

Lights Templar

Origin - Book VI

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by
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Dedicated to a new beginning

Interlude 1

"So what's the plan for the next few days, we just sit around and wait?" Everyone looked at Adam with puzzlement. The question was a good one and they all had wondered about it during the resent hours that they had spent setting up the makeshift camp that they would be staying at for the next little while.

After they had taken care of the bandit camp that had been taking advantage of lack in local security due to the resent issue with the lord of light, the next step was to deal with the bodies of the dead and also teleport the ones still living to the closest jail that could handle them. At the same time they would also transport the merchandise that had been stolen so that it could be, ideally redistributed back or at worst sent someplace that could use the items.

While they had been preparing the gate to move them Alexandria notices a few magical items in the pile and this is where things had started to get complicated.

Alexandria slowly shook her head, "Look, Adam I get it but as I explained we can't simply give the magical items to people that will not know how to handle them. Especially after I identified a few and saw that it would be unsafe to magically move them to Astrum. And on that note given Astrum current resent change they are a bit busy and can't deal with this, plus given how we left I'm not really sure that I wanted to bug them for something like this, and so a merchant that I know from Newport had to be used but they will take time to get here and..."

Adam stopped her there, "I know, I know, look

given what happen with the last magical blade that fell into the wrong hands at the tower with the Crusaders that's the last thing I want to repeat as well. And I also get that it will take them a while to get here in order to get all this stuff, I was simply wondering what we plan on doing while we wait... that's all." He then smirked at her, "I don't always disagree with you, you know."

Alex now felt that she should apologize as that's what she thought his intent was, but figured she would let it go considering all the others time he too had not bothered. With her body language betraying her Anna figured that she would help out, "How many days did you mention again that it would take?" She gladly took that question, "Hmm, let's see... sometime tomorrow mid-day around from what the merchant said."

Anna thought about it while she turned to Mike, "That's not too bad, it only means one night here and then we can move someplace else. Any clues to where that could be?"

"Not really, we are kind of going by where the wind takes us right now. That is until we figure out what path we want to take."

A look of excitement then showed up on Alex's face. "Oh maybe we should try and find a forgotten cave of some sort. Maybe we can find some cool magical items or forgotten book there that someone hid in the past."

Adam shook his head, "Don't we have enough issues with magical items now? And you want to go looking for more?" Rosamia quickly gave him a quick poke to his side, "That's not really the same thing, as these items belonged to someone recently and we can't simply just take them for ourselves."

"Yea yea, whatever, just as long as we don't have to climb another tower anytime soon I'm good for anything. Still cave or no cave that does not

answer my question of what are plan is until they arrive? Are we simply just going to sit around?"

Seeing as no one was coming up with an answer Iris figured that she would take a shot at something that had popped in her head. "Ah, on that, I know this will sound weird but we could kill the time with stories of ourselves. Like important moments in our past. I mean I've heard some of them for others but rarely from the people themselves." She then paused for a second, "Plus given everything that has happened recently to us and, well everyone else, I think it could be good to you know remember."

Anna smiled, "Remembering the past to help with the present and help path our future?" Iris smiled back, "Something like that yea."

Adam was wary about this, "I don't know some things are better left and in the past and forgotten sometimes."

His negativity would not stop Alex from jumping on board with the idea, "Well I like it, plus depending on what you mentioned I may finally learn why you're such a grouch all the time..." She then smirked at Adam, "Unless that's how you were born."

Adam was not taking the bait on that one and had genuine concerns, "Look I'm just saying that some of us have actual skeletons in our closet if you know what I mean..." He then stopped as the mood of everyone dropped; he half wondered if he had gone too far again and got the confirmation when Rosamia looked at him. "I think that after everything that we have been through all of us are like that." Seeing as he did not argue Rosa then turned to the others but mostly focused on Iris who was feeling a little bit lower than the rest probably because she had brought it up. "I know it could be hard for some, but I too agree that it

could be an interesting idea." She then gave them a warm smile, "Plus it's not like there are other ideas and this could help."

Adam was still not convinced but did not voice his concerns this time. Seeing as the scrooge of the group had no other comments, Alex turned to Iris with a smile as well, "Looks like it's a plan." She then turned to the others, "So who will start us off?"

Adam had a wicked grin on his face and jumped in before anyone else could, "Why don't you go first, I mean I'm sure you have tones of interesting things to talk about."

Alex was a bit surprised as she had not intended to go first but as she looked at the others who seemed content in her going first she figured why not.

She looked at him, "Fine I will." Her response was a bit more snarky than she had intended to be but she also knew that Adam would not take it personally. I mean all he cared about was probably skipping his turn or not going at all. Still, while she was fine going first she did wonder about what to talk about.

"Where would a good place to start..."

"As long as it's not the day you were born because that could take longer than we have..." Adam then stopped and then thought about it, "Wait on second thought..."

He stopped his comment as he noticed the glares coming at him from multiple people one of which being Rosa. As Adam had that apologetic look on his face, Rosa turned to Alex, "His comment aside and as interested as I would be to hear about your mother who I don't think you have ever mentioned anything about, how about you start at how you actually passed the Council test. As you already know I was very impressed when

you mentioned it a long time ago but I never got the chance to ask how it all happened."

Ignoring the subject of her mother completely Alex jumped at the easier item, or at least the item she thought was going to be easier. "Well in the past I could not have told you about it even if I wanted to, seeing as if word got out on how they test it could cause an issue in the future but I suppose now that's all done it does not matter."

Having made up her mind on where to start Alexandria, and everyone else, got as comfortable as they could.

"Let's see, well this may not surprise any of you at all but I guess this starts where pretty much everything starts for me, I was reading a book in the library of Astrum..."

Chapter 1

The warrior took a quick look at his fallen comrades and then at the village behind him with the people looking at him, wondering how many more seconds they had before the end came. With this final look the warrior was now resolute in his next action.

He faced forward, looked up and gave his target a searing look of hatred. This look was reflected back at him in the reptilian eyes of the large dragon that was in front of him. The warrior knew that he had no more time left before the dragon breathed his large flame at a target. He also knew that even if the dragon shared the same hatred as him for his enemy that his target would be the village and its people.

Focusing on his emotion the warrior's blade started to glow red and then turned to a pinkish color only to finally end up in a bright solid white. He would save them all and kill his target that was the only thing on his mind as he raced to his target as it started to breathe in.

The dragon was about to unleash his fiery flame attack as the warrior swung his sword at the center of the dragon. When the swing reached its apex the white glow left the sword and launched itself at the dragon at great speed. The reptilian eye went wide as the glowing ball entered his body. He barely had time to realise that his death would be imminent as his body exploded from within, after the internal explosion the large creature fell to the ground.

The impact was felt by all the villagers, but not

the warrior as he had already fallen on the cold ground as soon as his attack had left his weapon. His brave sacrifice saved the town and its people.

Alexandria closed the book that was not even half way through, the title read 'The Dragon Wars story edition - book 1'. She smirked as she passed her hand on top of the cover, "Thanks for everything brave hero." Part of her wondered what it would be like to fight creature's such as dragons, she also wondered if she would have the courage to face something like that or would her nerves get the better of her.

"No point in trying to figure that out, as that's something that can't happen anymore." While there was a war going on with humans and elves their enemy were orcs and not dragons. Dragons had all been killed during the war of the dragons and will never be seen again. Still Alexandria figured that if she was around the right people she would be able to stand against something like that, she just felt it deep inside of her.

She looked around; currently she was in one of the many wings of the library of Astrum. She spent most of her time here alone with nothing much to do but read books. She sighed deeply, "I guess my chances of that happening are as good as dragons still being alive."

She put the book back and got ready to leave. For a long while books had been her only friends, they had also been great teachers, as well they also showed her other cities, towns, history, adventures and mostly importantly magic. If not for those books and all the time that she had spent with them there was no way that she would be ready to be asked to take the test of the Council of Astrum.

Alexandria, finally stepping out the library made her way to the Council meeting room that she had been told to go too. As she did she looked

around the city that had been her home since the day of her birth.

The place was stunning and brilliant, magic was everywhere and outside of the guards anyone here could use it. As you looked around you saw elves and humans marveling at the skills that one had mastered using it, most of them being elves. Still if you wanted to learn about magic this was the place to be as the place was brimming with it and to demonstrate this, the city was forever floating above a large river inaccessible no one unless invited. There was no way to reach it by foot, and if you tried to fly in using your own magic large pillars imbued with magical energy would stop you. The only way in was using a teleportation circle in the near town of Newport, which was also heavily guarded.

It was beautiful and peaceful and Alex did count her blessing that she had been here all her life, still as she continued to walk alone to her destination it was hard to ignore the little thought in the back of her head that compared this place to a beautiful cage and her being the canary trapped inside of it.

It's not like she could not leave Astrum but because of Alexandria's status things were a bit different. She was the daughter of Richard, the first human in history to be accepted into the Council of Astrum, the group that ruled this city. When she was younger this felt like it was less of an issue, she lived in a nice city always had friends that were ready to be around her and a dad that loved her. At times they would go down to Newport and visit especially when people of interest came by, and while she was forbidden to leave Newport due to her age it did not matter to her.

As time went by and the friends around her grew older their motivation also became clearer.

Indirectly Alex had access to things that normal people would not, while she was a curious by nature sometimes she peeked into things that she should not. One time she had been accompanied by one of her friends and while nothing bad happened during, Alex did receive a mouthful from her dad and was made to promises never to do that again.

Alexandria took her promises pretty seriously plus that was not a situation that she wanted to experience again, unfortunately her friend was not on the same page as her and did not really care about that. Because of that Alex needed to say goodbye to her friend, what she did not realise at the time was that this was the start of many goodbye that would follow until none were left around her. It's then that Alexandria realised that all this time she was around people that were not there to be around her but to be around what they could have access to if they were with her. When that had to stop, it seems like there was little point to continue the facade that they used when Alex was around them.

At the time, determined not to give up, she tried to befriend the other race that you could find in Astrum, the elves. She learned that while elves did not have the hidden motivation that her human friends had they also had little motivation to make a lasting relationship with humans. They would gladly help out with a project or research, talk from time to time but never really connect with you on a personal level. Maybe this was because of the life span difference there was between the two races, or maybe it was something else. All that Alex knew was that because of it, besides respect for one and the other, it was really hard to reach anything deeper.

And even then respect was easy to reach with

the older elves, but that was not the case with what was considered the younger elves. Automatically, even being younger, they had lived longer than any human and this gave them an air of arrogance when dealing with humans in a lot of times. There were exceptions but generally because of this younger elves simply grouped up together and ignored their human counterparts.

This had left Alexandria with being able to be with the older elves which often looked at her like a child but were still civil with her, her dad and her books. Traveling around without her dad or an escort was now out of the question, which left her with a lot of time on her hands. Time that she spent learning about magic, how to use it and how it worked. When she was unmotivated or more often than not drained because of the practice she then learned about the history of it which helped her understand the meaning behind the spell that she learned to use. Or sometime she simply read fiction which allowed her to remember to always try to see more than what was there.

Eventually after a lot of work, practice, tests and many courses she finally got the honour to be invited to take part in the test that everyone in Astrum hope to take, the Council member test.

The Council is a group of nine that hold the power over everything in Astrum, for as long as it's been created the group has always constituted only of elves. Only recently by elves standard has a human join their ranks. This was done by first passing the Council member test, this test is rumored to evaluate your magical abilities and understanding in a combat situation. Passing this test does not automatically make you a Council member but it does make you a contender should a replacement be needed, you also have access to Council only items and knowledge and you are also

a part of the Council duties and talks that take place. This contender period also allows the members to evaluate you on an ongoing basis; if you don't meet the criteria then you will be removed. What those criteria's are no one really knows but removals have occurred in the past which tends to keep anyone on edge a bit even after passing the test.

She finally reached the double doors and then paused for a quick moment to catch her breath. The summon at the Council chambers today was to go over the test in question, see who her opponent would be and also know when the test would actually take place.

Alexandria had already assumed a few things about this. First was that her opponent would be an elf, given the human rankings in Astrum there where very little other options. Sure there were other humans that knew more about magic then she did but they were also pretty old, which for a human participating with other elves in the ongoing of everything was a negative aspect. By the time they would get up to speed on everything they would be near the time they would have to find a replacement. With that in mind it left only elves. The other thing she had assumed was that she would be in some sort of combat situation against something where she would have to deal with better than her opponent. It really did not matter who the elf was as instantly they have knowledge of more spells than she did and generally knew how to cast them better as well. That said, depending on the target, having more options could be a negative. Also knowing more spells and casting them better did not instantly make you better at decision making depending on the situation you are facing and finally humans then to be more daring then elves by nature. With those

facts Alexandria knew that she had a chance to be on equal footing and depending on her opponent maybe even have an edge over them.

"Alright, time to face my future." She opened the doors and stepped in.

While she had meet Council members this was Alexandria first time at one of the meetings. The room itself was pretty plain looking. There were no windows, and lighting was produced by magical fire on the walls. At each corner of the room you had magical guard statues, golems really, that would activate given certain circumstances. Last item was a communication orb in the middle of the room and that was it. No chairs, tables or furniture of any kind.

As she made her way in she instantly spotted her father, being the only human in the group standing in a semi-circle in front of her he stood out a bit. She gave him a quick smile, which he returned. The other person that stood out was Solanar, while in theory all Council member where supposed to be equals there was one that had more weight than the others. She did not know why or what that entailed but she had to admit that seeing him in his official robes, that where slightly different than the others did make him very imposing compared to all the others. When she reached what she assumed was her designate spot on the other side of the orb and with her opponent to her side, she bowed in respect to all them. When she did there was another elf that suddenly stood out to her and his name was Lithius.

While she knew him more than any other elf the reality was that he was more a friend to her dad then her. That in itself was odd, elves where close to humans and worked together but Lithius when beyond that with her dad. It was easy to see

that what they had was true friendship. In the past she had asked her dad about that but he had given her no details about it and Lithius was worse when she had asked him. Eventually she had pieced together that her dad had paid a sacrifice of some sort in Lithius place and ever since then they had been inseparable. What that was she still had no clue, and for a while she was worried that he was fooling his dad and was simply with him to repay his debt for the sacrifice made. Eventually she saw that it was not the case whatever had happened and however it had started the end result was true friendship.

While that was the case for him it was not the case for Alex. She did not hate Lithius by any means but it was always easy to see that she was not comfortable around him. She always felt like he was judging her and also lecturing her. There was also a part of her that wondered if he enjoyed torturing her in a way. One time her father had gone on an actual adventure, she had begged him to let her join him as all he needed to do was recover a lost book. Sadly he had not budged on his decision and worst he had given her care while he was away to Lithius. Lithius saw that she was not happy with the decision so he struck a deal with her, if she was able to pass his test then he would personally escort her to her dad and let her join him. The test was simple all she had to do was get past the shield that he had created around her home, Astrum and Newport. The catch was that if she failed to break a shield that she would have to restart from the starting home position, the cruel part was that every time she restarted he would recast all shields differently and stronger so really she only had one shot at it. By the time she had finally made it, it was too late and her father would be arriving soon. No, she did not hate Lithius but

she did not like him.

Alexandria then quickly turned sideways to see who her opponent was, and she was shocked. While she did not know him personally, she did know of him. His name was Ehalaas, he was brilliant and very gifted with magic. Unfortunately that is where his good qualities ended, because he was so intelligent he was also very pompous even among his own kind. His outlook on humans was also very negative as when it came to magic he never took them seriously, in his mind how could he. Alexandria cringed a bit after the shock went away, she quickly changed her emotions to neutral and hoped that no one had noticed but still she wondered why of all elves he was chosen. There had to be better candidates, this simply added even more reasons for her to win as she would have to be a better choice than him. Heck in her mind there were many other better choices.

As Solanar began her attention was focused once again on the Council in front of her.

"Welcome both of you and also congratulations on making it here, I hope that you both realise the honour and responsibility that comes with being in your current position." Solanar then quickly nodded at both of them and continued, "Now before I go in the details of the test I must first warn you that while you are able to confirm when and who your opponent will be in this challenge you are not to speak to anyone on the challenge itself. Failure to do so will not only get you disqualified but barred from ever being chosen and a punishment will also be applied on top of this. As well you will not be able to receive any help from any members of the Council on this test. This is a challenge you need to resolve on your own using your own strength. Is that understood?"

Alexandria felt a bit targeted on that last comment of help from Council members but did not let it bother her, "Yes, I understand."

Ehalaas quickly turned to Alex with a small wicked smirk on his face and then turned back to Solanar, "There should be no worries from my side, and of course I agree with the terms that you have mentioned."

Solanar nodded again at both and then quickly turned to the other members to see if they agreed as well. Once approval was received he turned back to them, "Excellent, now as for the challenge itself it will be very simple. In one week you will both go to a room that will be specially prepared. The room will be empty save for rows of guards on both sides; nothing else will be in the room. For the task that will need to be preformed, you will need to cast a magic sealing spell on your opponent."

As soon as he said it both Ehalaas and Alexandria's eyes went wide in shock. A short while after Ehalaas forcefully held back his laughter and then composed himself, while no one commented on it everyone understood why he had reacted that way and so did Alexandria. In order to cast that spell you needed to touch the person in question, and there are many ways to prevent that from happening which Ehalaas should have a much larger arsenal to do so then Alexandria.

While worry set in, Solanar continued with the details. "During the combat any spell may be used, but they cannot be used before the challenge starts nor can items be brought in for the challenge itself."

This was more of a blow for Alexandria then Ehalaas, having time she could cast many spells on her before the challenge took place or even use an item or two as an edge. Doing things like that

for Ehalaas would be beneath him considering his opponent.

"The next and only other limitations for this will be that you are not to use any spells that could harm the guards that will be in the room."

And that was more of a blow to Ehalaas, as he would have easily considered blasting her in order to simply knock her out and then cast the sealing spell on her but doing so would require a fairly large blast, one that would hurt the guards depending on the size of the room.

"Are there any questions on this task?"

Ehalaas clearly had none and was already looking as he had won this challenge. While Alex had tones of questions there was no way for her to ask any of them as they all revolved around how the heck is she supposed to do what was asked and also how the heck was this close to being a fair challenge. She hated to admit it but given what she knew and what she assumed Ehalaas knew, in his shoes, she too would be pretty confident about this challenge.

As the silence continued for a bit and no question where forthcoming Solanar nodded his head with a small smile, "Good, now I will add that during the week while you prepare you will be both escorted to the room in order to inspect it. You are not to tamper with anything present as you inspect it but can ask questions there about the room and guards if you so choose to or the task itself if something comes up later. Once the process is complete and when the time comes the challenge will start and a victor will be chosen. In the case of a draw the decision of the victor will fall at the discretion of the Council members based on performance."

Alex supposed that in other circumstance a draw could happen but in this case she knew that

there was no way that it would and she also knew that Ehalaas thought the same.

"Good luck to both of you and may the best person win." Solanar glanced at the other Council members that quickly nodded their head, "And with that you are all dismissed."

A bit latter after the meeting Richard was sitting at his desk in his personal office when Lithius came in.

"I take it that you are preoccupied with something?"

It was a stupid question, of course he was and Richard knew that Lithius already knew the answer, "Why him?"

Lithius was taken aback for a second; Richard should know why as he participated in picking the candidates so clearly that was not the intent of the question. "Would you have rather someone with less magical abilities be selected?"

Richard shook his head, "Of course not. While I know that my daughter had other ideas in her head about all this and that this next step will be very hard for her the last thing I would want is to purposefully make it easier for her for something this important that will affect the rest of her life." Again Richard shook his head, "No, no, that's not it. I'm just wondering about what if he wins?" He gave Lithius a serious look, "Do you and the rest of the Council really think that he can do this job as expected?"

Lithius slowly nodded as he remembered Richard's reservation with Ehalaas candidature. "I'm assuming you are referring to his overall attitude. If that is the case then need I remind you that if he wins, barring something world changing,

he will be a contender for probably a good forty years. In that time many changes can happen in his attitude."

Richard realised this but he also realised something else, "I would agree with that completely if he where human. But as it's often mentioned, what is forty years for an elf. Even after that time will he not still be considered one of the young ones?"

After a quick calculation Lithius nodded, "Yes, the tail end mind you, but still in the zone. But even if what you fear happens then he will simply be removed and another test will be administered. Nine is the ideal number, but we will function as eight and even less if need be."

Lithius still saw concern on his friend face, "Stop worrying about this. At this time there is nothing that can be done about it and none of us knows what the future will bring. Worrying about things like that will only make thing worse and decrease your abilities in the now."

Feeling a bit resigned Richard took a deep breath and tried to relax. "Fine you are right." He then looked at the new pile of paperwork that had been delivered to his desk. "Plus given all the extra work that the Council has given me recently only by focusing on the now will I be able to get it done for the test date." He turned to his elf friend, "Does the Council trust me so little?"

Lithius chuckled, "That has nothing to do with it. The concern was raised but quickly dropped; still the extra work was my idea." Seeing the confused expression on Richard face Lithius clarified. "We all know that you would never willingly help your daughter cheat in some way. But after spending a lot of time with her there are things that have been noticed that could make it so that unknowingly something gets revealed.

Admittedly the chances of this are low as we also don't think Miss Alexandria would do something like that knowingly as well but just in case." He then gave Richard a reassuring gaze, "More importantly I knew that this time would be hard on you as well and figured that the work would help distract you."

He was right having nothing to do would have driven Richard mad but this also meant that he could not be there for her if she needed her. "Can I ask you a favour then?"

Lithius simply nodded.

"Can you look over her seeing as I will not be able to, just in case?" He then forced a happy smile, "She is my daughter after all."

Lithius stood and made his way to the door, "Of course, but only in the manner that is allowed to me."

"I'm not asking for more, thanks."

Alexandria was tired, she had spent all her time in the library trying to find something to give her an edge but she found nothing. She still had no plan or even an idea on how to approach this test. Currently she was planning on leaving and heading home to go over her spells and see if something popped out at her, tomorrow they were going to visit the room where the test would take place which only left her two more days after that to figure out something.

She was reaching the edge of one of the shelves when she stopped and moved back after hearing an annoying voice coming closer from the other side.

"Why do you insult me with that question, I'm only here to pick up something for one of the

teachers. I don't need any help; I mean you know who else they picked right?"

One of the elf around Ehalaas was still not convinced, "She is still probably one of the strongest humans in the city..."

Ehalaas instantly cut him off, "And there you have it, strongest human... Sure an ant is strong and can carry many times their own weight but with all that strength what can they really do against a foot coming down on them? The same thing will happen at this test and I will be the foot."

Alexandria was furious; it looked like he did not even see her as an opponent at all but at the same time she was hopeful. *'Please just say a little bit more and that will be the proof I need to get you disqualified.'* Not that getting him disqualified would change a lot, another elf would be chosen and she would be in the same situation as she is now. Still assuming she lost, not that she intended to but if she did the last thing she would want is to lose to someone like him. But then her train of thought got derailed as Ehalaas kept talking.

"Still ant or not I really must thank her; well I should probably say I must thank her father." The puzzled look of his classmates amused him. "Let's face it I am the best in the class but even so if not for her father making the Council then another elf would be in his place and I would have had to wait another many years before I had the chance at this test. Once I win I will be one of the youngest contenders ever and that will give me extra years of access to books and spells that I would normally not have access to for some time to come." He then smiled, "No, overall I'm very happy about all this and her father's sad reality. I mean how crushed will he be when his daughter fails and then he turns around and is replaced before he has time to do anything that will matter..."

It's then that one of his colleges stopped him, "I think you should stop, he is a member of the Council still."

Before Ehalaas could answer he was then forcefully turned around to face a very angry human. "Ah look what we have here..."

Alexandria cut him off, "How DARE you!!" She then poked his chest with her index finger. "Rag on me all you want, I'm fine with that and I'll take all you can throw at me. But the minute you DARE turn that to my father then that becomes a different matter."

Now it was Ehalaas that was clearly pissed, he forcefully grabbed Alexandria's hand that was still touching him and forcefully twisted it back. Elves where not stronger than humans generally but in Alex's case being able to lift whatever book she wanted to read was really all the strength that she needed, which made it easy for Ehalaas to pin her.

As he did he moved his face close to her so that only she would hear, "Act confident all you want but I will step on you and crush you and in so doing crush your father's legacy."

Alexandria eyes flared, that was it, who cares about the test, who cares about the rules, this elf needed a lesson. As she was about to call on a spell and do something very rash she heard a familiar voice and as soon as she did she dropped everything. Ehalaas also did the same and quickly let her go and moved backwards.

"Is there a problem here?" Lithius approached both of them.

Ehalaas smiled, "Of course not we were just having a friendly chat, that's all."

Alexandria was about to jump in but then she glanced at Lithius. Over the years she has had difficulty getting a read on how he felt as he was always so serious with her, but this was an

emotion that she knew well... disappointment.

Lithius then looked at both of them, "Need I remind you of your current position and what it represents. Do you both truly feel that both your actions right now where the proper ones given that?"

Ehalaas had a sour look, "I'm sorry sir I will endeavour to better myself." With that him and those following him continued to do what they had originally indented leaving Alex with Lithius alone.

Alexandria let out a large sigh, "I'm sorry to Lithius, it's just..."

Lithius turned around and started walking away from the library, "Follow me."

Again Alexandria signed here it came, the lecture, that was another thing she was used to.

"Do you have any idea what could have happened had you casted that spell?"

"Nothing good I'm assuming..."

"And yet you where still going to do it?"

"But the things he said, it was too much and he was wrong too. Are you telling me that what he did was right?"

This time it was Lithius that signed, "Had I not stopped you this matter would have been brought to the Council where you probably would have been removed from your current path. Another chance could possibly have been given next time but by then you probably would be too old to..." He then stopped as he saw tears forming.

"...But he's all I have left Lithius, I can't just let him be disrespected like that."

Lithius nodded, "That's true but it's also true that your reaction was a poor one. There will be many times where you will encounter people that you just don't agree with, more so if you make it to the Council. Will you throw magic at anyone that does wrong then?"

"You know I know you can't do that, and I get it." She then looked back, "But in his case he just does not even want to entertain the idea that what he did was wrong." Alex then looked back at Lithius, "What then?"

"Then you simply dropped the matter and pick it up later. If you can't beat the person you disagree with head on then you simply look for another way. We have rules and maybe he broke one that you don't know about which can help you in your next encounter. Be more mindful of your environment and the options you have instead of simply focusing on that one issue in front of you."

Alex agreed with the advice but it still sucked overall, "I understand and thank."

Lithius nodded, "Good, now go back home and think about more important things. Tomorrow you have that appointment and then there will be little time left."

She nodded, "That was the original plan..." She then stopped, "I know you will probably disagree but can I ask you not to mention this to father?"

Lithius took a moment to think about that one, telling Richard about this would help nothing but still this needed to be reported. "I can promise this, I will not tell your father but I do need to inform Solanar. What he does with that information is up to him."

Alexandria nodded, simply brushing this under the rug was wrong and actions had consequences. "I get it, thanks again Lithius." She then made her way home.

That night Alexandria was very restless. Now more than ever she wanted to win but she still had no clue how. She did as Lithius asked and looked at her environment and all her options. While this felt one sided she knew full well that there was a

way for her to win as the Council would never agree to her not having a chance but what was it? What was she not seeing?

"Arrrg, think Alex what are you missing... There has to be something I'm not thinking about."

Lying in bed she thought more about it, "If a spell is not what I'm looking for then what?"

It's then that a wild idea popped in her head due to Lithius comments, "Could there be a rule I'm not aware of? Or something else?"

There was no book on this topic, for obvious reasons, but she would get a chance tomorrow when they go see the room as more questions will be able to be asked then. For some reason this path made sense to her, "That has to be the way, I must be missing something and that's why I can't figure it out."

Now with a new path Alex tried to think of questions that she could ask for the limited time she had tomorrow. Eventually she finally fell asleep.

Both Alexandria and Lithius were waiting for Ehalaas to arrive before going into the room. Ehalaas seemed surprised to see Lithius, "I'm sorry sir I just did not expect you to be doing this."

Lithius nodded, "It was not planned that way but given recent events I was told to this."

Both Ehalaas and Alexandria realised what he meant, because of the outburst Solanar had been told. Obviously this had caused a reaction of sorts, still this could not have been the first time potential candidates had an argument between them before the trial but it did serve as a warning to both.

Noting that there were no comments Lithius opened the double doors to the room and everyone

stepped in.

Ehalaas was pleased and a bit annoyed, pleased because the room was pretty much what had been expected. It was a simple room with no furniture or window surrounded by stone. There were a number of guards standing at attention along all the walls and the room was about twice the size of the Council meeting room and that was the unfortunate part. While the room was big it was not big enough to throw a large attack spell, you could still throw a well timed fireball or lightning bolt at your opponent that would help you out but it would not be the winning blow.

"I see, hmm, interesting." Ehalaas then turned to Lithius, "I've seen all I needed, do I need to stay until she is done or can I go and continue my preparations for the trial?"

Lithius nodded his head, "You can leave at any time if you wish. Still are you certain about this?"

Ehalaas nodded and made his way out, "I'm sure, all I need now is to figure out the best spells to end this quickly. I think that dragging this out would be against our mutual best interest."

Lithius was a bit curious by this statement but let it go, as Ehalaas made his way out he then turned to Alex who was still studying the room which he was also curious about, "And what about you?"

Alexandria poked at one of the guards, "They seem frozen, like in stasis. Will that be the case during as well?"

"Yes, in order to keep this secretive as possible a spell was put on all of them now and will be then."

Alex admired their dedication and blind faith, going in stasis only to wake up with a part of your body burned out must be a horrible outcome. Of

course the idea was for them not to get hurt at all and there where probably other precautions that had been taken but still. While the guards where interesting there was another question she wanted to ask.

"I have a few questions on the trial and they all focus on time. Is there a time limit to the trial? Also what happens if you arrive late or early?"

The first part made sense to him in trying to look for a win condition by simply surviving but the other part of the question puzzled him. "There is no time limit, and the trial will only end when one of you is able to seal the other. That said if you both fall for some reason then a draw will happen and then the process will follow as Solanar explained. Now if you arrive late a grace period of five minutes will be given and the then trial will start. Once started the person that is present will be able to start casting any spell they wish while they wait another five minutes for the opponent to arrive. If they do not after that time period then they will win by default, something that has never happened so far. On the other hand arriving early will do nothing, you will be able to enter the room but the same rules will follow as now."

She took that all in, "So if I'm late then that give him an advantage and if I'm early then nothing really happens, I can't cast anything until it starts and cannot mess around with anything present in the room."

"That is correct."

Those were not the answers that she was looking for, but she did feel that she was still on the right track somehow. She also had thought of many questions to ask about the room itself but now that she was in it and was seeing it there was hardly any worth asking them. Alex needed more time, but did she even have it. "Is it okay if I think

about it for a little while or do I only have five more minutes and then I need to leave?"

Lithius had to think about that one, "In theory you have all the time you may want and I will stay here to answer any questions that I can but..."

Alexandria nodded, "I understand."

She then turned around and tried to take it all in. The room, the guards, the trial, that elf and everything else, there had to be a path to take. A good twenty minutes passed and finally a plan popped in her head. It was a wild plan that had a lot of risks but it could also work and really that was also all she had. It did hinge on two things, that she was about to confirm.

Alex looked at Lithius who had stayed there the whole time in silence never interrupting, which made her smile. "Two more questions and then I'm done." Once he confirmed his attention she asked away, "Can I dress any way I wish for this trial?"

Hard as it was to tell what he was thinking, this time it was simple to see the confused look on his face. Which made her worry a bit about her plan, as they had found a way for her to win but clearly what she had planned was not something they had thought of otherwise the question would not have confused him so much. But it could also be a good thing as if they had not thought about it then maybe that meant that Ehalaas would not see it coming.

"There are no rules as to what attire you can wear for the trial. Obviously you cannot wear anything magical or have any magical talismans or items coming in but other than that anything is allowed."

She smiled, so far so good, "Last question, normally we always have some spell or spells active on us all the time, I'm assuming that all those will have to be turned off for this trial correct."

This question had been expected it seemed as he answered quickly, "Yes, all spell that are currently active on the person will be removed as they enter these doors."

Now she was grinning, "Thanks for your time and the answers, I think I have a plan now."

Lithius nodded, "Good, I'm curious to see what you come up with."

Later that night Alexandria was once again in her bed looking at the ceiling thinking about the next few days. There was a lot of preparation to be done and there were still a lot of risks with the plan but it could work. It was funny that after all this time, work, training and preparation everything came down to luck.

She then chuckled, "No that's not right."

Luck would play a part sure but this chance that she had, this door that she saw in front of her was something that she had created because of all the work, training and preparation that she had done. And the reason that she had it was because she had seen it for what it was and worked hard to reach it and grabbed it for herself. Luck would play a part as it always did but it would not be the reason for her victory.

The day was finally here, there were still a few hours before the trial so Alexandria found herself in the library reading a book. She had to admit that while she enjoyed reading like it was eating she was having a hard time of it today. Sure you had the trial to think of but all the preparation where done for that and there was nothing more that she could do about it until the time came. No as much as she hated it her thoughts and concerns where more about the future after the

trial and that cage that she kept feeling around her. Would the Council help free that feeling or simply make it worse? She had no answers for that.

"There you are, last minute training?"

Alexandria turned her head and smiled, "No father, unless you considered this book to be of cramming material."

Robert took the book, The Dragon Wars story edition - book 1. "Hmm, no I would think not." He then sat next to her, as he did, he had a concerned look, "Still something is bothering you on your big day, is it the trial?"

Alex slowly nodded, "In a way yes, but at the same time more what comes after."

"Hmm, I can see that. Official to the rest of the world you will be a Council member even if to the inner circle you will be a candidate. Still rarely have candidates been removed so really the candidate title is more of a Council member in training."

She smiled, "Assuming I pass..."

Richard cleared his throat, "Well, yes you are correct with that. Still as a father I still think you will win somehow."

She then had a confident look on her face, "Oh I intend too, after everything I can't see myself losing to that elf."

He was a bit curious about the details of her statement but decided to let it go, to think that Ehalaas may have said something to set his daughter off was not really a big surprise. Plus he did not really care about his words, more about the fact that she seemed ready but there was also something else.

A bit of time passed in silence before he broke it, "You know if you want to talk I'm there for you. It does not matter what it is or even if you think it

will make me mad."

Alexandria signed and even eventually started talking. "I'm more worried that it will disappoint you then make you mad." The look on his face told her to continue so she did, "I hate to say it but I feel trapped here and part of me is thinking that wining this trial will only make things worse."

This was a pretty big one for Richard; he reached out and warped his arms around his darling daughter. "First I will never be disappointed in you please always understand that. Second I supposed I should apologize to you. Being a part of the Council was one of my dreams so I have no regrets at all, if because of that I pushed you somehow and you missed what you really wanted to do..."

Alexandria cut him off, "No that's not it. I'm glad I have this chance and honoured too. I plan on wining with everything I have. I want this, I really do... It's just I also feel that something is missing at the same time."

"Well maybe after this we can try and figure out what that is."

Alexandria smiled, "Thanks dad, I'd like that."

Ehalaas entered through the doors and as soon as he took his first steps inside he felt assaulted by a barrage of spells. The effect lasted only a moment but once done all spells that where normally active on him had all disappeared. It felt odd to him being like this, it was like if one of his senses had been turned off.

"I supposed that make sense." Now that the surprise of this odd feeling was gone he took a moment to look around. The room was as he last saw it, nothing in it but the guards standing along

the walls. But as he realise this something else popped in his head.

"Whaaat? She is not here yet?" He smiled sarcastically, "I'm not late but this trial will start soon, will she even show up?"

He was not talking at anyone in particular but while the Council members were not in the room he knew that they were all watching and listening.

In another room all members where standing around a large semi-circle orb that was showing them everything in the room from any angle they wished.

Richard was also present and given the conversation he had with his daughter was also a bit worried. Still he could not believe that she would not show up for this, but then why was she late? Another thing that worried him was that he could see that the others were having a secret conversation but had not included him on it, which was also odd. He turned to Lithius who was next to him. "What is going on?"

It was hard to tell but it seems that Richard could see Lithius smirking a bit, "You need not worry Richard." He then pointed at the orb, "It's about to start."

Ehalaas was yawning, "So when does this start and do I win by default?"

As if to answer his question a glowing blue projection of Solanar face showed up in the middle of the room, "The trial has begun you may now cast any spells you wish, keep in mind the rules of not hurting any of the guards and that your goal is to cast a magic seal on your opponent."

When the projection disappeared Ehalaas smiled, seeing as there was no one around he casted his first spell. He did not think that he would be able due to the time it took to cast but there was no way that he was going to pass on this chance to show the type of magic that he could do. When the spell was finished a very high level shield spell appeared around his person. "Assuming she shows up, I don't think she even has a chance now... not that she had any to start with."

A minute or two passed afterward and from this point on Ehalaas was getting annoyed. "Look she is not here why are we continuing this?"

When he finished the door finally opened and when it did Alexandria finally show up and walked in.

"So you finally grace us with your presence I see."

Alexandria quickly bowed to apologize for the delay but then her eyes went wide as she saw Ehalaas cast a spell.

"Lowering your head at me, while I do approve, it was also the wrong thing to do." Quickly as he could he casted a small lightning bolt at her.

There was no time for a shield or a counter, but then again Alexandria had never planned to do so from the first place. Knowing him he would aim for her dead center so she jumped as quickly as she could to the side. As fast as she was the spell still connected close to her which caused her left leg to trip forcing her to go on one knee. Still the plan was still a go, she casted a fireball spell at him that she had started preparing while she had been moving away. This time it was him that would have no time to react.

As the fireball made its way to him Ehalaas nodded in approval, "I supposed that was really your only option." But when the fireball got close to

him it simply dissipated and a shimmering globe appeared around him very briefly. He laughed as he saw sweat on her face, "Had you not been late then maybe that would have hit me but with this shield I will be able to absorb any range spells like that."

Alex was furious but still convinced she could win. If range spells would not work then all she needed was to get close to him, something she needed to do anyways. Now standing again she changed at him.

"Oh please, this is now sad. Let's finish this." Ehalaas touched the ground as she was getting close and launched his spell.

As Alexandria was to take another step a rock formation wrapped around her leg and then started climbing upward around her body, she was pinned.

"You did well for a human but this is now over." Ehalaas reached out his hand and prepared the seal spell, but before that he reached in close to her and whispered, "Thanks for making it so easy."

"Magic Seal"

Suddenly Ehalaas magic cut off for a second, the spell was too low to do anything else for someone as powerful as him but that was not the point. As the figure in front of him simply disappeared he turned around angry, "WHAT!"

He faced Alexandria but she was wearing a guard's uniform in order to blend in with all the others, she also has a large smile on her face. "This means I win Ehalaas."

"But how did you..."

While he was probably figuring it out she figure she would still go over it all just in case his big ego could not accept what had happened. "I was never late, I was here before you. But in order

to distract you I could not cast the illusion spell before the trial started. So while you casted that impressing shield of yours I took action. I had to focus a lot on the spell as I had to make it semi tangible in case something tried to bounce off me..."

Still angry he continued for her, "And with all my normal defenses against illusions gone when I stepped in it was easier to fool me. But the bind spell would have destroyed the illusion..."

She nodded, "It should have had I not focused all the power I had on making it more tangible, doing so broke my posture I'll admit but you where way to busy patting yourself on the back to turn around to see me." She was now grinning, "So I win."

A face of Solanar then appeared once again. "The trial is over and Miss Alexandria as won. She will now be a candidate to the Council and have access to anything that the Council has access to. Your next step is to train hard and as well, given resent event and past ones, gain as much life experience as you can before you become an official member." As Alexandria bowed her head at the projection he added some final words before disappearing. "Let me be the first to congratulate you on passing and welcome you to the Council Miss Alexandria. We all hope for great things from you."

"I'll do my best." Ehalaas was still fuming but she did not care about him anymore, she had done it, she had won.

Richard looked at Lithius, "You knew?"

"In a way we all did, still none of us knew her actual plan." Lithius pointed at Taeral one of the other members, "He was the first to notice that

there was an extra guard in the room when we arrived. This was communicated to Solanar and the rest of us who I'm assuming recognize who the extra guard was when we took a closer look."

Richard was a bit frustrated, "You could have clued me in on that conversation as well you know."

"True but we were also curious on your own reaction to these events. Plus you should have seen the illusion spell for what it was when it appeared and all should have been clear by then."

That part was true and Richard had no one else to blame but himself. Lithius nodded, "Worry not you were simply concerned too much to see what was truly happening. A normal reaction given the circumstances correct?"

"I supposed." He then looked at Lithius with pride and joy at the same time, "She passed Lithius, she is a Council member."

"So it would seem, congratulations."

Alexandria ran to her father as soon as she saw him, still full of joy and happiness of having reached this point. When she was close enough she jumped in his open arms, "I did it dad, I'm in."

Richard hugged his precious daughter as hard as he could, "Yes you are, and I'm so happy for you."

Interlude 2

As Alexandria finished her story everyone mostly sat in silence simply glancing at each other, they did not really know how to react. It had never occurred to them that the stories told would be that detailed or more importantly that personal. At the same time maybe that had not originally been Iris plan but something that Alex threw in seeing as she had gone first.

Adam was the first to break the silence before Alex could ask why there were no comments from anyone. "So basically you cheated your way in the Council?"

Alex was too confused to be angry from his statement, "How...Why? I don't get it what do you mean by that?"

"Well I mean if you look at it from a duel perspective you in a way cheated."

She was still stunned, "But it was never an actual duel really only the action of sealing the other person mattered. You could do whatever you wanted as long as you did not hurt the others in the room." She then shook her head in mild disbelief, "Did you not listen at all? Mind you coming from you why should I be surprised that you don't get it."

"Har har, still say what you will but the way I understand it they were mostly expecting a duel type combat and not really what you gave them. Plus that was a really big risk you took, I mean I would have noticed you right away dressed as a guard."

Before she could answer Mike cut in, "Personally I see that as a very small risk. Given what she said there was no way that he would

have paid any attention to the guards past the fact that they were there when he saw that they were human. Sure it could have backfired but there was only a small chance of that." Alex smiled acting proudly as she looked at Adam as Mike continued, "Truthfully I think the biggest risk was that the Council members did not blow your cover somehow, I mean they must have known what was going on."

She nodded at that one, "Yea I was worried a lot about that. I was betting on the fact that they would try to be as careful as they could. I mean if they dropped something that indirectly gave him an advantage then I could have turned it around as asked for a do-over if I had lost."

Anna did not really buy that last comment and it showed in the look she gave Alex, "Sure you think that now but was that really something you would have done if it had happened?"

Alex was acting very fidgety, "Of course..." It was clear that Anna did not believe her and given the looks that everyone else was also now giving her Alex then gave up, "FINE!... you're right, that's not something I would have done." She then slumped her shoulders a bit, "Truthfully I think I mostly convince myself that the plan would work because it had to as I had no others."

Anna then smiled, "That's fine Alex, I'm sorry that I pushed the issue. Still there is nothing to be ashamed about at all, I'm pretty sure that we have all been in that situation where we had to convince ourselves that whatever idea we suddenly came up with would be the right one."

"I think the real problem is that it's so hard to see myself like that now..."

Iris chuckled, "I take it that if you had to take the challenge now that you would do it differently?"

"Hahaha... yea you could say that." Alex

thought about it for a few second, "I mean now I would instantly cast the shield that would make me immune to basically any spells that he could think of, well given the limitation of the guards that he had. Then really it would be as simple as reaching out and touching him. In a way it would probably be too one sided now..." She then stopped and thought about that for a moment and eventually a small smile appeared on her face. For a long time she had envied the elves because of their long life span and the advantages that it gave them when it came to magic. But now with her current skill with the arts it was hard not to put her above most elves, sure there were some that were better then she was but given the time she had taken to get where she was compared to them it made her wonder if their long life really was an advantage at all.

Iris smirked, "I bet the look on his face would have been interesting if you could have done that. But I'm pretty sure that the Council would have then chosen a different type of challenge then."

"You're probably right... Hmm, that's so funny after all this time I've been so fixated on the advantage that they had over normal humans, as some of them put it." She then smiled, "But look at me now."

Adam chuckled, "Are you actually comparing yourself to a normal human?"

"Arrrrg, why must you always come up with comments like that?" she then pointed at him, "Fine you know what you go next, then you can see all the fun comments I come up with and see how it feels."

Adam shrugged, "Hardly any point, besides the time I spent training at the Crusader camps, which was very boring and there is no real reason to go over them there is only one thing to talk

about and well you all know it already."

Rosamia reached out to Adam and held his hand, "Well I would like to know about that time, it could not have been that uneventful. Plus it's something that even I don't know about."

"It was training, nothing really to talk about."

A small wicked laugh could be heard from Alex, "I bet it was boring because you had no one to talk to because no one would approach you as you were always brooding." She then focused on him with a confident smile, "I'm right, right?"

Adam shrugged again, "Who knows, who cares." A small smile could then be seen on his face, he still enjoyed pressing her buttons but sometimes he wondered if he had more fun seeing her reaction to his lack of reaction when she tried to press his.

Alex was visibly frustrated, "... Rosa, please do something with him before I decide to turn him into a fluffy bunny rabbit for the rest of his life."

Hearing that from any other mage Rosa would worry a bit, as she knew that Adam loved to get under people's skin if they allowed it and that others may actually do what Alex had mentioned if they were able to. But coming from her Rosa knew that the treat was empty. Rosa then looked at Adam, still it did not mean that he should try so hard and part of her wondered where he had picked that habit up as it's not something he did way back when. While thinking of that she then nodded, "You know I think that I'll go next."

Adam was suddenly annoyed which made Alexandria confused, "What can you possibly hate about that, you're skipping your turn." She then turned to Rosa, "Why are you letting him skip his turn?"

Rosa did not have time to answer her before Adam jumped in, "Because she is not skipping my

turn in a way." He then looked at Rosa, "You plan on telling them about that time right? There is nothing more to tell, we got attacked, many people got killed and because of that you became a priestess and I joined the Crusaders."

Alexandria could not believe the oversimplification of what Adam had mentioned, "Even I know it's more than that."

Rosa nodded and then turned to Adam, "You know it's more than that as well. I want to tell it and I think I'm okay to talk about it now, especially after having relived it in a way when the lord of light was going over my memories not too long ago." A concern look then appeared on her face, "Do you not want to talk or hear about it?"

Adam nodded his head, "...I just don't see the point of going over it, but I won't stop you... you know that."

Rosamia smiled a bit at that, "I'm glad to hear that, as I'm thinking to old you would not have said the same thing."

She then looked at everyone else and then took a deep breath, "Well here goes..."

Chapter 2

The young priest was finally arriving at his destination, as he got closer he stopped for a moment.

"Walls? Seriously?"

The priest looked at the small village up ahead and could not believe that it had in fact been surrounded by a protective stone wall as he had been told.

"What did you do to wind up here and can I convince you to come back." He then took a deep breath, "I have to find a way as you are needed once again."

The priest then continued his walk towards the small village of Plactum.

He had spent months in the Order trying to figure out where his old teacher had gone as a person of the High Order did not simply disappear. Eventually he had found out that his old teacher now resided in a small village of Plactum, unfortunately after looking at the maps that knowledge raised more questions than answers as the village's location was nowhere to be found. After spending even more months on that he finally learned about Plactum's roll in the Order.

The village had been created in the middle of nowhere and was protected by the Order for the Order and others of close relations only. It was basically a place where you lived if you needed to disappear while still having select few know where you were. Also if you where part of the Order and you needed to be separated from the rest for various reasons you would also be sent here. Wealthy members that had ties with the Order could send family member for similar situations

here too if need be. Because of this the place, while very secluded, was also very fortified. Still having known all this ahead of time still did not remove the shock of seeing a full stone wall protecting what looked like a very small place.

Finally reaching the only double doors to the village, the priest was greeted by the two guards.

"Welcome to Plactum mister Timothy sir, we have been expecting your arrival."

The guards were nothing special per say but there were armed with a sword and a spear that looked to be in good condition. Their armor, while light, was of the best hard leather that could be possibly used. While Timothy approached them he secretly wondered if they would be replaced with Crusaders once everything was in place.

"Thanks, has Master Jonathan been made aware as well?"

One of the guards nodded, "No, only we have been told about your travel here. We have also been told to wish you good luck in your endeavor here."

Timothy smiled at that one; he was not the only one that wanted Jonathan to return to his old position in the Order.

"My thanks; I hope it goes well as well."

When they let him in, Timothy stopped briefly and gazed at what was in front of him. As expected the village was nothing too spectacular. There was a church, which was expected, a few small houses and a few larger ones and nothing more in terms of living arrangement. What was surprising was the large tree in the middle of the village that could clearly be seen once you entered inside the stone walls.

The tree was one of the largest that he had seen and for a while he wondered if such of thing had been made using magic. As if reading him

mind the guard walked next to him, "It's quite the thing to see and everyone is stunned when they see it for the first time. We were told that when the original people that were looking for a place to build this village saw this in nature that they were totally captivated by it. In the end they saw it as a sign and so build the village around it."

Timothy looked at it more, "I thought it was magical... How big is it?"

The guard could not help but chuckle a bit, "It's close to fifteen feet in diameter and about seventy feet tall."

"That is pretty impressive." He then smiled at the guard, "But as impressive as it is it's not what I'm here for, still thanks for the information."

The guard simply smiled back as he made his way back to his post as Timothy fully entered the village.

Rosamia at about twelve years old was currently helping planting some tomato seedlings in the vegetable garden that was close to the church. She was almost done her part but then she would probably need to help with staking afterwards. But she was fine with that as she like helping in the garden like this. When she was placing her last seedling a dark haired boy of the same age appeared next to her with a big smile on his face, "I'm done."

"You're done with the carrots already?" She then turned to see that he was covered in dirt everywhere and then a stunned expression appeared on her face as she wondered who had planted who in the ground, "Adam seriously?"

As if unaffected by her comment the boy moved closer to her, "It's all right I mean you are putting things in the ground so it's normal to be

like this, plus we need to clean our cloths anyways so what if they are more dirty." He then nodded his head, "Rosa you worry too much about these things."

She thought that he had a point to a certain extent but at the same time still thought that he had over did it again.

Adam then jumped back, "So are you almost done, we need to go hunting after that."

His comment about hunting created a few puzzled looks from the adults around them but they stayed silent as Rosamia suddenly had a disappointed look on her face. "Hmm, I said I would join you but I don't think that I can. There is still a lot to do."

This time it was Adam that was disappointed, "Ah but we need to find it so that I can practice and then we can go on adventures together."

She hated to do this as she like spending time with Adam and his adventures but she also did not feel right about leaving her work undone. "Can we look for the branches tomorrow? I want to go too but..."

Adam saw the pleading face she had and was really bummed out about the situation. The plan was to find nice pieces of wood that he could cut out to make wooden swords for both of them. The next step was to go exploring in the forest and see if they could find caves or hidden treasure left about. He could do it alone but he was always with Rosa and he wanted her along for this so that they could plan where they would go once everything was done. Then he suddenly made up his mind on something, "Fine then I'll help you here and then you can finish faster."

As he was about to move next to Rosa one of the adults next to her, Sasha, stopped him, "Wait up Adam, what did you plan on doing with Rosa?"

Explaining his plan was way more fun than helping with the tomato so Adam went on and explained the whole thing. Once he was done Sasha smiled, simply two kids playing at adventure next to the village. Her smile then vanish as Adam, now done explaining, move closer to Rosa in order to help out. "You know Rosa once you are done with that seedling you can go with him if you want. We will take care of the rest." When planting tomatoes you have to be a bit careful especially when staking them and the last thing she wanted was for Adam to help with that, there was a reason why they had put him on carrot duty.

Rosa smiled at Sasha, "Are you sure? Thanks." She then pated the ground around the small topmost leaves and when she was okay with it turned to Adam and Sasha, "All done."

Sasha smiled back, "Thanks for the help you two, now be careful and Rosa make sure Adam does not go too far okay."

Adam was already leaving the garden as Rosamia got up and bowed at Sasha, "I will and thanks again." She then turned to see Adam pulling at the gates to get out already, "Wait up Adam we need to change first anyways..."

It was like that comment had knocked all the excitement out of him, "Ahhh fine, but hurry up okay."

A short while after it was no surprise for Rosa to hear Adam call out to her on the other side of the door, "You done yet?"

She hoped that he had not simply thrown the gloves, pants and other things they had to wear when they were out in the garden on the ground in order to quickly change out. As she got out and saw that his face was still covered in dirt she had a bad feeling and headed to the men's changing area. Unfazed by her actions Adam followed, "What?"

He got his answer with a stern look on Rosa's face, "Adam pick up after yourself otherwise you will get yelled at again."

He simply shrugged, "I'm probably going to get yelled at anyways so where is the harm?"

Rosamia sighed deeply, "Come on I'll help out too then we can head out."

"...Fine..."

As they cleaned out his mess Rosa wondered about something, "Are you still sure that you want me to do this as well?"

Adam suddenly stopped, "Of course we both need to learn how to use a sword or a weapon of some sort in order to defend ourselves if want to go on adventures together." He then paused, "You still want to do that right?"

Rosa nodded, "I do, but I also want to help people as well."

Adam shrugged, "No reason we can't do both right? Come on it will be fun, with the two of us together nothing will stop us. Maybe we can become holy knights or something that would be cool right?"

Rosa smiled, "Well I don't know if I want to be a knight but that does sound fun."

"Pfff, then whatever on the knight stuff then."

Having placed the last item back Rosa nodded at him, "Alright let's take our first step then."

All exited again Adam nodded and started running out.

Timothy looked up as he approached the church, it was much smaller then what he was used too considering his home was the holy city of Missa. This was probably two stories tall only; it really would not house that many priests.

"Adam, wait up."

The little girl's voice got Timothy's attention and as he looked ahead his eye widen.

"No way Rosa you just need to keep up."

A black hair boy was running at him, because he was looking back answering the girl he had not noticed him. Timothy though to move away but the boy was too quick and would crash into him no matter what, so because of that he braced himself. The boy was surprised that he had suddenly run into something and so simply went with the flow of events. As for Timothy, he grabbed him and shifted to the side with the boy in order to lessen the impact. Now that the crisis was over Timothy then helped him keep his balance who was almost about to fall down due to the sudden shift in trajectory.

Once the boy had regained his balance he looked up at Timothy, "I'm sorry about that, you're okay right?"

The priest nodded, "I'm okay, no harm done, but please be more careful and try to look ahead while running in the future."

The girl then moved closer to them, "I'm glad you are okay and I'm also sorry about this. I try warning him about things like this but they keep happening. At this point me nagging on him has become a full time job."

Timothy chuckled at that, he then turned to the boy, "Why are you causing so much trouble for this little girl?"

Adam kicked a nearby rock, "Pff, she does not know what she is talking about. I don't get into that much trouble..."

It's then that a figure appeared out of the church's main doors. The man was old with a full set of white hair and square rimmed glasses. He wore the traditional blue and white garment that all priests wore. "Now now children, don't start

arguing in front of an honored guest." The man then paused for a second as he stared at Timothy. "Oh my, it's you..."

The kids then bowed to the old priest and in unison, "Yes father Jonathan, we're sorry." They then moved closer to him as he instantly smiled and playfully patted the top of their head.

Timothy turned to the priest, "I see it more as you being the honored one, teacher." He then lowered his head in respect.

"Teacher, well that takes me back." Jonathan pondered on that for a bit then than also the reasons why one of his old students would be visiting him all the way here. A small grin appeared on his face and then as he turned to the two kids looking up at him and his grin turned into a smile. "I bet that you two were headed somewhere right?" As they both nodded in confirmation he continued, "I won't keep you then, you can both go while me and this gentlemen catch up on old times."

Both the kids smiled and then started running towards the town gate. "Don't go too far and be careful." From a distance now you could hear Rosa's answer, "Don't worry we will."

Jonathan shook his head, "If not for that girl I really would have my hands full with that one." He then motioned at Timothy, "Please come in, we can go to my private room and talk."

Jonathan led his old student to the second floor and in a large but simple room. The place had a medium size table that could hold four people, a large bookshelf, a dresser and a single bed. Jonathan then asked Timothy to sit and wait until he prepared some tea for the both of them.

While he was gone Timothy simply looked around and was somewhat stunned a bit. The room was overall bigger then what he had but the furniture type, bed and everything really was so

mundane. It was odd to think of someone like his old teacher living in a place like this. His mind and focus then returned to Jonathan as he served him a cup of tea.

"The kids look very healthy but where are they from as they can't be yours right?"

Jonathan sat down on the other end of the table and chuckled, "No they are not but I have been looking after them for eight years now so in a way I would like to see them as my own."

Timothy thought out loud about that, "Eight years... What was...?" His eyes went wide, "They are from the battle?"

Jonathan nodded, "Yes, considering my action back then I had to do something."

Timothy was then confused, "You had nothing to do with that kingdom's king going mad."

"True but I did agree to on behalf of the High Order to help the people that would try and imprison him and you know how that turned out."

At the time the king had gone mad. His people were all suffering due to lack of basic necessities and all of the people that disagreed with him would be stripped of everything and then kick out or killed depending on how they had disagreed. Eventually a group from his kingdom got together and tried to stop him but they were no match for the guards and everyone else that he still commanded. With that they reached out, sell swords answered the call and also the Order at the request of Jonathan who was at the time part of the High Order.

They had all underestimated the defenses that the king had put in place over time during his rule and the fight to dethrone him was not going well. During the back and forth many died, sell sword, priests and villagers. Eventually things got so bad that the Crimson stepped in and when they did

things where resolved in the few days that followed.

"True that the outcome was not ideal but what other choice was there at the time? Also I still don't see how you are to blame."

Jonathan looked at his hand and then a sad smile appeared on his face. "Those priests where ill prepared for something like this and I was the one that sent them in and continued to send then in after I realised this was the case. We also failed the villages that got hit in the crossfire. You're right that the fact that the king went mad was not my fault, but there is still a lot of blood on my hands none the less."

"Is that why you stepped down from the High Order?"

Jonathan thought about that, "Not entirely no, a big reason where those two kids. While the Crimsons did solve the problem in their own unique way they also left a lot of bodies behind."

Timothy nodded, "True, if I remember correctly they killed all the bloodline of the king and all the guards that served under him."

"They did, and that created a hole and with that hole the leader of the rebellion, if you wish to call it that, took charge and things started to turn in a better direction for everyone but the ones left behind." As a confused look appeared on Timothy face Jonathan continued. "They killed the royal bloodline and the guards but the families of those guards where left alive. Those families where spared from the old kings wrath something that those that suffered did not take to kindly too once the dust started to settle."

Timothy nodded, "Ah yes the relocation work that the Order did took a lot of resources and time." He then paused, "Wait so those two kids are from there?"

Jonathan nodded, "The boy was already living with the family of the girl when the Crimsons attacked. After that only the girl's mother was left and sadly we were not able to get to her in time before she passed away from the wounds that she had suffered from the anger of the now safe villagers. During the relocation no other family wanted to take the two four year old kids who were pretty traumatized by the events. Given my actions and also the direction that the other members of the High Order where taking I saw it as a good idea to take care of the kids myself."

Timothy nodded understanding a bit more what had happened, "I could see where being in the High Order and having to take care of two kids in their condition would be challenging..."

Jonathan then cut him off, "It really would have been impossible, not that I fully knew that then, but what they needed to get their smile back was a calm place away from fighting and also having someone there to take care of them fulltime if need be. Being in the High Order would have divided my attention which would served them little."

A puzzled look appeared on Timothy, "Away for the fighting? I agree that this place is very tranquil but what fighting are you referring too from Missa?" He then paused and then he figured it out. "You are now talking about the Crusaders right? Why are you so opposed to them? You said it yourself that the priests where ill equip to handle a situation like that, and something like that will happen again why not be prepared next time?"

Jonathan shook his head, "Being better prepared is one thing, but creating an attacking force in the name of the lord of light is wrong somehow, don't you see that?"

Timothy thought about it but sadly he could

not see where the risk was not worth it, "I do understand your point of view but I also think that it's worth the risk. The Crusaders will help deal with these situations and while we will not have the combat abilities of the Crimsons the holy magic they wield should compensate for the lack of skill making them be on par with them..."

He stopped as Jonathan was now shaking his head, "Using holy magic, the gift that the lord of light gave us humans, and only humans I may add, will now be used as a tool to possibly kill if need be. That is not right."

Timothy did not like where this was going and he was quickly realising that he would probably not be able to achieve the goal that he had set in his mind by coming here. "Of course it's not right but it's not like it has not happened with priests before and I don't think that you believe that it would never happen again. There are a lot of spells in holy magic that are attack spells after all."

"True and you are right, but while a priest may unleash a holy nova spell on a target it is to defend. The primary roll of a priest is to help, defend and heal, while the primary roll of a Crusader is to attack and defend. That starting point does make a difference in my mind."

"I take it that this is the other reason why you left the High Order?"

Jonathan nodded, "I'm a bit ashamed to admit that while I will use the children as an excuse, and they were in large part the main reason why, there is a part of me that wanted to do this for myself as it seems that I was the only one in the High Order that saw the creation of the Crusaders as a bad idea."

"But really was there another option?"

Jonathan shrugged, "We could have focused on defensive combat in order to be more effective in

those situations. The safety of the priest and priestesses that are put in those situations are important after all. But still why not try and reach out to the Crimsones and see if an understanding could be made between them and the Order? They would be the sword and we could be the shield."

"Hmm, that would be an interesting thought, but the Crimsones are very set in their ways and we don't even know where they live. Do you think something like that could actually happen?" Then Timothy stopped abruptly.

Jonathan waited for a bit to see if he would continue but when he did not he broke the silence, "You may have a point but no one really tried. Still I get the feeling that there was something else you wanted to say."

Timothy slowly nodded and then carefully chose his words. "... I was thinking that the difference between the Crusaders being the sword and the Crimsones being the sword is not that different."

Jonathan chuckled, "And so I'm a bit of a hypocrite as I'm okay with others doing the killing as long as it's the members of the Order." Timothy was starting to freak out and was quickly going to say something when Jonathan raised his hand in order to stop him. "No need to worry I too see the stupidity in my idea. But the more I think about it the more I do see a difference, it's small but it is in fact there." He then took a small pause in order to wait for Timothy to regain his composure and then he continued, "With the Crusaders being the sword they are a part of us from that point on. Meaning that from that point, people with harsh behaviors that have access to holy magic will have a place to go to in order to hone in that harshness. With the Crimsones being the sword a line of separation is created and while a priest maybe attracted to

battle their main priority, their main teaching still remains focused on defense and healing."

"Hmm, so you are saying that having the option of fighting and being taught how to fight could leader to a harsher Order? Why do you think that?"

Jonathan shrugged, "At the time I could not prove it, but now... The two kids you saw, did they look happy?" Timothy simply nodded and then Jonathan continued, "Now knowing what they saw, do you think they could be as happy as they are now if they were around a group that was training with swords and holy magic to attack a certain enemy?"

"You can't know that..."

Jonathan chuckled, "No you are right I cannot one hundred percent know that. But I do know that it would have influence them in a negative fashion, how much that I don't know. And while grown adults may be able to deal with that not everyone will, and soon recruiting will start correct? Will all those new recruits be grown adults that have been thought the priestly ways or will they start as Crusaders only now?"

Timothy simply nodded. When Jonathan had left, the order to create the Crusaders had been approved. It had taken a while to figure out everything with how things would work from this point on and also who would be best to put in charge of the Crusaders, but once it was all completed the wheel had started turning. At this time they were finally at a point where new Crusaders would start as Crusaders only and not be priests that had moved over.

He then looked at Jonathan; his face had a sad defeated look on it. "I get the feeling that I will not be able to change your mind and have you return to the High Order after all. There are many

there that wanted me to succeed."

"Hmm, are you really sure about that?"

Timothy was shocked at Jonathan's reaction, "Oh course, some miss your council and many, like I do, believe that you had more to teach others."

Jonathan finished his tea and sat there for a moment in silence. He then had a smile on his face but the smile was not a happy one, in fact it seemed like it was simply there to hide what seemed like a bleak expression that had appeared during his silence. He then took a deep breath, "Well I'm sorry to say that they will have to live without my teaching as these two kids still need me more than they do." He then turned to the window, "Speaking of which they will be coming back soon and I will need to prepare some food for us to eat." A genuine smile then appeared on his face, "Do you wish to join us?"

Timothy smiled as well, "Sound good, may be then we can talk about something a bit lighter like the day that you made a mistake in class."

"Oh please that only happened once, which is nothing compared to the level of tardiness that you had for each morning class. Why where you always late, you never wanted to say."

Timothy scratch the top of his head, "Hahaha, I still don't actually." He then stood up, "So you mentioned something about food?"

Jonathan shook his head, "Fine, and yes. Let's first see what we have at our disposal and then figure out something."

"Sounds like a plan."

Supper had passed and while Rosa and Adam had stayed up much later than normal they were both currently in the room they shared sleeping

peacefully. They did not know around what time it was when both of them suddenly started to wake up from the noise being caused outside.

"Hmmm, Adam... what's going on?" Rubbing her crusty eyes Rosa was starting to see that Adam was already out of bed and was trying to listen to the noise.

"I don't know, it sound like a lot of people are moving all over the place." He then looked at her, "Stay here I'll go check it out."

Rosa wondered on that, sure it would be faster but, "No I'll come too, someone has to make sure you stay out of trouble."

Adam smirked, "Suuure, just admit that you're just as curious as I am."

Rosamia was now out of her bed and was going to respond but then suddenly both of them jumped as the door to their room opened. Jonathan looked scared and concerned all at once. "Kids, stay in your room... Better yet, go under the bed, DON'T make any noise and if you can block your hears."

The two simply looked at each other. They had never seen Jonathan like this and that worried them a lot. Adam stated to open his mouth when Jonathan cut him off, "Do you both understand?"

Adam closed his mouth and then turned again to Rosa who was extremely worried and was already looking at him. They looked at each other for a few seconds and then both nodded their heads in unison to confirm that they understood.

"Good now go, under the bed now." Jonathan did not wait any longer as he then turned and closed their door behind him.

The noise outside was getting louder and now you had a clanging noise that had added itself to it. Both of them in silence did as they were told. Now under her bed Rosa looked at Adam who was now

also under his bed, he had both his eye shut and seems to be forcing them shut. Now Rosa was more worried, "...Adam..."

There was frustration in his voice as he answered her, "I don't know Rosa, but this noise... it's familiar, I just can't remember..."

Then they both heard a large scream coming from outside and when they did their eyes went wide as both of them suddenly remembered where they had hear a scream like that and also why the noise was familiar.

Now Rosa was scared, "...Why would something like that be happening here?"

Adam did not answer and his eyes were still wide in shock. Nervously Rosa called to him, "Adam?!... Adam..."

He then blinked a few time, shook his head and then started to breath heavily. He then suddenly crawled out from under the bed. Rosa followed and got closer to him and then they heard another scream, that one was closer. She then quickly turned to him with a very scared look, she also now realised that she was crying.

As he saw her tears Adam noticed that he too was crying as well. He then saw her jump a bit when they heard another. He paused for a bit and then took the sleeve of his shirt and wiped his face off. "I can't stay here, I'm going out."

Rosa more quickly then she had intended reached out to him, "You can't go, Jonathan said to stay and... well... I don't want to be alone..."

Adam saw that she was shacking and he was too. He reached out to her and wrapped his arms around her and hugged her as strongly as he could as a reaction she did not say anything but only tighten up her whole body as he was squeezing her hard. When he let go they both saw that they were still terrified from the noise they where hearing

outside but they were not shaking anymore.

"I don't want to be stuck in the dark hearing this all night just waiting to see if they will come at me next and then when it stops start worrying about if anyone will come back for me again."

Adam was remembering the time where his parent had been killed, things had been a bit different for Rosa but similar enough to understand where he was coming from, plus she did not want to go through that again as well. "Okay but what can we do?"

Adam really was not sure how to answer her so he simply answered the first thing that came to mind, after all the horror that was now filling his head from when he was very little. "We go help."

"How? We don't have any weapons or know how to use them."

Adam suddenly moved around and went behind his bed and pulled out a long stick that they had found to make their wooden swords with, "You can use this, it's long enough to be a staff."

Rosa took the staff that Adam gave her and clutched it more than wielded it, "And what about you?"

Adam was thinking as fast as he could, he was annoyed by all these questions but at the same time he realised that they kept him busy from remembering more about back then so in a way he was suddenly grateful for them. "Let's make our way to the garden where all the tools are I'm sure I can find something there." His eyes then lid up a bit, "Oh hey we can also use our spells."

Rosa's shoulders slumped a bit, "We only have one you know that."

He nodded, "Sure but at least it's not the same one." He then glanced at the ground, "But unfortunately I can only cast it on myself..." He then looked back at her, "But I'm doing this

anyways." He then paused before he continued and had a bit of a worried look, "Are you with me?"

Rosa took a deep breath and tried to relax, suddenly they both jumped again a bit as another scream could be heard. She was breathing quickly, '*why this again, why?*' There was no answer, just the fact that it was happening again and that she also did not want to do the same actions as the last time. "...Okay..."

A small smile appeared on Adam when she said the word as part of him was worried that she would have said no. He then grabbed her hand and then made his way to the door to their room and slowly opened it.

They made their way out of the room and proceeded on heading downstairs, all the while holding each other hands. From the looks of it whatever was happening outside had not made its way inside. With that, Adam's goal was still the same and that was to make it to the large garden tool shed that had everything. The issue with that is that they needed to leave the safety of the church in order to reach it, and while the garden itself had a fence around it this was not the case for the shed or the path to get there. Trying to be as safe as possible and also to give him time to continue to work up his courage Adam led the way around the back of the church where the fighting was harder to hear. When he got to the door he turned to Rosa, "Are you ready?"

It was easy to see that she was really scared but she did nod her head in agreement. Adam took a deep breath and tried to focus on the magic that was deep within him. It was really hard to do, especially with everything going on but he tried to only focus on himself and the hand that he was holding, eventually he was able to find it. From there things went like in training and the spell

effect of bravery enveloped him. Instantly he felt calmer and more confident about his plan, sadly this was not something he could do on Rosa and it was not something that she had learned how to do at this time. "I'm going to open the door and we will head right there, let's try not to focus on what we see until we get there okay?"

"...Okay", He held her hand and with the other he opened the door and walked out of the church.

It was still pretty dark outside as it was late and as much as he had said not to look around it was hard to ignore some of the houses that were on fire. They still could not see what was exactly happening but at this point that was a good thing as whatever was going on was not where they were. They both moved as quickly as they could to the shed, and was about to make it there in record time when his suggestion of not looking around was then completely ignored as they both glimpsed at what was happening.

The both simply stood there as from afar they could see a village guard being hacked by a large axe being wielded by something big that they had never seen before. It was like a human but much more muscular and from the lights being provided from the fire it seems like their skin color was green. They were both glued to that scene to their side but then Adam turned as he heard Rosa mumble something, "... Mon... Mons... Monsters!"

Again his eye went wide, considering all the noise around them Rosamia's mumbling was barely something he could hear but it seems like it was loud enough for that monster to hear her as it stopped hacking at the guard and made its way towards them. Frantically he looked around to see if there was anything that he could use as a weapon before the monster would reach them, unfortunately the only thing he could find was the

now staff that Rosa was clutching so hard that there was no way that he could grab it from her in time. She was so afraid, secretary they both had probably prepared themselves to see humans attacking humans again, and this was not what was happening at all.

While the spell helped Adam be somewhat functional, he really had no clue what to do, the only option left was running. He grabbed Rosa with his free hand by the shoulder and tried to shake her out of it, he would have used both but there was no way that she was letting that one go. Thankfully she snapped out of it quickly, "Rosa we need to run..."

Before they could turn and do just that, a human figure jumped between them and the monster. "What are you two doing out here? Run, NOW!" The voice came from Sasha, she did not look back at them as she gripped her sword and launched herself at the monster.

Both Adam and Rosa instantly made a run for the shed, opened the door and then went inside.

Catching her breath and a grip over her own fear Rosamia asked the question that was on both their minds, "Adam, what was that... What are those things?"

Recovering a bit more quickly Adam, nodded his head, "I have no clue what there." He then turned and looked around and found what looked like a very large knife, more like a machete and grabbed it. He knew that he did not have any experience fighting but he did know how to use this, as he had often helped with the hacking off of branches and other things, plus having something else but his hands help bring him some much needed extra courage. Thinking of that he reached in himself again and re-casted the spell again before it expired. Once done he turned to Rosa, "Do

you still want to do this now?"

Rosa hesitated for a moment but did nod in approval, "We need to see if we can help Sasha." Adam could not help but think that she was much braver than he was, sure he was in control but without the spell he wondered if he would be as functional as she was right now, part of him did not think so.

It's then that they heard a scream, it was close, and it was also coming from Sasha. They both turned to each other and ran outside. What they saw was pretty gruesome as the monster was now on top of Sasha with his large axe impaled on her side. Somehow the blow had not knocked her out and she took her blade and thrust upward right in the unsuspected monster's chest. In his case the blow seemed instantly lethal as he suddenly dropped.

Rosa started running at Sasha who was now lying on the ground; Adam was momentarily stunned that she no longer seemed scared like she was a minute ago.

Rosa reached Sasha, who was losing a lot of blood very quickly. "I told you two to run away..."

Rosa frantically looked at the wound, she had seen Jonathan heal wounds with magic and he had started to teach her but she had yet to be able to cast the spell. Nervously she then put both her hands on the wound, which instantly caused Sasha to scream. "Please let me do this please let me do this." Rosamia focus everything she had and tried to ignore everything around her and do what Jonathan had mentioned, she felt something building up and power go to her hands. A smile appeared on her face, '*I'm going to be able to do this.*' but as she opened her eyes the feeling dissipated.

"No..." frustrated she closed her eyes again

only to stop as she felt Adam's hand on her shoulder. "It's not going to work Rosa... It's too late." Slowly Rosa opened her eyes and saw that Sasha was out cold, she was not moving and more importantly it did not seem like she was breathing. Rosamia started to cry.

Doing everything he could not to look at Sasha dead body Adam started looking around. There were a lot of fires everywhere and you could see that a group was forming to try and take care of them in the distance. Also from what he could see there was only one monster left, unfortunately there was also only one village guard left as the monster had just killed the one he was fighting against. Now able to see the middle of the village, he saw both Jonathan and the visitor, Timothy, fighting what looked like a human in dark black robes with a blood red trim around it. "Like monsters are not enough? At least it's human."

Adam focused again on the last guard; he did not know what was wrong but even with his no experience he could tell the guard was having difficulty moving. They had to make it in time this time, "Rosa he needs our help, you're with me still?"

Rosamia slowly stood, "... I am." Adam then ran off after the last monster and the guard. Rosamia took another look at Sasha, "I'm so sorry..." and then she turned to follow Adam.

The guard moved to the side to avoid the horizontal blow from the heavy two handed sword it was wielding. The wounds he had suffered from the other battle were not helping him, but there was only one more and he would make sure to finish it. When he saw that the beast was then bracing himself for a forward thrust the guard moved his weapon in the way to block the blow. As the attack came at him, his blade did stop most of

the damage but there was still a pretty nasty gash on his side. With a quick look he saw that his block had not been enough and the wound would be lethal soon. He had to finish this now, as he tried to move his weapon in position the monster tackled him, the strength of the blow sent him on the ground opening up his wound even more. He tried to get up as the monster moved overhead but try as he might there was no way his body was complying with his wishes, "Come on there is only one, just one more blow..."

As the monster was about to perform a downward attack on the prone guard on the ground Adam rushed in and hacked at the monster's left calf muscle. When the blow hit the monster screamed in pain and turned his attack to Adam instead of the guard. Adam tried to pull out his weapon but it was harder to do than expected, he also needed to move away but there was no way that he could leave his weapon behind. Using all his strength he pulled out the blade which enraged the monster more, unfortunately there was no more time for Adam to move away and he could only simply stare as the weapon was about to cleave him in two.

When it got to about ten inches from his head it suddenly stopped and hit a shimmering small round golden obstacle. The obstacle twisted and the weapon momentum continued to hit the ground leaving Adam unharmed.

"Thanks Rosa", not looking back Adam moved to the side. With the monster bending a bit from the blow Adam was now able to reach the beast's sides. Without hesitation he hacked at it and scored another good hit, but this time was able to not get his weapon stuck.

The monster roared in pain and now on his knee took his weapon and attacked Adam with a

horizontal slash in order to swat him away. Adam was once again not quick enough to move away but then another shimmering golden shield appeared and took the hit. This time due to the blow of the attack the shield collapsed and shattered but all the momentum of the attack was gone. Using that Adam twisted around and hacked at the monsters back shoulder, causing him more pain and then moved again gripping his weapon with both hands and swung at the back of the head. The weapon impaled itself in the back of its skull and then the monster fell on the ground.

Adam was catching his breath as Rosa moved to the wounded guard still on the ground. "I'll save you for sure." The blood was pooling like Sasha had but Rosa put her hands around the wound and focused. She once again felt power going to her hands and when she opened her eyes the power was still present. For a while both her and the guard were a bit stunned as the area glowed golden a bit. Rosa poured everything she had in the spell but it was soon going to finish. When it did she once again started breathing now realising that she had held it in throughout the casting of the spell. The guard closed his eye for a second, still in obvious pain, and then reached out and put his hands on top of Rosa's. As she looked down she saw that the spell had done little or nothing to the wound.

Her eyes went wide as the guard coughed out some blood. The guard managed a weak smile, "It's not... your fault... okay..." Rosa was about to answer him but as soon as he said his final word his head fell back and his hand on top of hers went limp, soon after he stopped breathing.

Timothy glanced back at the two kids, "Well the final orc is dead, brave kids you have there."

Jonathan was still focusing on the magic shield that was now protecting them from some dark energy attack that their target was throwing at them. "Foolish kids if you ask me."

Timothy turn back at the human they were facing, "Is this really a Dark Cleric?" As he said it a pillar of fire rose from the clerics location, while the spell was in affect they could hear laughter and when it died down a lot of his clothes where burned out but you could clearly see that the damage to his skin was in full regeneration.

Jonathan prepared to defend against another attack, "The last time I ever saw one of these I was much younger then you and it was a remnant that had somehow survived, it was nowhere near this powerful as well."

The cleric looked at Jonathan, "I am no remnant I assure you and while the plan is not going as expected I will show you that I am not whatever you saw back then."

The cleric then focused and then a large black goo like substance came from the ground and enveloped him. Then more of it came forth, and more and more until there was like a large blob of black goo as tall as a normal house in front of them.

Both Jonathan and Timothy backed away, "What's he doing?" Jonathan had no answer as he then looked at the large thing in front create two arms and then a head, once the shape was there two large red eyes showed up and then a very large mouth. "You now face a true cleric's power."

Jonathan saw that everywhere the black goo was touching the tree in the middle of the village was being devoured into nothingness. It's then that the creature aimed both his hands at the two

priests, "Timothy, protection spell, NOW!"

The two joined in to create as large of a shield around them in order to protect themselves from the black liquid that was being poured on top of them. Luckily the shield held, "Do you know of any way to beat this thing?" Once it's stopped Jonathan looked around and everything around them not protected by the shield had been eaten alive only to leave the ground showing.

It's then that they heard a child scream.

Rosamia was screaming at the top of her lungs and Adam was on his knees unable to do anything, his spell now broken unable to handle the level of fear he was he was feeling. They had not been hit by the blast but all this had been too much for them. Rosa soon stopped screaming but was glued there unable to do anything. Seeing this only seems to make the Dark Cleric happy. "This is only the beginning..."

Jonathan looked at his target and then looked at Timothy, "I need to you to go to the kids and protected them with the largest shield you can muster."

Timothy was confused, "What do you plan on doing?"

"Just promise me, it will all be clear soon."

Timothy then nodded and then moved in the direction of the children.

Jonathan took one last look at the back of Timothy, "Please help them." He then turned to the kids. Rosa was still looking at him, glued really and now Adam was simply fixed on the red eyes of the Dark Cleric. "I hope you can still find a way to smile after all this."

He then fixed his gaze on the cleric, "This is not the beginning... It's the end."

The red eyes focused on the priest, what foolishness was he talking about and then his red

eyes grew wide, "How?"

Jonathan was already casting the spell that would end this; it was a pretty easy spell to cast considering its consequences. After the encounter with the first Dark Cleric he thought that its power was impressive and figured that researching a way to defeat them could be needed should more show up. In doing so he stumbled on something from the time of the dragon wars that would be effective in hurting them; which he figured would be enough should they face something similar to what he had seen. Unfortunately this thing in front of him was something else then the last time so would it be enough? And if not what would happen then?

When an accident happened at Missa that destroyed the books that he had learned this spell from, in an act of stubbornness, he decided to keep the knowledge for himself after the others had figured out that he knew of their content. His stubbornness had come from his fear that the Order would eventually teach this spell to all members of this Crusader branch that they were so insistent in building. If something like that would happen he could not figure out how he could repent when he finally saw the lord of light at the end of his journey.

The spell was now done and he only said one word, "Valkyrie"

A large pillar of light formed around Jonathan and his body then lifted from the ground. The Dark Cleric tried to stop him by attacking him while he was in mid air but the pillar seemed to protect him.

Once Jonathan stopped a blinding light enveloped him and then a large golden figure appeared clad in golden armor with a large double horned helmet. He was about the size of the goo

shaped Dark Cleric in front of him and he was wielding a spear that he then hit the base of the Dark Cleric with. "...My mission is accomplished..."

Timothy had reached the kids, from the looks of it only the girl had paid attention to what Jonathan had done. It was all clear now why Jonathan had hidden himself here and also why he had gotten so much support from the High Order members to try and convince him to come back. The legendary lost spell was treated like an urban myth to all the high level priests that heard it and here it was being casted. Timothy grabbed the two kids and threw them on the ground and then him on top of them and casted a shield around them in hope to protect them all.

As everything went white all around them, Timothy prayed that his spell would hold. The power of the Valkyrie spell was nowhere near what he had imagined; this was too much for anyone and used improperly could destroy kingdoms. The seconds ticked by and they felt like hours and he kept praying for the shield to hold as he gave it more and more energy. Eventually everything stopped.

Timothy first looked at the children, as they started to get on their feet he saw that they were both fine. When he turned around the shock of what he saw almost made him lose all balance.

The middle of the village was now a large crater. The body of the Dark Cleric was gone but Jonathan's was still there. After a few second the shock finally dropped and Timothy ran towards Jonathan. It took him a while to notice that the kids were following him as well.

Timothy kneeled beside Jonathan, who was surprisingly still alive. "Can I heal you?"

Slowly Jonathan moved his head, "...No, there is no point. No spell will be able to heal the after

effects of casting this spell." He closed his eyes, "Was it enough?"

Timothy nodded, "It was, he's gone, and not a trace of him is left."

"Good.", Jonathan then noticed the two kids next to him, both crying. "Please take care of each other and I'm so sorry that I could not protect you as I had hoped."

They did not say anything but kept crying, "Timothy, I'm sorry to ask this of you but please take care of them."

Timothy slowly nodded as he saw Jonathan close his eyes never to open again.

Rosamia was making her way up to the top of a small hill where they had decided to bury Jonathan's remains. The hill was overlooking the village that he and others had died protecting; everyone agreed that it would be a fitting final resting place. A bit more than two years since that attack had passed and many things had happened.

Timothy had stayed with them as promised in order to take care of them while the village rebuild, things were pretty bad at the starts for many reasons but eventually both Adam and her started to open up to him. Things had really started to click when Timothy offered to help both of them to defend themselves. The reality of the situation was that after being attacked in two different homes there was no way anyone could guarantee that something like this would not happen again, so getting training was something they were both opened too.

The surprise was when Timothy told them about the Crusaders and how they fought using holy magic. While Timothy himself had not been

chosen because he had to stay where he was, he did know people that were going to be training others and how they were going to go about it. This was also knowledge that he showed both Rosa and Adam. Learning how to better defend themselves helped both of them cope with what had happened which Rosamia was very thankful for, unfortunately this was also something that she resented.

Ever since that night Adam had changed, so had she but more so him as he became more distant. When the training began she finally saw fire in his eyes again and at the time she thought that things would go back to the way it was, she now knew that she had been deluding herself. The more Adam learned the more he wanted to know and soon after gone where the wishes of exploring together while going on adventures. Now it was talks of bandits and keeping people safe. Rosamia was on board with keeping people safe but the way Adam wanted to do this was by hunting them down before they could attack, while that strategy had merit it also did not sit well with her for some reason. Later on she also saw something else that had taken a while to realise, he no longer smiled the way he did. It's was like all the innocence that had been in him had been completely destroyed and replaced with something else.

Timothy had taken care of them and had showed them how to be strong using their own power that was something Rosamia would be forever grateful for, at the same time he had also help build a rift between Adam and her which was something that she had not appreciated, especially when Adam had left the village in order to be approved to join the Crusaders.

When Timothy had explained why he had visited the village the reason why Jonathan was

against the Crusaders had also been explained. Adam did not understand the reasoning given and so had wanted to join as soon as he could. In the case of Rosa, she could see where Jonathan's concerns were coming from as she saw them in Adam and because of that had refused to join Adam when the time had come, furthering the rift between them.

Today was the anniversary of Jonathan's death and Rosa had news to give him so she had made it a point to go back and visit but as she reached the top she was surprised to see that she was not alone.

Next to the tombstone was a young man clad in silver and white armor, he had two short swords as weapons and black hair. Rosamia had a small smile on her face, "Congratulations on being accepted in the Crusaders."

Adam turned around, there was no smile but there was a fire in his eyes still. "Given what is happening now, I don't see how they could have refused me. I still have a few years of training to go over but I have no worries on that." He then looked at her or more specifically the robes that she was wearing and then he smirked when he noticed a small breastplate. "Congratulations on being accepted as a priestess... of sorts..."

Rosamia looked at herself, everything was normal for a priestess with the exception of the spear and breastplate that she wore. Sure priest would be trained with a weapon but it was not something that was shown until the very end of the training and also very little of it. As for the armor, well that was unique to her only. "I made quite the splash when I was tested for my knowledge and combat ability and was often asked if I wanted to join the Crusaders instead..."

Adam was suddenly annoyed, "And why didn't

you?"

'Here we go again...' This question discouraged her as it had been talked about many times and it had never ended well. "You know why, I agree with Jonathan. I don't see that..."

Adam suddenly cut her off and was also visibly angry, "That they are not needed?!? How can you think that now?" He raised both arms reaching to the sky, "Orcs, that's what those monsters where and now they are attacking us. The whole world knows now, and while the first attack was defended by everyone only the Crusaders are holding them at bay now, how can you think that they are not needed?"

Rosamia sighed, "...I just think that... maybe there is a better way..." Seeing only more anger from Adam Rosa continued, "Please listen to me Adam..."

"I won't! I simply cannot do that. Town, villagers, people are being attacked, we both know how that feels. We both have the power to help them and you want me to what...wait until some better plan come along. I will not simply wait while others need help." He then had a bit of a pleading look on his face, "It's not too late Rosa, just join me too. I saw the people there being approved and you have way more skills then they do, you would be a shoe in, so please change your mind."

Rosamia was trying her best to hold her anger at what Adam had said, "I was there too Adam, both times, so don't you dare say that I want to ignore the people that need help. You want to help them by killing their attackers and I want to help them by healing their wounds, so who is more equipped to help them in the end?"

"Healing their wounds helps but it will do very little when the next time they get attacked and you are not there to heal them again. Once the enemy

is dead they are dead for good."

Now she was as frustrated as he was, "It's all about the enemy now and not about the people that you are protecting."

"That hurts, as I'm doing this to protect them..." and then with a softer voice Adam continued, "And to protect you."

Rosamia slowly nodded, "That's sad really because I want to do the same just not with the Crusaders." She then turned to the tombstone of Jonathan, "...I could never join them..."

Adam was puzzled by that, "You know while I was being tested an odd thing happened. A High Order priest came to visit and asked me a lot of questions on that final spell that Jonathan used that night. I knew nothing more about it then Timothy and after a lot of questions the High Order priest was convinced." A questioning look appeared on his face, "I never asked but do you know about it?"

Rosamia was taken aback a bit as this was not a question that she had thought Adam would have ever asked, more signs that he had changed. Still she had been asked the question often; so much that she had lost count. "I know as much as you do Adam, and I too was asked about it. It seems that the spell used is truly lost after all."

"Given its power, that's a shame."

Given that response, Rosamia was even more convinced that she had done the right thing by hiding the details of the spell. That spell had haunted her for months if not years in her dreams, at the time she could not understand it but now with the training that Timothy had given them both it was pretty easy for her to understand what she had seen. At the start she had avoided talking about it because she simply did not want to, but later on she started to wonder what would happen

if Adam knew about it or for that matter every other Crusader. The thought scared her. Sure there was this large gulf between them but maybe it could be mended in time, but with that spell in his hands she did not think that she would get the time to get to that point. She had to keep it to herself, for all the Crusaders and especially Adam, yet another reason why she could not join them.

"Maybe power like that will never be needed again and it should stay lost."

Adam felt odd, he knew Rosa better than anyone and she knew something he was sure of it but how much was not clear. Still he also knew that there was no way that she was going to tell him about it for some reason, and truthfully deep down he hoped that she was right, he figured that she wasn't but still hoped for it. "Well anyways I just came to pay my respects; sorry I got you angry again. Please be safe Rosa."

Rosamia shook her head again, *'Then join me you idiot, because I can't join you and nor do I want to. Can't you see what the Crusaders are doing and will do to you? Why can't you want to let this go.'* But instead of saying this she simply opened her arms and reached out to Adam. He stopped and took the invitation for the hug. This made her smile a bit as it reminded her of old times, "I promise I will find a better way."

"Hmm, well in the mean time I promise that I will do everything I can to keep everyone safe." He then broke the hug and made his way down the hill.

Rosamia simply stood there for a long while after he was gone, after a while she rested her hand on the tombstone and then had a sad smile on her face, "I'll keep Valkyrie safe but while I'm doing that, please guide me to find a better path for both our sakes and keep him safe for me."

Interlude 3

When Rosamia finished once again a silence appeared with everyone, but this time it was different as pretty much everyone was simply looking at Adam and where waiting on his reaction to all this. This was obvious to everyone but Adam who was simply lost in thought, he was going over everything that she had said once again as there were a lot of things that bugged him about it. It's not that it was lacking details as she had remembered the events better than he had, which made sense considering what she had gone through, but the fact that something did not make sense to him.

His thoughts were broken when he realised that Alexandria was now standing in front of him with both arms extended with a very warm smile on her face. This only confused him more, "What?"

She did not answer but instead reached out and wrapped her around him, "I am so sorry that you had to go through that, it also explains so very much."

He was feeling touched until that last statement but this time did not retaliate as he normally would have. Alexandria was, as much as he would verbally deny it, a close friend and she was also a very emotional person which allowed him to poke at her easily. So this time he let it go and smiled himself, "Thanks..."

Alex broke the hug and then went back to where she was sitting a little while back, while she did that he noticed that Anna and more importantly Rosa were also smiling at him. Their reactions were more on the approval side than anything else, he then realised that he

unintentionally smirked at the action he had just done, '*I am changing more then I realise it.*' Still putting that aside there was something still bugging him and there was only one person he could ask about it.

"So if I understand correctly the reason you did not join the Crusaders with me is because of Valkyrie? Why not tell me that back then?"

Rosamia chuckled a bit, which made Adam a bit angry. "Sorry for laughing at your question; it's just that I asked myself the same thing when I relived the memory. How would things have been different if I would have done that? The thing is that I did come to an answer on that one and I think I made the right choice. Also to clear it up a bit it was not just because of the spell that I did not join, Jonathan's opinion mattered a lot but you also where a big factor in the decision as I did not like how the idea of training and joining the Crusaders changed you." She then paused a bit before continuing, "And if I want to be totally honest with myself I was maybe afraid that I would change as well if I followed the same path."

This shocked Adam, so much. "... But things could have been different..."

Before Rosa tried to explain it more Anna jumped in, "Things would have been different, true but not the way you think. Personally I think that if she would have told you, you would double down even more and convinced her to join. I'm sure she would have hated it deep down but would have continued for your sake and eventually I'm pretty sure that she would be alone."

Adam was frustrated, "Why do you say that..."

Anna turned to Mike who continued the explanation, "Having joined she would have told you about the spell. It probably would have stayed between the two of you but still there would have

come a time where a situation would have happened and one of you would have needed to cast it and you would have done it. Given the circumstance there is no way that you would have survived, leaving her alone... again."

Adam still refused the explanation, "How do you know, maybe we could have avoided that situation..."

Mike smirked, "If it was the you from now, sure that would be different. But you have to compare to the you of then. The you of then that tested me by playing a gamble during a mission with enemies all around us, the you of then that left me to die and saved Rosamia when you saw no way out." Mike stopped as Adam waved at him in order to stop.

Rosa then took his hands and made him focus on her only, "And now you understand the answer I came up with. You where so full of anger, hate and so many other dark emotions that there is no way that it would have turned out for the better for the two of us. At the same time, the me of then did not understand what you where really feeling at the time... I just couldn't. The only time I finally did was when I myself was surrounded by that darkness when the Crimson town was attacked and I saw everything all over again. I completely lost it too then." She then looked at Alex, then at Mike and Anna, "But when I did I had people pulling me back in order to help me remember what truly was important." Rosamia then had a sad smile, "I don't think that we could have done that for each other back then."

Rosamia was holding back some tears and to his surprise so was he, "I guess we were doomed to fail back then." He then looked at her clear blue eyes, "But not now right?" She smiled at him, "Nope not now, now we have a chance." Adam

happily nodded.

"Ahhh, that's so sweet." Alex grabbed Iris's arm, "Right?" Iris nodded, happy for Adam and Rosa, "Yes it is."

Now feeling a bit uncomfortable with all the emotional focus Adam looked at the married couple of the group. "Well I guess we can't all be like you two all in sink and all that."

They were both surprised by the comment; Anna looked at Mike who shrugged. "Is it weird for me to think that what he said is not completely true?"

Anna chuckled, "Not really, I feel the same way. Back then I had no clue why you were doing what you were doing."

"Same here, I mean here you where already an outsider, the lowest grade recruit and doing the opposite of all the others. You were a big question mark to me, not only then but after as well for a long time."

Anna teasingly smiled at him, "Same for me. I guess if you look at it, it makes sense we were very different from one and the other."

He nodded, "Very much so, you where and are still more sociable and outgoing where as I'm more of an introvert and not as outgoing as people may think."

"WHAT!" Adam could not believe it at all, and he was not the only one as Alex was shaking her head in disbelief as well. "I'm... with Adam on this one... I can't believe I said that..."

They both shrugged and then Anna turned to Rosa, "It's like she said, the us then are different then the us of now and the us of now is pretty much all you have seen."

Rosamia understood were Anna was going but she still wondered about it, "Okay but, how did you get from there to here?"

Anna looked at Mike, "Time, talking to one and the other..."

"A lot of talking to one and the other..."

"Honesty helped a lot as well."

Mike nodded, "Yea we had to be very open with one and the other, and because of that when one of us opened up the other had to put their own emotions aside and put themselves in the others shoes."

Adam was confused, "Is that the only way because..."

Rosamia felt the same way Adam was, "So what you're saying is that if we can't do that then..."

Anna quickly cut her off, "No, no, no stop what you are both thinking right now. First every couple is different and move at their own pace. Also what works for us may not work for you. You asked me what we did to get from there to here, which was the path we took and while there maybe things to learn from that there is a pretty good chance that the same steps will not be good for the both of you."

Mike nodded, "She's right, plus things were different for us. When we met we were much older then you two and plus we had a good two years to get to know each other which helped build that trust between each other. I mean every day we were practicing together and spent more time together afterward to discuss the good and the bad that happened during training."

Anna had a mischievous half smile, "You make that last part sound like I was forcing you to do all that, last I checked you first approached me."

Not biting Mike smiled, "True but I simply asked a question you where the one that came up with the request."

Before Anna could retort, Alexandria waved her arms around to get their attention, "Okay, okay that's enough. I think we know who's going next and what you are talking about now."

Anna laughed, "Are you sure, it's pretty much what I've told you about before."

Alex looked at Adam and Rosamia and then turned back to them, "Oh I'm pretty sure and I'm also sure that I'm not the only one who thinks that."

Iris then jumped in, "And I only heard it from the others and never from the source itself so for me it would be new in a way."

Both Mike and Anna looked at each other, "I don't mind, do you want to start it up?"

Anna nodded, "Probably best if we start from the beginning. I mean my actions are what started it all right?" Mike simply nodded.

She then turned to the others, "Well okay then, we will try and add more details considering what was already talked about from you two."

Iris smirked, "I'm sure it will be worth it, and if not, I'm sure Alex will make it worth it with questions afterwards." Alexandria was rubbing both her hands together and had a bit of a wicked grin on her face.

Anna simply smiled and started the story.

Chapter 3

"*I*'m going to make it; I'm going to make it... I need to make it."

Anna was running as fast as she could to make it back to the Crimson town. She had finally entered the outer walls that protected the townsfolk, just a little bit more and she would reach the inner wall where all the Crimsons and trainees lived.

"Anna!"

The mention of her name made her stop and turn around. The man approaching her was in his mid-thirties with brown hair and a mustache. Anna recognized him as one of the fruit vendors in the town.

"Oh hi, not that I don't want to stop but I'm in a real hurry right now.", Even after saying that the man still approached her carrying a large basket filled with green apples

"This will not take long; I just wanted to give you this for all you did for us."

Anna looked at the basket, there was no way that she could eat all those before they went bad and it's not like she had too many people she knew that she could share them with. "You know that's not necessary, I'm just glad I could help."

The man smiled and handed her the basket, "We know it's just that we want to help you as well if we can, considering all you do for us."

Anna smiled and took the basket, "Thank you very much and don't worry as long as I can I'll be there to help out."

The merchant smiled back, "Many thanks for that." As he started to leave Anna turned as well and made her way to the inner gates. In a way that

merchants request was the reason why she was once again dashing through the town.

The Crimson town was hidden from the rest from the world, in order for that to happen they needed to be as self-sufficient as possible. A long time ago it had been setup where the regular townsfolk would give a certain amount of goods to the Crimson in order to keep them safe, which was good as this freed up more time for the Crimson to train and get better. This arrangement had been active for a long time now and since then the townsfolk had never been attacked by anyone or anything inside the outer walls.

The issue came when the people needed to leave the outer walls. Typically a group of Crimson would follow a group of people and protect them when they needed to get extra supplies from the forest or if more help was needed for the livestock's. That was all well and good but if someone needed something extra for personal reasons then they had to find protection themselves or take a risk. More often than not they took a risk as asking help from a Crimson would come at a high price and giving more then you could possibly gain was not a good transaction.

In the case of the fruit merchant they had gone off hunting in a well know spot. Sadly they ran into trouble with a pack of wolves that had made their way there. They had been able to escape with only minor wounds which had been good news; the bad news had been that the wolves had decided to stay in the area. Not being able to find help from the Crimson for this issue, or in some cases not being able to afford the help, they had turned to her and asked if she could do something about it.

It was well known that Anna was still a trainee but it was also well known that she was always

willing to help if it was for a good cause and being able to find extra food if need was a good cause in her mind. Unlike others she did not charge anything which made her very popular among the townsfolk and also kept her very busy.

She had been able to drive off the wolves but figured that she would check in on the area just in case for the next little while in order to make sure that it was once again safe. This is where she had gone this morning, she had planned on being able to make it back in time but when she thought she had found something time had escaped her and because of it she now had a new problem.

Anna slowed down as she arrived at the inner gates and the two Crimson's guarding moved their spear in the way to block the path. *'Great, I seriously don't need this right now.'*

Anna waved at them, "So what's the reason this time?"

"We were just thinking that you spend so much time outside the inner walls for a trainee that you may want to consider yourself a townsfolk instead, and well you know that they are not allowed inside right?"

Anna glared at them, "This again...?" Crimson's always had a parent that was a Crimson. It could be the mother or father and in some cases both, but never had there been a trainee that had neither that is until Anna came along. In her case she had been invited by the leader of the Crimson's, the Commander, to join when he had been visiting a small town where she had previously lived. At the time Anna had thought her prayers had been answered, now she wondered about that. Because of her origin most, if not all, Crimson's treated her like an outsider. Not wanting to go directly against the Commander wishes most of them had tried to make her life harder in order to convince her to

simply leave on her own. And while the constant bullying was not fun by any means, Anna had lived through worse.

"Well we are just thinking that one day you will finally wake up from this dream and realise that you don't really belong." With a grin on his face he continued, "We are just here to try and help you see that before anything bad happens, that's all."

Anna sighed a bit, things where far from being in a dream and sadly this could go on for a while making sure that she would be late for that training session. But then she smiled as she saw a red haired female Crimsons walk to the inner gates from behind the guards.

"Just let her trough otherwise I'll do more than report you."

The two guards suddenly looked back and then instantly move away and positioned themselves at attention when they saw Julia.

Julia was head trainer of the spearmen for the Crimsons so she held a pretty high position but she was also Anna's Guardian and more importantly her only friend in all the Crimsons. Now with the way clear Anna made her way in and gave Julia a quick hug and also handed her the basket of apples, "Thanks I owe you one, also I have to go."

Julia chuckled, "I know you're about to miss your training session and that's going to bring you in trouble that I can't get you out of." She then smiled as Anna was already running away, "And your count is way higher than one you know." Anna simply waved at her as she continued running.

Anna was so thankful for Julia not just for this save but for everything. All trainees where assigned to a Crimson as a Guardian. Not only did

they stay with them but they also where there to guide and help them. At the beginning Anna had had issues being assigned a Guardian as no one wanted help her out with that task. Eventually Julia had stepped in, the issue was that Julia was busy in teaching others about the art of using a spear and had little time to be a Guardian. Typically this was why Crimsons that where already teaching where associated with a trainee that was low maintenance, Anna was not sure that she fit that bill but Julia has stayed with her for her own reasons and for that she was eternally grateful.

Finally arriving to her destination, with probably only seconds to spare, Anna positioned herself in line with the others and finally felt a deep feeling of relief. The training grounds were a simple large oval shape zone filled with sand, next to it you had a wooden stadium seating that had been built for when special events and matches occurred. In line with her you had ten other trainees in the group she belonged too, making it a total of eleven, which was a number that Anna had started to hate during training practices.

While trying to ignore the coming dread of practice Anna tried to focus on the sword instructor who was showing them a lunge and block technique. The lunge was shown as a single strike that could disarm your opponent or at worst knock them off balance and set them up for another attack. That's something that she would be able to practice on her own to a certain extent and because of that Anna paid as much attention to the details as she could. The block was the designed counter to the lunge being shown, that was something that would require a partner which would be difficult and unintentionally because of this Anna's attention wavered a bit and, only then

did she realise that one of the others trainees in the group was glancing at her.

While he was not looking she glanced at him herself. She did not know him and had never talked to him, which was not really something new. She did know that he was at the top of the group, actually him and someone else kept exchanging first place every time full trainee ranking matches were held. Anna could not recall his name, but she was pretty sure that he had not been one that had given her a hard time. If anything before today he had pretty much ignored her, something that was pretty common as well. *'So after all this time what do you want with me I wonder?'*

Before she could think of any reasons the instructor stopped his demonstrations and then the feeling of dread and worry came back.

"Okay now that you know the basic, partner up and practice. I'll come around and tell you what you are doing wrong."

'One, two, three, and four...' That's all the time it took and as she looked around everyone was already partnered up minus her. "Nothing is ever easy..." As she said that the man that had been glancing at her was approaching her. Anna was stunned, she looked around again and low and behold there was another trainee that was also alone with a similar shocked look on his face.

'Wait! He's coming over here? Why? To practice?'

"Hi, do you mind if we partner up for this?"

She was stunned for a moment, "Ah, sure..." but then she recalled that this had happened to her here and there, "I take it that you will want to start with the lunges and me on the blocking?" Most times when someone approached her during training was to use her for their training and then leave her be when the time came to switch, seeing as that was probably his plan she figured that she

would get it out in the open right away.

"If you want I can, but if you want to practice on me first that's fine with me too."

Again she was stunned, but he looked like he was serious. "Well if that is the case then I will start it up." As she got in position so did he.

When his sword was at the angle that had been shown by the instructor Anna lunged forward and hit the spot that had been mentioned, both swords collided and a large clang sound could be heard. The results had not been what had been shown as his sword had barely moved from the blow, she tried again.

Clang

He looked at her as she tried again, "I have to ask, are you the person that goes out and helps people in the town with their problems?"

She prepared another blow, "I am, don't tell me you have an issue with that as well?"

Clang

He nodded, "Not really, I'm just curious as to why you do it."

Again Anna prepared for another try, "Hmm, I'm not really sure. I guess I just want to help with what I can. I mean it is the right thing to do right? Plus should we not help each other out when we can?"

Clang

He dropped his posture and one hand went on his face, it seems that he was trying to hide a smile. "Are you laughing at me?"

He quickly nodded, "No, no I'm not. I supposed that you are right and we should do that. I just never thought that it was as simple as that of a reason."

Anna shrugged, "Not everything has to be complicated, I mean there is enough of that to go around already. Plus like I said, it felt like the right

thing to do."

When he was once again in position she tried again.

Clang

She then stopped, this was weird. "Mind if I ask a question?" He simply nodded in agreement, "Okay well I thought that you would let me practice but every time you block my move..."

He smiled at the comment, "It's because you are doing it wrong."

"What! I'm doing it like he showed us."

He nodded, "Yes you are, your form is exactly as he showed us but your speed is off and the strength of your blow is really off causing the maneuver to fail."

She was puzzled, she turned to the instructor and then back to the guy in front of her. "But..."

He stopped her and explained, "While he is showing everyone he can't go as fast as he should otherwise you will miss some of the details of the movements. As for the strength behind the blow well that's just simply tricky to show." He then pointed his sword at her, "If you don't mind, let me show you. Maybe that will be the best way to go about it."

Anna got in the same position that he had been a little while back, she saw him getting in position as well and then he lunged. Both sword hit but the blow was very strong so much that her sword dropped to the ground. As for the speed, he was not fast enough for her to not see what he was doing but at the same time he was fast enough for her not to have time to react. He was right; it was much different than what she had been doing.

He moved back and positioned himself so that she could try again, "Okay once you are ready, simply focus on adding the same amount of strength to the blow; we can deal with the speed

after you have that part right."

Anna did as instructed and it took a while but eventually she was able to deflect his sword as it had been expected. Now it was time to focus on the speed part, as she did that Anna noticed that he was sometimes glancing at the instructor between blows. Eventually she finally managed to disarm him.

She was catching her breath and he smiled at her, "Good work you have it now." He then glanced again at the instructor who had yet to come to them as he had mentioned that he would have.

Anna smirked now figuring out why he was doing that, "Don't expect him to come over. Maybe you are used to that, but if your with me that's not going to happen."

He was really puzzled by that, "Is that the case all the time?"

"It is, not only that but more often than not my practices go without instructor and partner."

He was not smiling anymore and had a pretty serious look on his face, "That should not be the case." But then his emotion changed and it looked like shame, which puzzled Anna. "I guess I need to apologize as I'm also someone that contributed to that without knowing."

So many thoughts and question were popping in Anna's head but eventually one stood out and then she figured that she would go for it as she had nothing to lose in asking. "Well if that's the case then would you mind practicing with me in the future as well?"

He simply stood there deep in thought; Anna smirked at his reaction '*I guess I asked for too much.*'

"Okay."

"What?!" Again she was confused, "You said okay right?"

He smiled, "I did, no worries. At tomorrow's practice I will partner with you, and the day after that and so on."

That was way more then she expected and while she thought she was stupid to ask she did so anyways, "Can I ask why?"

"Because it's the right thing to do and it feels right." He then took the position of attacker, "Okay now let's practice your blocking."

Now she understood why he had laughed when she had said the same words at him as she had a similar reaction. Still this was a welcome change of pace.

A lot of time passed and blocking had overall not gone well. In order for Anna to properly learn how to do it he had to slowed down and cut a lot of the strength behind the blow. Still in the end she had been able to perform the maneuver properly, which was more then she had ever excepted when she had first seen it, now all she needed was more practice.

It's at that point that the instructor made his way to the middle of the training area, "Okay I think you all have a good idea now. Keep practicing when you can and see you again tomorrow."

While people started to disband and the instructor as well he looked very confused. This time it was Anna that felt sorry for him, being excluded like that was probably a first for him. She gave him a smile, "Well see you tomorrow?"

"Actually do you have time now for something?"

"Sure, I was simply going to wash up and had no real plans after. What do you have in mind?"

He then position himself in the middle of the training area, "I need you to come at me with everything you have. I'm serious, try and do the most damage as you can."

'*This guy...*' She nodded her head, "Why do you want me to do that?"

"I need to see something, is it a problem?"

Anna shrugged, "Not really but I'm not sure what you will get out of this." While she did not know much about this person she did know that he was much better than her, actually following the last ranking given everyone was better than her. Normally she thought that he would do this so that he could show her that, as that had happen before, but something inside her told her that was not the case this time. Sadly because of that she had no clue why he would want to have a dual then, still she would humor him and then she got in position.

"Remember, with everything you have. Until I say so and also, until I say so I will only defend so only worry about attacking."

Even more confusion but she put all that aside and focused everything she had. The first blow was the strike that they had just learned, as expected he blocked it with little issue. Then the real move that she had planned went into motion as she quickly flipped around and preformed a horizontal slash, which he blocked again. Then Anna flipped her blade and thrust at his stomach, before the blow could hit he defected it to the side.

This continued for a while and as promised he only blocked, dodged and deflected. Not once did he counterattacked or preformed any cheap shot at her. From a different point of view Anna figured that she should be grateful that he had done as he had said but she could only feel frustration at this time. All blows had missed, one or two had come close but ultimately nothing had scored a hit.

It's at that point that he suddenly moved back, "Okay now we stop." Still frustrated she took the time to catch her breath, she did not know why

she was as frustrated as she knew full well that he was better than her at this but still not even landing one blow was too much.

"Alright, now get ready as this time I want to switch the roles."

She quickly looked at him, "What? You know what will happen if we do that?"

He nodded, "I do, at least I think I do, but it needs to be done."

Anna was not so sure about that, but fair was fair she supposed. She sighed deeply and got ready "Alright."

As soon as she said it he lunged at her with the blow that had been practiced today, she tried to block it as was also shown but as they both knew she needed more practice in order to properly do it. He then flipped around and preformed a horizontal blow and hit her, but then Anna was visibly pissed off. The next blow confirmed it as he flipped his blade and preformed a thrust aimed at her stomach. This time she blocked that move and then moved away afterword.

"WHAT GAME ARE YOU PLAYING!?"

He too seems frustrated, "I'm not playing any game at all. I'm glad that you saw that I was doing the same moves as you and I did that in order to give you a handy cap. My real goal is to test your abilities in defense; I mean I did test your attack abilities earlier."

She simmered down a bit, "Okay fine, but why do this at all?"

"I need to know what you are capable of currently. Otherwise partnering with you at training will become problematic later on."

There was logic in that and she did understand where he was coming from, but then why not say that instead of simply ordering her to attack him and defend against him. Once more she

got in position, "Okay I think I get it. Let's try again."

He resumed from the start and attacked her with every move that she had. Even knowing the moves, due to his speed and strength, it had taken everything she had to block half of them. Overall it was a pretty bad performance and she knew it. Currently they were both sitting at on the seats next to the training area. Eventually he looked at her after spending a lot of time gazing around. "Does this happen often?"

She was not sure what he was referring too but she did have a clue given the looks that she could see from other Crimsons that passed by. "It's a perk given to me for my status here." That comment seems to send him deep in thought. After a while she realised that she had been looking at him for a bit now and then she slowly shook her head, "You know if you want to back out, I will understand."

His puzzled look surprised her. "That's not what I was thinking at all actually." He then paused for a moment, "You don't seem to be that type so why would you think that?"

"Generally I'm not but I've been burned many times from other Crimsons and trainees as well so it's hard to not automatically assume. Still you are right; I should give you a fair chance."

He smirked, "Well that answer was unexpected, you keep doing that."

She laughed, "Thrust me it goes both ways."

He then nodded his head as he had made some decision, "Fine lest do this then." He then looked at her, "As you asked I will be your partner during the training sessions but that will only go so far. If you want I can help train you to get better. I don't know how far that will get you but what is happening here is not fair for you and

there is no reason for it."

Suddenly a half smile appeared on her face, *'He's kind, I did not expect that.'* She then looked at him, "I promise to do my best."

He seemed happy, "Good, then before we go our separate ways there is more thing I wish to do."

She wanted to ask but figured that she would see soon enough, "Lead the way..." It then suddenly hit her, "Ah, sorry to ask this now but... what's your name?"

He chuckled, "You're right, after all that we have yet to introduce ourselves." He turned to her and extended his hand, "The name is Mike."

She took Mike's hand and shook it, "and I'm Anna."

Mike smiled, "Okay Anna, let get you what you will need for the next little while for your training."

Anna nodded and followed his lead, so far this day had not gone at all as she had expected and that made her very happy.

Julia entered the shared room that she had with Anna. The room was basic; you had a simple large wooden dresser for both, two single beds placed on each side of room when you entered and in front two small desks.

"So did you make it in time after all?" As she made her way to her desk she paused for a second as she looked at Anna. She was currently reading a book at her desk, not only that but she also had a small pile of books next to her. Julia tilted her head to read the title of the book that Anna currently had in her hands, "So you did not make it in time and this is your punishment?"

Anna turned to Julia with a cheeky look on

her face, "Har, Har... No this is something else and has nothing to do with me actually making it on time to the training session, seeing as you asked."

Julia was doubtful, "Are you sure about that, because you are reading some pretty basic stuff."

Nodding in agreement Anna closed the book, "He mentioned that but there are a lot of things that I seem to have forgotten about so sadly I had to go back that far."

Julia was really confused, "I think you need to explain what happened today." As she said it she grabbed an apple from the basket that Anna had given Julia earlier.

Anna thought about where to start, "I think I'll start right after your question." She then explained making it to the training session, and then going over Mike offering to actually train with her and not use her like so many others had done in the past. She also talked about the sparing match after the fact, at which point her mood turned a bit gloomy.

"Hmm, you said the name was Mike?"

Anna was curious, "Yes, You know him?"

"Only in name and in passing at that, continue your story and I'll tell you after."

Anna was now very curious and she just could not image the link that the two would have, "Well in any case, after that he dragged me to the planning hall where it seems that you can find all these books on styles, combat practices and weapons."

"Wait, wait, wait, you knew that right?" Anna slowly nodded from side to side and Julia tried to hold back her laughter, "Seriously? Considering how long you have been here that's pretty funny in a sad way."

Anna did not appreciate the comment probably because that was the second time today

that she had gotten a somewhat similar response. "Well if my Guardian would have given me the tour then maybe I would have known that." She ended the comment with a sarcastic smirk, in order to tell Julia that she really did not blame her for it, but at the same time it would have been nice to know.

Julia shrugged, "Hey, I told you that I was busy but that if you had any questions to still come and asked. You never asked about this at all." Then Julia also had a sarcastic smile on her face, "Seems you had other things on your mind I guess."

"Anyways, after going over what he had seen that I was lacking, he simply pulled out some books and told me to go over them. Some of them he said I would go over fast because I knew most of it but that there were still things in them that I needed to remember or learn in some cases." She then put the book on the table, "He was pretty demanding about it as well, saying that he would check if I went through some of them tomorrow when we are supposed to meet up for extra training. I mean how much am I supposed to learn in one night?" Anna then stopped as she saw that Julia seems stunned at what she had said, "Something on your mind?"

Julia was now serious, "Is that what he said, that he would train you? He did not say something like, let do extra practices or something like that?"

Anna nodded, "Nope, he specifically mentioned to help train me in order to get better. Why, what's the problem with that?"

"The Crimsons are very structured not only in the way they live but the way they fight. In order for a person to be able to join the ranks they need to act and fight a certain way, because of the importance of this training it is left to specific people. Take me, if you use a spear then you

followed my training routine. If you want to learn more then there is nothing wrong with that and in a one on one scenario knowing more then what you are trained can be a life saver, that said when in the group then you need to fall in line with everyone. The trouble comes in when you follow someone else training then it may be harder for you to do that in the end which can cause problems. Because of this trainees can do extra practices together, that's encouraged, but a trainee training another is not encouraged at all." Julia paused, "Hmm, plus there is the issue of his Guardian."

Anna was a bit stunned by all this as this rule was news to her, "Is he going to get in trouble? Also what about his Guardian, why would it be more of an issue for him?"

Julia smirked, "Because Mike's Guardian is your sword instructor, that's how I know his name."

Anna suddenly understood what Julia was talking about, "Oh...That could turn out badly." then she thought about it more, "Still, as much as he was of help today is he really going to keep his word? Especially after you told me about the trouble that he could get into... He's probably going to help here and there only." She then smirked, "Still that alone is more than most."

Julia then sighed deeply, "I am sorry about that. Even if you use a sword there is still a lot that I could show you, but I just..." Anna then cut her off, "Don't worry about it, you already do so much. Even with your schedule there is no one else I would rather have as a Guardian then you."

Julia had a small smile, "I was surprise when the Commander at Arms told me to be your Guardian. I kept telling him that it would be a poor decision as I had little time, but I guess it worked

out in the end."

Anna nodded, "Personally I think it did." She then turned back to the book, "I should keep reading. Training or no training, this is stuff that I should know."

Julia then reached out and put her hand Anna's shoulder to encourage her, "I'll leave you to it."

The next day at the training session the sword instructor went over more advance methods of using the two maneuvers that had been covered the day before. It was an odd feeling for Anna this time, she noticed that she could follow along better with his instruction having really understood both actions yesterday. Plus Mike was already next to her in line, which made all the worries of partnering up lessen. Once the lesson was over, as Mike had promised, he turned to her and offered to be her partner. It was such an odd feeling, but a good one at the same time.

Once the training was over Anna stretched out the kinks, given what Julia had told her this is where she expected him to modify what he had said yesterday. He waited around for a bit in order for the others to start leaving and then got closer to her, "Let meet outside of town in about one hour." After that he simply left.

Anna went back to her home and waited it out and wondered if something else was really going on. Something deep inside told her that she was not being pranked this time, still it was an odd request. As she finished another apple, and was now starting to get sick of them, she figured that she would put some in a bag and hand them over to him as a gift or in the worst case a distraction.

When she made it out of town it did not take

long for him to appear, "So what is this about?"

Mike motioned for her to follow him, "Last night after I gave you the books a thought popped in my head. I remembered how many looks we got for others passing by and that felt uncomfortable, so I figured that I would find a better more secluded stop for us."

Anna was trying to hold back the worry that she was suddenly feeling, "Ah, so your plan is to lure me into the forest so that we can be alone and train?"

Mike paused for a second and then looked at her with a serious glare, "Of course, why else?"

Anna held back her laughter, "Yes why else..."

The walk was a few minutes away from the town. When they got there Anna saw what looked like a small forest grove. The small clearing allowed for enough room for the both of them to properly practice but was also very private, it was perfect.

Mike then stopped, "For the following days let's simply meet up here one hour after practice." He then looked at the ground, "I also plan to find something for us to sit on soon, I just did not have the time yesterday."

Anna was not sure what to think, "So you where serious after all about training me?"

"Of course, I take it that you did not believe me or still don't?"

Anna shrugged a bit, "Well, in a way, yea. Especially after what Julia, my Guardian, told me about trainees training others. I mean are you sure about this? This could get you in trouble."

Mike nodded, "It could get us in trouble." He then shrugged himself, "But only so much if my guess is right. Plus you may not believe this but as much as you think that this is for you only, you're wrong as I'm getting something out of this too."

Anna chuckled, "You are? The match

yesterday was pretty telling on where each of our skill levels are. Plus are you not on top from our group, what can I teach you combat wise?"

Mike smiled, "Actually I'm in the top, using a sword, from all groups. There is only one other trainee that matches me, we tend to go back and forth on first place. With your help I plan to always be on top. It's something that I noticed when we practiced together yesterday."

"Well from what the instructor tells me I'm currently at the bottom of all groups..."

Mike then cut her off, "And yet you are the only one with actual combat experience in all groups."

Anna was puzzled by that for a second, "You mean those tasks that I do for others when I sometimes have to fight?"

He nodded, "Yep, out of all trainees you are the only one that has actually used your blade for something. That's not something that you should simply toss aside."

Anna then had a half smile on her face, sure there was a lot of bulling and teasing but through it all she was still confident in her own skills or at least she thought she was. He was making her see that maybe all of this was in fact getting to her without her realising it, which was something she would also have to work on. She then reached out for the bag that she had prepared and handed it to him, "Thanks and here is a little something for that comment of yours."

Mike grabbed the bag and peeked inside, "Apples?" Seeing as there was no answers coming from Anna he smiled and then put the bag away, "Thanks." He then moved away and took out his blade, "So shall we start today lesson?"

Anna nodded and positioned herself as well, "Let do it."

Anna was arriving at the morning training practice, so far most had already arrived but she did not see the sword instructor anywhere. She made her way next to Mike and stood in a horizontal line like everyone else, Anna then looked around and everyone seemed on edge. "Something I should know about?"

Mike tilted his head to the left, "Something odd may happen today, and it seems that we will find out what that is together."

Anna turned and saw that the dark haired, fully bearded sword instructor was now arriving. With him you had a trainee that was dark haired as well. "Are we getting an extra? That's odd?"

"That is not an extra, that's Anthony." He then looked at her, "You know when I mentioned that there was another that I kept swapping first place with?"

Anna looked at the trainee again, "That's him? Hmm..."

"This morning my Guardian told me to prepare myself for something and that's all he said."

Anna was now getting worried, "You think that it's because of me and the help you are giving me?"

Mike shrugged, "I'm not sure."

Anna thought about it more while they still made their way closer. If it was punishment of sorts due to the personal training then they had taken their time with it. From the first time that they had started, about two months had passed and everyday they had both partnered together when there was a need and everyday they also practiced in their secret grove.

Overall Anna had improved drastically in that time. Due to how she had gone against him he had

told her to focus on her speed more than strength. Also the base double edge long sword that was given to all trainees had also been changed at his request; she now used a curved single edged blade. This had caused some setbacks as a new style had to be learned but it did play much better with her overall speed and flexibility. At this time she was pretty much on par with the new blade as she was with the older one, but now she saw how much faster and also more accurate she was with this new weapon. While she knew that keeping the gear in good condition mattered, the thought never occurred to her that changing weapons would help her out so much. Overall she had learned a lot in the last two months because of him and it had also made the normal day to day more pleasant by having someone to talk too and spend time with that was not her Guardian.

The instructor was now positioned in front of all of them with Anthony at his side. Whatever this was and if she was the cause or not it seems that they would all learn now.

"Today's training will be canceled as we will instead have a special ranking match."

This caused a lot of mumbled by the other trainees. Canceling training for ranking matches was not abnormal, it's just that normally when this happened all trainees would gather up and versus matches would be had for the next couple of days. But seeing as there was only one extra person it raised a lot of questions on how this would proceed.

"As you may have all noticed two trainees have recently decided to always pair up. Normally this would not be a large issues but in this case seeing as their skill level is so different a test was ordered to see if this would be allowed to continue."

Anna was holding it in but inside she was

furious, she mumbled to Mike as silently as she could, "Is he implying that I'm actually pulling you down?"

Mike eyes were locked on the instructor but still answered her, "I think that you are being generous with the word implying."

The instructor then pointed to Mike, "Step forward and except this challenge."

As Mike moved closer to the center Anthony moved as well on the opposite side and the instructor pulled back.

Anthony smiled at Mike, "I was told that you have been slumming it, were you planning on using her as an excuse for when you could not beat me during the next time we went at each other?"

Mike took out his blade, "You have no clue what you are talking about and I'm warning you now, it's you that should start thinking of excuses."

Anna could see that Anthony was now more pissed off then she was and as he pulled his blade out she saw that his blade was also different then all the others. His was more like a rapier but the blade was larger than the others that she had seen before. Still like all others it was narrow and thinner at the tip. Now knowing a bit more about all this Anna wondered if Anthony was also someone that used speed more than strength.

"You can begin when you wish."

Anna was amazed by Anthony's speed; as soon as he could he used a thrust and aimed at Mike. He narrowly blocked the blow but that did not stop or worry Anthony from the looks of it as he quickly pulled back and preformed another thrust, when that was blocked again he quickly moved and performed a horizontal slash to keep Mike from advancing at him while he pulled back

again.

Anna looked around at the other trainees that where focus on the match, they were all stunned. The instructor also seemed puzzled and Anthony seemed very displeased. The only person that was smirking was Mike, Anna knew that smirk from having spent all this time with him. He was going to win this or that's what he was sure of. The thing was Anna felt that way too, while Anthony was really fast compared to her the difference was not that off and given Mike's experience she figured that he would be able to compensate for that. Overall this fight seemed to be surprising for everyone but Anna.

Mike moved his sword in a defensive position and grabbed the pommel with both hands, "This is not going to be like the last time, I'm warning you now."

"Pfff that was simply luck no one is as fast as me here and only with luck have you beaten me in the past." With that he charged at Mike again.

Mike quickly focused on the man coming at him, his gamble had paid off but he was still not in a position to counter Anthony's speed without full focus. His blade was aimed at his left shoulder; Mike then let the pommel go with his right hand and with his left swung at Anthony's blade. The blow caused both sword to be knocked away, but it also left Anthony open which Mike took advantage of by performing a quick jab with his right hand at Anthony's face.

As his blow connected Anna smirked, he had recently warned her about that when she had practiced charging at him. He had stopped short during the practice and now seeing the bloody face of Anthony she was very happy about it.

Anthony then quickly retaliated with his signature quick jabs with his swords, having also

practiced this with Anna Mike was able to block most of them and those that he could not he simply moved away in order to dodge instead.

This was the first time that Anthony attacks had not scored a hit by now and he did not like it at all. Still being the accomplished fighter that he was he did not let this control him, instead he pulled back and this time he was the one that went on the defensive.

Mike than had to go on the attack and this was also where things would be less practiced. Mike used the thrust that had been shown a while back and aimed at the hand holding the weapon. With Anthony guard around the pommel of his weapon it was easy for him to protect himself, but still when the blow hit Mike had a bit of a smirk on his face as the strength behind it had been more than had expected. Because of this both weapons where once again knocked in an awkward position, Mike knowing that this would happen reacted faster and spun around and backhanded Anthony on his head.

Anthony then crouched and preformed a low spinning sweep in order to knock Mike to the ground, as Mike countered with a jump Anthony continued his spin and brought his weapon in position to stab at Mike in the air.

Seeing the move for what it was and unable to dodge it Mike used his weapon to block the blow but as the weapons connected he countered by locking his weapon with his. Anthony was still on the ground when Mike landed from the jump and with both weapon's locked Mike pushed down at Anthony.

Anna was smiling now, Anthony was pinned due to his position and in a few seconds later he fell flat on the ground with Mike's sword at his neck.

The instructor then stepped in, "Well we have a clear victor for this match."

Mike reached out his hand to Anthony to help him up; when Anthony grabbed it he also gave Mike a glare. "Don't think that this is going to be a normal occurrence."

Once he was up Mike then shrugged, "Anytime you wish Anthony." and with that Mike moved back to his position in line with everyone else next to Anna.

It was clear to see that the instructor had not anticipated this outcome, "It seems that the worries were unfounded, still let everyone know that these surprise test can happen when a change in pattern occurs." He then looked at Anthony and then the rest of the trainees, "That will be all for today, be ready for tomorrow were we will double our efforts."

While it seems that most were happy to have the day off, a rare occurrence if near unheard of, Anna was still a bit worried. "Is that all? Not that I'm a big fan of the implications made but still?"

Mike looked worried a bit as well, "I'm not so sure that's it as well, but for the time being it seems to be the case." He then smiled, "Seeing as we have the rest of the day off do you want to do something or do you have another task?"

Anna though about it, "Hmm there is a something that I could do but I had already planned time for that later." She then smirked at him, "But we should use this time to for extra practice right?"

He smiled back, "It would be a waste not to use it."

As they both made their way to the grove she wondered on something. "So is that why you wanted me to focus on speed?"

"Ah you noticed that did you."

She was suddenly worried, "That's not the only reason right?"

He then nodded, "Nope, it was just a happy coincidence that's all. Speed seems to fit you well in how you fought, sure I could have mentioned for you to use strength but that would have been way more work on your end and I'm not sure if it would have been a good fit for you."

Ultimately it had been the right decision and given the choice Anna would have probably picked speed as well, still it would have been nice to have been asked.

"So how does it feel to be number one still?"

He smiled, "I have to admit that it's nice but knowing Anthony he's going to double his efforts and come back sooner than I would like I'm sure."

"So that means that you need to practice as well I take it?"

Mike nodded, "Oh I plan to."

There was an awkward silence after that; Anna wondered what was going through his head as there were a lot of questions swimming in hers. The main one being now that he had what he wanted would things continue as they had?

"I see..." Anna then sighed as he was really not catching her hints, "Can I assume that I'm still a part of this practice as well?"

Its then that he suddenly stopped, "My plans are still the same. I will continue to partner with you and also help with your training. It's like I told you back then, I'm also getting something out of this as today showed so it's not all about only helping you." He then thought about it and wondered if that was the real issue, taking another approach he continued, "Don't worry about it as long as we don't reach the goal I don't plan on stopping." He then started to walk again but turned to face her, "Unless you want me to stop..."

Anna nodded her head, "No I want to continue, no worries there... by the way, what goal are you talking about? You never really mentioned it before."

Mike smiled, "Well sure I'm number one now and Anthony is two, but why not try and add you to that mix."

She then stopped, "Wait you plan on trying to bring me to that level?"

"Ideally I want you to be number one so that I can try and beat you and take that place back. I mean considering what we are doing, how else are we supposed to get better then by going against stronger opponents and learning new ways to defeat them. Also as Crimson's we need to be ready for anything, what good is it to have some of us be weaker than the others when there is no reason for it. I take it you agree right?"

The logic given was not what she had expected, "I do agree with it and there is no reason that I can't be better than I am now but should that not be the instructor's job? Why do you feel that you need to fill in for him?"

Mike paused for a second trying to find an answer for her question and then he smiled, "Same reason as you, I mean why do you take it upon yourself to help the townsfolk? Should that not be the Crimson's duty to do so?"

"That's simple, because they need help and they are not getting it and I can give it."

Mike smiled again, "And there you have your answer to your question."

Anna smiled as well as they continued their way to the grove for extra training. Over the past while her gut had pretty much told her that she could trust this person, it's just that over time she had just simply made up her mind about ignoring that when it came to the other Crimson's and

trainees because of all the things that had happened and had simply labeled them all the same. It was encouraging to be wrong about this as it gave her hope for the future.

Mike had finished showing the things that they were going to go over today, feeling pretty confident Anna got into position. As they were about to start they both paused for a second and both turned to the side.

"You're not expecting anyone right?" Mike slowly nodded his head, "No, I'm not." The footsteps they heard were coming closer, "Could it be your Guardian? You mentioned that you had told her about this place."

This time it was Anna that nodded, "It could be but listen more closely it's just not one person coming so I don't think it's her." Mike paused and listened, she was right there was more than one. "What now I wonder?"

Only a few seconds later and they saw their sword instructor and a now clean but with a bandage on his nose Anthony alongside him. They were both puzzled and a bit worried. Mike looked at his Guardian, "Sir what are you doing here?"

The instructor stopped and looked a bit angry, "Given what you are doing you are in no position to ask questions but seeing as I already told you I guess you force me to repeat myself. I am here to test your skills and see if this little thing will continue."

This confused Mike even more, "But I already did that test and won." He then looked at Anthony very quickly, "A rematch so quickly would be odd."

The instructor chuckled, "I guess you are slow from time to time."

Mike's eyes went wide as he then understood, he turned to Anna and saw that she too had caught on. Anna then pointed at Anthony, "But wait you want me the lowest rank to fight him? Is this a joke?"

The instructor look dead serious, "How else are you supposed to test yourself if you don't go against someone stronger then you?"

Anthony then cut in, "Don't worry I'm not too pleased about this as well." The instructor then grumbled and Anthony shook his head and took out his weapon, "Fine, whatever."

Anna quickly turned to Mike, "If they expect me to win..." Mike was thinking the same "Do your best." There really was nothing else that he could think to say and it was also clear that it was not enough as she still looked worried. Anna then slowly nodded and got into position as well, "I plan too."

So here she was weapon ready going against one of the top of the trainee. Anna tried to focus, *'This is ridiculous, I know training others is wrong but why not simply tell us to stop and why challenge me here and not in front of the other?'* It's then that Anna stopped for a second, this really made no sense. If humiliation was the goal then in front of everyone would be better, then what was the idea of all this?

Anthony then got her attention as he pointed his sword to her, "I was told not to give you any handicap but I want this to last more than a second if I'm going to trouble myself. So tell you what you can have the first move. Position yourself however you wish and I will not move until you start."

The ego on this one, "Fine."

Anna got close to him and put her hand on the sword hilt that was still sheaved and crouched,

a few seconds later she quickly pull out the sword in a upward horizontal arc at Anthony. The blow was quick but not quick enough as he moved to block it with his on sword. When the blades hit Anna quickly twisted the handle and then as her blade was now blocking his with its side she thrust forward. Anthony countered with strength, of all things, by pushing his blade still connected to hers to the side making her thrust move offside and also leaving her very open. This was something Anna had somewhat expected as she used the force that Anthony was using to push her aside and spun around, as she did she quickly moved backwards and slashed in a downwards arc to prevent Anthony from moving on her.

The instructor was still stone faced, "Hmm, she has improved."

This comment was a pleasant surprise to Mike but it was still hard to read, "I am showing her things based on old training logs, there is no reason to worry about her not being able to match the rest of us."

The instructor was now frustrated, "That is not the point. The point is that you should not be bothering with this, focus on your own skills like I told you to do. Plus you know full well that you should not be doing this so why?"

What was this about Mike wondered. "You know I checked the rules and there are no direct rules that state that we can't actually train someone. Sure it's not recommended and there could be repercussions but..."

He then cut Mike off, "You should remember your place trainee as you're already on thin ice with this."

Anthony was now getting bored; sure she was better than expected and no way was she the lowest rank but she was far from his level as well.

"You're better than expected and I'll also give you props for attacking head on and not trying something from the back when you could, but still can you handle this?" As he finished he moved backward and position his sword ahead.

Anna focused on what she had been told and looked for a cue of sorts that would give her an idea on his target location. As he took his first step forward and moved his blade she saw it, the blow was aimed for the left shoulder. She moved her sword to block but then mid move Anthony managed to change his target and then aimed for the right. Mike had downplayed his speed but then as she remembered the match that she had just saw he did not look this fast, maybe it just looked that way because she was now the target. He was too fast for her to reposition her blade so she decided to dodge by moving to the right as well and at the same time lowered herself and prepared to counterattack with a low kick. As she preformed the counter the situation played out the same as with Mike but reversed. Anthony avoided the kick with a jump and as he did arched his blade down at Anna which forced her to block with her own. As he landed she was still crouched on the ground and he was pinning her from above.

This was not what she expected to happen but it was not the first time or the last that her attacks would not play out as she had figured. Still this time she had an edge as for a while now she had wondered what she would done if she had been in his position during the match, and now that she was, there was no better time to try it out. Pin down as she was she used her other hand and pushed ahead on the back of her blade, as she did she lowered her weapon causing Anthony to slide ahead while she tumble to the side. While he quickly regained his footing she quickly slashed

her sword around in a horizontal arc scoring a quick hit to the side of the armor.

Every Crimsons had two blades; one was the actual sword and the other a replica but dulled. Most time the dull blade was used and this case was no different. Still even if a real blade had been used it would not have had enough power to break the armor but simply scratch it, but a hit was a hit. "Looks like I get first hit former number one." The insult was a risk as Anna had seen that Anthony had held his composure during the battle with Mike, still in his eyes she was not a worthy opponent so maybe it would have more of an effect.

Looking at Anthony it seemed like it was working but then the instructor cut in, "Anthony stop messing around." The tone that he said it automatically snapped Anthony back, oh sure he was still mad but not in a way that would help Anna at all.

Mike looked at his Guardian, "That was a bit low."

The instructor angrily turned to Mike, "You know full well that he is holding back." He then looked back at the battle, "Still, this changes things." His last comment was odd and as much as Mike wanted to ask he held it in.

Anthony charged at Anna, the blow was much quicker than before so much so that she did not have time to block it and he then scored a hit to her side. While it hurt it was not considered lethal so the match would continue and so would his barrage of blows. It took everything Anna had to try and block some of the blows, due to her disadvantage she ignored the ones to the side and focused on the ones aimed at the middle. Overall she had protected her core but had this been a fight with real blades pretty soon it would be over using a death by a thousand cuts approach.

The situation was pretty grim but Mike really wanted smile still. *'She's doing great, much better than I expected.'*

As Anthony reposition himself Anna caught what little break she could, *'I can't just react like this otherwise I lose and that means it's all over.'* Then something that Mike had told her popped in her head in situation like this. She could purposefully put herself in harm's way creating an opening for her to strike. Suddenly her gut disagreed with that idea, as it had when he had mentioned it. *'There has to be a better way, I just need to be faster for just a little while.'*

Time was up and Anthony charged at her again, from what she could tell he was aiming high and to the left. Having made up her mind Anna acted on her last thought, she acted by not defending but counterattacking. She used her left arm and attacked the incoming weapon with as much strength and speed as she could muster. Anthony was surprised by the blow but at the last minute was able to block it with his sword guard, and not only did he block the blow but also manage to pin her own sword down as well with it. This was fine as the follow up attack was not going to use her sword; Anna quickly jabbed at his face with her right hand. Before the blow could connect she felt a hand grab hers.

Anthony smiled, "That first attack was faster than I expected but the second one was lacking." Anna was pinned and did not know what to do and in that moment of hesitation Anthony connected with her head with his own. The head-but made her step back and drop her weapon, when Anna focus back her attention on Anthony he held his sword tip next to her face. The match was over and she had lost.

The instructor then cut in, "Anthony, you are

done." There was a bit of frustration in his voice, Anthony then pulled back and made his way next to the sword instructor. The victory was his but it had not gone to plan from the looks of it.

Anna picked up her weapon and then made her way next to Mike, "So what now?"

Still not too please the instructor looked at her, "Now the choice it out of my hands. I recommend that you stop this but until I order you to the choice is yours still. I hope both of you make the right one." He then turned and looked at Anthony, "Come there is much to do it seems." Anthony simply nodded and followed along as they left the small grove.

Anna looked to Mike, "I wonder what that means?"

Mike smiled, "It means that Anthony is going to have a very hard few days coming up."

Anna was confused by that, "What makes him so special?"

Mike once again smiled, "Anthony is the son of the instructor and I'm thinking that he is not too pleased by his overall performance today."

She was stunned, "Wait, wait, so you mean to say that they are related, and that he is your Guardian and also you main rival?"

Mike nodded, "Yea that about sums it up. As you can imagine things are a bit complicated overall."

Anna took a deep breath, "I bet."

"Changing the subject, you did great back there you know that right?"

Anna smiled; the compliment was nice to hear even if she had lost. "I said I would do my best."

He gave her a warm smile, "And that you did." He then paused for a bit to think about something, "You know let call it a day after all. We can pick up tomorrow with something else."

She was glad to hear that idea as that fight had taken a lot out of her, "I'm okay with that but what is the change going to be about?"

He smirked at her and pointed to her head, "I think we should focus on what to do when you are pinned like you were."

Anna simply smiled and followed him back to town. She did not need to ask anymore if they would continue in spite of the warnings as she knew that they would, and also part of her trusted the fact that even if they were told to stop that somehow they would find a way. Things were getting way too interesting to stop now.

Later that night the instructor made his way to the Commander at Arms personal home. The Commander at Arms was going over paperwork and the instructor sat down in one of the free chairs. "So how did it go?"

The instructor sighed a bit which made the Commander at Arms stop what he was doing and stare at him. "The plan failed; at this time even if you tell me to stop them she should be able to pass the final test when given."

It was clear to see that the Commander at Arms was not pleased, "That is very unfortunate. I did not think that she would get that far ahead in that small amount of time." He then had a questioning look on his face, "You followed my commands right?"

The instructor nodded, "Of course I did. During training no extra help is given to her besides what is shown to everyone else."

The Commander at Arms thought about it more, "Hmm, she is a black stain on what makes us Crimsons. You do agree with me right?"

The sword instructor nodded, "I agree that she does not belong and should not be trained as a Crimson."

Those words were carefully chosen but the Commander at Arms did not press it, already he had put a good friend in a bad position so he did not want to continue with that line of questioning. "I had hoped to get her removed sooner but it does not seem to be an option anymore. I suppose that I will have to wait for the final test after all."

The instructor nodded and was a bit relieved, while he agreed with the Commander at Arms he did not enjoy these ploy of his nor the fact that his training method had been modified because of it. "Shall I tell them to stop?"

The Commander at Arms had to think about that one for a while but eventually he smiled, "No don't bother. Let them keep going, I have something in mind that will not only get me what I want but also reward you for your hard work with this matter."

The instructor then stood, "Thank you for that, but I only do what I think is good for the future of the Crimson that is reward enough."

The Commander at Arms smiled at him, "If only everyone thought as you and I did. Still I realised that what I asked has been a strain on you and would still like to thank you, one friend to another."

The sword instructor smiled back and then turned around to leave as he closed the door and made his way home he mumbled to himself, "Thin ice indeed."

Mike barely dodged the incoming attack from Anna; she was so much faster now. Missing the attack she spun around in order to put more power

in an overhead attack while he repositioned himself, her follow ups were also much better now as you could see that it was a planned move and not some quick improvising due to having missed. Still something had to be done otherwise she would be able to take over, as a counter for her swing Mike blocked the attack with his sword causing a bit of a push back on Anna. While she was quickly regaining her balance he twisted around with an overhead strike, which she blocked with her sword with enough strength to push it and her own sword aside. Expecting this Mike then quickly pushed forward in order to tackle her, there was a frustrated look on her face as she tried to resist but unfortunately it resulted in her falling on the ground.

Mike moved back with a smirk on his face as Anna picked herself up, "You know I hate it when you do that."

He shrugged, "And I keep wondering why you try and resist it when you should dodge it, or better yet use my weight against me and drop me to the ground instead."

Now she looked more annoyed than anything, "Yea I know, I know... It's just I keep wondering if now I can handle with my own strength. I know speed is my focus and has been for a while since we started but I think that you would agree that I also need to try other things as well."

"I do, I just feel I need to point it out..."

Anna had a half smile as she cut him off, "I know, every time you feel that need."

Mike raised both his hands in surrender, "Fine fine, I give. I'll try and hold back on the nagging points then."

She laughed, "Thanks."

There was a bit of a silence that was created after the small banter, some time now had passed

since they started these training sessions and the important day had finally arrived. Mike seemed particularly excited about it, "So I take it that your Guardian gave you the news in advance as well?"

Anna gave him a small smile; she enjoyed his excitement but did not really share it. "She did, today some of the trainees, me and I would assume you, will be taking the final challenge in order to become a full Crimson."

Reading on her lack of enjoyment at this occasion Mike was left a bit puzzled, "After all this time, don't you want to become a full Crimson?"

Anna thought about it for a while and then turned to him with a serious look. "I do but it makes me wonder, this event, it just feels like after all these years like the other shoe is about to drop. I don't really know how to explain it; it's simply a gut feeling of mine."

Mike wondered about that, "I get where you are coming from. I now see that things were bad at the start and plus that challenge way back when did not help out, but you have to admit that in the past two years since then things have changed."

She nodded, "Oh I do. I mean this partnership that's been ongoing between us for the last few years has changed my environment here considerably. My overall rank has gone up and with that more and more people around seem take me more seriously."

"Well you are third now in all trainees..."

Anna cringed a bit, "... I still say that I should be second. That last battle with Anthony was very close the way I see it."

Mike nodded, "Oh I agree, there was no way to figure out the outcome of that one so evenly matched that you are now."

"I'm sure to get him next time." She then slowly shook her head, "Anyways as I was saying

as much as things have changed I still think that this next step will turn out ugly. I'm better now but I'm still an outsider that has not and will not change."

Mike thought about that for a while, personally he did not agree with her. "I hate to argue with your gut feelings as over time it's proven me wrong too many times but still I really hope that you are wrong." He then paused a bit, "Still there is nothing I can do about that but I will try and give you a different outlook on it. You say outsider because that's what others called you but really you are more special than any of us." He then pointed at her, "You are the only one among all of us that was picked for this, we simply inherited it. For you, for some reason, had something that made the Commander want to include you in our ranks, even if that was never done before. If that does not make you special somehow I don't know what would."

She was touched by his words, she did not see herself as special when it came to that, but she did like the fact that he thought it was and that made it special in its own way. "That's very crony." She then gave him a warm smile, "But very sweet none the less."

Mike saw that she was happier but that still did not change the fact that the next step worried her, he tried to think of a way to convince her but then was interrupted when Anna got his attention with a very sudden concerned look on her face. "I'm not sure what will happen next but whatever happens I hope that this, between us, can still continue somehow."

It had never been in his original plan when he had started this but he had to admit that whatever was between them was pretty important to him. "I hope so too."

They both sat in silence for a bit after that wondering on the future that would soon take a big step forward. Eventually the time came for them to leave for the training class meeting where the official news would be given.

Once there things were already different as all trainees were present at the training circle and a lot of instructors with the Commander at Arms and the Commander himself were sitting on the seats behind them. When everyone arrived the sword instructor took center stage.

"As some of you have already been told there will be a lot of you have been deemed ready to take the final test in order to become a Crimson. This is a big step where if you pass, you will have the honor of donning our customary red cape and with it all the responsibility and heritage of the Crimson."

He then paused for a bit and looked at the Commander at Arms who simply nodded. The instructor then turned back to the trainees. "This year will be special, as three among you have shown great skill."

Mike was pleased to hear this and he whispered to Anna, "Seems like you made the little group after all." Again Anna was less enthused as her gut would simply not let it go, "...So it seems."

"For those three their challengers for the test will not fall under the standard that we have applied for the years but will be actual full fledge Crimson."

There was a lot of mumbling as essentially this meant that for those three they would have to be so good that they were already better than actual Crimson.

During this time the instructor moved closer to his son, "The first that will have the great honor of this challenge will be Anthony. His challenge will

take place three days from now."

He then moved closer to Mike, "The next one will be you, Mike. Your challenge will take place a week from now, so two days after Anthony."

Then the instructor simply looked at Anna, "And finally you will be the next day after Mike."

The lack of mention of her name did not go unnoticed, which only help to strengthen Anna's worry.

"The day before the challenge the name of the Crimson you will face in combat will be posted. Giving you some time to prepare for this to remain fair but also not too much time in order for you to not over prepare as that would ruin the challenge."

At that point he had moved again at the center in order to properly face everyone, "I encourage all to come and see all these challenges as they will all be important events in our Crimsons history."

He then motioned for all to be dismissed and then it was done. As people started to leave the area Mike and Anna made their way to Anthony. Mike first reached out to him in order to shake his hand, "Congratulations on being the first trainee in history to beat a Crimson, I know it's a bit premature but I know that you will make history happen somehow."

Anthony smiled, "I plan to do just that, there is no worry there." When Anna extended her hand as to congratulate him Anthony took it as well but then his proud smile went away to be replace by an inquisitive look. "It does make we wonder why I'm not second considering our current ranking mind you."

Anna shrugged, "Luck of the draw?"

Anthony once again smiled, "Maybe your right." He then nodded, "Well good luck to both of you as well. Now if you will excuse me there are things I wish to do in order to prepare before I go

and make history." Once again his high attitude had returned.

Over the years Anna had learned to respect Anthony as Mike did even if he had a large ego about him as he did put in the effort to get where he was. As he walked away she mumbled to Mike, "He is way too quick to believe what he wants to believe." She then looked at him, "I mean he did bring up a good point, being rank number one, should you not have the honor?"

Mike shrugged, "I don't care about that."

Anna tried to hold back the laughter but simply couldn't, "Your joking right, you the person that practices the most out of all of us does not care about being number one?"

Again Mike raised his hands in a sign of defeat, "Fine, sure I care, you got me. But it's still not a big deal for me as you make it out to be. I know where I stand and the people close to me also know so that's good enough for me." He then smiled, "Plus this way we get to graduate closer together, considering our partnership is that not a good sign."

Before Anna could answer Julia made her way to them, "Yes and that partnership has been the talk for the last few years amount the other instructors. While Anthony will make history his way, you two already did make history with what you have accomplished. You should both be proud."

Mike was happy to hear that. Over the years, due to being close to Anna often, he had spent a lot of time here and there with Julia and had come to respect her. So the comment that she had just said did mean a lot coming from her and from the looks of it Anna felt the same way too.

"From the news that I got your challengers will be personally picked by the Commander at Arms

and the Commander himself, which should make it interesting."

While the Commander at Arms reputation was not the best having the Commander also there to balance it off could make things interesting, and could unknowingly help Anna seeing as he himself had pushed for her to join their ranks.

Anna forced a smile, "I'm not really sure what will happen next but let all three of us make history with this."

Mike nodded and smiled back, "Don't worry it will be fine, you'll see."

Julia did the same, "I agree. Now come, after seeing you two at the last ranking match I'm so sure that you will win that we should go get a nice meal and celebrated ahead of time."

That sounded like a good time with good company, something that Anna was fully on board with. "That sound like a great idea, let's do that." And with that the three left the training circle.

Anna was sitting on the side of the benches right behind the training area, the place was packed as they watched Mike fight the Crimson. Anthony had drawn a lot of attention as well during his match, which he won but that fact that he won made the event even more popular for Mike's challenge. Anna figured that most did not believe that a trainee could win but when it was proven wrong that news spread like wild fire and now everyone wanted to see it. Currently all the seats were full on the benches but that did not stop the crowd as they formed a circle around the training ground and stood to see the match in progress. It was safe to assume that the same thing would happen for her match as well.

Overall Anna was impressed with this new change; the matches so far had been very fair. Sure it was obvious that the Crimson in question had the upper hand but it did not last long and then the match suddenly became even, well at least that was what had happened to Anthony. For today things had started off less impressive as Mike had let the Crimson beat him up as he went full defense, but then things started to change and the Crimson could no longer land a blow on him anymore. As she watched now, Mike had now changed his strategy and was now attacking with the Crimson more on the defense than anything. She had to smile as things were going exactly as he planned it. The first part was to test his strength, once figured out then test out your own limits against him and then finish him off. Anna thought the plan reckless as doing it that way would draw out the fight, but this was a dual so things were a bit different because of it. She then smiled and then stood up and started to leave, whatever she thought did not matter at this point as things were pretty much set in stone.

On her way to the mess hall she noticed that Julia was currently running and stopped when she noticed Anna. Julia then made her way to her with a puzzled look on her face, "Is it over already?"

There was still cheering going on so that in a way answered her question but Anna answered it anyways. "In a way it is, as at this point he's won for sure."

Julia was still a bit confused, "But this is a battle, even if mock, something could happen you know and considering how much time the two of you have spent together should you not... you know."

Anna chuckled at Julia's view on the situation, "You're right something could happen

but that does not seem to be the case. Anyways we already agreed that I would do this if things looked good in order to make it to the mess hall before everyone else does after the match. I mean I have my own to prepare for and the announcement should be posted right after his." She then smiled, "And before you ask, he's the one that recommended that I do that. When it's over he mentioned that he would find me and join up."

Julia still looked confused, "I really don't get both of you."

Anna shrugged, "Not much to understand, we are good friends and nothing more. As good friends I wanted to be there for him but at the same time he mentioned that I should not needlessly risk anything on my end for my own challenge. It's hard to argue with that logic."

Julia had a frown, "Hmm true, but it is very logical and not very emotional."

Anna did not really know how to answer that one, "It is how it is." She then wanted to change the subject as this one was going down a path that she did not really want to think about, "So what about you? If you want to see the match you should hurry otherwise I'm heading to the mess hall if you want to join."

She thought about it for a moment, there was something that she needed to do while the match was happening so she hurried up to see if she could still catch parts of it, but from what Anna was saying there would be little reason anymore and she would know better than anyone what he was capable of. "Okay I'll head with you if you don't mind."

"Alright, I'll give you the highlights as we eat and then we can have the conclusion from the source himself together."

When they arrived to the nearly empty mess

hall Anna and Julia grabbed a fairly large meal and a place to sit. Once comfortable Anna started the play by play as they both started to eat, she also included the idea behind what he was doing as he had explained it to her the day before. This made for a long conversation, long enough for the place to be completely packed by the time she had finished. Ideally Anna had figured that she would have been told the results by him but with everyone around now it was pretty much the chatter and was hard not to hear its conclusion spoiled.

Julia smirked, "Well I guess you called it, looks like he won. What puzzles me a bit is that it seems that it was one sided there at the end."

Anna nodded, "Probably things started to turn around drastically as he started to attack. By then he had a pretty good idea on his opponent's capabilities so I'm not too surprised as he tends to do that often."

"Hmm, that's a bit of a risk in a way."

Anna chuckled a bit, "I'm glad I'm not the only one that thinks that way."

Resigning herself to the idea of a tactic that she probably would not have endorsed Julia changed the subject. "So how do you feel about your upcoming test?"

Anna thought about that, "I'm really not sure, things seemed to be on the up and up so if that's the case tomorrow then I should be fine."

Julia slowly nodded her head, "You're still worried that there is a plan against you?"

Anna was a bit tired of this argument that she had with her Guardian and also Mike, "Look you have to admit that the timing is odd, the fact that this year things are different and new in a place where different and new are not really welcomed..." She then slowly shook her head as it was clear that

Julia was still not agreeing with her, "Look it's just a gut feeling I have and really I'm looking forward in being proven wrong. I just can't shake the feeling that's all."

It's then that suddenly the place's tone changes to whispers as Mike walked in and made his way directly to Anna and Julia. He sat next to Anna as she made room for him. Julia was once again confused as he should not be here right now. "What happened, should you not be at the ceremony?"

Normally after the test was passed the trainee would head to the Commander at Arms place where a few other Crimson's would be present and they would officially congratulate you as a full Crimson. At the same time they would give you the trademark red cape, which he was currently not wearing.

Mike shrugged, "It's not a big deal, the Commander at Arms had to leave shortly after Anna left. After the match I was told that something came up and that the ceremony would happen sometime tomorrow before Anna's match."

Anna was suddenly worried, which he saw. "Don't worried this has nothing to do with you and your status that you keep warming me about. Things do come up, and the ceremony is just that. In all intend and purpose I am no longer a trainee anymore and while the cape is symbolic it does not change that fact."

She was still not convinced, while everything he said was true there was something off about this and now she was sure about it. She looked down as her plate that was now finished, "If you don't mind I want to see if my posting is up." As she stood up she then added, "Its okay I'll go check by myself you both can stay here."

They both shook their heads, "Not going to

happen, let see if you're right after all."

They made their way to the posting board next to the training building where all the equipment resided. Typically all news was first posted here as the place always had people coming and going from it.

Anna rushed over when she saw that a new piece of paper had been pinned to the board, when she got close she could see it and it was in fact her test details. As she read the name she did not really know who it was, she turned to see two stunned faces next to her which made her worried and wonder. "Okay, who is Theseus?"

Julia did not know what to tell her, "...That's impossible..."

Mike was thinking the same thing. "He's in the top five of all Crusaders that is not the Commander and Commander at Arms."

Suddenly there it was this is what Anna gut had been trying to warn her about ever since she was told about this test. Still she asked the question, "Do I have a chance?"

Before Mike could answer Julia jumped in, "I don't want to belittle all the work that you did but he's never been defeated so far, he has a perfect record."

Before Anna could react a tall looking man suddenly showed up, it was the Commander at Arms and he had a really smug look on his face. "Is there an issue with the posting?"

Julia quickly turned at him angrily, "What do you mean is there an issue, you expect a trainee to be able to defeat HIM!? This is not a training exercise if she losses to him then she can't qualify."

The Commander at Arms was not intimidated;

heck he still looked smug and happy." Looks like you have gotten too close to your charge and are missing the big picture. A war is starting up outside, it's not here yet but it is coming. When that day comes you think that your enemy will be a fair match? If the new recruits can't handle this then they have no business in my army."

Anna was not going to let other people fight her fights so she jumped in as well, "If that is the case is there any particular reason why I'm the only one being challenged by this life lesson of yours?"

Again the Commander at Arms was not intimidated, which was not surprising but he did try and avoid eye contact and plus there was also an air of superiority as he answered her question. "I see it as being fair to the other trainees. None of the others have had the chance at the extra training like you have. While you were tested here and there I wonder if you hid you full potential, so now is your chance to show us all what you can really do."

This answer confused Mike, "Then what about me, I'm also one that participated in those extra trainings that you mentioned so why was I excluded."

The Commander at Arms sighed deeply, "I am tired of explaining myself but I will indulge you this one time. In a way we made a guess with you and as you so clearly showed everyone today that guess was wrong. You had your opponent cornered and there was nothing he could do at the end." He then pointed at Anna, "And she's been training with you all this time and you mean to tell me that I should pit her against a regular Crimson. This is a test after all, I can't do that." He then grinned, "In a way her opponent is your fault." He then shook his head and before any of the three could cut in again

he started to move away, "Look I have important things I need to attend to. If you think you have no chance then don't show up to the match, you still have that option, no matter what tomorrow will be interesting."

Julia was still furious, "There is no way I'm letting this go on, let me see if there is anything that I can do." She then started to leave as well, "I'll let you know okay."

Julia had not waited for Anna to answer but she still did anyway, "Okay, and thanks..." She then silently thought about the situation, this had been planned she did not care what the Commander at Arms had said. "Don't worry, I do not believe for a second that you are to blame for this so don't you dare take any of it okay?"

Mike appreciated the comment but still had to wonder if that was the case or not, "Thanks..."

There was a silence between the two for a while as they simply stood there. Anna was sure that Julia would not be able to do anything about this, her opponent was Theseus and nothing was going to change that. That said was there a way for her to win? She turned to the only person that could help her out, "So can I win?"

Mike thought about it, "Well undefeated is an interesting title for sure but it is only a title. While it's probably deserved to what extent is the real question here. I don't think that he got that simply because he fought opponents weaker than him, there must have been some strong ones but how many and what style did they use... for that matter what style does he use?" He then looked at her trying to sound as convincing as he could, "There are a lot of questions and depending on their answer maybe you can."

It was not the best motivational speech but for some reason it still gave her hope, "Okay any way

we can answer those questions?"

Mike nodded, "Well considering who he is there is a strong possibility that there will be a record of him in the archive. Not everyone is there but those that have made a mark in the Crimsons are and undefeated should be a mark of sorts..." He then paused and stopped.

Anna was curious, "What is it? You thought of something else?"

Mike shook his head, "No, just a stupid question that's all."

Anna smirked, "What is it? You know you want to ask."

He was still unsure but after a while he did ask, "You sure you want to do this still?"

Anna shrugged, "Not much choice in the matter. I don't want to give up if that is what you are asking. There are too many reasons for me not too. Still I am interested in knowing my odds."

Mike then smiled, "Alright, let go and see what we can find then."

It did not take long for them to make it to the archive and find the registry details on Theseus. Both of them looked at the entry, he had a pretty long list of combatants at various levels. Anna looked at Mike, "I think it's safe to say that some of these were actual challenges for him."

Mike nodded, "I recognized some of these names and they are no push over. Sadly some of these also use speed as you do so he does have experience against that."

Not a big surprise considering the long list that was in front of her, "Okay anything on his style? From what I'm seeing nothing seems to pop up."

Mike once again nodded, "That's because it seems that he is an all rounder and does not specifically use speed or strength but uses both

equally."

Anna then nodded, "Ah, kinda like you do?"

It's then that an odd look appeared on Mike's face, "Did I say something wrong? I mean when we fight you don't seem to favor any of those too as well."

"No you are totally right but that made me think that maybe there is a way to give you an edge then."

Anna suddenly understood his idea, "Okay I know you did good today but still... Also keep in mind that I have never beaten you?"

Mike stopped her, "That's not the point, the point is that yes you have never won but at the same time we never focused on you needing to beat me."

She then smirked, "I'm pretty sure that I've tried pretty hard here and there do to that."

He smiled, "Yes I'm sure you have but this time I can give you pointers on how to go about it. There are weaknesses to being an all rounder and I do know some of them. If we practice those it may give you an edge."

Anna had to admit there was a chance that it could, so she turned to him and nodded, "Okay, do you mind helping me out again then?"

Mike smiled at her, "Nothing would make me happier."

As they made their way to their own training spot Anna still had a smile on her face. Whatever happens tomorrow happens. She would prepare as much as she could and would not give up, as Mike had said a title was just that.

They had spent the better part of the afternoon practicing on different tactics to use and also

trying to drill them into Anna so that it became second nature to use. Thing is that time was really short for this so really there was only so much that they could do. Already it was getting dark and as they were both sitting down to take a break Mike wondered if continuing today was worth it at all. He looked at the sky and then turned to Anna, "Should we call it for today?"

Anna put her sword away, "I think its best that we do that. That said do you mind if we do a bit more practice tomorrow morning?"

Mike shrugged, "I don't mind at all, tell me when and I'll be there."

She smiled; there was no hesitation at all with his answer. "Let's meet up early that way it will give me time to clear my head a bit before the battle. Plus you still have that ceremony to go to right?"

"Sure I do, but if there is a clash for some reason or if you need me I'm willing too..."

She then cut him off, "I appreciate it, I really do, but don't do that. You have worked hard for this so don't skip it and plus you have been there for me in the past two years more than I could have imagined already so I would never ask..." She then stopped as she saw that he had a bit of a disappointed look on his face. "What's wrong?"

He was stuck in his head for a while before he answered; something that Anna now knew was something he did when he was trying to explain something important to him. "Everyone keeps seeing this as I'm helping you and getting little in return. For them, whatever, but for you to still see it that way, well it's stings a bit."

Anna did not know what to say at all, his comment made very little sense to her. "Sure you're getting extra practice but really what more is there?" She then had a teasing smile, "Don't tell me

that it's also because of my nice personality?"

He smirked a bit, "In a way, yes."

Now Anna was simply stunned and seeing her shocked look he then continued. "I have never ventured outside this town. My main focuses where sword, practice and tactics, nothing else. I never questioned anything and pretty much went with what others told me. But then you showed up, you where different than the others. While I know you hate hearing that because you see it as a negative I saw it as a positive. Your doubts, comments and actions made me wonder and think about things that I never thought to think about, which helped me question myself and think about what I wanted more then what was simply expected. Yes I did get extra practice out of it and that was very helpful, but as I said many time I also got a lot out of this as well and the main reason why was because you where so different then everyone else." He then gave her a warm smile, "So yes, simply let me know and I'll see how I can help out. Is the ceremony important, sure it is, but if you don't mind, me sticking with you is also as important to me."

Anna was impressed, happy and relieved all at the same time as this was the first time he was so open with her. "I'm happy that you finally told me like this, because I'm sorry to say that I did not see it that way at all. I'm very relieved that I was able to do this for you, especially with all the help you gave me with training and also the nudge that I needed to get back to my real self as for a while I was starting to get lost with all the bulling and I was not realising it." She returned his warm smile, "Thank you again."

There was a moment of silence between the two as Anna was thinking that this was probably the first time where she truly understood him and

his motivation. It was also the first time that Anna did not see this partnership as her mostly being the taker and him being the giver, now she finally saw that, indirectly, she was also giving a lot to him. He helped her learn how to properly fight and helped with her environment and she helped him in understanding who he really was and what he wanted to do.

Having sorted all that out Anna then took a deep breath, "Well I guess that really ends it for today after that." Again she smiled at him, "So is there anything you wish to do? Or should we simply meet up tomorrow morning?"

"Well if you don't mind I would love to go to the mess hall as I've barely eaten anything all day."

Anna then thought about it and then her eyes went wide, "That's right you never got anything after your match, I'm so sorry after the news I just got caught up with everything."

He chuckled, "Yea me too actually, but now that we have stopped I'm starting to feel it. So if you want to join me I would be okay with that."

She then stood up, "Let's go do that then, plus I could stand to eat something as well as it's getting to be that time after all."

It took little time to get there and even less time for them to pick out some food and start eating. There were a few people around eating as well but the place was far from packed as it had been earlier today, which made it easy for them to see Julia approach them. As she sat down it was also easy to see that she was very discouraged.

"I'm sorry Anna, I talked to all the other instructors, the Commander at Arms again and nothing's changed. I tried to even talk to the Commander to see what he thought about this but could not reach him as he was busy with something, or so I was told."

Anna slowly nodded, "It's alright Julia, I'm sorry to say but I did not expect you to be able to change the posting. I'm sure the Commander at Arms has been planning this for a while, so I don't see him not thinking of everything in order for this to happen one way or another."

Sadly after everything she had done Julia had to agree, "Still I wish that was not the case, as this is unfair and I feel so powerless to help you with it. As your Guardian and your friend I should be able to do something."

Anna shrugged, "I know you tried and that's what really matters to me." Julia did not seem happy about that. "Well if you want, if you know anything about Theseus and how he fights that would be a big help. We looked at the archive and got some information but not having seen an actual fight there are a lot of missing pieces."

This seemed to bring Julia out of her mood a bit as she thought about the question. "I can't say that I have crossed paths with him that much but I have some information. Overall he is pretty much good at everything and special at nothing. Still there is one thing that is unique to him and that's his sword."

Instantly Mike was curious about it, "How so?"

"His sword is like a normal long sword but he asked the blacksmith to widen the blade making it almost as wide as a claymore."

Anna looked at Mike, "That must make it pretty slow then?"

Mike nodded, "It should but with its size still around the size of a long sword it should make it less bulky than an actual claymore." He then turned to Julia, "Any particular reason for the modification?"

"Hmm, I can only tell you what I was told by others for that. It seems that he somehow uses

that change as a defense against others. That's all the information I have on it sadly."

This was still interesting to Mike and something he would have to think about more but unfortunately all that was put aside when an Crimson suddenly appear standing next to their table. When the Crimson saw that he had their attention he started to speak.

"Anna and Mike have been requested to head to the Commander's home immediately as he wishes to speak to the both of you." He then took out what seemed like a sealed letter and presented it to Julia, "You are to read this alone as they are for your eyes only, orders from the Commander himself."

All this was odd to all of them and considering the event about to happen and the reason why Anna was in this town in the first place it was hard not to think that it was connected somehow. Both Anna and Mike stood and nodded, "We will head there immediately." Anna then quickly turned to Julia, "See you tonight, seems that this day still has some surprises after all."

Julia nodded back, "Good ones this time I hope." Anna wished for the same thing as she made her way out of the mess hall with Mike.

This was the first time that Mike and Anna had seen the Commander house, reason being as there was little reason why a trainee would be summoned here. When they first entered, they were both surprised to see what looked like a private indoor training room. Everything was there with practice sword of all kinds and also wooden wing chun training dummies. What was even more surprising was that while it felt like a private

training room there were other Crimsons there currently practicing. They both wondered if an invitation was needed or if anyone could actually use the place.

While the sightseeing was interesting that was not the main reason they were here, which was indirectly reminded as the Crimson guard quickly continued passed the training room to a small hallway that then lead them to another large room.

This new room was very different than anything else. Old tapestries could be seen suspended on the walls; on the floor large cushions could be found around a low wooden table. No one else was in the room currently and the only exit was the entrance as there were no other doors or windows.

The guard pointed to the cushions, "Please sit I will go alert the Commander that you have arrived." When he left Mike and Anna did just that. They both said nothing but it was clear that they were both uncomfortable and nervous about what was going to happen next.

Not long after an old man appeared, behind them. He nodded and then made his way to the other side of the table and sat down as well. The man was bald and in easily his fifties, still even with his age he wore a striking physique. The Commander then put beside him a bag and then placed both of his hands on the table and once again nodded at the both of them.

"Thanks for coming here so quickly and I apologize for summoning you at this time, especially with what must be going though your minds right now with tomorrow event."

Anna wondered where this was headed, while she had seen the Commander here and there it was no more so then anyone else. The only time she had really spoken to him was when he had

invited him to join, besides that there was no contact. "So this invitation is connected then? Also does it have to do with the reason why you invited me here in the first place as well?"

She knew that the two were probably not connected as how could they be but really at the time she had never really asked why he had invited her, and this seemed like the only time where she had to the chance to ask.

The Commander slowly rubbed his chin briefly as he thought about his answer. "In a way those two things are connected and in a way they are not."

This comment cleared up nothing and only raised more questions and so both of them let him continue.

"Let me start by saying that while it may seem like I brought you here and then left you, know that I have been watching over the years. Unfortunately due to my position I have not been able to help you and for that I am sorry." He then looked at Mike, "Yet it seems that others have stepped in where I could not, and that bring me some happiness." His mood then went somber, "Now as for your current situation, I sadly cannot intervene nor can I directly help but I can answer questions you may have."

This was unfortunate news for Anna but really before the summon she had not planned on anyone intervening with the challenge so it changed very little. It still did not explain his earlier comment, "Okay but you mentioned that me being here and this challenge was connected in a way, how is that?"

The Commander nodded, "In the beginning, when the Crimsones got formed, we could rely on our skills and our numbers did not matter as much. Our mission was to help the defenseless

from one king or beast. Now the world is growing and we have Crusaders and also beasts from another land invading our homes and kingdoms. The reality of the situation is that, we don't have the number for that to go against those issues ourselves anymore. Seeing this ahead of time and in order to get around the problem I figured that I would try and see if I could expand our pool of possible members. But as you know the Crimsons are very inclusive and have been for many years and that was a large challenge against my idea of expansion. I had hoped that by brining someone from the outside it would help and make the others more accepting and at the same time see if my idea had merit. As for why you specifically, as a child you seemed strong willed. I needed someone that would not easily give up, given the challenge I was about the place on them, and that was the main criteria I was looking for. You just happen to be the first one I found fitting that need."

Anna did not know how she felt about all this, as it was a lot to take in. "Right place right time and right attitude, as simple as that and nothing more... hmm."

The Commander then continued, "I see now that I gave you an impossible task, and for that I apologize. Still that will pale in comparison to what I will next ask of you."

This had both of them worried; still they said nothing and silently asked him to continue.

"I must ask you to not show up at the challenge tomorrow and to leave this place."

Both of them were stunned and simultaneously commented, "WHY!?!"

The Commander took a deep breath, this was not how he had wanted it to end but there where little other choices. "I have learned that the Commander at Arms has planned to make an

example of you once you lose the battle tomorrow. It seems that he purposely made sure to attract a large crowd around the even in order to show that we should never entertain the idea of polluting, as he puts it, the Crimsons. Disappearing from the challenge will lessen his ability to do so."

Mike had no clue how Anna was feeling about this but he knew that himself he felt pretty outraged by it. "Anna maybe able to still win, with due respect I disagree with writing her off like that."

While Mike expected a reply from the Commander it was actually Anna that answered his comment. "...And yet this would be easier on everyone."

Mike was in shock, "How can you say that, sure it's easier on everyone else but not you."

While Anna was thinking on how to reply to him the Commander added some extra words to the situation. "While this is my request the choice is hers, I will not force you one way or another."

Truly this was a horrible day for Anna, as she thought about it more both of them simply waited on what she was going to say next. She looked deep in herself to see if the answer she had come up with was something that she actually agreed with. Really she hated this whole situation and it really was not fair. It was not fair to Mike and really it was not fair to her at all, but moving the anger that she felt aside was there really another choice. "If I somehow win the challenge that will foil the Commander at Arm plan, but that will only stop the current plan. I'm sure that he will then think of something else and what if he then up's the ante, now it's going against someone that is undefeated next will be what? If I leave then I'm sure that he will spin it his way but will have nothing else to build on in that long term." She

took a deep breath and then looked at Mike with a sad look on her face accompanied with a lot of remorse. "...All this effort to not even get a chance, it's frustrating and unfair but it's also the best decision. I'll admit that there are a lot of people that have done me a lot of harm here but there are also those that have helped and the last thing I want is for my presence to hurt them which it seems will happen if I stay... I'm so sorry, I really am."

She then quickly turned to the Commander, "I'll leave tonight, I think that will be adequate for your request."

It was clear that the Commander did not really want this but he had still asked and Anna was not going to offer him any sympathy for those feeling, which was something that he accepted. He then reached out to the bag that he had with him and then pulled out two glowing orbs and placed them in the middle of the table. "Thank you for your decision, as a token of my gratitude please have one of these. They are probably the last of these types of orbs left in existence. They will enchant your weapon of choice with great power; keep in mind that this power will also come at a great cost. In the times to come this will probably be better in your hands then here, plus I hope that you can accept it as a parting gift."

Anna did not really know what to make of these orbs. They were a little bit smaller then the size of her fist, both of them had a faint glow but one of them was light green and the other light red. Not knowing what this was about and also after everything she had been told Anna cared very little about these. Still she reached out and grabbed the light green orb and placed it in one of her pouches. To her surprise the orb was pretty solid and did not feel like it would break easily. She then stood

up, "I think that I've had enough for today. I'll go and leave now; there is much that I need to prepare for."

They both said nothing as she left the room. When she was gone Mike turned to the Commander. He was still very angry about all this; this whole outsider business was simply idiotic in his mind. Still she had made her decision and at the same time he had made his as well. "With all the time that we have spent together, as much as I want too, I won't ask her to change her mind on this. Also I am thankful that you included me in this meeting as I could have easily been excluded. That said, after this, I still I need to at least convince her that it was not all for nothing and that she did succeed."

Mike saw that his comment puzzled the Commander so he clarified his viewpoint. "She helped change the way the townsfolk's see us by always being there for them, something any of us could have done but never did. Not all Crimsons approved of her, true, but to say that they were all against her would be wrong and that's a step in the right direction given what you wanted to do. Also, and more importantly for me, she help me see a different side of myself and showed me that there are different paths. Maybe she did not meet your expectations but in my book she did great."

"Hmm, maybe you have a point but in saying what you did but unfortunately it is not enough." He then wondered on something, "Given your comment, should I assume that you will also not be present come the next morning?"

Mike simply nodded in approval.

"I see... that is too bad. Still as I told her, it is your choice to do so." He then pointed as the last orb on the table, "Then please take this as a gift for being there for her when I could not."

Mike really did not agree with any of this and was really ashamed that the place that he held dear for all these years would do something like this for such a stupid reason. Still this was the place that gave him a home and trained him; it was also a place that fought for something that he too believed in. Unfortunately he now saw that there are more bad apples in the mix then he ever thought was present and their influence was pretty strong. Mike picked up the orb, stood and still bowed down in respect. He then left to see where Anna had gone too.

Now alone in the room the Commander sighed deeply, "Good luck to the both of you, I hope that the outside world gives you better options then I was left to give to you."

Anna was in what she thought was the private inside training room still in the Commanders house. It seems that everyone was gone now and with the place now empty she figured she would blow off a bit a frustration before she made it to Julia's and her place. Explaining all this to her was going to be hard and if she still had all these emotions on the surface there would be no way to explain it to Julia in a way that she would be okay with it.

And so she then took out her sword and then aimed at the wooden dummies, she knew full well that you where not supposed to do that and that doing so will probably ruin it but she did not care. This time she was going to allow herself to be destructive, rebellious and selfish. After all this only to end like that, she was going to take this moment and no one was going to stop her.

"That will probably have to be replaced now. I

take it that things did not go favorably for you with the Commander?"

It was not a voice she had ever heard and when she turned Anna saw a tall man with brown clean cut hair. He was a Crimson, which was no surprise in this location but the weapon he had on his hip was odd. As Anna looked at the weapon she saw that it was a long sword but much broader than any she had seen. "...You have got to be kidding me." When the man made no comment she then looked him in the eyes, "You're Theseus right?"

He nodded, "And seeing as you are a trainee that fits the description I was given, I'm assuming that you are Anna correct?"

Anna smirked, "That I am." What rotten luck, short of the Commander at Arms this was probably the last person that she wanted to see.

"Seeing as I have the chance now I will apologize in advance for tomorrow as I don't see it going favorably for you."

Anna did not really know how to take the comment, part of her was insulted but at the same time she could see where a person like him would see it the way he was. Still with the recent events and insults, even if unintentional, it was not something she wanted to take. "I could surprise you, you never know."

Theseus smirked, "I suppose we will see tomorrow. Still for today please stop the damage that you are currently causing."

Anna turned at the wooden wing chun training dummy, it was destroyed but she was still frustrated. She then smirked as Theseus started turned and leave as a bad idea suddenly popped in her head. She then pointed her sword at him, "I challenge you!"

He stopped and then smirked again, "Wait

until tomorrow. You know full well that I can't accept this unofficial challenge now seeing as there is an official one tomorrow."

Anna nodded, "I do, but I'm still challenging you now. You don't have to worry about tomorrow as it will not matter anyways."

As Theseus moved to the middle of the room and took out his blade Anna figured that this was going to happen after all. "If you want to throw your chance away fine, I suppose I can understand it as there is no way you can win and doing so tomorrow will be embarrassing."

Anna was suddenly very frustrated once again and again she could see where this person was coming from. In a way she wondered what his words or thoughts were when he was told that he would be in an official dual tomorrow with a trainee no less after never being defeated by anyone. He must have thought that it was a joke of sorts, but joke or not he would go with it and be the instrument that would finally kick Anna out of the Crimson's as that's what failing this challenge meant. Anna positioned herself as well and from the corner of her eye should could see that Mike had finally gotten out of the room and was now standing in the hallway, part of her wondered why it had taken him so long and the other part of her ignored that question as in a few seconds all her attention needed to be on the fight. Still it was nice to know that there would at least be one witness to this event.

Seeing as he was only standing there Anna figured that she would start it off. She went with speed and used the quickest strike she could at him, it was a bit sad to see him dodge it with only some effort. Still not feeling to discouraged she then followed with a thrust. The fact that he blocked with his weapon was not a surprise but

how he did was. Her strike hit his weapon on the large part which was now, using her own and his momentum that he was now adding, sliding off his blade. In doing so it caused Anna to lose balance a bit creating a quick opening which he immediately took advantage of with a horizontal slash. The move was quick but not especially quick; it did feel like there was a lot of power behind it which was surprising because it did not look like he had put a lot in it. Still Anna was able to recover and move away. From there they both backed away and went into a defensive position.

"Not bad, I know a lot that are unable to recover from that. Let's see how far we can take this."

He then raced at her with a thrust of his own which she dodged. Not letting up he followed up with a horizontal slash in the direction that she had dodged. Anna blocked it with her sword using both her hands at the hilt and then blocked another blow coming at her from another angle from another of his attacks. *'I can't let him dictate the course of this battle otherwise I will truly lose after all.'*

As he came at her again, she saw that now he was holding his blade with both hands, Anna aimed to counter by aiming at his weapon to knock it away. While the blow had been stopped it had hardly worked as a counter attack as he was easily able to reposition his weapon upwards and preformed an overhead slash. Seeing as blocking it again would leave her in a vulnerable position Anna quickly moved back. *'His style is similar to Mike but there seems to be more experience behind each blows, or is that how it is when you fight anyone that has more experience then you. Still there should be a chance; I just have to wait it out until I see an opening as we practiced.'*

"I must admit that I am impressed. I never expected you or any trainee to last this long or to prevent me from being able to score even one hit. Your instructor and Guardian did a fine job teaching you."

Catching her breath Anna smirked, "No instructor and no Guardian, just a crazed sword fanatic that likes training way too much who also happens to have a really good heart."

"Hmm, that is a disappointing answer..."

Once again he charged at her with a combination of a thrust and slash. Anna dodged the thrust and blocked the blow, as she did she realised that each hit now had more and more power behind them meaning that there was very little time left before he overpowered her.

His attacks continued and Anna did her best to dodge and block everything she could. So far she had been successful at countering everything but now she no longer was able to attack, which singled the end for this match. She knew it and she could tell that he knew it too. Her time to wait for an opening for a reversal was now gone, but Anna still would not admit defeat just yet. There were too many similarities not to be able to take advantage of it somehow and it's then that an idea came to her, if she could no longer wait for an opening maybe she could create a situation where one would appear.

As Theseus prepared another barrage Anna moved low and reached him first with a quick horizontal strike of her own. The speed was not as fast as the start of the combat but it was still faster than his attack which was what mattered. He avoided the attack and now with her low he prepared an overhead swing, quickly she rose up and grabbed her sword with both hands and with the power and momentum attacked his weapon

again. This caused both weapons to swing in an awkward position as they connected.

Then it happened, Theseus let one of his hands release his weapon and repositioned himself to tackle Anna. When the blow connected she would be pushed back and then, using his other hand still holding and repositioning his weapon, would thrust ahead and finish the match but then his eye went wide in surprise as he preformed the tackle.

As he approached her Anna also let one of her hands let go of her weapon and shifted her weight to her left leg and moved in low. While his other foot was up she used her right foot and aimed as his leg holding his weight. This caused him to lose balance which she then, with her now free hand, grabbed him and forced him to tumble to the ground as Theseus tried to regain his balance from the trip that she had preformed. When he landed on the ground Anna quickly aimed her sword at his throat. Anna then had a smile on her face, "I win."

She then sheaved her weapon away and then extended her hand at him. Once his surprised look was gone he took it and lifted himself up. "That was very unexpected." He then looked back and saw that another person was now there. During the combat he had noticed someone was present but had paid them no attention. Now that he did he saw that it was another trainee. He then slowly turned to her, "Hmm, seems that there is a witness to this after all. It would be unprecedented but if you wish you could probably..."

Anna raised her hand to stop him. She figured where he was going with this. If both Theseus and Anna mentioned the results of the combat and Mike was able to corroborate the results of the fight as a witness they could make the unofficial

battle official. There would be push back from the Commander at Arms she was sure, especially considering who the witness was, but still given the circumstances it would be hard for him not to approve the result especially if Theseus also confirmed. And from the looks of it, he seemed prepared to.

"No worries, this is still unofficial and did not count against your record." It looked like he was about to say something but she did not let him as she turned around and made her way to the door as Mike did as well.

"I'll assume that you will still show up tomorrow but don't be surprised when I don't." She then stopped next to Mike, "Thanks for accepting the challenge Theseus and not holding back, it helped justify all this training for all these years."

She then put her hand on Mike shoulder and gave him a quick smile, "I beat the odds after all." He smiled as well but then it was gone when as sadness then came over her. "I need to get ready and say my first goodbye to someone... Meet me at the outside entrance later to see me off?" He simply nodded as she made her way out of the house.

Theseus then turned to Mike, "It seems that she knew that I was going to attack that way before even I did, I wonder how she did that?"

Mike smirked, "It's because that's what I have done many time over in that situation, and it seems that our styles are similar so..."

This seemed to annoy him, "So luck?"

Mike slowly nodded, "Not really. Anna waited for you to be in that type of position but you never where, so using her skills she created a situation where you would be open like had been planned." He then shrugged a bit, "Was there a bit of luck, sure, but there always is in battle when you are anticipating the moves of another as I'm sure you

know full well."

His annoyance was gone but there was still some frustration left, "I accept that, but what is all this talk about tomorrow then? From my point of view she would make a fine addition to the Crimsons."

Mike could not hold back the smirk that appeared on his face, "If only they all saw it that way too." He then took a deep breath, "Find out for yourself tomorrow Theseus, just keep in mind that what is said may not be the actual truth of it. Mind you with what happened tonight, I'm pretty sure that you would have figured that out on your own." Mike then turned, "Good night Theseus, and thanks for being a good sport about all this. Now I have to go and get prepared as well, as my night is far from over."

Anna walked in to the home that she shared with Julia. It was now getting dark so she lit a lantern and when she did she almost jumped to see that Julia was already in bed sleeping. Anna was puzzled by this, Julia being asleep now was odd even under normal circumstances and today was not a normal circumstance. She thought of reaching over and waking her up but then had reservations against it, not really sure why she let it go for now and started packing instead. She took the bedroll that they all had and backpack, in it she stuffed in some clothes. She then unfastened her practice sword and flipped it with the real one. Normally she would next pack up some food but that was not really going to be possible at this time, she would have to figure out something for that on the road.

A few moments later and everything was done and Julia was still sleeping, which now made no

sense. *'There is no way that you are sleeping so why don't you want to talk to me? Would it not be easier to simply not be here instead of this?'* It's then that she noticed a somewhat crumpled piece of paper on the desk; it was almost purposely placed in order to be noticed. A bit puzzled Anna then remembered that Julia had gotten a letter when they had been summoned, would this be that letter? She got closer and sampled some of what was written. *'This is pretty much the detail that states the choice that the Commander gave me... There is no way that you did not know what option I would choose. Hmm, I think I understand now.'*

Anna took her stuff and made her way to the door; before she walked away she turned to look at her sleeping Guardian. "You are not to blame for any of this, if anything I want to thank you for everything you did for me. You are the second person out of two that I will miss more than anything." She then smirked, "Funny that you are the second considering you are my very first true friend. I can't say I saw that coming as well." Anna then had a sad smile as there was still no reaction from Julia, "Again thanks for everything Julia, I will miss you." and then Anna turned and left her home for the last time.

Julia had been awake but at the same time she was so full of shame that she could not face Anna. Here was a young woman that Julia had been put in charge of in order to protect, guide and take care of and when the time came, when it really mattered Julia could do nothing. She had begged everyone about the challenge but they all ignored her, for a while she had thought to go talk to the Commander about this but then she had read the letter that he had sent her only to see that he too had given up on her, much like everyone else. What pained Julia the most was not being

able to not help, it was the fact that in the end due to her actions, or lack thereof, she too had given up on her. Anna would not see it that way, which had been clear by her parting words, but Julia would see it that way and that was proven as she suddenly realised that tears were now streaming down her cheeks.

Anna was making her way to the outer gates of the town. At this time of night there was almost no one around, few guards here and there but they paid her no attention. This was an odd site for her but at the same time confronting. It was a way to say goodbye to this place without the odd looks. Her mood then changed as thinking of goodbye reminder her of the next person she would have to say that too. It was funny, while it had only been two years he had grown on her quite a lot and the thought of not having him around did not sit well with her. Considering how she felt part of her wondered if she thought of him as more than a friend. She smirked at that thought. *'It was far too late for that now, still how to say goodbye to him?'*

She was going to find out soon as she finally saw him waiting at the outer gates as she had requested. The first thing that stood out was that he was wearing the red Crimson cape on his back and from the looks of it had another on in his hands. Anna gave him a half smile, "I'm not sure that the cape will be official, by the way where did you get it?"

He handed her the spare red cape, "Well seeing as the ceremony will not go as planned I figured that I would go ahead and grab what was rightfully mine as I did win the challenge. While I was there I saw another, and well you did win after all."

She fastened the red cape on, "I suppose your right." She then quickly nodded, "Plus I did work hard for it." As she looked at him smile at her she then noticed something else at his feet in the form of a backpack and bedroll and then she suddenly recalled what he had said. "Wait a sec; what do you mean that the ceremony will not go as planned and what are those?"

Mike then picked up his backpack, "I think you know what it means."

Anna did not really know what to think, part of her was so happy but another part was truly scared by this decision. "Oh no, I can't let you do that. This place is everything to you, you could easily be a top member if you stay here, and you know that. To throw all that away..."

Mike looked in her worried green eyes, "Are you not doing the same by leaving as well? There is no way that you can doubt your skills after what you just did and with that there is no way that you can't say that you could not be a top member as well. And yet you are ready to throw all that way and for what?"

Anna scowled at him, "You know fully why I'm doing this." She then raised her arms to the sky, "This place is not for me as the people in it do not want me here, I think that's clear even to you now."

He slowly nodded, "Painfully so actually. But you know I'm sure that the townsfolk don't feel that way, I know that your Guardian Julia does not feel that way and so many others." She was about to cut him off but he did not let her, "Look I understand why you are doing this as this battle will resolve very little and cause a lot of harm to those that do want you around."

His words hurt her in a way because that was the exact reason why she had chosen to leave, "If

you understand then why this? You don't have to do this?"

Then a sad smirked quickly appeared and disappeared, "That's funny because I feel that I do need to do this." He then took a deep breath, "Look, I'm not doing it for them don't think that at all. I'm doing this for you and also, in a big way myself. Remember when I told you that being with you made me see things and myself in a different light, well I like that. And I'm not ready for that to end. Yes this is a large step for me, I've never been outside this town so I don't know if I'll be of any use to you or if I'll turn out to be a hindrance. Still I would like to join you." He then looked at her, "Now it's my turn to ask if you are okay with me tagging along with you."

Anna was still a bit confused; this was not what she had expected at all. "I can't say that traveling alone is appealing at all to me, still..." She then had a very serious look on her face as she looked back at him, "You have to promise me that you will have no regrets doing this, I don't want you to ever..."

He then looked back at her with the same intensity that she had. "Reality is that I don't know if this is the right decision, there is no way to know. What I do know is that not being with you feels wrong to me and for that reason alone I know this is the right choice in the end. So what do you say?"

A small warm smile appeared on her face, "I say that you are very corny with your feeling... and also that I will be very happy if you accompanied me on this new journey of mine."

With that Mike nodded and fastened his backpack that seemed heavier then hers and they both walked away from the home that had sheltered them for many years.

After a few hours of travel Anna pointed at the pack, "That seems pretty full what did you bring in there?"

"Well clothes and I was also able to grab us some travel rations as well."

Anna was clearly happy at the news, "That's great news; I was thinking that I was going to have to forage for something on the way to the first town. It's pretty far from here."

"Hmm..." A sad look then overtook him and then he turned to her, "...Anna I think I made a mistake."

This quickly made Anna stop. "It's, not too late I will understand if you want to take it back." Being honest with herself, she did not really want him to do that but at the same time she would not blame him given the big unknown that was now in front of them.

He quickly chuckled, "Don't be silly, it's just your comment about the distance made me think about all the walking that we would have to do and then a quick regret popped in my head as I really regretted not having taken some horses along with us as well. I mean I thought of the food, weapons, the capes, and also about what I would say to you but the horses totally escaped me."

Anna's head suddenly hurt for some reason, what bad timing on that expression for something so stupid. She quickly gave him a quick punch to the shoulder and continued walking as he followed right after her, "I should have told you to stay."

Interlude 4

As Anna stopped Alexandria looked at Mike, "Wow that really was bad comment on your end." When the others nodded Anna laughed, "I know right, I mean there where so many other ways to break the news but to choose those words and that look at that time..."

Mike suddenly raised his hands in resignation, "Hey it just came out like that, and I never meant to hurt her feelings." He then looked at Anna, "And you know that, now and then I think, right?"

Anna had a skeptical look on her face, "I do now, but that day was very confusing for me and comments like that really did not help."

Mike had a simple smile as he slowly nodded at her, "Well I'm sure that I've already done so but I apologize again for the comment." He then waited a moment as she still had that look on her face, "While I do mean it, you are teasing me about this right?"

A coy look suddenly appeared, "Well I don't know about them but, yes I am." Suddenly Mike was less worried, which made them both smile.

Rosamia felt a bit jealous of the two in that moment but overall she felt more relived. "That all said you where right when you mentioned that your situation was different than ours. You know way back when I was so sure that it was the same, I realised that I was wrong when I looked at it again but now even more so."

Anna was happy to hear that the couple comparison idea felt laid to rest, "Each one's at their own pace." A smile then appeared, "I mean both of you have made it this far so I don't see why

you will not figure it out, it will simply take the time it take."

Alexandria was a bit skeptical, "Are you sure I mean Rosa's a saint but I mean there are limits." Seeing Rosamia sad reaction to the comment made Alex think that maybe she had gone too far with this game that she played with Adam, after all it was not a game anymore if they hurt someone else in the crossfire. But then she saw Adam's wide grin and instead of doing anything else she simply braced herself for it.

"Like the words of a hack mage that had to cheat on her test in order to pass matter at all."

Alexandria was simply stunned; there is was again the accusation that she had cheated on the most important test in her life. She simply sat there wide eyed with her mouth opened. Before she could use that weapon as Adam knew she could he quickly changed the subject as he turned to the others, "So I take it that story time is over now? I mean we all had a turn right?"

Anna could barley believe it, those two really like going at each other and if she did not know how much they actually respected one and the other she would be very concerned. Still she did not see any reason to continue that particular game, "We can stop, but if they want too there is one person that did not have a go at it."

Now it was Adam that was skeptical, "Wait I told you that..." Still a bit frustrated at him Alex cut him off, "Not you, you slow poke. She was talking about Iris." As Alex looked at Iris it seems that she was equally surprised by this as well.

When Iris looked at Anna it was clear that Alex had been right but that brought up a very nervous and sick feeling inside the pit of her stomach. As if reading her thoughts Alexandria took a hold of her hand and squeezed it as if to

bring her back from that very uneasy feeling that she was all too easily focusing on. This made Iris wonder if Alex knew, she turned to her but Alex did not look at her instead she was looking at Anna and the others.

"I think that we should stop for the night actually, I mean it's late now and that merchant could be here early tomorrow..."

It was clear to all that she was covering for Iris, so Anna then focused on her. "I only mentioned it because, if you don't want to then we will not force you."

Rosamia jumped in right after as well, "She's right, don't feel pressured. I mean we talked about what we wanted to because we wanted to." She then quickly looked at Adam, "And in some cases we did not say anything at all." Adam knew that he was being used as an excuse for a greater good here so he played with it and simply nodded in agreement.

Alexandria wanting to still try and prove everyone wrong continued with her obvious lie, "Guys this has nothing to do with Iris, I mean it's been a long night and..." She then felt Iris squeeze her hand back and stopped and then she looked to see that Iris had a sad smile on her face, "Sorry sis but I don't think that they are buying it, plus when was the last time you did not want to hear a story?"

Alex suddenly took a deep breath, "When I know that the story is going to cause you pain. I can do without that one if you don't feel like telling it" She then returned her sad smile, "But I will listen to it if you want to tell it."

Iris then chuckled a bit, "You do know then." Slowly Alex nodded her head, "I'm sorry I do. I just never knew how to approach it."

Seeing as the others were confused Iris looked

at them and then mustered the courage to tell everyone, "I... still have serious nightmare about what happened to me even now." She then looked at the ground not really able to face them, "I know it's all over with, I mean I was there for it, but some nights I can't shake it off and I wake up screaming."

Alex instantly reached out and wrapped her arms around her, Rosamia and Adam where a bit of a loss for words and Anna felt sorry she had brought it up. "Iris I'm sorry I really did not know." Before she could continue Iris tried to ease her guilt, "It's all right, truthfully it is."

Iris then looked at Alex and nodded with a small smile to lessen her worries as she sat back down. She then looked at Rosa and Adam, "I am dealing with it, or should I say I'm finding ways to do so. Still it does make me wonder about how you dealt with it, there is a part of both our stories that are very similar."

Both of them thought about it and had to agree, having monsters come to your home and rip it away as a child was in itself an near impossible task to deal with. Still for them that's where it had stopped, but they silently wondered at the same time, had they actually dealt with it with those feelings and the scars that it had left? Rosamia then grabbed Adam's hand, "I think that maybe tonight we are really starting to heal that wound from long ago, and while if there is anything that we can help you with you know that we will. Still I think that we are still on the same path as you and that's trying to figure out how to deal with it." She then looked at Adam, "We may be further along but..." Adam then nodded, "I can honestly tell you that I'm not over it, but like you I am trying and as Rosa said I will be there for you if you need it."

Iris had a genuine smile on her face. Part of

her also wanted to laugh at the stupid trap that she had fallen into again. These people had saved her life, cared for her as much as her own parents and she idolized every one of them for different reasons. But in doing so she forgot that they did not have all the answers and that they were human as well. And, probably more importantly, that they would never think that she was not good enough for having not figured out how to deal with something on her own. She then took a deep breath and convinced herself, "Fine let do it."

It was clear that they were all concerned but it was Alex that voiced it. "You really don't have to if you don't feel like it."

Iris nodded, "I know, I'll tell what I can and if it gets to be too much than I'll stop. I think that will be the best way to know where I really stand with all of it."

She then looked at everyone, still partly trying to convince herself, "Before it happened I lived in the town of Vestis..."

Chapter 4

Vestis was a fairly populated town that focused solely on its primary trade, which was silk. While they were not the only place that produced it in the world they were the ones that prided themselves in producing it using traditional means. The town was split into different sections that allowed for homes to focus on the initial step from the silk moth to the worms all the way to the weavers. Generally everyone was fairly close in the town and while the environment was a busy it was also happy. The town itself was a bit detached from the rest of civilization but still had a main traveling with merchants and other possible customers coming in and out at a fairly regular interval.

Today was a bit of a special day that had a lot of people running around trying to get everything done for the spring festivities that was going to start a little bit after mid-day. This was something that Vestis did every year where they would take an afternoon off from their duties and celebrate the coming of the warm weather. Because of this all hand where on deck and anyone that could help with the day to day was asked too.

Currently little Iris was in the worm pen making sure that all of them had enough fresh leaves to feed on. Helping with this chore was not unusual for her as it was something that she enjoyed doing. Seeing the white worms grow from their initial state in the span of about one month was always amazing to her. As she finished up, her half state of daydreaming about them was broken when she heard her father calling her.

"Iris! Can you get out here when you are done?"

Iris quickly stood up and patted off some of the dirt on apron as she took it off. "I'm coming now."

The pen was not even a minute's walk from the house so it took her no time to get there. When she did she had to take a step back in order to not be in the way as her dad was contently moving from one place to the other. "Did you need something?"

He stopped and looked at his little girl that was quickly growing up. He then reached out for a large basket that held different types of food in it. "Could you bring this to your Mom at the neighbors, I was supposed to do it but it seems that I need to deliver the cocoons that are ready and by the time I get back..."

Iris took the basket and smiled, "Its fine, I was done anyways so I can go now if you want."

Henry smiled and nodded, "That would be great Iris, thanks. Also once you are done, unless your mom has something for you to do, your all done so if you want to enjoy the pre-festivities go head." He then paused and a little grin appeared, "Maybe Hale is free as well and he can join you?"

Iris blushed a bit, Hale was a boy about her age that lived at the neighbors. For a while Iris thought that he liked her but he never said anything or did anything special to show it. He did spend a lot of his free time with her which made his feelings all the more confusing. Iris now noticing the pause that had unintentionally happened with her father's question quickly stomped one foot on the ground and gave her dad a very determined look. "If he is free so be it, if not then I'll just go by myself." As she stormed out with the basket Henry's grin widen and he whispered to himself, "You're right no need to rush anything or grow up too quickly."

Iris was still trying to calm down after that

little moment with her dad as she approached her destination. The neighbors also had the same household job of tending to the worms so their home was similar built to the one that she lived in. As she reached out for the door there was a quick surprise shock as it suddenly opened and Hale stepped out. Iris quickly moved out of the way as he was more focused on his mom's voice then where he was going, "Hale don't forget to go check to see if there is enough food and once you're done your dad will need help transporting this food for the festival tonight."

"I know mom..." he then turned and took a quick step back as he saw Iris moving away from him as well. "Oh, Iris, sorry about that."

She quickly nodded and readjusted the hold that she had on the basket, "It's alright."

"I see that you are delivering things as well..." Hale then looked around trying to avoid eye contact, "Are you... done after that or do you have more to do?"

She quickly smiled, "Nope I'm done after this I even got permission to check out the fair ahead of time."

Hale's slumped a bit, "Ah, well I still have things to do as I'm sure you heard." He then meekly smiled, "Once I'm done is it okay if I come and join you?"

Given the quick teasing that her father has given her about this Iris wanted to instantly say no but she held back as that would not be fair to Hale and it's not like she minded his company. "That's fine, I mean if you happen to see me there that is."

Hale then had a wide smile, "Great see you then." Before she could say anything he turned and ran to the direction where the worm pen would be.

Before Iris could start thinking about what

had just happened her mom showed up at the door. "Iris is that you?" As she saw her girl with a confused look on her face she smiled and grabbed the basket that she was holding. "Why don't you come in dear?"

Iris did as was asked and then stopped again; the house was full of prepared food for tonight. Every section had large plates or crates piled up, it also smelled very good. Her mom handed the supplies to Hale's mother, "Oh good just what we needed to finish up here." She then turned to Iris, "Thanks for bringing this to us, was that the last of your chores for today?" Iris simply nodded in confirmation. "Hmm, Ruth why don't you go with your daughter to the pre-festivities then, I can finish up here."

Iris mom was surprised but happy as well, "Well if you're sure." With that Ruth made her way back to her daughter and they both made their way to the door, "If the situation changes let me know and I'll come back." She then smiled, "And also, thanks."

Hale's mom quickly waved at the two leaving, "No problems, now don't forget to have fun okay."

Ruth was very happy about this development as it gave her a chance to bond a bit more with her quickly growing child. "So did I hear correctly back there? Do you and Hale have something planned for later?"

Iris suddenly stopped and turned to her mom with a flustered look on her face, "Not you too." Not knowing what she was referring to Ruth smirked and quickly matched paces with her daughter that was now walking a bit faster to their destination. "Oh don't be like that, I was just curious."

Iris sighed as she suddenly slowed down, "Fine, basically if he see me then we may do something and if not then nothing."

Ruth had a compassionate look on her face, "That sound very complicate."

He daughter quickly agreed, "I know, it should be simple right?" As she turned to her mom she said it again but this time with a confused look on her face, "Right?"

Ruth grabbed her maturing little girl, "Sadly that's not always the case I'm sorry to say. But don't worry too much about it as it will get easier with time."

Iris looked at her, "It does?"

Her mom then had a teasing look, "Sometimes... maybe..."

Iris then broke the hug, "Which one is it then?" Simply getting a shrugged from her mom really did not help, "Maybe I should just drop this, I don't need to be with anyone right?"

Her mom instantly had a concern look on her face, "No you don't, you're right. At the same time don't simply toss this aside because it's confusing or hard, if you do that then you will miss out on what this life can offer you."

"Fine, still can we drop it for now and just have some fun?"

Ruth smiled at her daughter, "That's not a problem at all."

By then they had arrived at the festivities which were held at the middle of town. Seeing as this was a planned event, the place was also packed with more than normal traveling salesmen trying to sell extra products. When the food, wine and dancing would start most of them would pack up for the night so now was a good time to see if there were any interesting things to find.

After a few hours Iris and her mom where sampling some of the food that was now available. "You think that dad will be here soon?"

Ruth wondered about that too, the place was

getting crowded as she figured that everyone was pretty much finishing what needed to be done for the day and where heading here. "I would assume that he should be here soon."

A little while passed and more food was eaten and Henry finally arrived. Iris turned to greet him as her mom pointed out his arrival. As they all got closer she noticed that he was accompanied by Hale and his family. Henry hugged his daughter and kissed his wife. "So did you two find anything of interest early today?"

Iris quickly pulled out a silver necklace with a small white pearl attached to it. "Mom got me this, it's so pretty."

Henry looked at it, "Well I do think that it's very pretty on you." The compliment made her smile.

"...I think it looks good on you too." Iris turned to Hale suddenly very nervous for some reason, "...Ah, thanks Hale." Then there was an awkward silence between the two which only seemed to grow as the seconds ticked on. Not knowing what to do and with Hale not giving her any clues, Iris grabbed a plate and started to put some food on it. "Hale you have to try these, they are very good." Somehow that broke the silence and Hale was back to normal talking about the food that he was trying out.

His mother approached Iris's parent, "That boy of mine, I don't know where he gets that shyness from." Henry smirked, "I think that I'm okay with it." She then laughed at his comment, "Poor Henry, daughters don't stay maidens forever you know."

A few more hours passed and the party was now in full swing. Iris sat back down at the table that the two families was using and noticed that her mom and dad were not there. She turned to

Hale's mom, "Did they go out dancing again?" She tried to see if she could spot them.

"No Iris, they needed to get something from your house and your dad was not sure where it was so your mom went along with him. They should be back soon, don't worry." She then looked at the crowd, "Why don't you go and join them dancing instead of waiting here with my husband and myself?"

Iris looked at the many couples dancing together and then a bit of a dreary look appeared on her face. "Hmm, you know I think that I'll go and see if I can catch up with them instead." She quickly smiled and then walked away from the celebration, "I'll be back soon."

Hale's mom then suddenly saw her son appear, "Hale! Did you not ask her to dance with you?" His lack of answer and eye contact gave her all the answer she needed, "Why not?"

Hale was still shifting a bit, "I don't know..." She really had no clue where he got this from. "Well, do you actually like her?"

"I think so? How can I tell?"

Now there was a hard one, "Tell you what, forget about all that and ask yourself would you like to dance with her? Don't think about what it means for now and if you want to do it then I suggest you go after her and ask before it's too late." He stood there for a while and then started to march off in Iris's direction. She sighed a bit, "Good luck, my sweet dear boy."

Iris had not seen her parents on the way home but as she got there she noticed that there was light coming from the house meaning that they were probably still there. She rushed over and then

suddenly stopped, something felt wrong for some reason and also she was starting to get scared. She slowly approached the door to the house to see that it was broken, 'A robbery here?' She then saw something move inside. "Mom... Dad, is that you?" The shadow moved deeper in the house very quickly, *'Is it possible that an animal broke in and I just scared it?'*

She slowly stepped in the house and then suddenly froze. The furniture inside was all broken, she looked around to see if her parent where around. When she turned to the corner she saw her dad body on top of her mother. They were both cut by something, the wounds look really deep and there was blood around them everywhere. Iris's eyes went wide, her mouth was open as she wanted to scream but nothing came out due to the shock.

She did not know how long she just stood there mouth open but her gaze shifted when she saw something mover towards her. In front there was there large green man looking thing. He had a large axe that already had blood on it.

Finally Iris screamed, "AHHHHHHHHH!!!"

The scream made the creature move at her quicker; somehow Iris managed to move back and start running. She needed to get help; she needed to let the others know. She looked back to see that now the creature was not alone and there were two more with him, she ran faster.

Then she suddenly stopped as she saw Hale coming at her. He was waving at her with a smile and then he suddenly stopped and his eyes went wide in shock.

"HALE!! RUN!!!" Iris did not know how but as soon as she screamed it out one of the monsters ran passed her and made his way to Hale.

He had no clue what was going on or what

this thing was, all he saw was a large axe being lifted above the monster head.

Iris saw Hale use his arms to cover his face as the axe came down on him. When she saw him being cleaved Iris dropped to the ground. Her parents, these monsters and then Hale... it was too much.

She dropped to her knees and screamed with everything she had, "HEEEELLL..."

Before she could empty her lungs she felt a blow to the head and then everything went dark.

When she finally woke up she did not know how much time had passed or even where she was. The only thing she knew was that somehow someone had changed her clothes as she wore very little and was very cold. It was also very dark and there was no one else around. "...Hello, is anyone around?"

There was no reply, she was shivering, scared, and it was so dark all around her. "Mom, Dad..." As soon as she said it the picture of their bodies showed up in her head. "...Noo..." She was now crying in fetal position, "... Help me, please... anyone..."

Again there was no answer as the only thing that was around her was darkness.

Chapter 5

*I*ris was clearly uncomfortable, "I'm sorry... I'm going to have to stop there..." She then stood and without facing anyone turned and ran into the forest.

Adam instantly stood as well only to stop as Alexandria motioned for him to with her hands, "Wait, I'll go after her. I just want to give her a bit of space for a few minutes."

He was a bit skeptical, "Are you sure that's best?" Alexandria was a bit frantic as she looked at him, "No, Adam I don't or at least that's not what I want to do. I want to run at her and tell her to forget it all, that it's all done." She was starting to cry a bit, "But she's trying to deal with this so I feel that I should give her a moment to do that...but I don't want her too..."

Anna then stopped her as she was suddenly next to her, "Alex" As she looked at her with tears pouring down her cheeks Anna continued, "Just go, you don't need to say anything if you don't feel the need too, just be next to her." Alex nodded, gave Anna a quick hug and then ran off after Iris.

Adam sat back down and turned to Rosa, "Similar but very different at the same time." Rosa could only nod. Sure both their parent had been killed, but they had not seen it, also when the attack came there where people around that helped them during and after. To have that happen and then be whisked away and kept in the dark and tortured at that age, no it had been very different for them.

It had taken a while for Alexandria and Iris to return and by then it was getting pretty late so the Lights Templar had decided to call it a night. After

a few hours Anna was making her way to Mike who was still sitting by the fire keeping watch. She sat next to him and gave him a quick kiss, "Your times up."

There was a bit of a smile, as there always was when he looked at her, but then concerned appeared as he looked at the sleeping tents that had been prepared. "How is she?"

"Well currently Alex has her arms wrapped around her, reminds me of the first night after we saved her." She then thought about it more, "She should be fine, I'm more wondering what she plans on doing next. Knowing Iris I don't think that she plans on bearing it down after showing how it affects her to all of us."

Mike agreed, "It's funny I sat here trying to think of a way to help her as in a way I did go through the part that she left out..." Anna instantly shook her head, "You can't do that and you know it."

Again he agreed, "I figured as much, I mean it's the same but in so many ways it's not. When it happened to me I was an adult and she was still a kid. I have no clue how she was able to hold on for so long given what was probably done to her."

Anna looked back that the sleeping tents, "That I don't know, but somehow she found the strength to fight them and it. She said that she was lucky that was were able to find her which is true, but at the same time after seeing Genevieve, I wonder if she in a way created her own luck by holding out so long for us to be able to find and free her."

"Hmm, maybe you're right about that."

She suddenly wrapped one of her arms around him, "Just maybe?"

He looked at her teasing smile and also wrapped his arm around her waist as well. "You

can be wrong too you know?"

She rested her head on his shoulder, "Do I really have to?" She then chuckled, "In any case I'm just happy that things turned out okay for her. I'm just a bit worried about what will come next; still I know that she will overcome it somehow so I'm only a bit worried."

"That's okay I'll do the worrying for you."

She knew that he was only partly joking with that one, "Well wait until we see how she acts tomorrow before you do, and in the mean time let's just enjoy the quite night together. In a way it feels like it's been a while." Mike then kissed her and did just that.

The next morning things where a bit uncomfortable mostly because everyone was walking on eggshells around Iris, who seemed fine but was clearly in deep thought as soon as she had woken up.

Eventually the caravan appeared and that created a nice distraction as Alexandria instructed nearly everyone on how to load up all the magical items. While that was happening Iris had slipped out to the side in order not to be in the way and at the same time to renew her private thoughts. When everything was done and the merchant was now on his way the uncomfortable air of the group quickly returned.

After a while Anna figured that she would act, normally she would leave that to Adam as he enjoyed that task but when it came to Rosamia or Iris it was something that he shied away from. Anna bent down in front of Iris who was sitting in order to get to eye level and then smiled, "So Iris where are we going?"

The question surprised her for a moment but then after remembering Anna's knack of knowing

what's on peoples mind that moment quickly disappeared. "I think I want to go home."

Adam was confused, "Why go back to Astrum?"

Anna smirked at how much he had missed the mark and answered his question while looking in Iris's eyes. "See means Vestis..." Seeing the confirmation in Iris's eyes she then stood up, "Alexandria can you get us there?"

Alexandria was not sure about this at all, "Ah... sure I guess I can."

Adam then jumped in, "Are we sure about this?"

Suddenly Alexandria sighed, "Is that joke not old even for you. Do you really think that I can't do it or will leave you behind?"

Adam shook his head and was a bit annoyed, "That's not it and to answer your question no I don't care if it gets old, still the reason I said that was that maybe Iris does not want to go back that quickly?"

Anna did not think that was the case but the point had merit and so she turned to Iris, "Is he right?"

Iris then stood, "No... You were right let's head there now." She then looked at everyone, "I hope that you guys don't mind?"

Rosamia answered for the group, "Of course not, we are just worried that's all. What do you plan to find there?"

Iris did not really have an answer to tell them it's then that a half smile suddenly appeared on Anna's face. "You spent the whole morning thinking about reasons to go and reasons not to go, and about what it could do to you if you did and also if you didn't. Then finally when I asked the question you blurred it out as you realised that you were paralyzed with the questions in your

head and the only way to get an answer was to go."

Now Iris was confused, "Okay, that's a bit eerie even for you?"

Anna shrugged, "Oh that one is easy for me, I mean I married someone that does that all the time."

They suddenly looked at Mike, "Anna's exaggerates a bit, I don't do that all the time... It's just an interesting pass time of mine that's all." Before anyone could respond he changed the subject, "So Alexandria, do you need much time to prepare for the spell?"

Obsessing over everything like that, hobby or not, could be a dangerous thing but Alex dropped the matter as she figured that he was in Anna's good hands which after so many years had kept him safe. "By the time you guys pack everything up I will be ready." As Mike nodded they all followed the silent command and packed everything up, once done they all grabbed each other's hands and Alexandria's spell took over.

When they appeared they could see Vestis in the distance, or what they assumed was Vestis as none of them save Iris had even been here before. Adam chuckled as they made their way forward, "Man the elves must love the fact that you can do that and they can't."

Alexandria thought about, "You would think but not really. It's not that they can't it just that they can't yet and for them yet has a different concept then us. Still for me it's changed everything. When the lord of light, Chaos, life essence merged with mine it opened my eyes to a new way to see and understand magic and with his demise that's still in me." She then turned to Rosa

and Iris, "That said I'm surprised that the Order did not ask you to stay in Missa considering that you two are the only ones that can cast a heal spell now."

Rosamia chuckled, "While I'm sure that Catherine thought about it and while I think that she is on her way to forgive me for what I did, I don't think that she is ready to see me every day even with the gift that we still have. But then that should not be an issue soon right?"

When Alexandria simply nodded Iris got very confused, "Wait what does she mean by that?"

Now Alex was confused as well, "I told you about that? They asked me to try and teach them how to do those healing elixirs." Iris was suddenly shaking her head, "I know but how is that a problem that will be resolved soon? Did you start already and when?"

Now understanding her confusing Alexandria smirked, "Well I'm actually almost done. You see I knew that I could not be there to teach them."

Suddenly Adam cut in, "Because that would be boring and you're not a big fan of Catherine as well." Alexandria still had her mouth open as he continued, "Don't worry I'm not a fan as well, I don't hate her but she is far from being my friend." He then motioned for her to continue her explanation.

Alex wanted to debate his comment but part of her knew it was a bit true so she simply avoided it, "As I was saying, because I would not be there I created three types of scrolls for her. They all show how to create different version of the elixirs at different strengths. The simpler one being the weakest and the harder one being the better version, at the start only the simpler one will be able to be used but in time and with practice things will change."

Part of Iris was surprised that she had already done this much work on this request. Still with that another part of Iris was also guilty considering her own task that she had given herself and the lack of work that she had done on it so far.

They soon arrived at the town where they were greeted by a guard, "It's not every day that we see non merchants come to this town." He then paused and looked closely at each of them, making Iris more uncomfortable than the others. "Wait you are them right?"

Alexandria suddenly had a large smile on her face, "After all this time it's finally happening, yes we are them, the Lights Templar..." She then stopped as the guard was suddenly very nervous and looked also a bit scared.

Mike chuckled a bit and looked at Anna, "This is not the first time right?" She thought about it, "Hmm, I don't think so." He then nodded and made his way to the guard, "Don't worry, yes we are them, but we are simply passing thought and figured we would stop by to see the silk that you make here." He then looked at everyone else, "We are actually on vacation right now and are simply traveling around, no mission no nothing."

This made the guard sigh in relief, "Oh well in that case welcome to Vestis, please enjoy your stay."

When they made their way in Alexandria started mumbling to herself, "Is our name linked to trouble or something?"

Adam could not hold back his laughter, "Put yourself in their shoes for a minute, what happens when we show up someplace?"

While Alex thought it over Mike turned to Iris, "Well, lead the way."

It was easy to see that Iris was very nervous about all this. Looking around things where so

different and at the same time so very similar. The town had grew a bit but everything was still split up the way it was back then, the path and trees where the same. She would not say it but part of her wondered that if she turned a corner would she suddenly see people that she knew or even yet her parent welcoming her home. She knew that last part was not going to happen but being here made her feel like that time before somehow. Suddenly lost in that thought she started to run in the direction of her home.

After a while and as the other followed her from behind she stopped at what looked like an old foundation on the ground. The others looked at her and then looked around them. You could tell that stone had been laid out on the ground to form a floor at one point in time but now only that was visible, as plants had grown around and over most of the rest. Alex reached out and put her hand on Iris's shoulder, "Can I do anything?"

Iris snapped back to now and started crying, "It's all gone. My home it's all gone, like we never existed."

Then everyone focus was suddenly shifted on an old women that dropped a basket of flowers that happened to be around what was left of the house. "You're alive?" The old women was in tears as well and looked a bit hysterical as she approached them, "You said your home, Iris is that you?"

It took a moment for Iris but then she recognized who this woman was, "Hale's mom..."

As the mother's thoughts where confirmed she ran to Iris and gave her a hug. Mike quickly turned to Anna as this is what they were both worried about, still there was not much to do at this point then to play it out, no matter how much pain it would probably cause.

"I thought you were dead, I mean we found the

four bodies in the fire of your house that night and all figured that something had happened." The mother broke the hug and with a large smile she looked at the others and then suddenly her smile disappeared and worry started to set in. "Iris, where is Hale... where is my little boy?"

Iris was happy about seeing Hale's mom once again as she had been close to her but when she asked that question her heart suddenly broke. How could she tell her what she had seen that night? As Iris was not answering the mother started calling for her son, "Hale where are you, it's been so long, why don't you stop being shy and come out?"

Things would soon get emotionally out of control so Anna did the only thing that came to mind. She wrapped her arms around the mother and gave her a hug, the mom then looked at her with fear in her eyes. Anna knew that she knew the answer but it had to be said, "He did not make it, I'm so sorry to say."

The mother tried to fight back with all her strength but Anna kept holding her. "NOOOOO!!! Give me back my SON!!!" It did not take long for her to lose her strength and as she did she started crying and dropped to her knees. All the while Anna dropped with her and held her as she cried, "Why do I have to lose him again? Why?"

Iris felt terrible this was the last thing that she wanted to happen. Should they have made themselves invisible when they came in, should they have not come at all? There had to be a better outcome then what she had caused. Suddenly her thoughts were broken and she felt Alexandria hand grab hers to try and comfort her. It helped a little but the pain in her chest was still very present. "What do I do to fix this?"

When no one had an answer Mike made his way next to Iris, "You can't, but if she is able and

you both can find the courage within yourself you can finally tell her what happened. Then maybe eventually this can be fixed."

Iris only squeezed Alexandria's hand more after hearing his answer, she did not disagree completely at what he said but as she looked at Hale's mom and thought of her own condition she wondered if he had asked too much of them.

Once Hale's mom had calmed down she had invited them to her home. When they arrived they properly introduced themselves to her and also her husband that was now with them. The home was generally small for a full size family but perfect for only two members. Currently everyone was in the dining room, the largest room of the house, and it felt a bit cramped. The table only sat four people, two of which were Hale's parents and on the opposite side you had Iris and Anna. Behind Iris stood Alexandria and Adam and next to him Rosamia. Mike had made himself comfortable behind Anna.

When the introductions where completed and the shock of Iris being alive had died down a bit for the father, Iris had proceeded to tell what had actually happened during that night at their request. Generally speaking she told the same tale that she had told yesterday, only difference was that she embellished the actions of Hale and also skipped over the details of his death simply saying that the orc gave him a quick killing blow. At that news both parent started crying again.

When the father had regained some of his composure he started to tell his version, "In our case we were starting to get worried as everyone had been gone for some time. When we figured that

we should start to go look for everyone a large cry was heard about a house having caught on fire. Everyone rushed to the scene and when we saw that it was your house that was on fire we started to panic and call out to all of you." He paused and looked at his wife that was bracing herself for the next part, "Eventually when the fire was dealt with it was seen that there were four bodies in the house that where heavily burned, two adults and two children, with that the searching stopped..." There was another pause as this time it was him that needed a moment, "Eventually the mourning started and bodies were buried and from there we tried to move on with our lives."

It's then that the mother cut in, "The hard part is that no one was able to figure out what had happened? It was just that it had happened. There was no reason for such a fire and why did no one try to get out of the house while it was in flames... There were so many questions." She then grabbed hold of her husband's hand, "But at least now we know what truly happened." Suddenly she tears where once again appearing, "...Still it makes me wonder what would have happened if I had not pushed him to ask you to dance that night?"

Iris had a pleading look on her face, "Please don't ask yourself that, if it was anyone fault it was my own for being the target. I know this may not help but I am sorry for what happened to your son."

It's then that Anna cut in, "Iris is right in saying that you should not delve with questions like that, at the same time she is wrong in saying that it's her fault. She did not know that she had been born with magic nor that she was the target of this evil being that gave the order to the orcs to do what they did." She then looked at Iris, "I'm sure that if she would have known that she would

have left the town and her parent as the last thing that she would have liked is to endanger others with her presence, at least that's what the Iris I know would have done with that knowledge." She then looked at Hale's mom, "And the same could be said about you, if you would have known of course you would not have sent your son there, and from what I'm seeing, you would have also warned Iris's family so that they too could have survived the attack. Both of you are not to blame for this at all as you simply did not know and could not know."

As everyone involved regain their composure after Anna's comment Mike simply reached out with his hand to Anna's shoulder, she never cease to amaze him in knowing what to say in situations like this.

Eventually the father started to look away from his wife and turned to Anna, "I thank you for those words and we will keep them in mind when thoughts such as those show up in our heads." After another quick pause the father looked at Iris, "If you don't mind my asking what happed afterwards?"

Iris was a bit in shook as that question was a big one that she did not want to go into the details of, Alexandria was then seen to reach out to her and was about to say something but it was Anna that cut in once again before she could. "The orcs bought her somewhere where she was imprisoned and tortured by the being that ordered the capture. This lasted for a long time, until the day that our group showed up and saved her. At her request she was trained and joined our team, eventually we fought the person responsible and Iris was a big help in defeating him. Once that was done the world started to change and things got complicated for all of us." As she paused Iris then continued for

her now that the harder parts had been passed, "During the dealing with those events I learned the why of what had happened to me and to others it seems. That being very resent I started to wonder what I should do next with this knowledge, which eventually lead me here."

"Well that is quite the journey you took, and we are both sorry to hear that this happened to you." Then it seemed like an idea popped into the husband's head, "I'm not sure if this place can help you find the answers that you are looking for but if you wish you can take the time to visit the grave of your parents."

Iris was not sure if she knew if she was in fact ready for that, but she also knew that she would regret not visiting. "Please tell me where they are?"

The graves had been placed a few minutes away from the house, Alexandria stayed close to Iris and she slowly made her way to the location with everyone else behind her. Getting there she saw the three graves stones, two for her parents and one for her own. The stone where pretty normal and had nothing special about them, but still the area was well kept which touched Iris's heart as it showed that the people here had not forgotten about them after all. She then made her way between her parent grave, kneeled down and reached out with both hand to each of them. It did not take long for her to start crying again. Alex kneeled next to her but said nothing, while the others simply stood behind her. Time went on and the crying stopped but it was clear that Iris was having an inner conversation with herself and possibly her parents. After a while she closed her eyes and dropped her head down saying nothing.

After a long period of silence Alexandria whispered to her, "Is there anything that I can do?"

It took a while but then Iris nodded but instead of looking at Alex she turned to the grave site that had her name on it. "I think I want to know who that is. They mentioned a body and assumed it was me, which it's not." She then turned to Alex, "So who is it?"

Alex was surprised as that had not been at all what she had expected, "I guess we can figure it out..." She then looked back at the others, "I guess that means that we will have to dig her out first?"

Adam simply shrugged and already started to make his way to the site when Mike stopped him, "Wait... First we could ask someone before we do that."

"It's not like there is anyone we need to ask permission for..."

Mike shook his head at Adam's blunt comment, "Not what I had in mind. Alexandria can we not contact K'azugg anytime we wish now?"

Both Iris and Alexandria stood up and nodded. Alex then reached out for one of her many sphere like pearls. "I wonder, maybe he's currently with other elders and what will they will think when my face shows up suddenly."

Personally Mike did not think that he would have it on him at all times, then again it could be the best way to keep it hidden. Still with a quick glance at Anna he knew that if a situation like that happened that it would really bad for everyone involved.

As K'azugg face showed up Alex waved at him, "How is it going? I have a quick question for you."

Both Anna and Mike were happy to see that while he was angry and annoyed about this, it looked no more so what would have been normally expected. "I am not at your beck and call whenever

you wish little human."

Alexandria mockingly thought about it, "Normally I would agree but for this you are." She then gave the orb to Iris who did not have a pleasant look her face; she then in turned pointed the orb at her grave stone. "Can you explain this?"

K'azugg laughter did not help anyone's mood, "Well it seems like someone read my mind and gave you a final resting place that I wish you all had."

Suddenly Iris focused the orb on her again, she looked furious. "I'm in my home town, where your friend captured and KILLED my parent you idiot. When all was said and done they left a body to take my place, so once again explain this NOW!"

Much to Mike's surprise K'azugg held the anger of being ordered around and was seen suddenly making a move that looked like he was crossing his arms around his chest. "I suppose you where one of the special cases. Normally we were ordered to kill all around but sometimes that was not possible. From what I heard from others is that when that happened extra items were given in order to help with the mission's success. In this case I would assume that they were given a body to pose as you."

Still angry Iris sent a wave a question's at him, "You assume? Where did this body come from? Do you know? Did any of you even care?"

This time it was clear to see that Iris was pushing his limit as he was now sneering at her, "I've told you this before, do not get all high on me with this. It was war and we were ordered to apprehend dangerous targets in order to possibly neutralize or use them ourselves. Do not tell me that your Crusaders did not do similar when they could in order to try and take back that tower." He then calm down a bit, "Now, yes I'm assuming, as

for the body or whatever items of extra that was given it was given by those Dark Cleric, where they got the body I don't know and no I do not care. Now is there anything else as this conversation really tests my patience."

The reality of the situation was that Iris did not really care about his patience but because she still needed him she pulled back, but that did bring up something else. "There is one more question; how far are you with my request?"

K'azugg shook his head, "You have got to be kidding me, it's only been a little while and we too have been very busy with the mess that needed to be sorted out after everything. While I figure you care about that as much as I do about your overall situation do remember that those place have lots of magic around them and we cannot simply approach them without..."

Suddenly Alexandria grabbed the orb from Iris and focused it on herself, "Magic? These places are surrounded with magic!?"

Mike held back the laughter as he saw K'azugg face suddenly be covered with worry at the mistake that he had made with that last slip up. "Now, now wait a sec there... what are you planning on doing?"

Alex instantly brushed him off and had a little coy smile on her face, "Oh don't worry, we don't plan on causing any issues at all."

Now he was really worried, "You never do but always happen to cause issues in the end. Now you will tell me this instant what your plans are as you cannot simply show up when you please around here."

Mike then made his way in the focus as he was convinced that K'azugg was about to lose it soon. "Don't worry; you just gave us information that we can use at this time. We currently have no

intension of making any rash actions and if we do we will talk to you before hand to let you know before we make our way there."

This seems to calm him a bit but not completely, which was expected. "I noticed that the statement implies that even if I don't allow it that you would still make your way here." Mike simply shrugged as an answer which was barely visible for K'azugg. "I strongly recommend that you wait for my information and that if you don't that you are to tell me before you act."

The statement was made as a command but it had little impact on all of them given the reasoning. Alexandria nodded with a smirk on her face, "We will make sure to do that." She then terminated the contact between the orbs and turned to the others, "... I think that I can hear his screams even from all the way over there."

Mike wondered on that, "I'm not sure about screams but his ongoing frustration with us for sure. So what's the plan Alexandria?"

She took a moment to think about it and when it appeared that she was taking too long Iris interrupted her. "Can you actually track that magic?"

She nodded, "That's the plan but it's tricky?"

Adam was skeptical, "Something that you can't do, now that's shocking?"

Alex mostly ignored him, "It's tricky because in order to track the magic I need magic that stems from the same source and knowing the magic that they were using I would need..."

She let the others finish her thought and with that Rosa jumped in, "Then you would need dark magic." But then confusion set in, "Then it can't be done, I mean dark magic is dead now right? That is what you told us."

Alex nodded in agreement, "Sure but I think

you took my words a bit too literal there."

Suddenly Rosamia was very worried, "What do you mean? Are you saying that there are some that could still cast dark magic?"

Alexandria quickly shook her head, "No... Well I don't think so, not how you mean anyways."

Because everyone seems to be getting a bit overly concerned by her words she decided to take another approach. "Okay let's flip the tables. The lord of light is dead and his power is gone and because of that there are no more priests that can use holy magic." She then pointed at Rosa, Iris and also at Adam, "But then you have you two... ah, well three I guess..." She then let it sink in for everyone but there still seemed to be some confusion.

"Okay sure but are we not different because his life essence merged into ours in a way?"

Again Alex nodded at Rosa's comment, "Sure we still have some level of power because of how affected we were, but turn that around and think of how affected all those Dark Clerics have been."

Now Adam was worried, "Does this mean that we should be hunting down Dark Clerics again?"

"No, well we could because they are still probably crazed if you ask me but the way their powers work is that they channel from the source and they can't do that as that way is gone now. That said if you magically inspected them you would still see a residue of dark magic."

Iris then understood what Alex was trying to explain. "The same thing can be said about arcane magic right? If I somehow create a golem with my magic and give him an order then he will perform the order without me having to keep feeding him more of my magic. And if someone checked they would see that he had been created or modified using arcane magic."

Alexandria snapped her fingers, "You got it. Essentially while the source of dark and light magic is gone their effects are still present. Creating anything new should be impossible but everything that has been already created will stay around. The spell that was created was destroyed but magic itself did not disappear or go away in a way."

Adam scratched his head. "If that is the case then how can we still cast light magic if creating anything new is impossible as you said?"

She then gave him a light shrugged, "That I'm not sure, my theory is that you are not actually using light magic to power the spell but arcane. Remember it's all magic so there is no reason why one type cannot mimic another, the trick is how to mimic it and that could be very complicated depending on what you are trying to replicate. In your case I simply think that you subconsciously know what that trick is due to what happened to us and your own personal connection with the spells in question."

Finally understanding all the pieces Rosa still wondered on something, "Okay but if that is the case and you are planning on using dark magic to track those places where are you going to find the residue, I suppose you could call it, in order to do so? Should we do like Adam said and track down a Dark Cleric?"

Suddenly Iris smiled, "We could but that could take time and I think I know of another way that would be faster." She then pointed at herself, "Use me, I was affected by dark magic for years..."

She suddenly stopped as Alex had a somber look on her face, "I can't do that Iris, you see yes you were affected by it but unfortunately you were also cleansed by Rosa, repetitively. There should be nothing left."

Iris was discouraged but still did not want to give up, "We can still try right?"

Alex only had time to sigh before Mike proposed something, "While she was cleansed, I can assure you that I was not. I mean there was no time for it given what was going on."

Rosa was suddenly stunned, "Your right I did not have time... and now I simply can't..." They all looked at each other to wonder about the implication of that would be for a moment before he then got all their attention again. "It's alright, and let Anna and me worry about that. Still, Alexandria, could I not be used as Iris mentioned?"

Alex slowly nodded, "I think so."

Mike looked at Iris and then turned to Alexandria and then opened his arms wide, "Well tell me what to do and let's find out?"

Alexandria took out another glass like orb from one of her pockets. "You actually don't need to do much; just stand still and I'll do the rest."

She started to cast the spell and then focused on Mike's inner essence, after a while she frowned which worried Iris, "Do you need help?"

While still keeping her concentration Alex answered her question. "My problem is that for someone that cannot cast any magic you sure are a mess due to all the magical footprints that have been left on you...Don't worry I should be able to do this after all, I just need to be careful..." She then paused and then suddenly the orb turned black, "In order to get a pure sample only." She studied the orb for a little while, "Well that should do it. It's very weak but should allow us to find at least one matching source. From there I should be able to grab more and expand the range and amount of locations."

Iris was suddenly glad, "So the hard part is finding the first one and from there the rest should

follow?"

Alexandria simply nodded and smiled as well.

Anna then pointed at the orb, "I take it this will work like the last time and that a map will be needed?"

"Yep, once we leave here I can teleport us to a city and from there we should be able to find what I need in order to have something that will guide me to the first place. I figure that we should first look for something here as it will make things easier and also there has to be something that was left behind in this section of the world with this type of magic."

Rosamia and the others also had no doubts about that as well after having a clearer understanding of what was left behind. "I supposed we should grab some supplies as we will probably be doing a lot more traveling then what was originally planned." As they all agreed, Rosamia chuckled a bit, "I guess Catherine was right after all about our so called vacation." She then turned to the others, "I am assuming that it's now done and that we will be trying to find and explore all these places?"

Suddenly Iris was wide eyed and a bit ashamed with herself. "I'm sorry I got caught in the moment. With this news I would really appreciate if we could do this but will understand if you want to take a bit more time..."

Adam was already moving towards the entrance of the town as he waved her concerns away. "Oh please, you know full well that you don't have to ask. As for our so called vacation well it's not like any of us had any real thoughts how we wanted to spend it so don't feel bad about canceling it at all."

Rosa quickly nodded at Iris in order to confirm that she felt the same way and then joined up with

Adam.

Iris smiled and then looked once again at the grave stones of her parent, "I'll find them and then I'll make sure that they are not forgotten of left behind, once that is done I'll come back to visit you, in the mean time watch over us." She then reached out to Alexandria as they too followed Adam lead.

Mike simply looked at Anna, given what Adam has said they both could think of many things they could do in order to relax and unwind. Eventually Mike simply shrugged and shook his head coming to terms that the short lived vacation was officially over by the looks of it. Anna knew how he felt and gave him a half smile and then chuckled a bit, "Well we can't be too surprised that this happened can we?"

"I suppose not."

She gave him a kiss and then grabbed his hand and led him towards the others, "Even if it was not planned it seems that another adventure has started for us we can't just let it sit there can we?"

Mike was playfully skeptical, "You're not just simply thinking about all the new exotic places where this will bring us right?"

Anna had a mocking shook look on her face, "Ah, are you accusing me of something?" Mike simply laughed as he then saw a smile appear on her face and her green eyes shine even more.

"Well ready or not, let's see where this takes us."

