that was very hard to magically read pointing to where the next volume may be.'

'Hmm, that is a bit frustrating but does make me wonder if are you planning on following this

map, alone?'

Richard thought about it, '...I am. We need to know if what he could do is genuine. As for being alone, I've stumbled onto two others that have been very useful so far. They have great skill and I think will agree to follow me on this little quest.'

It took a while before the voice of Lithius responded, 'Are you sure about this? While you may trust them they are still strangers. If you do find out more information on this and they see it as well somehow there maybe issues, issues that the Council will need to go over.'

'I know but there is something about those two that is of interest to me and I want to see if I can confirm my thoughts on them posing as William. I should be fine.'

'If you say so... Still there is someone else that will not be pleased by the news.'

At that Richard smiled, 'How is my daughter doing?'

'Currently Alexandria is trying to poke at a shield that I put in place in Newport to warn me if she tried to follow you. She is very tenacious and very creative; already she was able to pass some of my defences that I would have never expected her to be able to.'

This news concerned Richard, 'Ah Lithius you are planning on keeping her safe in my absence correct?'

'Of course, there is no need to worry, still considering her surprising level I see no reason why she can't keep showing me the cracks in my magical defences. No reason for only her to learn from this experience, already I have setup new defences for her to try out against.'

Before he left Richard wondered if his request would have been a bit frustrating for Lithius, now he was wondering if it was the opposite, which

meant that he was probably going to have a hard time when he came back. "Try not to be too hard on her, please. I know she wanted to join me on this one but there was no way that I could approve that. Plus considering she will be trying out for the Council test early next year I did not want to distract her from her studies.'

'I will do my best to remind her of that as I give her the news. I will also update the other members of the Council on your behalf.'

'Thanks you Lithius, and sorry for all the extra work, hopefully it will all be over soon.'

'It's alright; It is an interesting change in pace as always when it come to your daughter. Still take care Richard and come back soon.'

Richard stood up and took a deep breath, "Okay William time for the next step..."

The next morning Mike awoke and saw that William had made it back to camp probably during Anna's watch. As he awoke she waved him over, he cleared his head and then walked over to where the two were currently sitting. "Did something come up?"

Anna nodded, "Seems like William has a request." As Mike turned to him William started to explain.

"It seems that this book in question was only a partial answer to what I was looking for. Thankfully the book does detail where the other part is. The thing is that it will probably be dangerous and it is very far from here."

Mike jumped in before Anna could respond, "How far is far and also could you elaborate a bit more on the dangerous part?"

"Far is in the mountains to the south, essentially we will be crossing half the continent in order to get there. Now I will be using magic to move us to the closes place but we will need to

travel the rest ourselves, because of that I plan on making a quick stop to a city close to here in order to properly supply us. As for the dangers, I cannot say. This place will probably have defences that only a mage can deal with at the same time there could be defences that a mages cannot deal with and that is where your help would be needed. But I do realise the risk so the choice is yours."

Mike already knew what Anna was going to say, traveling to a lot of different places and at the same time helping someone that needed help was something that he had difficulty thinking that she would say no too. At the same time there was little reason for Mike to disagree with the request and so he simply nodded his head and smiled a bit.

Taking that cue Anna reached out her hand to William with a large smile on her face, "Looks like we will be joining you on this little treasure hunt."

William accepted the gesture, "Thanks for joining me." He found her smile and enthusiasm very intoxicating; it reminded him a lot of his daughter Alexandria. It sadden him that she had very little connection with anyone in Astrum, part of him wondered if he could introduce them to her somehow as he had a feeling that they would get along great. Mike had mentioned that they were interested in learning about magic so maybe something could be arranged. Still that would have to wait for now as they needed to prepare for the challenge ahead.

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They appeared in the middle of runes inscribed circle that was currently in what seemed to be a very busy place. Both of them looked around and where stunned at the amount of people buzzing around. This was the first time that they had seen this many people in one place. Another first where

all the shops that surrounded them, you had tones of armor and weapon smiths. If gear was not your priority then you had food stands as far as the eye could see, with different food some every day and other very exotic. This had to be what was described as a city.

William chuckled as he stared at the two that were simply trying to take it all in. "You may want to move away from the circle, at the same time try not to lose sight of me as we head to our destination."

They both did as instructed with some unexpected difficulty as they tried to follow pace with William while trying to not bump into others as he moved through the sea of people. Finally getting the hang of it they were able to stay close to him at all times while still taking in the sites around.

Anna turned to William, "Where are we?"

"We are in the port city of Navis, second largest trading city on the continent. While it's second for trading I argue that it's first for people moving about mostly due to all the ships that arrive at all times and also the caravans that keep coming and going."

Both Anna and Mike looked around, if what he was saying was true then you should be hearing bells from the ships or the smell the sea but with all the noise and also the different smells from the food around it was impossible for them.

As if being to tell what they were thinking William chuckled again. "Give it time, I'm sure that when we leave the main trade section you will start to see and smell."

While they kept moving about Mike thought of the world map, "Considering a few moments ago we were deep in the forest and where we are now why do we need to travel as you mentioned after

we have picked up whatever we need to pick up here?"

"As that would be faster? Yes you're right that would be but in this case it's impossible as the destination in question is surrounded by something that causes issues with my magic somehow. It's one of the reason why the map was needed and another why others have not been able to find it so far... Well at least I hope that's the case. I discovered this as I sent a magical probe when I saw the map and understood its meaning. As soon as the probe got close I was no longer able to hold the spell. "

Again Mike thought of that map in his head. That seemed pretty far for a magical probe to travel, then again maybe that was part of the spell. "Then I take it that you don't know if you will be able to use your magic when we get there then?"

William then nodded, "No clue, it's one of the reasons why I'm glad that you two decided to continue to join me on this as I may have had to rethink my plans otherwise."

Anna smiled, "Don't worry we will stick with you until the end of this."

"Thanks, I do appreciate that."

They continued to walk for a while longer. From here they could finally smell the sea air and also see some of those boats that he had mentioned. Truly all sizes seemed present and the docks seemed humongous, not that they had seen others to be able to compare. Eventually William stopped in front of a store that seemed to sell miscellaneous gears, like ropes of different kind, shovels, picks and so on.

Both followed William as he walked in the store. As soon as he did they were greeted by an old-timer with a long white beard. "Just so you know I'm not fond of your kind."

William was less shocked then the other two by the comment, "You mean mages, or human?"

"Pfff, you know what I'm referring to..."

"I do, still will that be a problem or should I go someplace else."

At that the old man waved at him, "If you want to get less quality items or if your gold is fake then yea it's best you go someplace else."

Now it was clear to see that William was annoyed by this shop owner's comments, "Just get us three sets of climbing gear, as for the gold I would not worry."

The old man moved around and prepared three bags full of equipment one would need if they went climbing. Once done William paid the asking price, after a while when the old man was satisfied that the money was in fact real they left the store.

Anna turned to William with a puzzled look, "What was that about? I did not know that mages had a bad reputation. Plus what was that issue with the money?"

William shrugged, "Normally we don't but around here I suppose that it's something that is catching on considering where we are and the current times. As for the money, that's just a superstition that somehow we can create gold from magic."

"It's okay of you don't want to talk about it but what do the current times and this place have to do with his reaction?"

William took a deep breath, in reality he did not want to talk about it but he also understood that these two really did not know much about the current politics in play. "If you don't mind I'll simply talk about the large picture as it's an ongoing issue that I've debated other with others too often."

He then stopped and looked at both of them,

"You know of the portal, the orc and also the barrier that the Crusaders are currently putting in place correct?" They both nodded, they did not know the detail but in order to stop the advancement of the invading orcs army the Crusaders were currently setting up a line in the sand so to speak to stop them and ideally eventually push them back. This effort had only started but had been ongoing now for quite some time.

"Good, well went the first wave appeared Crusaders and mages participated in order to stop their initial advance. We acted swiftly and were able to contain the damage to only the surrounding area of the Portal Tower. Sadly this is where the cooperation fell apart and the people in charge of Astrum wanted to do things differently then what the Crusaders wanted. Because of this issue, currently only the Crusaders are participating in the efforts at the Portal Tower. This city, being the closes to that location, gets a lot of Crusaders coming from the ships and there is also the growing sentiment that because of this issue we, the mages, are doing nothing."

Anna could not believe it, "I know you will not be happy for me to say this but, it's hard to see how they would think otherwise. Also after spending time with you I don't see how you agree with the state of things."

"I don't, but it's complicated, and while that is not a good excuse it is what it is. We are helping but in our own way that many probably don't realise. At this point in time I wonder if a common ground could even be found between the two of us, personally I hope that eventually one will be found. My other colleagues think that this will be impossible unless a third party would gets involved. The issue is that the only other party that

we can think of that could do the trick are possibly the Crimsons." He then looked at Anna, "Being where you come from I am curious to know what you think the chances of that happening are?"

The righteous fire that Anna had in her suddenly disappeared, there was no way that she could see the Crimsons act as a bridge between the mages and the Crusaders. Suddenly she had an appreciation for William's comments about things being complicated. "I don't think that would work out unless something drastic happened. Maybe then there would be a chance but otherwise I don't see it."

The mood suddenly turned very gloomy as Anna realised how sad the current situation really was and William saw that a potential option was closed to him after all. Not being his specialty Mike tried to change the subject to something else in order to change the mood to something more pleasant. "Going back to what you said, about the money, could you not create gold with magic?"

William laugh at that, "Of course not, why would anyone think such a thing. I mean if we could would that not completely destroy the economical system we currently have?"

Mike agreed with William's comment but what was off was the grin he still had on his face as he finished answering the question.

"Plus if that were true everyone would what to become mages and there is no way that Astrum could handle that many people." Still with a grin on his face William started to walk again.

"Anyways, let's head back to where we appeared. From there I will be able to send us as close as we can in order to get to our next location."

As the talks of the current situation had stopped and also now that they were back in the thick of the city's shopping district the mood went

back to normal. On the way they stopped to resupply their rations and when they got to the same rune circle that they had arrived on, William casted a spell and then they disappeared quickly leaving the port city of Navis.

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"I know this will make me sound like a child, but are we at the top yet?"

Anna laughed and Mike chuckled, "We are almost there, and don't worry I'm glad that's the case as well."

Anna looked up to confirm what he had said; the climb had been hard on everyone. "I think it's safe to say that we are all glad about that."

A few minutes later and Mike was helping William get on the ridge that had the opening of the place they needed to go to. As soon as both his feet were on the ridge William sat down for a bit to try and regain some of his strength.

They both looked at him and did the same thing. Mike angled himself to see the horizon, they had climbed a good height and the view was fantastic. He could see the town that William had magically moved them from when they had left Navis, the long walk that they had done to get to the base of the mountain and now the mountain that they had had to climb in order to reach the entrance to what looked like a cave. From what the map in the book had said this is where the information that William is looking should be.

Him mind snapped back to the moment as Anna moved closer to him, "I love this view as well, the wind is nice too."

Mike smiled, it had not really been the reason why but he had to admit that he loved it too. "Yes now that you mention it, it is beautiful and very

pleasant." They enjoyed the moment for a little while longer until they realised that William was now standing simply looking at the both of them.

He stood as well as Anna, "Sorry about that seems we got lost in the moment there."

William waved at them, "It's all good, no worries at all. In a way I'm glad that both of you can find time to enjoy moments like this."

Now that he had mentioned it Anna was happy about that as well, "I guess we head in, by the way how is your magic? Will you be able to use it now?"

He nodded with a sad expression on his face, "Right now the effects that prevent me from using my magic properly are still in effect. More so now because we are closer to the entrance it seems, even more reasons why that climb was uncomfortable."

Mike was a bit worried, "Do you think that will change inside?"

He simply shrugged, which did nothing to help the others worry. If this was a cave that has protected magical knowledge, having access to Williams spells would really be a large benefit. As they started to make their way in they both glanced at William to see if things had changed.

As soon as William fully stepped in he noticed a change, while the headache that he had been feeling for a while now was still present the block to his magical energy was not. He reached out his hand and opened it, quickly after he casted a spell and a floating flame appeared lighting their way. As the flame flickered normally and the spell did not disappear William looked at his companions and smiled. "Looks like I'll be able to use my magic inside it seems."

They were both happy to hear the news as Mike was about to comment all their heads turned and their focus was now deep inside the cave.

Seconds after the flame had been lit a large noise was heard from deep inside the tunnel, as they all looked at each other they could also feel rumbling on the ground.

"Seems that something is coming at us."

William commanded his magical flame to move ahead. It took a little while but then they saw a large bolder rolling down, the bolder was big enough to pretty much take the width of the tunnel. Seeing that it was coming too fast for them to stop Mike and Anna started to move backwards but only stopped when William simply stood there.

"How quaint..." William then knelled down, and with his hand touched the ground. Once contact was made, he casted the spell and then looked ahead. Suddenly a large crash could be heard as the bolder stopped in its tracks.

When they moved closer the other could see that somehow William had stopped the bolder by forming a large rock stalagmite. While the danger of them being squashed was over they now had the issue of a large bolder being blocked by another large rock formation blocking their way completely.

Mike turned to William, "I take it that you also have a next step?"

William nodded and moved close to the bolder and put his hand on it. After a few seconds the bolder crumbled into different smaller pieces creating an opening for them to pass through. William recalled his floating flame to gather at his hand and then continued on the upwards path leading deeper in the cave.

Seeing as the cave tunnel was big enough Anna and Mike followed next to him but slightly from behind in order not to bump into each other as they moved. If more traps showed up William would deal with them and if it was something else they could easily switch up to have the two in

front.

After a while they had reached the top of the incline and where now going downwards. Anna looked around wondering, "Can a cave like this actually exist naturally?"

William thought about it, "It could but for this cave I'm pretty sure that it was magically created, which in a way makes it even more dangerous."

Before Anna could comment William suddenly took a step back with his arms raised to each side forcing them to move back was well. They then heard and saw a small arrow be thrown from one side to the other. After the first one launched, a few more appeared launching arrows from one side to the other at random intervals and also at random locations.

William scratched his head as he looked closer. Magically a small hole on the wall was being created and then an arrow was thrown. Soon after, the hole would close only to open up on the other side, catching the arrow in a way. Considering everything this spell was pretty complex, William could take the energy to destroy the trap but it would take a lot of it due to its complexity. There was also the issue that they did not know how many more of these they would have to deal with. An idea then popped in his head.

"Please move back a bit more." Again he kneeled on the ground, he turned back to confirm that the others had moved away enough and then cased what sounded like a similar spell as he did before. When he was done a large rumbling was felt as small walls of rock grew from the ground to the ceiling. The walls appeared with about a centimetre gap between the cave walls. The trap spell was still active but now the only thing you heard was the arrow hitting the wall that William had suddenly created.

Mike was stunned; it was a pretty good way to get around the trap if you could manage to do that. "That is very neat." Anna nodded, "I agree..." She then stopped and focused on William as she realised that he did not seem pleased at all, "Something wrong?"

He thought about it for a moment. "In a way I'm just wondering on these traps, their pretty easy to deal with."

Mike chuckled, "Maybe for a mage but for a normal person I don't see how they could have moved ahead at least not without very large shields."

"Hmm, maybe that was the point. Given that this place is near impossible to find using magic maybe these traps are like this to deal with a climber that could randomly find this place."

While his logic made sense Anna could see that he was still worried about something, "I take it that there is something else?"

William nodded, "These trap, while basic, are all magically created. The bolder was less obvious but this one is pretty clear in that it's magical and not mechanical. In order to make this spell permanent a large amount of power would be needed..." He then stopped to think more about it and then continued, "There is also the possibility that these spells are being casted while we make are way down this cave." He then turned to the others, "I was hoping to find the missing knowledge I was seeking but now I'm wondering if I'm not going to find a person once we reach the end of this."

Anna and Mike simply looked at each other as William started to go down the cave tunnel again. There was nothing that could be done about it but they had to wonder on the type of welcome they would find once they reached the end, if the traps

where any indication then it would not be a good one.

After a while they reached what looked like a larger tunnel, almost like a small room inside the cave. They all moved cautiously as they now heard something breathing, they assumed it was a thing due to how heavy it was breathing. William stopped and sent his floating flame inside the room; it did not take long for it to trace out the silhouette of a giant beast.

All their eye went wide as they saw something that was as tall as two human combined, it had red beady eye and muscles on top of muscles. Horns could be seen on top of his head and where its feet should be you could see giant hooves. The beast wielded this giant two handed axe but had no armor.

"It looks like a giant humanoid bull..."

William had never expected to see something like this, "That is a Minotaur. It's a magical creation built to destroy mages. It's highly resistant to any forms of attack magic, plus it's very very strong."

Mike looked ahead; the Minotaur was positioning himself in order to block the passageway on the other side, which probably meant that his primary goal was to stop anyone from continuing on this path. With their speed they could probably move around it but they was no way to guarantee that they would all make it, so that plan was scratch out. "How resistant is resistant?"

William gave him a sad smile and then magically created a large fireball. The ball grew until it was about four feet in diameter, when ready he threw the ball at the target that simply stood there. The spell exploded and caused the room to be filled with smoke, when it cleared the

Minotaur was still standing where he had been without any visible damage.

"That should have killed anything at that size, and I think all it did was dirty it's stomach and even then I'm not sure it's that way because of the magic but more so the explosion after."

Anna shook her head; this was not encouraging at all. "Well this is why you asked for us to come along right?"

She did not wait for an answer as she ran ahead to attack the beast, Mike followed right behind her.

As they got closer the beast prepared an overhead swing with his large weapon, when he committed to his blow the two split to each side in order to avoid it. The weapon hit the stone ground and made a large noise as it also left a large indent in the stone. All it would take is one solid hit and that would it for any of them. With that confirmed all they needed to know was how many hit it would take from them.

Anna had veered left when she had avoided the attack, mobility played a key role in any battle and she was close to the left leg of the beast that was now busy pulling out his weapon out of the ground. She sliced her sword vertically and then did a forward thrust motion to stab the joint behind the knee. The skin was tough and the blade barley made any damage. These where not good results at all, Anna spun around to move away and preformed a horizontal slash exactly where the first one had been made opening the wound a bit more.

Mike continued his charge and moved passed the beast as he stopped and turned he saw the results of Anna's attacks. Finesse was not going to help much here it seems so maybe brute strength could help. He grabbed the pummel of his sword with both hands and then preformed an overhead

swing to the back of the Minotaur. The blow hit deep but nowhere deep enough. He then moved back to the side where Anna had been and performed a horizontal slash on the same target that she had hit twice already. The blow finally caused the wound to open up enough so that it would start bleeding.

Bleeding as it was it did not stop the beast, with his now free weapon, to do a large lazy horizontal swing as he turned to try and aim for the both of them. Anna and Mike were able to avoid the blow but it had forced them to move back and even with that amount of strength they wondered if one hit alone would do it as well.

Mike screamed, "William we will need help with this..."

William was watching the fight from the entrance of the room. Considering what he had read about these creatures these two warriors were doing pretty good still. That said he agreed with Mike's assessment that help would be needed, but was there any spells that would help? Seeing as they had been pushed away from their target William powered another spell. He aimed his hand at the Minotaur leg that was damaged and then a lightning bolt made its way to hit it. The spell hit but actually did very little, looking closer he wondered if it had helped the beast as the wound was now cauterised.

Frustrated by the results William focused all of his energy to his hands and then reached out in front. A large gust of wind left his position and hit the Minotaur squared on the chest. The beast staggered backward, it did not hurt him but it had created an opening for the other two.

Taking advantage they once again charged at the beast while it was recovering its footing. Anna once again aimed at the leg and reopened the

wound with two strikes. Mike unable to attack the same location moved to the side and once again thrust his sword forward to the Minotaur's right side. He pulled the blade out only to notice that it had barely hit at an inch deep. Still for some reason it had caused the Minotaur to aim for him for his next attack, Mike looked at the enemy's beady eye to try and figure out where it would attack in order for him to move to the right location to miss the blow. To his surprise the blow never came as another gust of wind deflected the weapon aside. This time the spell had been more focused and had not cause the target to lose his balance but had neutralized the attack. With that plan in mind both of them renewed their attacks with the idea that William could help out with their defence.

This pattern went on for a while and the damage on the creature was growing, but very slowly. As they were about to go for another swing the beast then pulled his weapon back and screamed in anger. Mike was close to the leg that Anna had been working on and moved to strike another blow. When he got close he realised how much of a stupid mistake that had been and also that they had underestimated the creature's intelligence.

The Minotaur now knew that his blow would be constantly deflected by the mage but there was only so much that the spell could do. As Mike approached for an attack, the beast grabbed his weapon pulled it back causing the butt of the handle to land squarely on Mike stomach. With his weapon this close there was no way to deflect it.

Anna saw the Minotaur land a hit on Mike on the lower part of his chest armor. Mike suddenly fell backward and then dropped to the ground. She rushed ahead as the Minotaur started to move towards his now prone target. Suddenly she saw a

change in the beast eyes and then stopped. There was no time to properly see what he was doing only that his gaze had changed to her. As a reaction Anna jumped backward, she did not care about losing her footing or the fact that she would land on her butt very soon, the main concern was missing the attack that was now aimed at her.

Due to the sudden change in his position the blow had been a lazy one but had a fairly wide arc. As Anna fell she saw the tip of the axe land and cut her chest armor offering little resistance. Then she felt her shirt underneath be torn as it too offered no resistance, followed by her skin that offered even less.

When the blow passed and Anna fell flat on the ground, she saw that that she was still alive and that she had been very lucky as the wound had not cut that deeply. Still this self check had made her lose precious seconds, seconds that the beast was using to prepare an overhead swing that would split her in two.

Mike eye went wide, as he saw what was happening. "William stop him!!!"

William was frustrated by the comment, he had been trying to do that since the start but nothing really worked. As if sensing his thoughts Mike screamed at him, "Just stop him like the other times."

This snapped William attention, what was he referring too. They knew nothings of magic so he could only be talking about something that he had already seen. He tried to think of the attack spell that he had used but then remembered that he had mentioned something about stopping him not hurting him. William then knelled and touched his hand to the ground, "What a stupid fool I have been..."

Anna was preparing to move left or right

depending on how the blow would ark down, but as soon as she had figured that he was aiming a bit to the right a wall of stone appear in front of her and then the wall formed itself partially around the Minotaur. This not only cancelled the blow but also trapped the beast. Slowly she moved away to where William was as the beast started trashing at his stone bonds that had magically formed in front of him.

Mike move close to Anna, "Are you okay?"

She nodded, "I will need to be patched up but I should be. My armor is trashed but I think I should be able to do another charge before I endanger myself. What about you?"

He smiled, "I was more lucky, the blow bruised me heavily only but no cracked ribs."

This was good news, Anna then turned at the Minotaur who was still trashing at his bonds.

"William, will that hold him?"

Before he could answer the question they saw that the beast had changed his tactic and was now preparing the hit the stone with his weapon. The blow was clumsy due to the position but had enough strength behind it to crack some of the stone tips that was pinning him where he was.

"I guess that answers that." She then looked at the others, "But it also answers are next move right?"

They both nodded and smiled; they knew exactly what she was planning.

The Minotaur was no longer pinned by the wall that had been quickly created as he moved to the side to continue his defence, Mike charged at him. As expected the beast pulled his weapon close to his chest again and had moved in a way to defend his side as that's how they had attacked until now. Mike's aimed his sword right in the middle of the handle of the axe, the target seem to baffle the

enemy causing him to have a free blow. When he moved away Mike saw that a large dent had been made on the handle. The weapon was large and it would take a few blows but it would break in time.

Anna did not move as fast as she could in order to not worsen her wound, which made the approach tricky. The beast was still baffled and Mike had also not charged as quickly, probably due to his own wounds, which allowed her to be able to be right behind him and also take advantage of the confusion. She quickly preformed two quick strikes on the weapon where Mike had first hit and disengaged. It would probably take one more blow for the weapon to break now.

William was still on his knees and was focusing his attention not on the Minotaur but behind him. He was currently using the materials of the mountain in order to form a bolder about four feet in diameter. Once it was ready he then focused on the ground around the Minotaur and waited for the opening that his teammates where creating for him.

With one blow left Mike charged at the beast but then saw that it had changed his plans. Maybe it had realised that William would not be able to deflect his blow or it saw that he was moving much slower than before and figured that one more hit would do it. Whatever the reason there was little time as the Minotaur took his axe and thrust forward at Mike's incoming charge. Still knowing what needed to be done Mike pulled his sword and twisted it so that the axe would connect with the flat of the blade. When it connected the strength was still enough to push his weapon and its weapon to connect with Mike's armor. Figuring that would probably happened Mike had position his sword so that his double edge had not cut himself when the blow impact happened. Still with

his already bruised stomach and this new blow he was sent to the ground.

Anna once again saw Mike take a hit from the weapon, but she also saw that the impact had also been enough to create the final blow that was needed on the already damaged handle. As the Minotaur pulled the axe blade back the shaft snapped and the axe fell to the ground.

That was the queue that William had been waiting for. He launched the spell that instantly created a wall all around the beast side trapping him waist down. The best once again trashed at the stone, as he did William then focused on the bolder that he had build and lifted it up in the air. Once at the right high he commanded it to pull forward. The beast never saw the large bolder connect with the back of his head. As it tried to lift his head up it saw the large bolder coming at him but this time in the front of his face. He tried to block it with his hands but was too dizzy from the initial blow to stop it as it once again connected. As the creature suddenly fell flat William took no chance and commanded the bolder up and then simply dropped it on the top of the creature head for a third hit. The creature no longer moved.

Mike rose up to see that his armor had been banged up but was still okay considering. He made his way to Anna who was already removing her armor in order to properly patch up her wound.

William looked at the Minotaur not knowing what to think. Part of him wanted to turn back as this had now become very dangerous if defences such as this had been left here. But also because of this he had to continue on and learn more. Someone powerful enough to create this could not be left unchecked for longer than he had already had been. The Council had been created to lead and guide but also to protect against such large

magical treats, and being a part of it he needed to do his duty. He looked at his two teammates, as Mike helped bandage Anna's wound, he wondered if he could do this with the current force present.

As they were about to finish the process William picked up Anna's chest piece armor that had been damaged and casted a spell. They both looked as the damaged armor seemed to repair itself. Anna took the armor back and inspected it while William explained what he had done.

"It's not perfectly repaired as I could only reshape it to the way it was with the materials that were still attached but still this will be better than fighting with a broken armor."

"Thanks, this will help a lot." She then fastened her armor back and then moved around to test the bandage and the pain. Overall the skills they had learned had helped to dull her pain and also stop the bleeding. As long as the wound did not reopen she should be able to heal it up quickly. Now ready as she was going to be she pointed to the next tunnel that continued their way downwards. "Shall we?" There was no answer as they all took their positions and continued their path down the cave.

They had continued down the path for a good twenty minutes with no other obstacles than their own nervousness. Mike tried to calm himself by taking a deep breath, "You know I was not a fan of the traps but after that beast the longer we just keep going down the more worried I get about what's going to be there when we reach the next thing."

Anna wondered about that too, "About that are we sure that there is something down there? You mentioned that maybe there was a person, do you still think that is the case?"

"I do actually, the more we go down the more I can sense his power."

Mike was puzzled by that, "You can sense his power? Is that a thing with mages where they can feel each other?"

Anna chuckled at the comment, "Come on you can't believe that right? He probably has a spell of some sort that's telling him this."

William smiled, "In a way you are both right." His comment caused both of them to stop for a second with a bit of a dumfounded look on their faces.

"Normally Anna is right we can't simply sense each other capabilities, but we can get a sense when the person is casting depending on the spell that is being cast. Generally there are always small detection spell that are active when we are out and about, currently I have one that warns me when large amounts of magic is being used around me."

"So if that is the case then that means that the detection spell told you of something pretty big and chances are that means that there is a person down there then."

William nodded at Anna's comment, "That's probably the case." He then stopped and turned to them. "We should be arriving soon actually for my guess, so now is the time to rethink this. Originally this was a going in and grab something type of adventure but now we will need to confront someone pretty powerful there may be little you can do to help out."

Anna thought about it for a moment, "Knowing what you know if we turn back are you as well?"

William seemed to think hard about his answer, eventually he nodded his head. "I must know what he is about and what his plans are. He is at a certain level that if left alone it could spell huge problems for us in the future. Because of that I must go."

Before Anna or William could interrupt or

continue Mike jumped in, "Well then it's simple, we stay with you and see this through." As he started to move again he looked in Anna direction and gave her a small smile which she returned.

As they all continued William cautioned them, "I appreciate your effort, I do, but again I will warn you that there may be little you can do."

Anna was sceptical about that, "There must be something that we can do even if we don't know about magic ourselves."

William took a deep breath, "There is, you can be the decoys. This person has been there for a while now and probably has some interesting magical defences; essentially buy me enough time to figure out a way around those defences. If you can do that then it will be of great help for the combat ahead."

It was not the best of situations to be in but in a way it was to be expected, "We will try our best, and who knows you say that we will have a fight on our hand but it may not be the case."

William had to admire Anna's optimism but after the traps and the Minotaur he did not share it.

It did not take too much more time before they finally found the end of their journey. The light was now showing them an old door. It did not look too sturdy and there was also no lock on it, it seemed simply there to block the view of what was on the other side. Also from the cracks around the door they could see a glowing red light, pulsing.

Mike pointed at the red light, "Any thought?"

William shrugged, "Sadly too many."

Anna and Mike took point, "Well only one way to find out."

As they opened the door it made a large creaking sound and what they saw on the other end was not exactly what they had expected.

William had been right; there was a person after all. He seemed very old and only wore a large robe with a hood over his head but his white beard was fully visible. His body seemed very frail and he was sitting on this very large chair. Around him were two large bookcases and also a large chest. The red pulsing light was created by glowing red runes that seemed etched on the floor in a large semi circle around him.

His head slowly lifted and they could now see his mouth, the voice that came out was very deep and empty. "Leave... now..."

Anna took a step forward, "We only..." she was then cut off by a glimmering large bubble shield that suddenly appeared which occupied about half the room. As Anna took a step back flames also appeared in the bonny hands of the caster in front of them.

When the mage weakly threw his fireball spell at them William acted and created a stone wall in front of them blocking the spell's path. As it connected the wall shock and a large explosion was heard.

William turned to the two, "Again I'm sorry to say but buy me some time and be careful."

Mike and Anna nodded and then they instantly split up and ran at the mage with their weapon drawn. Mike reached the glimmering field first, not sure what to expect he took his sword and swung at the shield. The sword passed through like there was nothing. This surprised and worried him, but all that was gone and replaced with a searing pain all over his body as soon as his hand holding the pommel of his sword touched the magical field.

"AAAAaaaaarrggg!!!!" He could do nothing but scream as the pain was everywhere. He tried as hard as he could to stay conscious as pretty soon

it would all but overtake him.

Anna stopped her approach and made her way to Mike as soon as he had started screaming. While she was preoccupied with that the mage casted a large lightning bolt at the wall in order to destroy it at a distance. The wall was still holding but from the looks of it maybe another spell or two and that would no longer be the case anymore. A bit frustrated by the situation she did something reckless and grabbed onto Mike's shoulder.

When contact was made she received a bit of a shock but that was all, she thanked her lucky stars and then proceeded to pull him out. As soon as contact with the field was broken he stopped screaming but he then fell flat on the ground. "Are you okay?"

"...Don't let... that touch you..." It took all he had to talk and currently he had no strength to even get on his feet, let alone fight. Anna had a worried look on her face, *'Is there truly nothing we can do?'*

"Ha ha ha..." The mage laughing forced her to turn her attention to him, "Simply be lucky that he is still awake still." He then took a deep breath then continued, "This shall not last..."

From the looks of it the mage was preparing another spell and this time it seemed that it was aimed at them. Moving Mike and herself away would be impossible, there had to be something. As she looked around she saw a fist size rock. As if on instinct she grabbed it and threw it at the mage's face. A smile appeared on her face as the rock passed through the field as it was not there and the mage's mouth contorted in shock and anger, the aim was true and soon it would hit him square in the face.

The mage suddenly cancelled the spell that he was casting and started another one that only took

a second to cast. Once complete the stone that was seconds from hitting him harmlessly deflected off.

As Anna grabbed anything around her and threw it at her target William chuckled mildly. He had wondered what they were going to do with that field in place. The magic of it would cause excruciating pain to any living mass that touched it; the weakness of it was two folds mind you. The first was that it had no effect on non living material, and the second being that it's effects where mostly centered on the first living mass that it made contact with. So while the person himself would be unable to do anything another could pull them out of its radius of effect. It was a powerful defensive spell, but the wall was still holding and there were giving him the time he needed, only a few seconds more and then it would his turn.

Anna was now out of ideas, the first few rocks had helped keep his attention but the last spell he had casted seem to now repel all of them without him having to do anything. Currently she was away from Mike still on the ground and the mage was casting what seemed like a large fireball spell aimed at her. She took a deep breath and as the large ball of fire was coming at her she jumped in the other direction in order to avoid direct contact. The dodge had been successful but then the fireball exploded as soon as it hit the ground. The explosion was not something she could avoid and it sent her flying a few steps forward. She dropped on the ground near Mike's body that was finally starting to regain his strength a bit.

"Are you okay?"

Anna grabbed her stomach, the blast and fall had caused her wound to reopen a bit. "I'll be fine, but what now?" The mage was once again powering another spell and the two could only look at each other both seeing that they had no answer for their

situation.

The wall then suddenly crumbled and the attention was then on William, "Now, he faces me."

Suddenly blue circular rune pattern appeared around William's feet and then three more around him. William casted a lightning bolt spell and aimed it at the mage as he launched the fireball spell that he had prepared for Mike and Anna at him instead.

The enemy mage frantically casted a spell to counter the lightning bolt that was coming at him. A wide grin appeared on his face as he had been successful and the bolt simply vanished. It had taken more power than expected to do so but at the same time there was no way that his target had time to do the same. His smile suddenly dropped as he then saw William with a large grin of his own casting another attack spell.

William ignored the fireball spell aimed at him and prepared one of his own. When the attack was close to hitting him its magic suddenly turned to an odd red vapour that was then absorbed by the runes around his feet. The runes then turned red and then burned themselves away. William threw his attacking spell at his target and quickly moved to one of his other circles close by. He had hoped that each of them would have been able to absorb more than one spell but there was little he could do about that now.

While their magical battle continued Mike and Anna had regained most of their strength and now were both able to stand and attack once again, the issue was how could they even do that with the field still in play.

William was now on his last defensive circle as the mage smiled at him, "Can you last... I wonder..."

William was wondering the same thing in a

way, he was confident that he had enough stamina for a long while but what was troubling him was that so too did the enemy mage for some reason. More worry poured in his head as he suddenly wondered if the enemy had mastered the ability to break his natural limits, which was the reason there where here in the first place. While that thought made some level of sense William could simply not accept it for some reason, he looked around and put more thought on the rune circle around the mage. He had dismissed it early as he had seen that it was a minor empowering spell but now that he looked at it more it was different somehow and maybe that was the key.

Having spent too much time in his head, William saw that his final defensive circle had been burned out by the mage. He was now convinced that he needed to get rid of his as well in order to turn the tables but in order to do so he would once again need a distraction. William turned to his two companions.

Anna saw the look on his face and so did Mike, "I want to help him but I still can't see how..." It's then that Mike grabbed her hand and moved closer to the glimmering field, "What are you doing?"

Mike then turned his back to the field and then grabbed his red cloak and wrapped himself around her, "You trust me right?" Anna head was racing, it was not an issue of trust at all but more of worry about what was coming next. She did not have time to answer him as he jumped backwards still holding on to her.

Anna felt a large shock go through her whole body, it hurt quite a bit but not as much as she had expected. She then realised what was going on as the shocks she felt was not coming from the field but from Mike's body. The pain suddenly stopped as they both landed on the ground on the

other side of the field. Mike was out for the count, he was still breathing but that was all he was doing. Anna on the other hand was standing up and reading her sword, she glared at the mage who was now slack jawed by what had happened.

She moved as quickly as she could to reach him as the mage grabbed a staff that was next to him and quickly empowered it. The two weapons connected, normally Anna's blade would have been able to cut through the staff, but somehow it had been reinforced to a point that it seemed as strong as her own blade. Still in a combat of weapons only there was no way that he would have the advantage.

She spun around and used the momentum to attack him with a horizontal slash, which as planned he blocked with his staff. Now she was in the perfect position to attack him again but this time with a back hand attack with her free hand to his face. The attack surprised him and he quickly casted a spell that deflected her hand. The blow had missed the target but still hit him on his shoulder. Given his current physical state it still caused him a lot of pain.

Continuing with her attacks she slashed again at him, and he deflected the blow with his staff again. While still moving with her initial momentum Anna attacked once more but this time with a kick aimed at his side. She had expected him to deflect the blow again as she saw that he was casting a spell once more, but as the blow connected and hit him square in his ribs causing him to double over she wondered what the spell had done.

Suddenly her eyes went wide as she lost balance after the blow had connected and realised what the magic had done. The leg that was holding all her weight had buckled somehow as if it had

been hit in the back of it. Anna fell to the ground and the mage quickly powered a spell.

Anna quickly positioned herself as best as she could and kicked herself off the ground in order to perform a flying tackle at the mage. It was not the best of moves but it had a chance to possibly cancel the spell that he was casting if she reached him in time. A weird smirk appeared on his face as she realised that this would not be the case as a magical force pushed her away forcing her to crash land on the large chair that he had been sitting on a while ago.

Her back hurt, so did her stomach and she was sure that she would be bruised all over but all that would be nothing compared to the pain she was about to feel as she saw a large flaming ball appear under the mage's hand.

As he was about ready to let lose his spell suddenly his head pulled upwards and it felt like he was gasping for air. His fire spell then cancelled and then he turned to see that William was now walking in his direction and that his magical runes around him were now burning up.

With his empowering spell destroyed the mage fell to the ground, with eyes now wide open and his two hands clawing at his throat as he was unable to breath anymore.

William helped Anna up and she turned to him, "What is happening to him? Did you cast a spell of some sort?"

He took a deep breath and a look of pity appeared on his face as he turned to the mage that was quickly dying due to asphyxiation. "He abused his stamina way too much, from the looks of it the only think keeping him alive was that modified empowering spell that he has casted around him. The modification, from what I understand, was done in a fashion to take the brunt of the cost of

casting large spells. While indirectly that empowered him in a way as he could cast well beyond his physical means it also caused a large weakness."

Anna then finished his explanation, "And when you destroyed the runes of the spell it could no longer protect him and the cost all came rushing back in one hit."

William nodded with a weak smile, "Something like that yes."

When the mage was no longer moving, Anna made her way to Mike's body and gently slapped his face a bit to try and wake him up, "Time to wake up you crazy fool."

His eyes where finally opening, "That was painful, but did it work?"

Anna gave him a half smile, "It did but these last minute plans of your need more work, especially if they will leave you out of the fight like that."

He weakly smiled back at her, "I'll try and do my best."

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While the two patched up their wounds William looked around and poked heavily at the books there where in the two shelves. After some time they had finished and where mostly watching him, he was now holding a few books in his hands while looking at another. Anna smiled, "So I take it that you found what you where looking for?"

He shook his head for a moment and seems stunned, "Oh I'm sorry I completely forgot that you where there for a moment, seems I got too absorbed in these books." He then looked at both of them with a questioning gaze, "Have I been at it for that long?"

Anna laughed, "It's all good, it's not like we did

not need the quick rest anyways." Mike nodded at that, "Very much so." He then turned to the chest, "I did not see you open the chest? Is there anything in it?"

William looked at the chest for a few minutes and then casted a spell or two, "Hmm it does not seem to be protected. Or maybe it's just not protected anymore." He then moved to it and opened it. Instantly his eyes gleamed, "Oh it seems that there are in fact more books inside."

Mike just shook his head, "I guess treasure hold different values for everyone."

William nodded and also reached in to grab a large bag of some sort, "Oh I do agree with that, but what is this." He opened the contents and peeked inside; he closed it off and reached in again to pull another. "Seems that these are bags of gold, it's probably all that he had saved up before locking himself inside of here." William then turned and threw the first bag at Anna and then the other at Mike. "Here for both of you for the help that you gave me."

They each grabbed the bag, from the weight of it there was a very big amount in each of them. Anna had a puzzled look, "Are you sure I mean you helped out a lot with everything too, should you not have a share?"

William extended his arms, "These will be my reward, and trust me when I say that I got the better deal so in a way it's the least that I can give you for everything."

Mike shrugged and then turned to Anna, "I'm okay with that." Anna nodded with a smile, "Same here." Still it did leave one important question, "I do wonder how you will carry all of these things back with you?"

William smiled, "That is actually a problem, but something I will be able to resolve without your

help." He made his way to them and then helped them up. "I have the books I was looking for so for now let's head to the entrance of the cave and I'll explain in more detail."

For some reason the way back seem to take far less time than it had originally and also thankfully the Minotaur was still out of commission. As they stepped outside the air felt great and was really refreshing. While they took another break, William was creating some sort of rune pattern on the ledge. Mike was a bit puzzled by this, "Is your magic working outside now?"

William finished the circle, "Yes everything is working perfectly fine now, the interference was probably caused by him and with him unable to power the magic anymore things are now back to normal." He then nodded, "Good now this will allow me to come back here at a moment's notice. Now as for our next step..."

Anna smiled, "This is where we part ways correct?"

William returned her smile, "I'm sorry to say but that is correct. Still there is no need to leave you hear, is there any place you wish for me to drop you off before we say our goodbyes?"

"We were originally heading to the magical city, I'm sure that it's an easy location for you to drop us off at if you could."

William's smile widened, if only they truly knew how easy it would be for him. "Yes, Mike had mentioned this before. You wish to see if you can learn magic right?"

Anna thought about it, "Well it would be handy and we were curious but even being able to talk to others there would help us understand more about magic, which we really don't know a lot about." She then gave him a small mischievous smile, "Plus I'm sure it's a nice place to visit, I mean it's

actually floating in the sky right?"

William laughed, "Yes it is and it is a really beautiful city with many wondrous things to see and experience." His smile then disappeared, "Sadly it also has a lot of rules and one of them is that, unless you are an Astrum guard, people that cannot learn magic cannot access the city. Even then simply being able to cast magic does not guaranty entry."

The enthusiasm of the two suddenly dropped and William understood why. "Still let's see what untapped potential you two have access to. Simply stand still while I cast a spell on both of you." The spell did not take long, the first target was Mike. William did not seem too encouraged as he repeated the process on Anna, once done his mood stayed the same.

"I'm so sorry but, I don't think that magic is for the both of you."

"It's that bad?"

William nodded at Mike's comment, "In a way you are not the worst case I have seen but you are pretty close. Basically if you studied for a long time and focused at the end you could possibly be able to light a candle and maybe start a camp fire. Essentially your body's lack the necessary gene to power spells on your own. You can still use magic and power it but it needs to come from some other place then your own."

Anna was saddened by the news, "I guess that means no floating city for us then."

William simply nodded. Mike then looked at Anna, "Well maybe we could still see it if we became guards?" He then turned to William, "I'm sure we could do that."

"That I have no doubt, if that is what you wish then I'm sure something could be arranged."

Anna then took a step forward and also put

her hand on Mike's shoulder. "While that would be interesting, I don't think that's what we want to do." She then looked at Mike, "And you only mentioned that because of me right?"

"I figured that this would be the only way to see the place that you seemed interested in seeing."

She gave him a half smile, "Don't get me wrong I am interested but I'm also interested in seeing so many other places as well. While it's good for us to know that we have options it's not an option that we should be taking right now and I'm sure you agree with that. I mean how else will you be able to write all those chapters in our many books that you mentioned."

Mike then smiled, "So true" He then turned to William, "I guess we will have to pass on that after all." Then a puzzled look appeared, "Still if that is the case where should we head next?"

Anna shrugged and while they thought about it William though about it as well. Suddenly he remembered something that they may be interested in. "Now there is a place that I can drop you off. It's not a place for you to visit but more help out with the skills you already have."

This got Anna's attention. "If you know of a place that we can help somehow then please let us know."

"It's a small town next to the Portal Tower. It's located at the top of the continent and most of the people there deal with the process of wood and also fish seeing as they are close to the ocean. They are not warriors and the Crusaders have yet to setup a patrol there, now I'm sure that they will soon but in the meantime the place is relatively defenceless."

Mike quickly turned to Anna but had already guessed what she was going to say, "Well I guess that will be our next destination then."

William then smiled as Anna also agreed. "Good then let us be off then, please step inside the circle." When they did William casted his spell and they suddenly left the mountain side cliff to reappear next to a road with a small town about one hours distance.

When they did reappear William seemed nervous for some reason and quickly checked around, then at himself, and then at the other two. Once he was satisfied he then seemed to relax once again. This odd action made the other two wonder, "Is something wrong?"

William waved their worried looks away, "It's all good nothing for yourself to worry about." He then pointed ahead. "Ahead is the town I was talking about, it's called Xiphias. I don't see that you two will have any issues with the people there. But I will warn you that they are stubborn and very attached to their homes."

Mike turned around and could see the large tower, "It's still pretty far really but at the same time still very close. I supposed they would have to be stubborn to not have left the place considering what is going on at that tower."

Anna looked as well, "Well that's certainly not going to stop us from trying to help them anyways." She then focused her eyes on William and opened her arms wide inviting him for a goodbye hug. William had a bit of a sad smile and took the invite, he then whispered to her.

"Thanks for doing this to help these people and while I understand your choice part of me really wished that you would have agreed to be Astrum guards. There is a person there that I think you would get along with well."

Her smile widen, "Oh you never know what the future will bring it could still happen. I'm still not convinced that I'll never step foot in that place even

with what you told us."

William then broke the hug, "I hope that you are right." He then turned to Mike and extended his hand. Mike gladly took it, "Good luck William."

"To you both as well." He then took a step back, gave both of them a quick wave and then disappeared.

Mike turned to Anna, "Well that was certainly interesting."

She smiled, "Yes it was." She then looked at the town in front of them. "Now shall we see how our next challenge will go?"

Mike nodded with a smile, "Lets."

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A few days had passed and William was sitting in his large chair in his office in Astrum. He was still going over the books that had been found but he would soon need to make his report to the other Council members. It's then that a familiar face entered his office, Lithius walked in and sat at an empty seat. "I take it that the little adventure bore fruits, Richard?"

For some reason it felt odd hearing his real name after being called William for the last few days. Richard then thought about the question, "Well we did stop an mage from doing no good, and considering his books he was in fact up to no good. I also met interesting people and did find what I had headed out to find in a fashion."

Lithius was curious, "In a fasion?"

"Yes most of what is in here will not be of any help, but there does seem to be a way to temporarily go over one's limitation. From what I read it would be good for maybe one large spell but the risks are great, so much so that one could burn themselves out."

Lithius thought about that for a moment, "It could be useful... but..."

Richard nodded, "My thought exactly, there could be situation where one of us is alone and the need to do something great come upon us where this could be useful but we need to be careful."

"Because of the cost, correct?"

"Hmm, there is that but also because of the way it done. I need to read more about it but part of me wonders why no one has already stumbled onto this seeing how simple it is to perform."

Lithius smiled something he did very rarely. "My friend sometimes the simplest things are the most hard to figure out or see."

Richard thought about that one for a bit, "I suppose you are right." Then something occurred to him. "Oh I forgot to report that the issue with Xiphias may change soon."

Lithius turned suddenly cautious, "Explain Richard, as the situation in Xiphias has already changed from the last update that you got."

Richard was suddenly stunned, "What?!"

"It has been reported that a large group of goblins and orcs are now heading to the town."

Richard eyes went wide, "What about the Crusaders? Are they still heading there as well?"

"Yes and no. A small group of Crusaders have been mentioned to head over there but they will be too small to deal with the enemy troops. I think their orders are to do as much as they can and return when the situation becomes too much."

This was horrible news. "I've asked the two companions I travelled with to help out with that place. If what you say it true then I may have sent them to their deaths."

Lithius looked at Richard and had a concerned look on his face. "I'm sorry to say that there is not much that can be done about that at this time."

You know that the Council is forbidden from interfering directly at this time..."

"...But maybe William could..."

Lithius cut him out, "Richard while you were able to hide yourself from those two I don't see how you will do so from all those people in the town or even the Crusaders that will eventually show up there. What will you do then?"

Richard waved his hands in resignation, "I know I know... I could maybe send word to them and warn them but it's probably already too late for that and knowing them I don't think they would agree to simply leave." He then closed his book and then stood up.

"Where are you going?"

Richard took a deep breath, "I am going to see my daughter Alexandria. I suddenly need a bit of cheering up. Maybe she can tell me about a new book that she has read where the heroes always find a way to win over evil. I think I need a bit of that right about now."

Lithius nodded and watched his long-time friend leave his study.

## Chapter 4

Still feeling their wounds from the previous battle the two approached the town at a leisurely pace.

"So I've been wondering, any ideas why William simply did not drop us off at the town itself?"

Anna thought about it and then shrugged, "I don't know, I'm sure he had his reasons but I really don't know. Still if it is a small town and they are about to be attacked I'm not sure how they would feel about having three strangers suddenly appear from nowhere."

"I see, so you think he didn't in order not to add tension to an already bad situation. I suppose that makes sense now that you mention it."

Anna smiled, "If you put yourself in the villagers shoes it can help give you a different point of view in these things." She then slowed down and squint her eyes, "Hey I've been wondering does anything with this town look odd to you, I couldn't see it that well before but now..."

Mike looked ahead and tried to see what looked odd to Anna. It was really hard to tell but now they were close enough to start seeing it. The right side, the side facing the Portal Tower, seemed damaged. There was no smoke coming from the roofs but they did seem damaged somehow. Not only that, but on that side you could see large burned patches of grass. By the looks of it the town had been attacked.

"Wait I thought that they were going to be attacked, seems that we are already too late."

Anna wondered on that, "Well maybe not, let's

pick up the pace and get a better picture of what's going on."

They could only run so quickly at this time but they both tried their best to get to Xiphias as quickly as they could.

Finally arriving at the town's entrance they noticed that there were no guards around, this worried the both of them. They slowly walked in and tried to get a feel for the place. The town seemed to be built in a square pattern. The middle had a very large and well travelled road, to the right side you had what seemed like houses for the townsfolk and to the left you had a large mill with large stock houses. A few normal homes could also be seen but they were very few. To the far back you could see a large ship docked at the town's small wharf. Now it was also clear to see that the town had been attacked, the houses had broken windows and the roofs had been heavily damaged. From the looks of it fire and arrows had caused most of the damage.

Mike continued to look around, "Okay this is very odd, this place was attacked for sure but why is there no one around?"

Anna thought that was odd as well, "From what William said these people are very tied to their homes I don't think that they would leave that quickly if that was the case."

As they continued to walk on the middle of the town's main road they finally started to see people coming out of a large main building at the end of it. They walked quickly to meet up with the first group but stopped as the wave of people parted around them as they got close. Their comments also made Mike and Anna stop in their tracks.

"...Who would be coming here at this time?"

"...They are not Crusaders, who are they?"

"...Fools rushing in to find glory, well they are

too late..."

Eventually an old man slowly walked in their direction. He was in his late fifties with sandy gray hair but had a good solid built and carried himself well. "Well I can't say that we expected any non Crusaders visitors with the evacuation warning still in place. Who are you? Better yet ignore that question and turn around, as you may want to leave now while you still can."

"A friend told us about this place, we figured that we could help out but we overheard that we were too late?"

The man smirked at that, "Some friend... The Order sent an evacuation warning to our town saying that we were going to be attacked. They mentioned that they would send Crusaders but just in case asked that we leave this place." He then shook his head, "Their fools if they think we would all leave that quickly, plus there were not that tough after all if most of the people had not left out of fear then we would have had no issues against them... fools all of them."

Anna thought that a lot of things did not seem to add up, and from the looks of it Mike thought the same thing. "Well if we can't help you with the fighting at this time, maybe we can help with the clean up. Do you have any wounded from the fight?"

The man nodded, "Sure we do but what can you two do about it? You're a not priest that's for sure."

Anna smiled a bit, "No we are not, but we can help with cuts and certain other wounds. A herbalist friend of ours taught us a little while ago."

The man smiled at that comment, "That would be a great help. Please follow me." As he lead them to what seemed like a storage place he continued

to talk, "The name is Ian by the way; I'm what I guess you could call the person in charge of the town at this time. Normally we make our decision together in this town but a divide happen when the evacuation recommendation came in. A lot of us left but a large group of us stayed and I was asked to temporary lead everyone that did while this was going on."

When they reached the storage room he stopped before he opened the door. "Now we did our best but our herbalist made the decision to leave so there was little that we could do besides normal bandaged."

He opened the door and both of them where in a bit of a shock. The place was empty except for about thirty cots that all had wounded on them, some where men, other where women and you also had two children. As Ian had mentioned they were all bandaged and had been cleaned up but there was blood on the bandages as the wounds were not closing fast enough and it was easy to see that most of them where in a lot of pain, some more than others.

Anna turned to Mike and reached out her hand. "Give me your pack I'll do what I can."

Mike was a bit puzzled, "I can help too..."

Anna nodded, "I know but you figure out what's happening here first and then come and help me out. While helping these people is important knowing what could be coming next could be as important."

"Alright..." He then turned to Ian, "Please tell me what happened during the attack and also if you can show me where is happed."

Ian shrugged a bit, "Sure follow me."

As both of them left and walked to the opposite side of the town, where Mike and Anna had seen the damaged houses Ian chuckled a bit.

"That lady yours with seems pretty pushy there."

Mike had to smirk a bit at that comment, "She can be at times but typically it's with purpose and also with good intentions behind them."

"Well I'm just glad that those people will get some proper help no matter how small it is. Still I did not want to say it there but I don't think that going over the battle will do any good. We fought, some of us got wounded but so did theirs and eventually they turned tail, nothing more to it."

That alone felt odd to Mike, if this was a small town away from the Portal Town then sure maybe but way too many pieces did not fit. "I hope your right, but still no harm in going over it if you don't mind."

"Suit yourself."

It did not take too long for Ian to escort Mike to the right edge of the town. Ian then pointed at the forest border that was away from town. "The attack started from there, they showered us with arrows from the edges of the forest. At the start you had only normal arrow but eventually they added a cloth bud and lit it on fire, which caused some damage to the houses here."

Mike looked around to see that the walls where scorched and that was probably how the roofs also got damaged.

"Now we had a few archers for ourselves so we started to return fire... That got them going as then a troop of four goblins attacked us. We tried to hit them as they made their way here using the clearing but with their shields our archers where no match." Ian then moved a bit away from the houses where large red stains could be seen on the leftover grass and pebbled ground. "When they finally reached us we jumped them here." His mood darkened a bit before he continued, "If only the others had not left then we could have easily

taken them out but sadly while we did defeat them... well you saw the cost for yourself."

He then took a deep breath, "Well that's pretty much that. When their troops got pounded on the ground the arrows stopped. Eventually our tracker, Austen, went to check and confirmed that they had high tailed it out. We had won the battle." He then shrugged, "That's all I got. I warned you that there would be nothing more to it."

Mike thought about that, he was sure that this was not a waste of time. After fighting goblins he could see how four of them could make this much damage, plus you also had the arrow to deal with. That said the story made sense but unfortunately that's the only thing that did.

"Well shall we go back? Nothing much to do here, well until they next attack I guess... assuming they do at all."

"Your tracker where is he now?"

"Austen? He's in the forest right now, again just in case. If he sees anything then he will let us know. Why?"

Mike then nodded, "Good, while I worry about his safety that's a good thing."

"Why so worried, Austen is our best tracker hunter. He promised that he would focus on staying invisible and trust me if he does not want to be seen in the forest nothing will spot him. Still are you that worried? The where not that much to deal with after all, well they did not warren an evacuation order that's for sure."

The more Mike thought about it the more he figured he was right. "You did fight the enemies that are coming at your town but what you fought was not the army, I'm pretty sure it was simply a scouting party."

"Pfff you don't know what you are talking about, there were a lot of arrows. I mean for sure

you had a good six to ten goblin firing those during the whole fight..." Mike then cut him off, "Right there you only convinced me more. Think about it, four goblins did that much damage to you. What would have happened if those six to ten had joined in?"

Ian was about to answer something but then stopped himself, Mike took that opportunity to continue. "Also if that's all it was do you really believe that they would have bothered to send an evacuation order or even send troops, who eventually should be here or so we were told. Plus you also have the last point, only goblins attacked you. You are so close to the tower that there is no way that at least an orc or two would not have joined in on the attack."

Ian thought about more, "Now you could still be wrong but assuming you are right what do you think will happen next?"

"I would prepare for at least double what you went up against."

Ian did not seem pleased by that fact, "That's not something that... hmm..." He then looked at Mike, "I take it that you too will try and convince us to leave because of this?"

Silently Mike had to agree that it would probably be the best decision but with the advance warning from William and the fact that they had stayed even after that attack made him abandon that idea. "No, but if you really want to protect this place and stand your ground you may want to change a few things to help out."

Part of Ian was pleased, finally a plan that did not force them out of their homes. "What changes do you have in mind?"

"I was told that you specialized in wood here, how much material do you have around that could be used to build a wall on this side of the town?"

"Hmm, that's a tall order but I can check it out and let you know. I know we still have a lot left but not enough to build a proper wall plus there is also the manpower involve in doing something like that."

Mike nodded, "I completely understand what you mean. No point in killing yourself to build a partial defence and not have any energy left when the time comes. Still we need to do something as a makeshift defence."

"I'll see what I can find, still I'm thinking you may be worried about this too much like all the others, but this works out as there were a lot of question from the others about what would we do if they attacked again and the Crusaders had not shown up. This idea of a defence will help everyone put their minds at ease a bit and if you are wrong then it's not going to hurt as well."

Mike smiled at Ian, "Here is hoping that I am wrong." While he had said it he did not believe it one bit.

Mike then made his way to the converted store house and saw Anna still tending to a wounded person. Seeing him she stood up but was still looking at the man that was on the bed, he seemed to be in a lot of pain. "Don't worry, we will be back and I promise that we will have enough to help you out." Anna then gave him a small smile, "Just hang in there okay?" The man simply nodded.

Mike looked around, most of the people here had been rebadged some were already looking a bit better then the first time he had seen them other seems to be in the same situation. Anna grabbed both their packs and simply turned them around to empty them of the left over content. Once done she moved closer to him and then grabbed his hand and lead him outside.

"Is it that bad?"

She gave him a weak smile, "No, it's just a bit hard to tell someone that I don't have enough medicine to help them. Overall there were three that were in critical condition, I think I stabilized them and that they should be okay, once we get back you can double check. The others will be fine in a few days or more if they get decent help. Right now the bigger issue is that I used up everything we have and it was not enough."

Mike nodded, "Yea that is a problem, should we go ask if there is a place that we can get more components?"

"I already did that. Thankfully this place is next to a forest so it seems that we will not have to go too far. It seems that there is also a spot that was used by their herbalist so we should find what we need there."

"Well that's good news..."

Suddenly they both heard a voice approaching them, "What's good news?"

Anna waited until Ian was closer and explained the situation.

"Do you need an escort? I mean we know these parts better than you I would assume so..."

Anna smiled, "No we should be fine, the person I asked gave me very detailed explanation so we should be okay."

Ian nodded, "Okay, well before you both leave I took a look and we do have enough material to cover the side but it will take a lot of time as we don't have enough able bodies. That said you still think we should do this?"

Mike nodded, "Yes, but before you start let me think about it more to see if there is a way to speed it up. I also want to talk to Anna about it to see if she has any ideas on it too."

"Sounds good, while you are gone I'll round up the guys and we will start moving everything in

place so then we will be ready to go when things are figured out."

Mike smiled, "Thanks Ian, that's a great idea." Ian simply nodded and left.

Anna then looked at Mike, "I guess it's my turn to ask, is it that bad?"

"It's not good, at least that's how I see it. Lead the way and I'll fill you in."

While Mike explained the situation they made their way to the location that she had told him about. The place looked like a mini garden in the middle of the forest and while he did not recognize a lot of the plant here he did see enough to think that they should find what there were looking for.

Anna then pointed at a location of plants. "Over here seems we will find everything we need here."

As they began filling both their bags Anna thought about the situation. "I agree that a wall would help slow them down and also help with arrows but if you are right I don't see that it will be enough."

"I think the same but at this time I'm not sure what do to do about it."

"I guess we will know more when that tracker comes back, here is hoping that we will have enough time to think of something when that happens." She then paused and then an idea came to her, "Still for that wall of yours could the houses around not be used to help somehow. I mean they must be empty I would assume considering the damage."

Mike thought about that, "Hmm, that's a pretty good idea. Once we head back I'll check it out very quickly and let Ian know if that is the case. Then I'll come and help you with the preparation for these things."

Anna nodded, "Glad I could be of help. Plus

once everything is prepared I'll go and help you out, Ian mentioned something about missing manpower for this."

Mike suddenly became a little bit hesitant. "About that, could you instead stay with the injured? I'm sure it would boost morale and..." He then stopped as he saw that she had a bit of an angry look on her face. "I take it that you don't want to do that?"

Anna felt a bit frustrated, "Do you mind if we talk about that?"

Mike simply nodded.

"Look, I don't want to be cast aside okay. We are in this together as we mentioned before but you seem to push me behind sometimes. You don't need to do that."

Mike took a deep breath, "I'm not casting you aside trust me." He then moved closer to her and then quickly moved his hand to her stomach region and instantly she flinched. "I just thought that you may want some time to heal that up more. Plus it would really help out the town's folk to see someone helping their injured and helping with the defence. At least that the impression I got from Ian."

For some reason Anna only felt more frustrated, sure it made sense again but she could not escape this feeling she felt. "Fine..."

Mike frowned at that, "Oh I'm not sure if I should ask so if you don't feel like it then don't but that did not sound like the good type of fine."

Anna almost wanted to laugh at that comment, now he picks up on these things. "Look I just don't want the same thing that happen at the Crimson town to happen again I guess. Maybe that's also why I'm so defensive about you seemingly pushing me away for my protection. I just don't want to live like that again."

Mike did not really know what to tell her, he understood her point of view after thinking about his own issues a few months ago back in Silva but still. "I don't know, I can tell you that I don't want you to be pushed aside nor do I believe that there is any reason you should be. I'm with you on this and I want you to be with me on this too, equally." He then paused, "Still... that said... I will try and keep that in mind as I may not want to push you away but I do want to keep you from harm if I can help it."

Instantly before she could interrupt he raised his hand in order to tell her to wait and let him finish, "I also expect you to do the same for me, I mean we are friends right and we are in this together so that's how it should go... right?"

It was hard for Anna to stay mad after that but it also made her wonder about something else. "I suppose you are right, as friends we should be there for each other." She then gave him a half smile, "So friend's right?"

Mike was baffled by her statement but glad that she seemed to be feeling okay. "Sure, I mean what else would we be?"

Anna then stood and picked up her full bag and had a bit of a coy smile on her face, "Nothing else come to mind on my end." As he stood himself she continued, "I guess we should head back it maybe a long night for us if we stay here longer." Mike simply nodded and followed her back to the town.

The way back was spent in silence, which allowed Anna to think about things a bit more. She was right as he did try and protect her. Somehow she needed to be able find a way to let it go as that part of her life in that town was over and the situation here was not the same at all. *'Hmm, I guess I just need more time as well.'*

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Two days had passed and a lot of work had been done. Turns out Anna's plan to use the houses had been a really good one. It had been noticed that a lot of the houses on the right side where in a somewhat nice vertical line to each other. Now with Anna's idea if the wood that had been collected was placed between the gapes of the houses it created a long makeshift wall that was quick to built and took very little materials. In order to help with the defence small gaps had been created in order to let arrows from the villagers fly trough and aim for the incoming enemy. Currently they where building a small lip on the top of the makeshift wall in order to help against the enemies arrows that had been aimed on an arc, but everyone suddenly stopped working as they saw that Austen, the tracker, was returning.

Mike entered what was now the town's medical center and saw that Anna was preparing some extra medicine. He made his way to her and as he did he looked around, already half of the people that where there initially where gone which was very impressive.

As he pulled up a chair next to the desk that she was working at and then he smiled, "I must admit that is some pretty good work. I never expected that Jane's teaching could help so much."

Anna stopped working and turned to him, "Just goes to show how good she was in teaching us what we would really need in the limited time we had."

"Agreed," He then looked at the ones still in the beds. "So are they going to be all right?"

She quickly nodded, "They should be but the ones that were in critical condition will still be here a long while. I know that I can keep their condition

from going worse but there is a limit to what I can do."

Mike took her hand and looked at her brilliant green eye, "This is not on you."

She gave him a bit of a smirk, "I know, but that's still a sad fact none the less." She then took a deep breath, "So what brings you here while there is more than enough daylight to keep working on defence?"

These last few days Mike had only seen her in the morning for their practice sessions and at night when he helped out a bit, so him visiting during midday sent an obvious message. "Before I go over the details how is your wound." Quickly remembering the talk that they had he continued as he saw her lips pursed. "No worried you're coming along for this I have no plans on leaving you here... I'm just... worried..."

Anna took a deep breath in order to let her current emotions go, "The wound is fine now. There is still a trace of it but it should not reopen anymore. It was not that deep but was pretty wide so it took more time to heal then it normally should." She then looked at him with a stern look, "Now that you are informed, I'm sure there is no more reason to stall on the details of what is coming at us."

Mike nodded, "None at all."

He explained that there was a group of eight goblins and four orcs coming their way and that they should arrive during the early morning. While they had fought before in real combat this time was different as if they messed up the town would not make it. Plus their numbers where really large compared to them and they had never even seen an orc so their actual battle skills where going to be a bit of a mystery.

"Hmm, I take it that there is a plan in order to

deal with the numbers?"

He then nodded, "There is... but it's an interesting one."

This peaked her curiosity, "Okay an odd way to start."

Again he nodded, "Yea it is, and I want to clear it up but not here. Let's go get ready and at the same time I'll go over the details."

The next day had arrived very quickly and everyone in the town was on pins and needles, so where Mike and Anna, who's current position was in the forest where the attacking troop would be passing by anytime now.

"I still can't believe you planned on using the townsfolk's as a decoy."

Mike sounded a bit defensive, "I don't see it that way. I'm maybe using the town itself as a decoy but everyone in it is as safe as they can be..."

Anna had a bit of a teasing smile on her face, "Hmm, so you say."

Now Mike was really defensive, "It's not like we have much a choice. We let them send out whomever as the first wave to the town. Logic says that it should be goblins again; as the town picks them off with their arrows we charge in from the back, which is something they can't be expecting especially after how the first one turned out."

Now Anna was more honest with her expression showing him that she had been teasing him. "I know and I agreed to it too, as did the people in the town..." She then stopped talking and crouch a bit more, Mike followed her movements. She silently continued, "Now time to see how it's going to end up."

Mike only nodded as they finally saw the enemies approach. Austen's count had been on the mark but Mike then realised that an important thing had been left out from his report and that

was the weapons that the goblins were wielding. Most of the goblins had bows and arrows which probably meant that a fair share of them would not all be joining on the initial charge to the town.

The two watched as the enemies passed their position. From the looks of it the original plan was still okay but the numbers that had been assumed were very skewed. In total only three goblins who had pulled out some very large shields were marching to the town. The others had already started firing arrows and the orcs simply stood there. It seems that they were pointing at the town and arguing.

"I guess they did not expect to see a wall there and that's causing issues?"

Anna shrugged, "Maybe. Are you still thinking the same for the plan?"

"Yea, I'll take on the orcs and you go for the goblins..."

She then interrupted him, "And I think we should flip." As he had a puzzled look on his face it was hard for her not to smirk. "Now you know how it feels, still in this case there are more goblins than planned and you can overpower them easier than I can. Rest of the plan is the same, once you are done join up with me to finish them off."

'So much to learn and adapt too', Mike simply nodded.

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The townsfolk saw the three goblins come out of the forest and sent as many arrows as they could at them. While they were also on the receiving end for arrows themselves the new defence was helping a lot to give them plenty of cover.

Ian shouted at the people around him, "Shower them with as many arrows as you can, make sure they don't get close to even hit the wall."

Austen then turned to him, "A lot more stayed behind, think we will be fine?"

Ian shrugged, "I'm sure we will." While he had said it, a part of him was a bit worried but he pushed that aside and focused on the goblins.

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Mike and Anna both rushed at their targets as quickly as they could. Anna reached the orcs first and Mike continued onwards to the goblins that were closer to the clearing. It was clear to see that they had not expected anything to rush at them from the forest and now was the time to capitalize on that surprise.

Mike first attack pierced the first goblin in the chest; he then quickly pulled his sword and slashed horizontally to slice at the side of the goblin next to him. There was no resistance from the second target as well. This left three more goblins that were now dropping their bows and took out short swords.

Not willing to let the momentum go Mike charged again at one of the targets. He grabbed his sword with both hands that prepared an overhead swing. The goblin was now aware but little time had passed from the initial surprise and while he had a weapon he did not have time to prepare a proper defence. As planned the move was blocked but Mike put as much strength as he could and pushed down causing both swords to knock down and hit the goblin. Most of the damage had been done by the goblin's own sword but the strike had been fatal and he suddenly dropped, leaving two fully prepared goblins to face off.

The orcs Anna saw were very large, they easily match any largely built human she had ever seen but with greenish skin color. She wondered if

they all looked like that or if these were simply special. Putting that question aside a contest of strength was out of the question, but there was speed to test out.

Anna's fist hit matched Mike's. She used a piercing attack on the first orc and as quickly as she could preform a horizontal slash on the one next to him. The attacks all hit and were successful but the end results were less than desirable. The first orc was on the ground but was still alive, for how long Anna had no clue. As for the second while he was now bleeding from the wound to his side that only seem to make him angry, the other issue is that the orcs were more battle ready than the goblins. Already the two others had recovered from their surprise and were already in the process of flanking her.

Now with two at her back and an angry one in the front Anna aimed at the angry one first as he was going to get first blow. The orc attacked her with an upward slash as he pulled out his long sword from this scabbard. Anna could have dodged the blow by moving backward but that was the expected move and would also bring her way to close to the other two that were going to attack as well in any second. With that knowledge Anna used her blade and preformed an upward slash as well, her target was actually the blade and not the orc. As both blades connected she knocked his higher and then moved forward to the orc's side and then quickly turned around. When the orc's swing finished Anna was now behind him and the other two orc's had to cancel their attacks unless they wanted to hit one of their own. As a bonus while she had moved behind him she had also been able to score a quick hit to the knee. The wounded orc turned around and while he was no less angry he was now wobbling a bit. *'Tougher*

*than goblins but no way as impervious as that Minotaur, this should work out.'*

Mike had finally finished up the two left over goblins, again he was impressed on how well they worked together in order to defend themselves. They had scored a hit to his left shoulder but it was mostly a flesh wound and nothing to worry about. He turned to the orcs, one was alive but down for the count it seems and there was another that was about to go down as Anna delivered another quick slash at her target as she moved around them.

Mike once again charged at his target as he was close to deliver the blow, the orc suddenly turned around and blocked the move. After having successfully defended against his blow the orc then pushed forward with their weapons still locked, the shear strength of these orcs was surprising. As Mike was losing the battle of strength he suddenly pivoted around the orc hoping for him to drop his guard and be unbalanced by the sudden change. This did not occur as the orc easily recovered and was now swinging at him in a horizontal slash. Surprised again by his battle prowess, but less so then the first initial block, Mike changed his tactic and retaliated at the orcs blow.

"Ahhhhrrrrrg!!" a scream was heard as the strike that was aimed at the orc wrist was successful, while the hand was not completely detached the enemy did drop the weapon and seemed unable to use the hand anymore. His reaction caused an opening to the chest that Mike would not pass up, once again gripping his sword pommel with both hands he aimed at the chest and while the orc did try to block, there was little to do so with other then the damaged arm. Mike pushed in more and finally his target fell to the ground.

While Mike had occupied one of the two remaining orcs Anna now had an easier time to figure out the speed of these new enemies. This left over orc was much stronger than her but he was also using an axe and the axe had nothing at its tip, leaving most blows to be horizontal or vertical. Anna easily danced around her target avoiding all the hits and also causing some damage on very important points on the orcs body while doing so. She knew that being too confident was stupid in battle but in this case she had this, all that she needed was one single opening. It's then that the orc looked to his side very quickly as they heard a scream coming from the other one that was engaged with Mike. A small smile appeared on her face as she lunged forward with her blade, the orc tried to block and would have if Anna had not shifted her weight at the last second causing her to drop to his side. Now that she was in the position that she had planned to be in she made a thrust motion with her sword and aimed it upwards. The blade entered his side and continued to slice in while still going up. Her target was dead and it was all done.

Mike pulled his sword out of his target, "Well that seems that it's all of them..."

His comment was cut short as the initial orc that Anna had hit and had stayed on the ground had pulled out a horn and was now blowing it.

A large horn sound could then be heard in the area.

Anna quickly slashed at the orc's head stopping the sound and the orc. She shook her head as she knew that that damage was already done. "...You just had to say it right?"

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Back in the town they had eventually dropped the three goblins and patiently waited to see who would come out of the forest clearing first. Eventually they all tensed up when they too heard a quick horn like sound in the distance.

Austen moved next to Ian, "You think that it means that they are retreating?"

Ian nodded, "Not sure, they did not do that last time they moved away."

"...Then reinforcements? Should I go check?"

Again Ian nodded, "No, they are smart. If something comes at them and they can't take it than they will run back here. If we all wait here we can cover them with the arrows we have left and attack whatever they are running away from."

Austen nodded and part of him was glad that he did not have to go in the forest to confirm, the other part was hoping that they would all be okay.

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Mike was standing ready next to Anna who was doing the same, "So any wounds on your end?"

"Just a minor scratch on my leg you?"

"Same but on the shoulder."

Anna nodded, "You know that we can't leave here right?"

"I know but maybe we can split and flank up, I mean they will stop at least for a second or two when they see this and then..."

The plan sounded good to Anna but it was not meant to be. "Too late I can already see them; they will be on top of us in a few seconds."

Mike was frustrated, "That makes no sense if they where that close why did they not join in? They must have heard the noise from the fight."

Anna did not disagree but for whatever reasons these four new orcs had not attacked and

had waited for the signal. "No time for that now, two each?"

Mike simply nodded and joined up with her against their new enemies.

Two of the four orcs charged at them, now knowing their strength they both dropped their own charge and moved the left and the other to the right. This cause the group to split up in two groups of two as was planned.

They needed to end this fast as they needed to get out of there before more reinforcement showed up, if more showed up. Strength was not Anna favourite weapon in combat as she was often at a disadvantage for some odd reason but seeing as these orcs acted the same as the others she thought that maybe she could get away with it this time.

The orc that had charged had instantly recovered and was already changing his attack to a horizontal slash at Anna while the other was coming at her from her side. Anna gripped her sword pommel with both hands as well and lowered herself to avoid the initial blow, she then move forward at her target and at the same time slashed at the arm that was holding the weapon. Holding on with both hands allowed her to cut deep, when she pulled out the orc dropped his weapon on the ground. Not finished with her attack she then pivoted around and slashed downwards at the targets leg, again causing a large deep cut. Suddenly the target dropped to his knees and then she twisted her weapon and thrust the blade to his neck pushing with her other hand at the end of the pommel. The sword cut in and defeated the target.

As she looked up to her next target she was caught off guard as he was suddenly not attacking her with his weapon but more concerned about the

orc that she had just killed. This moment of surprised cost her as the orc just swung his large arm at her knocking her and her blade backwards. Anna clumsily tumbled backwards until a tree trunk stopped her. The blow knocked the wind out of her, and while she had time to recuperate she now saw that she had to deal with a very pissed off orc that was suddenly charging at her. With very little time she dropped to the ground and tumble to the side as the orc weapon crashed on the tree trunk. As strong as they where he had some minor difficulty pulling out his blade, this gave her an opening that she needed. As she got up Anna sliced upward and aimed at the orc's armpit, there was no way that she could simply cut it off but she could score a large hit that would be very deep. When she did the orc was no longer able to use the arm but was now able to grab the weapon with his other hand and wildy swing at her with a horizontal slash. She dodged the blow and as it landed on the ground she thrust forward at the orc head. His other arm was useless and there was no way for him to move away, the move hit its target and another one dropped to the ground.

She looked at Mike's direction; he had dropped one on his own but somehow got hit on the leg which was slowing him down against his final target. Before she could approached to help he suddenly shifted his weigh on the damaged leg, what was something the orc did not expect, which permitted him to score a hit on the orc chest at a angle that had also not been expected. His foe then dropped to the ground.

Anna approached Mike as he stood up and pulled out his blade. "I guess it's not that bad?"

He nodded, "It looks worse than it is actually, anything on your end?"

As she confirmed the wound she answered,

"I'm sure my back will be very sore and blue later tonight but that should be it."

He smiled, "Good, let's move from here and wait to see if any others will come out."

They both hid and waited a good long while.

After a few hours Austen was getting worried, "I don't hear anything and nothing has come out, I think that this time I should go check up on them. They could be really hurt."

Ian nodded, "I guess your right..."

He then stopped and a large smile appeared on his face as the two came out of the clearing. When they got closer the cheering stopped as everyone was stunned at the way they looked. Currently they were both slowly walking back to the town, nothing else had shown up but they were wounded and also covered with a lot of blood all over. Overall they were a pretty gruesome site to behold.

When they finally reach the town Ian cleared his throat. "So, ah, how many where there in the end?"

The both stopped and Mike looked at Ian, "All in all that were eight goblins and in the end eight orcs, which was quite the party to attack a town like this one."

Ian shrugged a bit, "But they were stopped and soon Crusaders should arrive and with you and them here I'm sure we will be fine." Mike had a sad look on his face as he saw that Ian believed that, what was worse was that all the others around him also seem to believe it too.

"Sure, well in the meantime we will go and get cleaned up and rest up for the night." He then looked at Austen, "I'm sorry to ask but can you keep watch again like you did before?"

Austen nodded, "I'll get ready and head out tomorrow morning."

Ian gave Austen a pat on the back, "With

Austen here as out tracker nothing will be able to get us without knowing about it."

As Ian started laughing with the rest of the townsfolk Anna and Mike moved away and ignored them. "I understand your frustration with Ian but it seems that there is more to it."

Mike signed, "Yea I was hoping that after this he would be encouraged to listen to the evacuation order that was given. But it seems that our efforts only served to make him think that staying was the right decision after all."

Anna shrugged, "Seems like it, still without us they would all be dead after an attack like that. So we need to keep going, with any luck those Crusaders will arrive and then maybe things will change to our favour."

Mike smiled, "I hope so."

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After spending the rest of the day cleaning themselves up and unwinding after the battle they woke up at separate times the next day and made a few quick checks before meeting up together for morning practice.

Currently Anna had finished going over the patients and was heading to the location. The place they had picked out was only a few minutes away from the town and was next to the edge of the forest. Normally she figured that this place would be busy with lumberjack and a few other people going back and forth caring the materials to the store houses to be processed. Unfortunately the people in the town that had stayed had other concerns leaving the area pretty deserted.

As she approached she saw that Mike was already there, she smiled and quickly waved at him. When she got closer her own smile

disappeared as she saw that he was brooding over something. "Don't tell me that Austen is back and another attack has been spotted already?"

"No not yet, so there is that but now Ian is dead set in staying no matter comes their way."

Anna frowned a bit, "Okay but that's news that we already knew. You actually expected it to change overnight?"

Mike simply shrugged and Anna chuckled at that, "Trying to be an optimist I see? Still I don't blame you, part me also wanted him to change his mind. I'm thinking that the next wave will probably be as big as the last but this time with the reinforcements already there in the group."

Mike nodded, "I was thinking the same thing which leaves us with a few issues."

"Mainly can the two of us keep up and also keep these people safe." She then paused for a bit, "Knowing when those Crusaders will show up would also help us out."

Mike smirked a bit at that which made Anna wonder, "You're thinking of something bad aren't you?"

He sighed deeply, "It's been a while, and they did give an evacuation order so part of me wonders if they simply will not show up at all. I mean there could be something else going on at the same time so where do you go, the new place that is unprepared or the town that ignored your warnings?"

"Hmm, that is a dark thought but if that is the case where does that leave us and please don't say that we simply leave them be."

Mike gave her a small smile, "No I was not thinking that but assuming there is a next wave, which I'm sure there will be and then add in the possibility of another but this time even bigger. Looking at the big picture the odds are against us

in the long run."

"Well so far there is a lot we don't know so I say that we still try our best and see where it goes. Overall things are progressing at a rate that we can still handle it and we actually don't know about the Crusaders, they could very much arrive in the next hour as they could also not show up." She then gave him a small smile, "That said try not to think about the negatives too much it does not lead to a happy place."

Mike returned her smile, "I suppose..." He then took out his blade and forcefully changed his mood. "But as you mentioned let try the best that we can and on that I want to try something new for practice today."

"Oh, I thought that we were already doing something new for a while now?"

Mike chuckled, "You noticed that?"

She gave him a half smile, "Of course, but I can't see the end goal. I noticed that when we practice now you are closer to me forcing me to swing around you and vice versa. It was a small change at first but it became more obvious eventually."

"When I first saw the goblin attack I notice that they seem to attack in groups a lot and fortify each other as they are attacking. Now that's probably because a lone goblin against a trained human warrior is not that much of an issue..."

She then cut him off with a small wave of her hand and had a mischievous smile, "And yet you were so worried about them when you first encounter them a few months ago."

"Ah... Well... actual experience helps with that. Anyways, while their idea of fortifying themselves is a good idea it's also ignored to a certain extent. When they trained us there was little cooperation like that."

Again she interrupted, "Well that's a simple reason, Crimsons are at the top and battle tactic like that are for the weak... and so forth..."

Mike did not really agree with her but ignored the comment, "So I was thinking that we could incorporate it in our combat style but at the same time better and stronger then what the goblins use."

That statement made Anna curious so she let him explain more. "The idea is to combine our fighting strengths into one and at the same time cover our weakness."

Anna then nodded, "Making us overall better and also making combat safer and easier. Okay I'm in but in order to do that we need to be even closer and that could get interesting."

"Yes it could, but I think that it could also give us an edge. If I'm able to give you an opening then with your speed how many strikes can you get in? Also you are able to move around the enemy better than me, so how may hit from me will it take when you have them all twisted up?"

Realising the goal of the modification of the past practices and added with the two years that they had spent already together she figured that they could probably pull it off. "Well as I mentioned I'm in. I take it that you already have a plan then to try this out?"

He simply gave her a wide grin, which made her chuckle. "Of course you and swords, still this reminds me of those practices sessions and the things you came up with in order for me to catch up."

"Good times I hope?"

Anna gave him a half smile, "Of course." She then pulled out her own sword, "So shall we?"

He then started to go over the details and then they tried to apply it. There was a lot of little issues

at the start and they had to take it slowly, too slow for actual combat, but they were getting into the motions of it and with time they would get faster.

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A few days had passed and everyone was thankful but also on edge. On the good side of things Anna and Mike had had enough time to practice their new manoeuvre so that at this point they really needed a field test to figure out how to get better at it. Overall it required a lot of focus which limited their time that they could keep it up, but that would be a problem that would go away eventually and currently it may give them an ace up their sleeves against their next battle. The other thing that was good was that during the down time the villagers had acquired a few more people to add to the people that would help with the defence. Currently you had eight archers, that were now a bit more practiced than they were about a week ago, and you also had six others equipped with makeshift spears to attack anything that got too close.

At this point everyone saw themselves as ready as they could be, which also brought on the edge that everyone was feeling. They did not know what else to do to prepare more and they also knew that another attack was going to occur, but with Austen who had yet to return with his report it was easy for their mind to run wild with possible scenarios that all ended badly for everyone.

The next morning had arrived and Mike had joined Anna at the makeshift infirmary, it was sad to say but those that were there would probably stay there for a long while unless someone with better training or someone with healing power would arrive. When the rounds were done they

both headed to Ian, who was currently at the wall, to get an update on the situation.

"Any news from Austen?"

Ian slowly nodded his head, "Nothing so far..."

Anna quickly looked at Mike and then with a worried look moved to Ian, "Look I know that he is a good tracker but maybe we should go and check. I'm starting to be worried as he's been out there a long while now."

Ian shrugged, "I'm not going to lie I'm worried a bit too. Normally He can live off days in the forest if he wants to and he has on a few occasions, so I'm not worried about that but this time it's more than wild animals in the forest... Still he was told not to push it and he knows his limits so he should be fine." He then smiled at Anna, "I really appreciate your concern but it's probably best if you stay here and wait."

The both signed and left it there. Normally they would then head off for morning practice but it was hard for them not to wait a while to see if something would come out of the forest clearing and with that they stood and impatiently waited. What would be the first thing to come out, a fleet of enemies or their tracker?

They stayed for about half an hour and then they heard a scream, "He's here he's coming back..." They all did not have to ask who the person was referring too so instead they all focused on where the person was pointed too.

With someone pointing the way it was pretty easy to see, but it was also odd. For some reason Austen had taken the long way out and was coming at them from a lower position in the forest clearing. You could also see that he was running at full speed and a short time after you could also see that he was really out of breath and was pushing himself. This worried everyone, but at least soon

they would get some answers.

Austen had finally made it back and he beeline his way to Ian. "...Ian ...We need to talk... Fast!"

Ian approached Austen that had both his hands on his knees trying very hard to catch some of his strength back. "How bad is it Austen?"

Austen then stood strait and then pointed at the town hall building, "Order the others to get ready and follow me I'll explain the details there."

They all followed his orders but at the same time it only served to worry them more, if Austen did not want to give the news in front of everyone what did that mean for what was coming at them.

The town hall was a large building with a lot of benches in order to be able to sit the regular number of people that would normally be in the town of Xiphias. Currently besides the four of them it was empty and with about around fifty people left and some of them wounded, it stayed empty most of the time.

Finally able to speak normally Austen explained the situation, "There numbers are doubled."

Ian then cut in and then looked at Mike, "Well that was expected right? I mean double the amount of orcs and possibly a few more goblins making it just a bit bigger than the normal troops and the reinforcement combined."

That's when Austen shook his head, "No that's wrong, what I mean is double THAT number. So about sixteen goblins and I think twelve orcs. Overall I'm not sure on the exact numbers as when I reached that I simply moved as far away as I could and took the longer way around in order not the get spotted."

While his explanation was nice all three of them where only half listening after they had heard the number count. Anna slowly looked at Mike who

then broke the silence that had set in, "When will they show up?"

"Midday today I would guess..."

Once again a silence set in and this time after a while it was Ian that broke it. "You two alone can't handle that much right?"

Mike then had a mock smile, "Oh god no, that's way too much for us alone..."

Suddenly Ian and Austen were very worried, that's when Anna stepped in, "Don't worry we don't plan on simply leaving because of that." She then turned to Mike, "But it does complicate things a lot."

He then nodded, "That it does, let me think about this for a moment."

With those numbers they were easily one of them for two of theirs, while they had the defensive position all of their able bodies were not trained warriors which is what they were going against.

Mike then took a deep breath, "Okay so I'll make a few assumptions and assume that they will be okay as the last time my guesses were right it's just the numbers that were a bit off."

When they all nodded at his comment he continued, "We can assume that they will know that they will be attacked in the forest this time, sure we did not leave anyone in the forest alive to tell the tale but we also left the bodies there so it's something they will figure out pretty quick as they get closer. So assuming that, they will probably split their troop into two, one that will charge in and the other that will protect the rear."

Anna nodded at that, "That makes sense. They don't want to be attacked from both sides and eventually if nothing comes the rest will advance as well." She then turned to Ian and Austen, "If we head out to the forest again and take out the half that stay back, then maybe we have a chance."

Austen then looked at Ian, "That would leave us to deal with the other half until they can provide backup, assuming that time happens."

Ian had a worried look on his face but somehow still felt somewhat confident, "We are more prepared then the other times this time. I'm pretty sure we can manage." He then nodded as if convincing himself more than the others, "Yea, okay, I'll go and tell the others and try and get a few more people to man some bows to help out."

Mike held back a deep sigh as that was not the attitude that he had wanted from Ian, still they had very little choice. When Ian had made his mind up and was already starting to leave the building both he and Anna started to leave as well. They needed to get into the forest and quick in order to get into a good position so not to get spotted ahead of time.

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They tried to be as careful as they could and after a while they finally reached the attacking troops and they had also not been spotted. As it turns out Austen numbers where bang on, sixteen goblins and twelve orcs.

Anna whispered to Mike, "Now to see how it will play out."

It took a bit of time and from the looks of it some ordering around but in the end eight goblins equipped with shields and swords went out, they were also accompanied by four orcs that followed behind them.

"That least a few more for us to handle then planned..."

Anna smiled, "Maybe they just fear what's in the forest more than the village."

Mike then smiled too, "You're probably right. Still we can't simply charge in and we also can't

spread out to deal with the orcs as the goblins will probably take pot shot at us when they can."

Anna shrugged, "Well that only leaves one thing."

Mike nodded, "We need to take down one with the first attack. I'll start it up..."

He did not wait for her to confirm as he started his charge followed by Anna being right behind him.

As expected the orcs were not surprised at all when they saw the two approach them. A group of them stood their grounds in a defensive position and the others pushed back a bit probably to try and flank and encircle them as they got close. But that was part of the overall strategy so the two were not worried as they moved in.

Mike was the first to strike, he aimed his sword at the first enemy orc. Instead of just trying to knock it aside, which would have been impossible because the orc was expecting it, as the two blades met Mike continued and put more weight into it in order to push it even more. This tactic seemed odd for the orc and with one hand he was unable to stop Mike full body advance pushing his weapon aside. This opened up his side for Anna, who was right next to Mike, in order for her to pierce his chest with one strike with her blade.

The first target was down, but then that is where the real dance began. As the orc was falling to the ground the one on the left was already preparing to attack Anna who was open after that strike. There was also another orc coming at them from Mike side. Having practiced moving around each other for the past few days, Anna bent down a bit and pulled her sword out. As she did, Mike's blade passed over her head and blocked the attack coming at her from the orc to the left. Then Anna swung her blade in an upward motion in order to

block the attack from the right.

As the blade connected she did not stop moving but her target was not the right orc but the left one, and so she moved with dexterity over the body of the fallen orc and around the left side of the orc to their left. Mike did the same but moved to the right of the left orc and as he did nicked the leg of the enemy with a quick flesh wound. This caused the orc to twist to the right where Mike was, leaving another opening for Anna who stabbed at the orc from behind.

Having no time to see if the blow was fatal she then pulled out the blade and preformed an overhead swing in order to block the incoming blow from the orc that was next to the one that she had just hit. Mike then took his pummel with both hands and did a forward strike at the same target that Anna had just blocked to his chest. Mike then pulled his blade out and took a step back and shifted to his side to block a strike from of the orcs that had spread out earlier. Anna played defensive in order to cover Mike's back and blocked two attacks, once done she once again moved away but this time to the right of Mike and also the right of the orc that he had just block the attack and nicked the orc on his leg in the process. As soon as she did Mike moved to the left of his target.

Now in a similar situation as the previous orc, this current one was not going to be fooled by the manoeuvre that he had just seen a few seconds ago. He twisted to the left ignoring the women and prepared to block a hit from the man. He was surprised to see that the man, while close to him, was not paying him any attention but was instead blocking another blow from one of his others. He then realised the fake out as he felt a blade pierced through his chest, he only had time to voice one curse before he started falling to the ground.

Mike then moved backward to where Anna was positioned after having defeated the fourth orc. Arriving next to her the current position was the four leftover orcs in front of them and the eight goblins still firing arrows at the town as they could not aim at them in case they accidentally hit one of the orcs.

"So far so good."

Mike nodded, "Very, but now we need to change. Go for the goblins and then act accordingly."

Anna then dashed ahead on the side of the orcs in front, as she did she tried to score some quick hits at the orcs. One of them hit but would cause no issues and the other was blocked, still that mattered little as they were not her target anymore, the goblins were.

She continued passed the orcs and made her way to the goblin, running as fast as she did the goblin did not see her coming his way. As she plunged her sword into him she turned to the goblin next to him that had turned around and was now fumbling to get his sword out, he was too slow and he too felt her blade through his chest.

The other goblins were now very aware of her attacking their ranks, and suddenly changed their tactics. Two of them that were farther off still attacked with their bows the other four were now switching to their swords.

With arrows coming her way Anna used the goblin she had just dispatched as a shield in front of her in order to block the arrows. After she felt the two "trunks" as the arrows hit his already dead body, Anna then used the body and threw it forward at two of the goblins that were now coming at her.

As the body was flung forward the two charging stopped and tried to get out of the way.

One of them was successful while the other was not, who in turn fell on the ground flat with the body now on top of him. Anna had charged right after throwing the body and now aimed her sites on the one that had moved away as his defence was now broken. When she was close the goblin tried to block the blow but only succeeded in deflecting it, now instead of an instant blow to the chest he had a fatal wound to his side causing him to fall to the ground with blood running out of his body and little for him to do about it. Anna then took a step back and plunged her sword down at the target that was still trying to move the dead body away from him. The hit was a success and the goblin then stopped squirming, the odds were now four goblins, all with swords, against her.

Mike was practically on full defensive against the four orcs. Luckily he had managed to wound one of them that Anna had nicked as she had charged at the goblins, he was still in the fight but he was easier to block and slower to move than the others. The other things he considered himself lucky on were the fact that none of them had understood what he had said to Anna. It had not occurred to him at the time as none of them understood what they were saying, so why would the orcs. Still if that had not been the case things could have turned out much worse, more things to work on for future battles he tough himself as he block an incoming blow.

This bopping and weaving around the orcs continued for a long while, Mike could not afford to get flanked nor could he afford to get seriously hit. Currently his main goal was the same as Anna's had been, hold them off long enough until the other could come and help you out. The issue was that you could only do that for so long and really it only took one good hit and everything then fell

apart.

In order to improve his odds and help Anna give her more time, which he figured that she would need if his guess was right, instead of aiming for the one that was wounded he aimed for the others in order to wound them as well as slowing them all down as much as he could. If an opening happen he would take it, but given how these orcs where fighting unless something surprising happened he did not expect it.

Anna then pulled her sword out of the last goblin that was now on the ground she then turned to Mike, who was okay and holding the others at bay. He would need help but there were others that may need help more than he did.

She then looked at the village and saw that the fight was going pretty bad. A few goblins had fallen on the way and also an orc but all the others where now at the wall and where in the process of smashing it down. Anna put her sword in her scabbard and then reached down and grabbed one of the bows from the goblins that had not been damaged. Taking a few arrows as well Anna started to pick some targets.

Her first shot was way off, the bow in question was not in the best shape, still now she had an idea on how to compensate and the next shot actually hit one the of the orcs. She had aimed for the back and had hit the leg instead but she was getting there.

As Anna saw the orc she hit turn around and shake his fist at the forest clearing she let go of another arrow. This time her aim was perfect and it landed on his face, the orc fell to the ground. This caused the other two left over orcs to turn around, hitting a friendly by accident was one thing but a hit to the head falling a comrade was another.

Anna continued to fire some arrows and was successful in dropping another orc, by then some of the goblins had moved back and covered the leftover orc with their shield making it hard for her to aim at him. As she fired around to still grab their attention, Anna's hope was answered as the orc fell by himself probably due to the spear attacks from the villagers. Now that the orc had dropped the goblins then fell quick as they could not defend from arrows from the back, the top and also spear hits from the side. Once things were back under control, Anna then turned to Mike in order to help him out and hopefully finish this battle.

Anna charged in and hit an orc in the back; she then took a step back and pulled her weapon out as one of the other orc turned to face her leaving Mike with two.

Mike did not know who to thank but for some reason the one that had been wounded was still at his side attacking him with another. He suddenly changed his attack and aimed at the wounded enemy. Taking his sword with all of his strength he did an overhead attack at the orc on the side that was wounded. As expected the orc could not properly block the move due to the wound, causing him to suffer another large wound but this time on his left shoulder and arm.

As if taking advantage the other orc next to Mike moved in to attack, Mike ducked and twisted missing the blow that was aimed at his head and was also able to counterattack the orc slashing his stomach open. Not moving from his spot Mike then twisted the blade around and thrust it backward to hit the wounded orc now fatally. He then stood up and looked at Anna, who had already wounded her target to the leg and arm. Mike silently approached the last target and hit him on the back.

Once all of them were down they all took a moment to catch their breaths, "I take it the town is okay?"

Anna nodded, "There is damage and their maybe wounded but the attackers are taken care of." She then looked around herself, "Seems that it worked out great after all."

Mike smiled very happy that it had, "Very, and the practicality of the new style is much better than expected. Still there is room for improvement."

Anna nodded and smiled, "Ahhh more practice time after all..." Suddenly she stopped and then they both looked backward as a clanging sound was now heard from deeper in the forest. Anna looked at Mike with a puzzled look, "Reinforcements? If so who are they fighting?"

Mike simply shrugged, "No clue, but we will have to check it out." Anna simply agreed and then they both left in the direction that they had heard the sound from.

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It did not take long for the two to find what they were looking for, but what they saw surprised them a bit. They moved slowly in order to greet the figure clad in silver armor with a white cape and clothes surrounded by four dead orcs.

The person suddenly went on the defence but then relaxed as he saw the two approach him, "Crimsons?!"

Mike returned his puzzled look, "Crusader?"

The Crusader nodded, "Yes, so I take it that we have you two to thank for the mess we are now in with this town now."

Anna was confused and so was Mike, "What mess are you talking about, we help heal the wounded and also protected the town long enough

until you guys could take over."

The Crusader slowly nodded his head, "How little you know." He then pointed deeper in the forest, "Right now a large army is heading there to crush the town as there have been issues with the previous attack. What you just faced is simply a prequel to what is to come sometime tomorrow morning I would guess."

Mike was stunned by this, he had no reason to believe that he was lying but it also made no sense to him. "What?! Why send so many for just a small town... what is there to gain from that place."

The Crusader shrugged, "Nothing but fear. We don't even think that they plan on occupying the place once they take it. You may think you helped but really all you did is created a bigger bull's-eye on the town that was already present."

Anna was a bit frustrated to be told that all they had done had been for nothing, "If you are so knowledgeable what would you have done? Had we not been there many innocent would have died."

"We told them to leave, and after the first battle that you stopped we would have shown up, it's just that we received orders that things had changed at that point and that we needed to investigate. That's when we saw this."

Anna was shaking her head in disbelief, "After the first battle more would have died. With luck maybe they would have managed but by then all you would have to deal with was twenty to thirty people as all the others would have been dead..." She suddenly stopped and took a deep breath, "Ahh now I get it, you never planned saving the town did you?"

Mike then cut in and continued the accusation, "With a blow that they would have suffered from the attack you were planning on having an easier time to convince them to leave..."

now with what has happened it will be all the more harder. Still that makes me wonder, are you still planning on going to the town after all this and how many of you will show up?"

The Crusader was stoned faced, "We have our orders and I don't have to share them with you."

That answer pretty much gave everything they needed for the two. With a sad look on her face Anna looked at the man, "I also take it that you will not be heading back to the town with us then?"

He nodded, "As I said I have my orders." As he started to move away he quickly turned to them, "I suggest that you leave, good as you are you can't face what is coming and have no clue on what you are really fighting so leave the battlefield to those who do."

They watched him leave and both had a disappointed look on their faces. Anna was still furious, "A plan with cost in lives in the plan is not a plan that should be accepted." She then turned to Mike, "What now?"

Mike was not sure himself. They had the rest of the day to repair and prepare for something that would overwhelm them. "I'm not sure Anna, I'm really not. I think that we should head back talk to Ian and then see where we go from there."

Anna smiled, happy that he had not given up. "I take it that you hope that now he will change his mind?"

Mike smiled, "One can hope right?"

She smiled again and nodded in confirmation as they started their walk back to the town.

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They both took a bit of time in order to get back to Xiphias. Given what had been told and what they both expected they agreed to not speak of the

Crusader that they had talked to. They would also try and embellish thing a bit more when they talked to everyone, mind you from what the Crusader had said there was little need for that.

When they finally arrived they were greeted with large smiles from everyone that was helping defend the makeshift wall from the attacks.

"Man that was impressive, you two really live up to the Crimsons reputation. Also a big thanks for the extra hand back there." Ian then looked at Anna, "There were wounded and we have already moved them with the others, looks like it's nothing serious but if you could take a look at them?" Anna simply slowly nodded as Ian then turned to Mike, "We are also getting the wood ready to replace the wall section that was damage..." Its then that Austen took a step next to Ian, "And come tomorrow Austen here will go out again."

Mike had a bit of a sad smile, they had fallen into the pattern pretty quick which was good but killing their mood like he was about to do was not something he wanted to do. "Hold up, about that there is something that we need to talk about."

Both of them we curious, "Oh? Should we go to the meeting hall?"

Mike waved that idea away, "Here will be fine." He then looked at all of them; it seems that he had suddenly grabbed all their attention. "Austen will not have to head out tomorrow morning; it took us a while to get back because we took a little detour and already got the information on the next attack..."

Ian was surprised, "So soon, hmm... Well we will be ready for them the next time as well."

"About that, their numbers... Ian we can't take those on." Mike then pointed to the bodies of the enemies that were still being disposed off. "This time, think twice this much and also, from the

looks of it, there will not be arrows to help you out." He then pointed to the damaged wall, "This is what happened with those numbers and our help, think what will happen with twice those and no help."

Ian mood turned a bit sour, "You paint a pretty bleak picture there, like we already lost before we even try. Given the past battles you expect me to simply believe that?"

Mike was a bit discouraged by his answer, so was Anna but she did not want to simply leave it there. "It's a bleak picture alright but it's also the truth. And while you may be okay with the decision in your head, please think about the wounded that will not get a chance to act and everyone else that simply can't. You still have a ship there so it's not too late..."

Ian then cut her off, "So after everything we turn tail and run!?! I will not accept that."

This puzzled Mike a bit, "Why? I understand the importance of home and all that but is it worth your lives?"

Ian was now visibly frustrated, "You don't get it as well, I thought you did but you don't. We are not staying here simply because of that. It's a part of it but really we are staying here in order to protect our way of life as well." He then pointed to the tower, "Ever since that THING started spewing these things, nothing has been the same around here. Now change happens, we get that, but we also don't what to lose what we have when we have done nothing wrong. Don't you agree that we should stay our ground to protect this way of life? Or do we simply keep moving from place to place abandoning more then simply our homes every time they attack?"

Anna then had a sad smile on her face, she wished that she would have known the reason why

sooner as maybe they could have approached this differently but it was too late for that now. She then took a deep breath and looked at Ian, "You're right, I agree with you." They were all a bit confused by her statement, including Mike. She then continued, "I'm very happy that we were able to help you fight for that belief and we will do our best to continue to do that if you all stay, at least that's the plan so far. But this is no lie, with what is coming next, the chances of you seeing the next day are not in your favour at all. Knowing that should you not prepare for the worst? You want to fight for your belief, fine, and so far that's been good but don't you still have a duty to tell the others that the next one maybe too much and that you may not be able to protect them?"

Ian then calmed down a bit, "So essentially you're not forcing us to leave but warning us to take extra measures in case." Ian slowly nodded on that as he thought about it, "I... I can agree to that." He then looked at his men, "Okay town meeting everyone, left get everyone informed and then make the preparations."

This had not really gone as planned at all but there was little Mike could do about that, "I'll head with you in case there are questions." Anna then looked at him, "And I'll go look at those wounded." As everyone started to disperse Mike grabbed Anna's attention, "Once everything is done lets meet up at the practice zone okay?" Anna simply nodded; essentially she had volunteered them to a fight they could not win without even asking him about it, so it should make for an interesting time.

Anna had taken a bit more time in order to let everyone know that they may be moved soon and also to prepare for that. Currently she had finally made her way to the clearing spot that they had chosen for their daily practice sessions. Mike was

already preset, he did not seem happy but he did not seem mad. If anything he looked like he was in deep thought and there seemed to be some hint of frustration on his brow.

"Did they reach a final decision on tomorrow?"

That brought him out of his head, "Yes, it seems that they will follow your plan actually. The wounded and those that can't fight will be moved to the boat and everyone else to the wall in order to defend. Should the worst happen then the ship will leave with those onboard."

Anna wanted to smile and held it back, Mike then took a deep breath, "You know if that Crusader is right then we can't win."

She sighed a bit, already at that point, "Look I know that we said we would talk about these things but I mean I just couldn't. I'll understand if..."

Mike then cut her off by raising his open hand, "Stop, let's not go there. We are in this together, through the bad decisions and the good. Let just say that the next time it's me that we will be even... Plus it's not that this is a bad decision, I partly agree with it too... it's just..."

Anna moved closer to him, "It's just that this time it's pretty much a no win situation." She looked at him, "Is there no plan at all? Even a bad one?"

Mike could not help but chuckle at that one, "Actually there is, but it's a bad one and you and everyone else may not like it."

She wondered on that one, given what he had said the idea could not be that they would simply leave and she knew that he had no intention of dying out there so what could be so bad.

Seeing the confusion on her face Mike shrugged, "Look we can't stay and help them at the town otherwise we get overwhelmed. Again we need

to split their forces or at least slow them down, so that means we are in the forest again." Anna nodded, so far so good but there was an issue with that plan.

"If their numbers are right, then we can't stay and fight in the same position. We need to constantly move. Essentially we see a group, we do the most damage and then we move to the next leaving whatever is left for the wall."

Anna then understood the issue that he had mentioned earlier. "That's a hard call to make, how much is enough? And can the wall hold?"

Mike shrugged, "No clue, this battle gives us little options. Ideally we hit all the large targets and then move on. If we are good then the wall maybe can hold, I mean they could stop their progress and rethink the attack." He then looked away, "But all the little targets could also decide to pack up creating a large target and then we would not even know about it as we would be deeper in."

Anna thought about what he had said for a while, clearly that was what he was trying to figure out when she had arrived but really was there a solution to this. She broke the silence with a deep sigh, "Alright let do that then."

He was instantly puzzled, "Are you sure?"

She shrugged, "Is there another option? I mean this allows us to help them, keeps us alive and gives them time and possibly a chance." She then looked at him, "Still I think I want to add to it. Given that we now know why Ian was acting the way he was I think we can agree that he was not purely stubborn."

Mike slowly nodded, "Sure, I guess..."

"I think we should let him know about the Crusader, I know that could be dangerous but it could also give him and everyone else hope which they will need during this fight."

She was right it was possibly a bad call and the reason where the ones that they had originally left that part out, still that was when they both thought that he was being hard headed because he did not want to leave his home and things where a bit different now. "I guess we can tell him, at this point I don't think he will change his mind about the boat and your right that it could help. I just hope that they actually show up if we let him know."

Anna nodded, "Same here, we could really use their help on this one."

Mike nodded too, "Yes we could. Alright we can update Ian on the plan and then we will need to get ready ourselves. Plus a bit of rest would be a good idea if we can manage."

Anna smiled, "It would... and thanks for following my crazy idea." She then stopped him from interrupting, "I know we said to agree to do this but I still want to thank you for it." She then gave him a warm smile, "When it's the next time and I'm the one that follows then you can say the same to me... Okay?"

Mike chuckled a bit, "Sure sound good."

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The next morning came all too quickly for everyone but at the same time the wall had been repaired, the injured had been moved and Mike and Anna had time to unwind a bit and resupply before what was probably going to be the largest battle that they had ever been in.

Currently they were at the entrance of the town with Ian next to them. "So I see that you are not traveling light for this one?"

Anna smirked at the comment from Ian, for this battle they had bothered to bring their

traveling bags with them as well whereas before they had left those in the town. "Don't worry we're not going to run off on you."

This time it was Ian that smirked, "I'm not worried about that, with everything that you have done I don't see that you would do that." His smirked then disappeared and a genuine smile replaced it, he then also outstretched his hand. "Seriously thanks for everything that you have done, we will never forget it as long as we live."

Both of them shared a worried glance at his comment but still forced a smile and shook his hand before making their way to the forest to meet the incoming enemy. Along the way Anna wondered about something, "What do you think that was about?"

Mike wondered on that too and did have a few theories most of which he did not want to share in detail. "He's probably thinking that this will be the last fight so may as well say it before anything happens. I can't say that I don't see it that way a bit as well."

Anna had trouble with that comment, "You two are thinking too negatively on this... I'm starting to wonder if it's a male thing."

"I don't think that's the case, I mean hope for the best plan for the worst right?"

"Hmm, I guess but if you need to think about the worst for any situation all the time where does that leave the thoughts of hope and with all those negative thought do you truly believe in that hope?"

Mike was baffled by that one and had no answers for her at all, he did think that she had a point but did not really see a way around it. At that point they were soon approaching the forest, "Well whatever happens I guess we are both about to find out soon."

From this point on both of them walked slowly and tried to make as little noise as possible in order to not get spotted by the enemy first. With about half an hour's march they finally caught up to the advancing army. They move away a bit and crouched as much as they could.

Silently whispering to Anna it was easy to see that she was as stunned about the numbers as he was. "I count about around eighteen goblins."

Anna nodded, "That's not all there is a large troop of orcs coming our way, but they are too far for me to get a good count."

He then looked in the direction she had mentioned and saw the orcs as well, "As planned large targets first."

As he started to make his way to the orcs she stopped him and then pointed at the goblins, "Bunch of small targets make a large target don't you agree?" He did but they did not have time or capabilities to deal with both, he then nodded, "One-pass each, I'll head in first seeing as I'm slower."

When she confirmed he stood up and charged at the goblins. There was an initial surprise from the enemies but at the same time it was short lived and also caused little commotion with the goblins, after all it was eighteen against one. Still this reaction did help Mike as they did not instantly all pull back and aim their arrows at him, instead most of them continued forward as the few that he was charging towards took out their sword and got ready.

This was already a good sign he figured as he took his own blade and slashed horizontally at the enemy in front knocking his weapon away. Before the goblin could recover he then buckled down and tackled the goblin while at the same time he pulled back his sword and readied it for another attack.

As soon as the goblin that he had tackled bumped into the other one next to him, Mike used a piecing attack to try and stab both at the same time. The first goblin was an obvious hit and while the second one also got hit it was hard to tell if the wound would be fatal or not. Having no time for a check or to have a second attempt, Mike pulled out his sword and spun around with another horizontal slash to defend the incoming blow from another goblin. Mike then quickly stabbed the goblin at his knees and then turned and made a run back deep in the forest where he had popped up from.

The goblins that had stayed around switch their weapons and took out their bows and aimed a volley at him. As soon as the first volley was launched they reloaded, it's then that they saw another figure in a red cloak charge at them but this time it was a women.

Anna took advantage of the fact that they could not attack her or quickly defend themselves as their sword were away. She stabbed a goblin to his side and then pivoted around to slash at another to his side as well. Finally when they started pulling out their sword again, Anna performed another piercing attack on the one in front of her and then as they were about to counterattack she turned tail as well and made her way back deep in the forest.

With now two targets more goblins needed to break their advance and deal with the issue so that no more attacks like this could be done on the rest of the army. Anna rejoined Mike as they watched five goblins make their way to them. Suddenly Anna looked at Mike, "Did you get hit?!"

Mike shrugged, "Yea an arrow nicked my left arm... again. It's really nothing, I guess the aim was off due to the cape and I'm sure this will be

the first of many today but why that spot again is what I'm really wondering about."

Anna wanted to laugh at his obvious attempt to lighten the mood and normally she would have joined in but now the goblins were almost at range and there was no longer any time for talk.

She moved ahead to meet the first two that were charging at her, for the first she simply dodged the blow at the last second. This caused the goblin to wonder for a second how he had missed and look back, leaving him open for Mike's overhead swing. As for the second goblin that was charging she stood her ground and deflected the blow, the parry was successful but did not create an opening as she had wanted and because of that she pulled her leg back and kicked the goblin on the knee. The blow forced him to drop down and when he did she slashed downward with her sword and finished him off.

This had left her opened for the other three that were close enough now to take advantage of it, but neither were able to make the hit as Mike suddenly tackled into them. Goblins were smaller than he was by a lot so throwing his weight around was a very useful attack against them. This time because of how they had tumbled away from him he could not follow up with an attack, but that did not stop Anna as she jumped in and slashed and pierced at two of the three goblins.

Once again this left her open and the final goblin tried to take advantage of it. Mike continued his current duty of defence and blocked the blow making sure to lock the goblin's weapon with his. With the goblin trying to free his weapon he was an easy target for Anna as she attacked him from behind.

She then turned to Mike, "Not bad at all." He suddenly pointed deeper in the forest at a group of

orcs coming their way, "But we are now out of time."

Anna nodded, "I'll start it up you follow me." It was then that he stopped her and handed her a bow and a large quarrel of arrows he had taken from one of the dead goblin. "Actually I was thinking of something else." She smirked and grabbed the bow and quarrel.

Mike then took position a few steps ahead of Anna and in front of the incoming group of orcs that had splinted off from the main group that was still advancing to head to the town. He counted five orcs coming their way; they slowed down as they saw Anna ready to fire her first arrow. She let the arrow go and everyone, save for Mike, was stunned that her target was not the five orcs coming at them but the orcs that were advancing. This was not something they too had anticipated which allowed her a free kill, as she got another arrow ready the five suddenly charged as fast they could and the ones marching took out wooden shield to protect themselves.

Three orcs were now charging at Mike with two others behind them, he borrowed Anna's plan with the goblins and dodged the middle orc and moved to the left and blocked the left orc's charge leaving no openings for both him or the orc. Anna quickly aimed her second arrow at the knee of orc that was charging to the right, the hit was successful then the orc fell on the ground. This left the middle orc who had missed Mike but had continued forward to Anna, She quickly dropped the bow and took a step forward as she unsheathed her single edge blade in a forward strike. The blow had more power to it than she or the orc had realized and had caused him to take a step backwards. Even while surprised by the unexpected opening she still took another step

forward and then thrust the blade at the orc, the blow was a hit but had been deflected as the orc tried to block it.

Done with the contest of strength, Mike pulled back and then swung his bade across the orc's back that had been hit by Anna. As she then quickly finished him off, Mike turned to block the blow of another once again locking blade with him. Giving that the strength difference was now very similar, or in most case at a disadvantage for Mike with the orc, Anna had little time to take advantage of the opening that this had created. She jumped in and managed to stab him in the chest; it's then that she felt a hit to her leg. She turned to see that the orc that she had wounded with her arrow had scored a hit with his blade. The hit was very shallow as most of the padding on her leg managed to defend her, and as she spun backward with an overhead swing at the orc to finish him off she realised that the blow also caused no issues to her manoeuvrability.

With three down the two leftover orcs positioned themselves in a defensive position and waited for the other two to make the first move. Mike obliged them by charging at one of them with an upward strike, the blow got blocked by the orc. As the other orc started to take a swing at him Mike moved to the left, avoiding the blow, and ducked in order to avoid the horizontal back swing of the orc that he was currently engaged with. Now having missed both blows, he counterattacked the orc by slashing away at the back of his legs. The orc had no armor to help deflect the blow and was unable to move away as the other orc had moved too close to him. With primary veins cut on both legs the orc fell and would not last long.

Suddenly left on in the open the remaining orc prepared an overhead swing on Mike's still

crouched position. Mike faked a block action in order to keep the orc's attention which allowed Anna to position herself behind the orc and finish him off.

Mike stood, "This plan that we had is not going to plan at all so far."

Anna shrugged, "Well we did cause a large dent in both their forces."

It was not too hard for them to spot the next volley of enemies approaching. Mike then nodded at Anna's comment. "True, so I guess the new plan is to keep going doing what we can and hoping for the best then?"

Anna nodded, "We can think about the doom and gloom after the chips have fallen, but for now I agree on focusing on what we can do and believing in others to help out where we can't." She then picked up the discarded bow and followed Mike that was moving away in order to get into a better position as they had yet to be spotted.

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"Hey Ian when do you think they will show up?"

Ian squinted ahead to get a better view, "I'm not sure but I'm thinking anytime now so get ready everyone."

It's then that everyone turned around as someone started to shout behind them "Ian! Everyone! Crusaders! There here!"

Maybe not as secretly as he would have hoped Ian breathed a sigh of relief, with Crusaders they would be fine for sure. But they had warned him about this and they also mentioned an extra little something and as he saw them approach in their silver and white armor he saw that they were right after all. He moved to greet them and extended his hand, "We are so glad that you arrived, an attack is

about to take..."

The middle one that was looking around interrupted it him, "We know, you have about ten minutes before they start showing up." He then looked at him, "I take it that you are still not willing to evacuate?"

Ian pulled back his hand, seeing as none of them made any movement to accept it. "No we don't but if this goes bad a ship is ready to take the people that have stayed behind to safety."

"Then why take a chance with your lives? Why not take the safe route and leave now?"

Ian was starting to get frustrated with him; clearly he did not want to listen at all. "Because we still have a chance, there are people out there fighting for us. With their help and I'm assuming yours we can win I'm sure of it."

The two other Crusaders looked at what Ian assumed was the leader of the bunch and simply waited for him to reply. Eventually after looking around again the leader turned to Ian, "We have our orders but we will help." Ian was instantly relieved when he heard this but at the same time he was a bit worried as for a second there he thought that he saw surprise in the faces of the other Crusaders when the leader had confirmed the help. "Your defences look sound; we will head in front of the wall in order to protect it. Only fire your arrows when I command it, the idea will be to use them only against the larger groups only seeing as you only have so many."

Ian nodded and eagerly repeated the command to his men as the Crusaders made their way around to get to the front of wall that had been built.

"We will defend them? That was not the order I remember?"

The leader looked at his comrade with a small

smirk. "We are here to defend the people, even the misguided ones. I know our orders but something is wrong." He then turned to the other, "The numbers you mention don't match what my tracking spell is telling me, did you make an error in your scouting report?"

The man quickly shook his head, "No sir I did not, I think it's those two Crimsones that I told you about. I'm pretty sure that they are the cause of this miscount."

"Well the order still stands, defend if we can and leave once we can't. So far with these numbers and this defence we can hold this position. Still Crimsones are only normal people and you mentioned that there were only two of them, I just can't believe that just that were able to cause so much damage." Before the man could reply to continue defending his report the leader continued, "In any case, let smash as much of these invaders as we can. Also if we are able to report an unexpected victory..." He then had a large smile on his face, "All the better for us really."

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Both Anna and Mike missed the feeling of having only one minor wound each, currently they had been ambushed by a troop that had aided a group that had splintered off to attack them. The result had covered them with many wounds on their arms, legs and sides. Thankfully their armor and skill had protected them from any major injuries but now even the small ones were taking their toll.

After a long fight they were finally getting the upper hand with only four goblins and four orcs left. During this fight they had also noticed that while goblins and orc fought very well in each

group that if they attacked commingled, like they currently were, their synergy dropped considerably. Still with their old numbers this discovery meant little, but now they both thought that they could finally take advantage of that.

Currently two goblins were about to attack Mike with a thrust forward, plus there was an orc right behind them that was in the midst of swinging at him with an overhead attack. Anna was next to him but there was no time to communicate as already they both needed to move as more attacks were coming at them from different sides.

Mike dodged to the left where there was an opening, this caused the goblin to the left to miss his attack and the goblin to the right to not only miss but be pinned as he could not move left due to the other goblin or the back due to the orc still being there. Mike then positioned his blade up in order to block the orc attack. Anna followed the path Mike had created and moved around him while blocking and dodging an attack, when she finished she had positioned herself next to the orc that Mike had blocked his overhead swing of and preformed a quick horizontal slash followed by a thrust at the orc. The hit was fatal and as she pulled her blade out she kicked the orc body forward in order for it to fall on the two goblins pinning them beneath his large body.

The attack had created some more breathing room but also an opening on Anna which a goblin has quickly taken advantage of by running at her as well as an orc. The goblin's attack was a horizontal slash; Mike quickly moved in the way and planted his sword on the ground causing the goblin to hit it mid swing. As the goblin started to move his sword away Mike grabbed him with both hands and lifted the goblin off the ground and

threw him at the orc that was now very close by. The goblin flayed around as it landed on the orc who was then caught unbalanced and then fell on the ground with the goblin.

Anna suddenly jumped in next to him to block two attacks, as she did Mike grabbed his sword and then aimed at the two enemies and thrust downward piercing both of them. Mike then had just enough time to pull his sword out and block another orc attack, seeing as their numbers were dwindling even more he held the block for a few seconds. Seconds, that Anna took advantage of as she moved backward and slashed at the orc side that was open, and then she continued to move around him to hit him and attacked again but this time in his back.

The final orc watched his brother at arms fall and he charged forward, Mike quickly avoided the blow and counterattacked with a slash to his side. While the orc pivoted around Anna jumped in and finished him with a forward thrust.

By then the two goblins that had been pinned under the orc had finally been set free with the help of another, but now the odds were two against three. Both Anna and Mike charged at them and made quick work of what was left. The battle was final over.

Catching their breath Mike looked at Anna, "Are you okay?"

"About as much you are I'm thinking." Finally breathing normally she continued, "But hey, at least now we know why they keep separating the troops with only goblins and orcs."

He then nodded, "It's amazing to see the drop in coordination but I would think that it's not going to last as time goes by."

"I agree, I mean eventually they have to get the hang of attacking together. Here is hoping that this

invasion does not last long enough for that time to come." She then looked around and stared picking up a fresh quarrel from a goblin and another bow. Afterward she turned them over to Mike, "Here I think that you need to join in as well with this."

He nodded and took the weapon and then suddenly turned back to look deeper in the forest. "I wish we had time to bandage our wounds but it seems that another troop is close by."

Anna looked at the same direction, "I know I hear them too but is that not odd a bit?"

"I agree, we can hear them but not see them so they must be far still. That said they don't normally make that much noise when moving around."

Anna nodded, "Shall we take the long way around and see what the next challenge is?" Mike agreed and followed her in deeper in the forest.

It had taken about five minutes walk but then they finally saw what was making all the noise. There was a good eight orcs and those low numbers considering the past troops would have been surprising if not for the two very large creatures in front of them.

The beasts were around twice the size of orcs and their skin was a light sandy brown color, they also carried this massive club that was the size of half a small tree.

Anna shook her head, "Are those ogres? They're really that big?"

"I guess they are..." He did not really know what else to add. He wondered if they could take those, at the same time he wondered if they even had a choice in the matter. They were really wounded and with this unknown enemy on top of that. "...So big targets right?"

Anna tried to hold her chuckle, the comment was not what was funny and nor was the situation

but it's just that she had been wondering the same think herself. "I wish I could say that we can just leave this but..."

As she trailed off he continued, "I know, deep down I feel the same." He then looked at her, "You think that we can split them off somehow?"

She lifted her bow, "Join me and let's find out."

The makeshift plan was to fire a few arrows at one of the ogres and hopefully split the group up, if not then they would try and aim for the orcs as they made their way in the opposite direction that they would be coming at them from.

In position they launched their first arrows. The hit was good for both and both landed on the chest of the ogre that they had aimed for. Very quickly two mixed emotion set in for the both of them, the first was relief as the group had split evenly with four orcs and the one ogre coming at them while the other continued forward. The second was worry as the arrows had barely pierced the body of the ogre, the hit had been so weak it seemed that as the ogre brushed them aside that barely any blood was visible from the wounds.

They still had time so they attacked again with arrows but this time aimed at the orcs, again their aim was true and both scored hits. Due to Mike's angle he could only heavily injure his target orc, Anna had better luck and was able to drop her target. With the enemy drawing close they dropped their bows, pulled out their swords and then suddenly split up.

Mike aimed at the orcs currently they were both side by side with one attacking with an overhead swing and the other a horizontal one. Mike dodged the overhead swing that landed on the ground and blocked the other with his sword. Without missing a beat he then pulled his sword back and hit the orc that was pulling out his blade

from the ground to his face with his sword pummel. The attack confused the orc for a brief second that allowed him to move between them and while he was at it sliced a hit on the other orcs side. The wounded orc then tried to pivot and counterattack him with an overhead swing, the blow was slowed down a bit probably due to the wound which allowed Mike to dodge it by moving backwards. He then blocked the swing from the orc that he had hit to the face.

At that time all three of them were all very close to each other, but more importantly both orcs were right behind each other. Mike pulled back his blade and pierced forward, the first orc in front moved away but Mike continued his attack, because of the closeness the orc behind him had not had time to see the attack and could not react fast enough to the hit that was suddenly coming at him as his companion had moved away. The blade hit him square in the chest.

Mike pulled the blade out in order to dodge the attack of the left over orc next to him and counterattacked with a slash to the knee. He then purposely moved around the wounded knee and slashed again but this time to the side. Both hits were very serious but the orc still did not fall and instead tried one last desperate attack against his enemy. With his current speed it was easy to miss the attack and position himself for a final blow.

Once delivered Mike quickly checked up and Anna, who seemed to be holding her own. He then moved to the orc that he had targeted with his arrow to finish him off in case he somehow alerted the others as it had happened before.

Due to the wounds, or lack thereof, that the arrows had caused the ogre Anna approached her target carefully. It did not take long to see that the ogre was simply a fighting brute that relied

completely on its size and strength to kill their targets. Even with the many wounds that she had suffered herself she was still faster than the ogre's attacks, which was good because it could possibly only take one hit to fully incapacitate her.

Now that she had a good idea on his attack pattern she needed to test her own attacks against him. As she dodged a swing from his massive club Anna counterattacked and aimed at the creature back leg. The hit was successful but there was a lot of muscle resistance, which was impressive, that caused the hit not to be as deep as it should have been. That said the creature was still wounded and more so than another large creature that they had recently fought against.

Testing another attack Anna continued to turn around her target and then slashed again but this time at the ogre's arm. With more strength behind the blow, this time the ogre really felt it and then roared in anger, which caused Anna to smile as the ogre started to attack with even less control than before. Now with an injured arm Anna focused on that side and then hit the leg not once but twice. From that point on it took everything the ogre had to attack from his right side and after a while he even had to start defending himself as Anna speed up her attacks.

Now with the ogre completely on the defensive and with his attention focused slowly on Anna, Mike moved in from the back and grabbed his sword with both hands and stabbed at the creature plunging his sword deep in his chest. As the ogre roared in pain, Mike let go of his blade and moved back. In a desperate move the ogre lifted his weapon and swung at the new target. As Mike dodged Anna preformed a similar attack that Mike had and now with both blades deep in his chest the ogre fell to the ground.

As they recovered their weapon from the dead body Mike was surprised at how well that had gone. "I guess all that combat with that Minotaur gave us more experience against larger targets than expected."

Quickly recalling all the trouble that they had against that creature Anna smirked "Seems like it, which is good because we have another one to catch up too and take down."

Mike picked up their dropped borrowed bows, "Why did I know that you were going to say that?"

She took the bow and a sudden half smile appeared on her face, "Because you know full well that there is no way that I would let something like that reach the village if I could do anything about it."

They quickly made their way to the target group that had advanced and used a similar attack pattern with this group but this time they focused their arrows on the orcs right away. Now with proper line of sight and knowledge that there was no point in wasting their first volley on the ogre there were able to take down the orcs and the ogre itself in very little time.

Once the fight was over they were greeted with a pleasant surprise as both of them could not hear or see anymore incoming enemies.

Anna then dared to say it, "Does this mean that we are done and that we survived?"

Mike was wondering that himself, "I guess so, still let's take a quick look deeper in just to make sure."

They then moved deeper in the forest and while they did see more orcs and goblins none of them were moving in the town's direction. From the looks of it they were patrolling more than anything. Not wanting to push their luck both of them disengaged and made their way back to

Xiphias to see if they had also succeeded at the other mission.

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Once they felt safe, they took the time to bandage the wounds that were getting worse and eventually made their way back. Along the way they encountered no resistance which they were both thankful for. As they finally reached the edge of the forest they both release a large sigh as a large weight had suddenly been lifted off their shoulders, Xiphias was still standing.

Mike pointed at the wall, "It's damaged at certain parts but it's still there and I can see people moving on the other side, looks like we did it after all."

Anna then smiled as she focused on the damaged parts of the wall that allowed for a better view inside the town. "Look, I think I see some white and silver armor, seems that the Crusaders made it in time after all."

Mike focused as well, "Looks like your right." He then turned to her, "Hmm, I guess then we did not succeed after all in a way."

She quickly lightly slapped his shoulder, "How dare you say that? I mean sure if not for the Crusaders there would have been casualties, but those in the boat would have made it out and I'm sure that some of them would have joined up as they lost momentum during the defence." She then smirked at him, "There is no way that I'm letting you look at this as a loss. I mean given the comments of that Crusader that we talked too if not for us I'm not sure they would still be at that town now."

Mike slowly nodded, "You're probably right." He then looked at her, "So shall we make our way back?"

Anna thought about it but then slowly nodded her head, "Nah, something tells me that would only cause issues especially with the Crusaders." She then looked back at the large tower, "I mean if they are dealing with this all the time I'm not sure if I can blame them with their reaction as much as I did."

Mike then looked at the Portal Tower as well, "True, if the orcs are able to throw so many to attack one town it make me wonder on their overall numbers and resources."

Anna nodded, "All the more reason to stay clear I guess. Plus there is already a large group dealing with that thing there is no need for us to get involved."

"I agree... but then if you don't want to go back to the town where should we go next?"

Anna thought about it but no destination came to mind. "I'm not sure, tell you what, why don't you pick this time?"

Mike smiled, "No preference because your too exhausted as well to think of one?" Anna simply teasingly smiled. He then slowly nodded his head back and forth with a small smile on his face; he then took a moment and thought about where they where and where they may want to go. "You know this may take us a while but why not head back to city of Navis?"

Anna thought about it and then nodded, "Sounds like a plan. That place was so big and now that we have money maybe we can take the time to enjoy it a bit and try some of the tasty food that they have around."

Mike then nodded, "We can also look at the types of swords that they have. Being a city that focuses on trade so much they are bound to have many different types."

She suddenly laughed out loud, "Blades are

forever on your mind right? Even after all this."

Mike could only shrug as a response. He then looked up at the sky, it was almost midday and they had spent half the day in battle. "Well now that we have a destination and enough time before the end of the day, let try and find a safe spot and rest for the rest of the day." Anna had no arguments with that idea and followed as they slowly walked away.

After a while she turned to him, "So after everything that we have done how does it feel?"

He chuckled, "From helping to repair a house, to wolves and our first goblin encounter, to then jump to fighting a Minotaur and then a mage, and then finally to this... I have to say that things escalated very quickly overall."

Anna could only laugh at that as she too was surprised at how things had ramped up.

"Still I guess that this will be as high as it will go for us and I'm fine with that."

Anna was playfully puzzled by that comment, "You think so? Well maybe you're right and maybe you're wrong." She then looked ahead and then felt a small breeze on her face; it suddenly created a clamming effect for her. "Hmm, you know I want to see more places and try as best as we can to help out where we can. If we can do that I'm sure that we will end up on the right path for both of us."

With a smile on her face she then looked at him, "You agree too right?"

He looked at those brilliant green eyes of hers and nodded in agreement, "Of course I do."

They both smiled and slowly continued their journey towards their unknown future.