

The Sword, The Scepter, and The Traitor



By
Kaizar The Sneak

***This book is dedicated to
Danielle Juno (DJ)
The best friend anyone could ever have***

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Chapter 1: Alina's Journey

"Can you remind me again why we are doing this?" Lea asked Leo.

"Because Alina *insisted* on going on an *adventure*," Leo said, rolling his eyes, "Even though I have told her time and time again that there is nothing interesting in these woods except maybe ticks."

"But have you really explored these woods!?" I snapped at Leo.

"Sure, lots of times," Leo said, "What do you think I do with all my time?!"

"I thought you bullied kids at school," I told him.

"Leo doesn't bully kids," Lea defended her brother.

"Then how come he has no friends, not even a girlfriend!" I smirked.

"I just...I just don't make friends," Leo mumbled.

"Because you're a jerk. Your whole family is so boring," I told them, "If it wasn't for me, you probably would just watch TV all summer long!"

"It wasn't *my* idea to have our cousin come over here for the summer!" Leo snapped back, "That was your parents' idea."

I was thinking of something to say in return, but before I could, I spotted something through the thick foliage of the forest.

"Hey! Is that a...a house over there?" I said, trotting over to my left.

"There are *no* houses in this forest," Leo laughed, "You're going loony!"

"My eyes *never* lie," I retorted.

"Hey! There is a house there!" Lea said, following me, "Look Leo!"

Leo reluctantly trailed behind us as I made my way to the abandoned house. It was at least thirty years old and in complete disrepair. The roof was so sunk in that it looked like it could be a nice swimming pool during the rainy months.

"But...but," Leo began, "How can this be?! I've been through these woods a bazillion times, and I've never seen this!"

"Maybe you're blind?" I suggested, walking over to the front door.

"Very funny," Leo sighed.

"I'm going inside!" I announced, pulling open the rusty door.

"You will do no such thing!" Leo yelled after me, "Mom left me in charge, and if anything was to collapse on you, I'd get the blame!"

"I'd like to see you get the blame!" I snapped, closing the door behind me for effect.

Chapter 2: Leo's Adventure

"Alina!" I yelled at her as she walked into the abandoned shack. The off-balance door then slammed shut behind her.

"Ugh! Obeying orders is *not* her forte!" I grunted.

"Maybe we should just give her some grace," Lea said timidly from next to me.

"Psssh, her parents and ours put me in charge, and as of such, I need to make sure you all are safe. I'm going in after her," I replied, striding to the door and throwing it open.

"You coming?" I asked Lea.

"Uh, um, I'm not sure that I want to..." Lea trailed off.

"Scaredy-cat," I mumbled, "Stay RIGHT there."

With that, I marched through the doorway and carefully closed the door behind me - not wanting to bring the roof down on my head.

What I saw astonished me greatly. I had expected a rundown interior with some rotting boards and a whole lot of plant life weaving up through what was left of the floorboards. Instead, I found a well-cared for stone room, with a myriad of weapons, shields, and suits of armor lining the walls and piled on the floor. I quickly spun around and saw that the back of the door that I had just closed behind me was constructed of heavy wood and metal. As much as I hated to admit it, Alina had apparently been right - I had not explored these woods well enough if this entire house was in here!

With all this epic, medieval armor and weapons around, my first thought was what to sample, and, of course, the weapons were my first choice. After accidentally pricking my thumb on a mace, I slowed down and carefully unpacked each weapon from the boxes on the floor. My favorite turned out to be an ornate sword with a lion head carefully sculpted at the bottom of the broadsword's hilt. Even the blade looked brand new and extremely sharp.

"Ha, hah!" I declared, "Feel the might of the almighty Leo!"

I jumped up into the air and brought the sword down on an imaginary enemy.

"Lea!" I said, opening the door again, "Check out what I found!"

Unfortunately, Lea was not outside anymore. Instead, there was a full-blown medieval battle going on. Arrows flew through the sky, and knights, with white fabric draped over their armor and a red eagle emblazoned on that fabric, epicly battled similar knights in black armor with a picture of some similar type of bird on theirs. In addition, I noticed several grotesque creatures and a few elven-like humans running around.

"ZWONG!" an arrow zipped right over my head and embedded in the heavy wooden door just an inch above my unkept, brown hair - jolting me from my shock and eliciting a gut reaction from me - to slam the door shut again.

"What was going on? Where was I? What happened to my friends?!" I couldn't seem to wrap my mind around the fact that I was in a whole different world, but I knew I had to be. This was way too elaborate to be a joke of any kind. Plus, they would have had to demolish all the forest outside which would have been impossible. Then again, the fact that I *was* in a whole new dimension was a bit far-fetched...ok... insanely far-fetched! Of course, I worried a bit about Alina

and Lea, but before I could make any decisions on what to do next, the door on the other side of the room was flung open and an old lady careened into the room – slamming that door shut behind her. My eyes got just that much wider.

“Who-who are you?” I asked, my mouth going dry.

“Don’t be stupid,” she said in a cracked voice. The old lady turned directly towards me, giving me a good look at her face. If I had been scared before, I certainly was now. She was a hag – or at least what I thought a hag would look like.

“White or dark knight?” the hag demanded of me.

Before I could answer, there was a significant commotion outside and a mace smashed a huge hole through the hag’s door. Without a second thought, she started waving her stick and mumbling an incantation. Not wanting to look totally idiotic, I raced for the nearest suit of armor and attempted to put it on while the door was ripped to shreds as whoever was on the outside attempted to force their way in. It took a while since I found out that armor consists of more than just one shirt or pants. Just as I shoved a massive, heavy helmet onto my head, the hag threw open what was left of the door and launched a barrage of lightning bolts from her staff into the hall outside. Just about as quickly, an arrow plugged right into the hag’s side. There was a hair-raising scream from her, and she keeled over. I would have expected blood to go everywhere, but instead, she just disappeared – leaving a pile of clothes, a bag, and her staff behind. I stifled a yell and retreated backwards into the room; even though there wasn’t much farther back I could go. At this point, there was some more pounding of feet and a black knight and white knight immediately appeared in the doorway – battling it out.

“Clang!” “Berang!” “BAAAAM!”

The black knight finally got the better of the white one and stabbed him in the stomach, causing his prompt disappearance.

“Who are you?” a gruff voice from inside the helmet of the black knight spoke to me as he spotted me not more than a minute later.

“I’m...I’m a soldier?” I stammered.

“No you’re not!” the black knight barked, jumping across the room and grabbing me by my helmet. He dragged me to his face and flipped open my visor, staring at me.

“Oh no!” he shouted, “You’re one of those deliverers!”

“A what?!” I yelped.

“I’m gonna kill you!” he screamed, drawing a dagger from his belt and plunging it at me.

As fast as I could, I brought my sword out in front of me to block where I thought the dagger would slice at me. Under normal circumstances, I would have been dead meat, but as luck would have it (or perhaps divine intervention), the black knight did something uncharacteristic of those trying to stab you; he sliced at me with it, instead of thrusting it. Thus, my weak sword block did the trick. Unfortunately, the black knight was many times stronger than I, and he swiftly pressed my sword against my chest with his dagger. Mustering all my strength, I gripped my sword harder and tried to press back, if only to get the dark knight’s foul breath away from me. Something strange happened then, though. My sword glowed blue, faintly at first, but the harder I gripped my sword, the stronger the glow got. It didn’t take long for the knight to notice this, and he jumped back in alarm.

“What are you doing?!” he exclaimed.

“How should I know?!” I said, before I thought better of it. However, as soon as he had let go of me, I steadied myself and relaxed my grip on my sword. Instantaneously, a blue arc of energy flew off my sword and collided with the dark knight. There was a small explosion; followed by some charred armor floating and clanging to the ground where the knight had been standing only a second ago..

“Oh...my...goodness,” I thought to myself, “I have powers here!”

I grinned what I imagined was a slightly evil grin and gripped my sword tightly again. As I expected, my sword glowed blue. I squeezed the sword even tighter, then bent backward and thrust the sword forward with all my might, letting my grip relax at the same time. Instantly, a powerful orb of energy blasted out of my sword – it’s back-kick forcing me backward into the wall. The energy hit the wall opposite me and exploded - immediately filling the air with more smoke and ashes.

Coughing and stumbling about, I made my way into the current building’s hallway. By the time the smoke cleared enough to see, it was apparent that I had successfully blasted a hole through the stone wall - completely revealing the battlefield outside. Although it was cool that I had done that, I had now made myself an easy target, so I raced like mad down the hallway – trying to get away from the battlefield. Despite my new-found powers, I wasn’t going to risk hand-to-hand combat with seasoned warriors. At the end of the deserted hallway, I found a spiral staircase that led into the ground – a basement of sorts I assumed. Without a second thought, I quickly descended the flight of stairs, and at the bottom, I found a small dungeon with many cells. Right in front and guarding all the cells was another black knight resting his feet on a small stool.

When I came to a halt in front of him, he sprang to his feet.

“Who are you?!” he demanded of me gruffly.

“Uh, I’m Leonard?” I said.

“What divination is this?!” the knight roared, “You’re no ally!”

He sprang at me with a spear that he had been carrying, but I yanked up my sword to block the blow, swiftly realizing that my sword was half as long as it had been five minutes ago.

Apparently, the tip of it had been blown off – my “power” had been too much for the sword to handle.

The soldier stopped in mid stride and stared at my sword, “What happened to your weapon?”

“Uh, I think I blasted the tip off,” I told him.

“Wait, how?” he said.

I squeezed the handle of my sword and said, “Like this!”

I then aimed it at the knight and relaxed my grip. There was a much smaller explosion this time, but it was still sufficient to do the job.

“Heheheh,” I said to myself, confidence starting to return to me.

“It’s Leo time!” I said, raising my sword into the air. Only, there was nothing left of my sword by this time – just the handle that I was holding.

“Rats,” I mumbled, dropping the handle on the ground. Knowing that it was just a matter of time before someone found me down here, I decided to search for another weapon and see if there were any prisoners that I could release - assuming that they would help me escape in return.

Luckily, there was another sword in a nearby wooden box as well as an old fashioned key ring,

but the latter didn't look half as cool as my previous sword and the former was of a type that I had only seen in those medieval movies.

With my sword and keys in hand, I walked through the "dungeon," looking to my right and left for any cells with someone actually in them. For being a dungeon, it was surprisingly empty. I had expected lots of skeletons strapped to the wall in chains and rotting corpses – but there were none of those.

I was just considering heading back upstairs when I reached the end of the dungeon and finally noticed a locked cell. Inside, there was a human wearing some simple chains around the wrists and ankles and with a heavy sack tied over the head.

There was no movement from the figure, but I unlocked the cell (after a bit of trouble figuring out how the old fashioned lock mechanism worked) and cautiously moved inside. The prisoner still made no movement, but I quickly discovered that it was a female elf. The green, almost earthy clothing had me convinced fairly quickly, but she was pretty badly banged up judging by the mud and dirt stains on her outfit as well as the scrapes and bruises visible on her arms.

Rather timidly, I untied the rope and removed the sack off the elf's head and said, "Hey."

The elf blinked and raised her head, looking up at me.

"Who are *you*?" she asked, "I said I won't tell you anything!"

"I'm not a captor," I informed her, fumbling with the locks on her chains, "I'm here to let you go... I think?"

I still wasn't sure who the "bad guys" and "good guys" of this world were, but the black knights seemed to have serious issues - especially considering they had already tried to kill me twice. I flipped open my visor and said, "See! I'm not bad."

The elf stared at me for a minute; then, just as I unlocked the last of her binds, she gasped, "You're a deliverer!"

"A what?" I asked for the second time, "What *is* a deliverer?"

"You don't know?!" she said to me, "You are one of the three people destined to deliver our kingdoms!"

"Uh.... I just got here, and I don't think I belong here," I replied honestly, "I don't even know how to sword fight!"

"Hahaha," she giggled, "That's funny! I'm Ember!"

"I'm, Leon-," I started to say, but before I could finish, Ember grabbed the chains that I had just removed from her wrists and slung them at me. Instinctively, I blocked with my sword, but that movement caught me off balance, and she slammed me hard in the stomach with her fists. For being a girl and me wearing armor, she was insanely strong, and I sagged to the ground.

"Ooooh!" I groaned.

"Oh! I'm so sorry!" she said, bending down to help me back up, "You weren't kidding! You can't fight to save your life, and I'm in bad condition too!"

"Tell me about it!" I moaned, clutching my stomach, "I'm from a whole different world where sword-fighting is rarer than a Dodo bird!"

"A what?!"

"Nevermind."

"I'm not sure why the prophecy would send us an incompetent hero, but your golden eye color does not lie. You must be one," she said confidently.

"I have golden colored eyes?" I gasped.

"Look in your sword's reflection," she told me.

I did and was astounded, "My eyes have changed colors!"

Ember stood up, "Thanks for the assistance, though. You certainly are a deliverer – born to free the enslaved and bring freedom to the heavy-hearted."

I nodded politely, "Now, can you tell me what's going on?!"

Chapter 3: Lea's Path

When Leo disappeared into the abandoned house, I got very nervous. As scary as it was to go into the house, it was even worse to be left alone outside in a place with tall bushes and trees and scary wildlife. I gave a little whimper and raced for the door, yanking hard on the handle and scrambling inside. I was glad to get around Leo and Alina – they were always so much braver than I! Inside, I found a beautifully decorated hallway with golden chandeliers, red carpet, and ornate, wooden doors spaced periodically throughout the hallway.

“Woah!” I gasped, taking it all in with wide eyes, “This is so beautiful. I never would have guessed it was so fabulously decorated and spacious inside of here!”

I slowly wandered down the hallway, looking for Leo or Alina. It was while I was rounding a corner in the hallway that one of the doors in front of me and bordering the hallway opened, and a girl about my age emerged.

“Oh thank goodness you have come!” she said to me sweetly, “I didn’t think that mother was going to get me a handmaid, but that’s so nice of her!”

“Uh,” I said, turning around, “I don’t think I’m your handmaid.”

I was confused about why there were other people in this abandoned house. It was abandoned after all.

The girl laughed and said, “Don’t be silly. Our handmaids are always playing tricks on us. Just look at your clothes, who would be so crazy as to wear something like that?! C’mon inside, and you can help me do my hair! It is ever so difficult to do it by myself.”

As there was no sign of Leo or Alina, and this girl seemed so nice, I decided to at least help her with her hair. After all, maybe she could explain about this house!

The girl’s room was even more beautiful than the hallway. There was an ornate desk, a massive bed complete with curtains, several sizable throw pillows, and a variety of other, medieval-like furniture.

“I had no idea that there was so much stuff inside this house!” I told the girl.

“Hahaha, I think of it more like a castle,” the girl told me, sitting down in front of a large mirror.

“Castle?” I exclaimed, “Wait, what town are we in?”

“Gravendale of course!” the girl said, “And I’m Yrited by the way!”

“Oh no,” I said, the gravity of the situation dawning upon me, “You aren’t joking are you?”

“Oh, of course not,” Yrited said, “I’m the princess after all. I wouldn’t lie!”

“Here, can you just pile my hair up like this?” Yrited said, continuing on like everything was perfectly normal.

Somehow, I had gotten myself into a weird dream or alternate dimension. That was the only “reasonable” explanation for how there was so much real estate in the abandoned house and how Yrited looked like she was from the medieval ages (an elaborate prank can’t make more space appear out of nowhere). Now, I needed to figure out how to get out of here! However, I knew that denying the princess help could potentially be a bad move, so I just played along as best I could. After helping her do her hair in a very old fashioned way for which I was infinitely grateful for all the hair-style books I had read, she showed me to her hand-maiden’s room where she helped me to dress in more culturally-acceptable clothes. What was definitely frustrating to

me was that the handmaiden room was the room behind the exact same door that I had entered through when I originally came here. Now, I had no clue how to get back to my home.

"Thanks so much for helping me get ready!" Yrited said to me as I finished getting dressed in a beautiful dress, "You're very quiet for a handmaid, but I like you! We'll get along fine."

I smiled politely.

"Alright, let's go to the throne room now to meet the new diplomats!" Yrited said to me, "You lead the way!"

"Uh..." I replied nervously, "I uh, need to tell you something."

"What is it, dear?" Yrited answered.

"I, uh, I'm not your handmaid, and I don't know what this place is," I told her.

Yrited looked at me carefully; then gasped.

"Of course you don't!" Yrited said in amazement, "You...you...you're a deliverer! The gods have listened to us!"

"Uh..." I said, "Deliverer? gods?"

"You don't know about the prophecy of the deliverer?"

"Uh, no... should I?"

"Oh my...oh dear," Yrited remarked, "What do you know?"

"Well, uh, I was in my world in a forest, and then I entered this abandoned house and found myself here not more than one minute before you found me," I told her, "From where I come from, this time and age is long gone."

"That would explain your lack of manners for a handmaid," Yrited responded, "No offense though."

"None taken," I replied quickly, "but, uh, how did you know that I am a 'deliverer.'"

"Your eyes are golden," she told me, "Look in that mirror."

I transferred my gaze to a massive, full-body mirror that was hanging on the wall nearby. Sure enough, my eyes had changed colors from brown to golden.

"Woah," I stammered.

"I have got to take you to father right away!" Yrited told me, "Follow me!"

Yrited ran out of the room and down the hall surprisingly fast for wearing a massive dress while I nearly tripped on mine a dozen times. By the time I caught up with her, we were rushing past a huge, indoor garden.

"Dad's throne room is right in there," Yrited said, pointing to two massive, double doors across the garden from us, "But I just remembered that there are a bunch of new diplomats here. We'll have to wait to tell him until he is actually available."

"That's okay," I told her, "So were you dressing up to meet all these diplomats?"

"I was actually," Yrited responded, "They should all be in the throne room since Dad had it transformed into a banquet area for today. Just do as I'll do, and you'll figure it out. You're smart."

With that Yrited walked elegantly to the double doors and threw them open. Inside, were many dozen soldiers as well as several ornately dressed men, a few women in fancy dresses, and several other miscellaneous officers and officials. Almost all of them looked up as we entered.

"Yrited!" a deep voice boomed from across the room, "So wonderful of you to have joined us. And who is your wonderful hand maid?"

Oh no, I thought, I hadn't told Yrited my name!

"She is here to escort me tonight," Yrited told her father, "She is amazing at doing hair!"

The king nodded his head; then continued his discussion with one of the men nearby. Yrited and I made our way over to a small table to the left where a bunch of the diplomats' wives were relaxing and sat down with them..

"You look wonderful tonight, princess Yrited," one of the ladies commented.

"Thank you Retoraa," Yrited replied politely, "so do you."

"How is life here at the palace now that your older brother has left?" another asked Yrited.

"Just find, thank you," Yrited responded, "If only a bit boring."

"By the way," Retoraa commented while munching on a piece of bread, "This bread is quite delicious!"

"Our cooks are the best I have ever seen," Yrited added, "Their dishes are always fabulous!"

Timidly I reached out in front of me and sipped a generous portion from the ornate cup at my place. Not surprisingly, it was quite good.

"This drink is quite nice too!" I commented, trying not to be too quiet.

"Agreed!" another of the ladies spoke out, "This wine is very fresh. We need this in my town!"

At the word "wine," my eyes got wide, and I nearly choked the drink back up.

"That reminds me of when I was on a journey with my husband and all of our drinks dried up on one particularly hot week..." Retoraa began, commandeering all conversations.

"What's wrong?" Yrited whispered to me, leaning over, "Is the wine not actually good?"

"Oh no," I whispered back, "It's just that I'm a minor."

"A what?" Yrited responded.

"Oh, uh, nevermind," I said, "It's quite nice."

"Well, if you don't like it, there's a cup of raspberry juice over here," Yrited told me, moving a nearby tin cup closer to me.

"Thank you," I responded a little louder than I would have liked.

It was while I was glugging down the juice to get the taste of wine out of my mouth that a messenger burst into our room, a look of pure terror on his face.

"The dark knights are ambushing the palace! They have already breached the front gates and taken over the dungeon and surrounding rooms. We must leave immediately!" he announced to everyone in the room.

In alarm and panic, the entire room got up and raced for a pair of doors at the back of the room.

"Protect the king, queen, and princess!" one of the officers yelled over the pandemonium.

Immediately, three soldiers converged on Yrited and escorted her quickly through the back doors and into a hallway. Since I had no idea where to go, I tried my best to follow.

"Who are the dark knights?" I asked Yrited as we raced as fast as possible down the hallway and took several confusing turns.

"Our sworn enemies besides the trolls and wizards," she replied, "They are always after my parents' kingdom."

Still confused, I nodded my head.

"Where are Dad and Mom?" Yrited asked the soldiers.

"They are taking an alternate way to the underground tunnel," one of them responded, "We are taking a third route so that there is a maximum chance that at least one of you will make it out alive."

"Are we in a lot of trouble?" I asked, quietly.

"A little," Yrited told me, looking far more worried than "a little" would normally call for.

We rounded another corner that led down a small flight of stairs which ended at a door that the soldiers threw open and we raced through. Unfortunately, on the other side was a whole pack of Dark knights. It wasn't too hard to tell who they were, because as opposed to our soldiers who were almost all white, yellow, and silver; these were almost entirely clad in black.

"Halt!" the dark knights yelled at us.

Our soldiers produced their swords and shields and moved in front – protecting us.

"What should we do?" I asked Yrited in fear.

"Do you have some sort of power?" Yrited asked me, "You are a deliverer after all!"

"I don't know!" I screamed, "I just got here!"

"Here hold this!" Yrited said to me as the soldiers in front of us clashed with the dark knights,

"Now squeeze it!"

Yrited tossed me a small dagger. I squeezed it, but nothing interesting happened.

"Just as I feared," Yrited said, dejectedly, "Of the three deliverers, there will be the fighter, leader, and traitor."

"Traitor!" I exclaimed in horror.

"Yes, one of the deliverers will be a traitor," Yrited replied sadly.

"I hope that won't be me!" I said.

"The fighter will have special sword abilities, but that doesn't appear to be you," Yrited replied.

In front of us, one of the white knights was stabbed by a dark knight, and, instead of collapsing to the floor, he just disappeared. The shock of seeing someone die scared me, and I screamed again.

"Let's run back this way!" Yrited said.

We turned around and ran pell-mell back the way we came. I wasn't sure where in the world we were heading, but Yrited seemed to know, so I just followed her. We raced around a right turn and emerged back to the main garden courtyard. Unfortunately, it was crawling with dark knights by this point. Before I knew what was happening, I was yanked off the ground by someone behind me. I screamed and kicked but was struck hard in the head.

"It's the princess!" a gruff voice from behind me said, while I smelled the putrid stench of rotting food emanating from his mouth.

Hearing this, a dark knight, with a red plume coming out of his helmet, strode over to the pack of dark knights surrounding and restraining us. The leader looked at us briefly; then said, "Take them to Ograd outside."

The soldiers nodded; then the one holding me grasped Yrited firmly in his left hand and dragged us both down yet another hallway. I screamed, kicked, and resisted, but the soldier smacked Yrited and I's heads together. This time, I saw stars. After marching down flights of stairs, our captor turned down another hallway with golden chandeliers, which I quickly recognized. It was the one where I had first appeared only a few hours earlier. With a sudden, disturbing yell,

Yrited turned on our captor, whipped out her dagger and stabbed him in the back. The soldier screamed in pain; then dropped to the ground and disappeared in a pile of armor and weapons. "They just disappear when they die?!" I exclaimed.

"Yeah, psssh, they always do," Yrited answered – as if that was all too common, "Hurry, there's a hiding place in my room."

Yrited and I raced over to her room and entered. Then, while Yrited locked her door from the inside, she told me to roll up the mat under her bed and climb into the space underneath the trap door.

"Get inside, quick!" Yrited told me, "I'll follow."

Despite hating close spaces, I was so scared that I immediately obeyed. Unfortunately, there wasn't a lot of room under the trap door – literally just enough for Yrited and I.

"Now what do we do?" I asked anxiously when Yrited had climbed in after me.

"We wait, there isn't anything else that can be done," Yrited said quietly.

There was silence for a minute or two; then I said, "Uh, well, can you tell me what is going on?" Yrited explained that for as long as anyone can remember, the dark knights and their allies, the various beasts and wizards and witches, had been at war with the white knights and their allies, the elves and dwarves. However, for just as long there had been a prophecy that one day, three deliverers would come who would free both sides from each other and restore peace. As far as Yrited knew, both sides were looking forward to that day. The prophecy also stated that there would be a scepter (thought to be a great leader), a fighter (thought to be a great swordsman), and a traitor.

"Who am I?" I asked Yrited.

"If I had to guess," Yrited whispered back, "I'd think you're the scepter. I'd bet it's not a coincidence that you appeared to us royalty."

"Does your father lead all the white knights?"

"No, my parents just rules over this certain section of the white knights. The real king of all white knights is unknown, but we receive simple instructions or insights from his carriers every now and then," Yrited informed me.

Just then, there was a banging on the door of Yrited's room, followed by the splintering of wood. Then, I heard the pounding of heavy boots as several soldiers rushed into the room. Yrited motioned to me to be quiet, but I was already doing that.

"They're not in here," a gruff voice said.

"They've got to be *somewhere*," another voice spoke out, "That princess and her friend couldn't have gotten far!"

"For being small girls, they're more skilled than we thought," a third voice announced, almost right near the bed now.

"They couldn't possibly have made it outside of the castle now that the elves have arrived, and it's lethal warfare out there," the first voice reasoned, "They would have been killed instantly."

"How many secret rooms are in this crazy castle?" the second asked.

"Who knows."

"ARGH!" the third voice roared, "Let's search a few of the others and then move on. We don't have time for this."

We waited for about five minutes after the voices had drifted off into the distance; then Yrited convinced me that we should leave.

"Let's leave now while there still is a bit of craziness to disguise our escape!" Yrited whispered. We hurriedly scrambled out from our hiding place and leapt for the door. However, no sooner had we reached the door, than two dark knights jumped out from the hallway and knocked us to the floor.

"Hah! Your plan worked perfectly!" one of the knights said to the other, "General wasn't patient enough!"

"He said to kill them, so let's take them down to the dungeon and slaughter them there!" the other replied.

"Please don't!" Yrited said, "My friend here is a simple handmaiden, not a princess. Let her go!"

"I'll think about it," the knight said, "Hmmm. Nope."

The two knights dragged us down the hallway and towards where I presumed the dungeon was.

"Let me GOOO!" I cried out, twisting and turning to get out of the knight's grasp, but this time Yrited's hands were firmly grasped by the other soldier, and she was not able to reach her dagger hidden in her dress. Thus, Yrited was also uncharacteristically silent as our doom approached.

"You don't think that I can die in this alternate realm. Do you?" I asked her.

"How should I know?" Yrited said, "You're the deliverer."

"The what?" one of the knights said, lifting me to my feet and staring me in the eyes. His face got so close that it became really awkward.

"She *is* a deliverer," the knight said to his buddy, "We need to tell the boss right away."

"Could it be the traitor?" the other said.

"Hard to know. We can't exactly ask her."

"Krrrack!" "BOOOOM"

Down the hallway and to the right, we all heard a large explosion and the sound of warfare.

"What in the world?" the dark knight holding me exclaimed, "I thought we got everyone in the castle! How is there still fighting going on!?"

"No clue, but I'll find out! You guard these two," the knight holding Yrited said, dropping her on the floor and running down the hallway. He had only gone a few steps when an elf emerged around the corner. It was so stereotypically an elf, and she swiftly produced a bow - nailing the dark knight before he could even draw his sword. However, the dark knight standing over me pulled the crossbow from his back and fired at her. As if on cue, someone jumped out from behind the elf and reflected the arrow with his shield. It was a white knight. The white knight then wielded his sword and launched a blue orb of energy at our captor who was already rushing towards his enemy. Despite using his own shield, the blue orb obliterated the dark knight and knocked Yrited and I backwards by a good few feet too. I was so horrified and shocked by the pure power that the white knight had that I didn't even bother to run away, mostly because it wouldn't have done any good.

"Are you okay girls?" the elf asked us, running up.

"I think so," Yrited groaned, sitting back up, "We need to get out of here though!"

"Lea?"

The voice came from the powerful knight, and I knew whose voice *that* was.

“Leo?!” I exclaimed, standing up quickly.

The knight flipped up his visor, and I could immediately see that it was, in fact, Leo.

“How in the world?!” I exclaimed.

“I didn’t know that you were trapped in this world too!” Leo exclaimed.

I was so happy that I ran forward and hugged him tight. Normally, Leo would have pushed me away and called me sappy, but this time he gave me a gentle hug back.

“I’m so glad you are okay!” He told me.

“I’m a deliverer!” I told Leo.

“Me too!” Leo told me, “I’m the ‘fighter.’”

“And I’m the scepter!” I told Leo.

“This is crazy!” Yrited said, “Both of our deliverers have arrived!”

“Who are you?” I asked the elf girl.

“I’m Ember,” she said, “And you are Leo’s sister I presume?”

“Yes!” I asserted.

“Sorry to interrupt the reunion, but we really need to get out of here!” Yrited told us all, “I think that we may be able to use our secret tunnels still; assuming that they haven’t been compromised already.”

“Let’s go!” Ember shouted to us, “Hurry! I can already hear more soldiers coming!”

Leo nodded at me, “I’ll follow behind your girls.”

It was while I was running after Yrited, still trying to not trip on my dress, that a very scary thought occurred to me.

“Leo,” I said to him, “If you and I both came in here via the abandoned house, and we both are deliverers. Then..., what do you think happened to Alina?”

“Most likely she’s somewhere in this realm too,” Leo thought out loud, “I wonder where she is?”

“But if you are the swordsman, and I am the scepter,” I said to Leo, “Then what does that make Alina.”

“Oh,” Leo said, finally putting the pieces together.

“Alina is the traitor!” we exclaimed.

Chapter 4: Leo's Flight

Yrited led us down a series of passageways to a dead end, except that when she pulled a lever under a bench nearby, a secret passageway opened up.

"In here!" she whispered to us.

When we had all gotten down on our hands and knees and crawled in, Yrited pulled another lever in the tunnel and the passageway door closed behind us. Luckily, the tunnel creators had been smart enough to put in some torches in the small tunnel, and Ember quickly lit the closest one using some rocks she had in a bag.

"Man, it's cramped in here," I commented.

"It wasn't exactly meant to be used," Yrited admitted, "It was more of an afterthought."

"How could you be taken by surprise?" I asked.

"I don't know," Yrited responded as we crawled down the damp tunnel, "We have several checkpoints, walls, and guards."

"Somehow they broke through your system," Lea added.

"I think I can explain that!" Ember told us all from the front, "We elves were tracking this army of dark knights for quite some time when we realized that they were headed here. Unfortunately, most of them were riding horses and griffins, which meant they quickly approached sentry towers and overwhelmed them. They were traveling too fast for us to warn you. I mean, I tried, but that meant I got separated from my comrades, and that's how I got caught anyway."

"Still, our knights should have seen them coming from quite a distance!" Yrited muttered.

"Is it a coincidence that the attack was during the meeting with all those diplomats?" Lea asked.

"Maybe," Yrited thought out loud.

"I think we're at the end of the tunnel now!" Ember told us, as she held the torch as far above her head as she could in order to illuminate the dirt wall in front of us. We all naturally looked above us to a trap door.

"Anyone want to do the honors?" Yrited asked us, "I don't know how far into the woods this tunnel has led us, and I also don't know where all the dark knights are."

"I will!" Ember said, leaping up to unlock the door.

She popped her head up for a minute, then bent back down and gave the "all-clear."

I was the last person to leave the secret tunnel, but when I emerged from the tunnel, I found myself, sure enough, in a forest, but I quickly saw that not more than a few hundred yards away was the clearing around the castle. On top of the trap door was a lot of moss and dirt that had either been planted purposely as a disguise or was the result of the tunnel not being used. My money was on the former. Although I saw many dark knights and their hideous allies swarming about, no one appeared to be looking in our direction, so I quickly shut the trap door and turned to follow after the others who were already attempting to run off into the forest.

"Hey you! Get over here!" a scratchy voice called out.

I whipped around to see a small assortment of dark knights struggling to control a black horse who was bucking and kicking with a deadly ferocity. Not wanting to give away my voice or my friends and not seeing any other options, I jogged over to meet the other dark knights.

“SNORT!” the horse crouched low and then sprang into the air – launching his captors in a myriad of directions. With nostrils puffing out steam, it looked around for another victim. Of course, it found me just standing right there, and, as fate would have it, it immediately charged. Instinctively, I leapt out of the way. The horse flashed by me; then came to a quick halt not more than a scarce two yards from where I was on the ground and whipped back around for another go. That’s when I noticed that it wasn’t just a black horse, it was a black unicorn. Scared to death by the sharp horn aimed right at me, I frantically scrambled backwards.

“He’s toast,” I heard one of the other black knights say from somewhere behind me.

However, the unicorn approached me slowly, sniffing my armor as I, still on my back, tried to crawl backwards.

“What in the world?!” one of the dark knights sang out, “He’s still alive!”

“Pat it on the side of its head!” another called out.

I slowly reached my hand out and touched the side of the unicorn’s head, while the unicorn bared its teeth. However, as I touched its head, there was a fizzle of energy from my hand to his head.

“Neigghhhh!” it said, standing to attention in front of me. Ever so carefully, I stood up - keeping a very wary eye on it.

“He did it!” one of the dark knights said, amazed.

“How?!” another pondered, coming over to me. Quickly, the unicorn plunged his horn into the dark knight, and the knight disappeared on the spot.

“STAY AWAY!” the others yelled, swiftly backing off.

“It’s okay, boy?” I said to the unicorn, “No need to get violent.”

“He’s not a dark knight!” one of the dark knights yelled to his comrades, “His voice!”

They quickly turned on me and attacked, but I easily destroyed them with a swing of my sword’s energy. The unicorn then turned to me and crouched down. I understood immediately the need to get out of here, so I jumped onto its back and held onto its mane for dear life. Unfortunately, I had never ridden a horse before in my life, let alone bareback, and I promptly fell off and rolled a good few yards – bumping right into a dark knight leader.

I sprang to my feet as fast as I could (considering the weight of the armor) and wielded my sword.

“Wait!” the leader said, “Don’t!”

I stopped as my sword glowed bright blue, and the unicorn steadied its horn.

“We don’t want to kill you. We want you on our side!” he said.

“You want what?!” I asked.

“You’re the swordsman deliverer, right?” he deduced, “We could use your help in defeating these awful white knights.”

“Why would you want that?” I said, “I’m not a traitor.”

“True, but if we can turn you, then we’ll completely demoralize our enemies!”

“What do I get if I help you?” I said, playing along. Obviously, I had no intention of working with them, but I figured that I could spy a little bit in the meantime – while understanding that I was playing a dangerous game.

“We’ll protect you from anyone that will want to hurt you, and we’ll introduce you to the other deliverer, the traitor!” he bartered.

"The traitor is here?!" I gasped, thinking of Alina.

"Well, not exactly *here*," he laughed, "But should be here soon!"

"Deal," I told him, "But you had better keep your promise *and* leave this unicorn alone. I'm starting to like him."

"Unicorns are the worst," the leader groaned, "We have another white one that we use, but they are so ornery, and they never listen to us. It's beyond me why we even use them in the first place. Plus, they have this weird attraction to power."

"Makes sense why he likes me then," I commented.

The leader looked me up and down and said, "Well, you're going to need different armor, and your sword is too weak for your power."

"Jorgen!" the leader called out to a dark knight standing nearby, "Get this kid a better suit of armor and one of the legendary swords."

Then, as an afterthought, the leader said, "Oh and find a saddle for the unicorn. This kid can't ride a horse to save his life."

I grimaced at the insult, but wisely said nothing. I could tell the unicorn did not like the dark knights, and it was only my hand on his head that kept him in line. Needless to say, I was still very lost and sort of running on whatever random idea happened into my head at the moment; mostly because everything was happening extraordinarily fast.

Jorgen led me over to a pen where the unicorn could get fitted with a saddle; then over to a large tent that had just been set up outside the castle.

"You're actually fairly tall," Jorgen told me, "So we're going to have to use a larger size of armor, but probably the lighter variety since you're a weakling."

"Hey!" I said.

Jorgen shrugged his shoulders, "Most of us are not one hundred percent human – we have some sort of creature mixed in with us. That's why any given dark knight is typically stronger than a white knight, but the white knights are more numerous and oftentimes more skilled."

"Why are you telling me all this?"

"Why not," he shrugged, "Being with this company kinda takes the life out of you. I just babble and fight at this point."

I made a mental note of that.

"Anyway, here's the armor," Jorgen announced, "Let's get you a color that isn't completely black, so it's easier for the guys to know who you are."

"But won't I want to be disguised so that enemies can't pick me out easier?"

"I mean, maybe, but you saw how the others treat dark knights that aren't dark knights, and plus, if you are fighting, your fighting style will give you away anyway," Jorgen countered, "better stick with something that immediately tells the others who you are."

It took a very long time to put the new armor on. First, I had to place on an itchy gray tunic, a heavy leather shirt, a full set of chainmail, and then thick pieces of metal that were tied together via leather straps at my side. Then, Jorgen hand picked out a large shield and light broadsword made out of ionimum carbonite apparently.

After putting all the armor on and practicing placing the sword and shield on the holder on my back, I felt like I weighed three hundred pounds. It was hard enough to just walk!

"How do you guys fight with this stuff!" I said through the helmet that Jorgen was shoving onto my head.

"Eh, you get used to it," Jorgen told me, "There, you look fine and the light gray armor makes you stand out."

"Wonderful," I said sarcastically.

"Now it's time for our afternoon meal," Jorgen announced.

I followed him outside and to a large bonfire that had been started right in front of the now fully conquered castle. Around the bonfire were several factions of fighters; I noticed a collection of witches/wizards, some trolls, a few minotaurs, and, the large majority, of dark knights.

"Our general, not Ograd, wants you to sit by him," Jorgen told me.

As we approached, Jorgen bowed to a particularly imposing man standing amid many of the dark knight leaders. He appeared to be the one running the invasion, but, as opposed to the other dark knights, he appeared way more human-like and only wore a simple leader strap around his bare chest, and an armored pair of pants lined with daggers. On his back hung the biggest axe that I had ever seen.

"This is the swordsman deliverer, sire," Jorgen said, bowing low to the ground.

"Very well," the general said, turning in our direction.

I attempted to bow as well, but my armor was so heavy that I just toppled over.

The general laughed loudly.

"Rise deliverer," he said, "You look like you're not used to armor."

"No sir," I said, "I'm totally out of my element."

"Show me your power," the general told me abruptly.

I couldn't really figure him out as he remained totally expressionless, but I turned around, aimed for a bare piece of land a few hundred yards away, and let fly a large saber of energy that caused a tsunami of flying debris.

"Huh," the general said, without missing a beat, "So you are the swordsman. Is that the extent of your power?"

"I don't know," I replied honestly, "That's all I have figured out!"

"Then you have much to learn," the general said, "We eat tonight, and I personally tutor you tomorrow."

"But sir!" I said in astonishment, "You personally teach me?!"

"The scepter is a more powerful force than any of us know," the general said very loudly to everyone nearby, "Even with the traitor and swordsman, we can still lose."

My mind eventually wandered back to Lea, and I couldn't imagine how in the world such a scared girl as my sister could be so powerful - let alone myself! I was always more of a nerd than a warrior.

I was just about to ask the general to explain how the scepter could be so powerful, when a slight commotion further away from us caused me to turn around. Even in the dim light of the evening, I could spot a squad of soldiers dragging someone towards us.

"LIGHT!" the general roared to the soldiers around him. Quickly, they lit a dozen or so torches and held them in the air. That's when I saw who the squad's prisoner was. It was Ember.

"Let me GO you thugs!" she screamed at them, "I'm not your prisoner!"

"Hey! That's the girl we captured spying on us just a few hours ago," one of the leaders told the general, "We put her in the White Knights' dungeon, but she must have escaped!"

"Has it not occurred to you," the general answered, "that the white knights are *friends* with the elves. Of course she would know how to escape from a dungeon of *their* design."

"My mistake," the leader cowered, quickly shutting up.

The squad dragged Ember, kicking and fighting up to the leader and dropped her at his feet.

Ember quickly stood up, but made no effort to run. Even she knew that wasn't possible.

"Who are you?" the leader said, still with no discernible expression on his face.

"Ember, daughter of Gretarious," she responded, "And we will bring you to justice!"

"Very well," he answered her, "But we won't go without a fight first!"

"Xee!" a minotaur addressed the general, "You should kill this impudent creature!"

"Has it *also* not occurred to you," the general spoke evenly, "that good very rarely loses? What makes you so sure that now will be any different?"

Everyone considered this for a moment; then shut up again.

"Toss her into the fire," Xee responded, "We have more important stuff to deal with."

Ember screamed and made a run for it but was instantly flattened by a nearby troll.

"Wait!" I shouted out loud.

"Yes?" Xee said, turning in my direction.

"Don't hurt her. She's my friend!" I said bravely.

"You're friends with *her*!" one of the other leaders said suspiciously, "Then you're no friends of us!"

At that same time, someone grabbed me from behind and pinned me to the ground before I could even react.

"Your story better be good!" that same leader said to me, coming up to me, "Because otherwise you're toast!"

"Why does it matter what his story is?" Xee spoke out loudly against the now night air.

"Why does it matter?!" the leader said, confused, "If he can give a good explanation of how they're friends, then we'll let him go?"

"No matter what he says, you won't believe him," Xee declared.

"But...but...but wait, what?" the leader said, getting nervous.

"You know," Xee stated, "No matter what kind of story this kid conjures up, your opinion on his 'guiltiness' won't change."

"I guess that's true?" the leader said slowly.

"And you're willing to cripple one of our only hopes of success to weed out a potential 'spy,'" Xee continued.

"Well, uh, I didn't consider that..." the leader said, backing off.

"It's fine. It's fine," Xee told the leader; then looked directly at me, "Let them go! We can turn them, or, if they don't, they know what *will* happen."

Immediately, the soldier behind me released me, and the troll released Ember. Ember glared at him and ran over to me.

"Now if there are no more interruptions or phony questions, we should eat. I'm starving," Xee said, sitting down on the muddy ground.

Chapter 5: Lea's Plight

When Leo left us because he was seen by the dark knights, the rest of us hurriedly ran off deeper into the forest.

"Are we going to wait for brother?" I asked the others after a few minutes.

"We don't have time to wait for him," Ember said, "You need to get to safety."

"But they'll find out who he is sooner or later!" I said to Ember.

"He's strong. He can take care of himself," Yrited responded.

"But where are we going?" I asked again, "How do we know we aren't running into another trap?"

"Do you normally ask these many questions?" Ember said, exasperated, "Be quiet so I can think!"

"So *you* can think!" Yrited said, "Precious help you are! I'm the one that knows these woods."

"Pssh, and I bet the next safe place you know of is like twenty miles away!" Ember shot back,

"Whereas I know some friends only about a mile away in this direction!"

"And how do we know that you aren't lying to us like your great fathers did of old!?" Yrited responded.

"Don't question me!" Ember exploded, "At least I'm not a stuck up princess like *you*!"

"Guys, uh," I began.

"SHUT UP!" Ember and Yrited cut me off.

"Fine!" Ember finally stated a few moments later, "If you think you're so smart, then you go get your own help – I'll go find Leo!"

With that, Ember turned around and ran back the way we had just come.

"Ember, wait!!!" I called after her, but Ember was already long gone – sprinting like a gazelle.

"Pssh, show-off," Yrited snorted, "Elves are such a pain. If they weren't allied with us, I'd show *them* a lesson or two."

"But now what are we going to do," I whined, "She was our only hope of getting out of here!"

"You too?!" Yrited said, "You think I'm incompetent too!"

"I don't know!" I burst into tears, "I don't know about any of this. It wasn't my idea to come here, and I'm running for my life already. I just want to go home where it's safe and quiet, and I'm scared for Leo and frightened about what is happening with Alina!"

At this, Yrited slowed down and stopped, grabbing me by the shoulders.

"Lea, I know you are frightened, but you can't let this stop you. You are our deliverer; we need you! I'm sorry that you had to witness Ember and I fighting, but elves and white knights have fought for years, even though we are allies. I *do* have a plan, and I know a place where we can get some help, but you need to trust me!"

"Okay," I sniffed, "I trust you."

"C'mon then, Lea. We have a long way to go!"

Chapter 6: Alina's Summoning

As soon as I closed the door behind me, I turned around and found myself face to face with a massive hall full of disgusting humans and creatures. I almost yelled but bit my tongue just in time. I quickly turned around and saw the last of a purple portal disappear behind me.

"Witches and wizards!" a strong voice from beside me announced to the hall, "Welcome the traitor!"

There was a loud cheering and applause; then everything fell silent again. To my left was a man dressed completely in golden colored clothes and fine jewelry – so startlingly different from everyone else in the room.

"Welcome, dear," he said to me.

"I'm not your dear," I told the guy, "and that's just gross."

The man looked startled to be talked to that way but quickly recovered himself and said, "My apologies. Forgive my ignorant ways."

I nodded politely.

"What are you going to do first?" someone from the crowd of magicians yelled up to me.

"Um, I'm still confused about what I'm doing here," I answered.

"Empress," the golden man addressed me again, "Please accept, once again, my humble apologies for summoning you here like this, but we fear that the white knights will take over our kingdom. I have collected all of the best magicians in the land to summon you here, and we all ask for your undying support in our endeavor to be freed of this tyranny."

"Ohhhhh!" I said slowly, "I guess I can help, *if* you'll let me go back home afterwards."

"Oh, most assuredly," the "golden" man gushed, "We would dream of *nothing* else. Also, my name is Zadok by the way."

"So, uh, how can I help?" I asked him.

"You don't know?" a wizard near the platform that I was on said, "Then why did we summon you here! This is a waste of time!"

A few others in the crowd gasped.

"Deliverer," Zadok said quickly, while gesturing to the wizard, "Pardon this old fool's ignorance. Did he upset you?"

"Um, uh, I mean a little I guess?"

With that said, Zadok lifted up his massive scepter and aimed it at the wizard. Before I could even comprehend what was happening, the wizard was sucked (sort of, it was kind of hard to tell exactly what happened) into Zadok's staff. At this, many of the others in the hall backed up.

"Well that solves that problem," Zadok said, dusting off his hands, "We simply can't handle dissenters. As for you, I'm sure you'll figure it out. You are incredibly smart."

I nodded my head and pasted on a smile.

"In the meantime," he continued, "I will introduce you to your bodyguard and show you your quarters."

At this, a boy that looked about my age, but with massive muscles, a huge armada of weapons hanging off his armor, and a colossal helmet stepped up to me and bowed to me.

"I'm Joel," he said, "and I will protect you with my life, deliverer."

"Why are you calling me a deliverer?" I asked Zadok.

"Ah, because you will deliver us from the white knights and elves," the man said.

"Oh, of course. Just checking to make sure you know," I responded, trying to save face.

"Come, follow me, and I will show you where your room is," Joel said, beckoning me to follow him. With Joel in the lead, we stepped off the large platform where I had been standing and through the crowd of magicians to the back of the hall. I could feel everyone looking at me as I slipped through the doors and continued down a few more hallways and turns. Eventually, Joel stopped at another doorway and opened it with a flourish.

"Your room, ma'am," he said, "I will be stationed right outside in case you need anything. Just call."

"Thank you," I told him as I walked into my room while Joel closed the door behind me. I listened to see if he had locked the doors behind me, but I didn't hear anything. That helped me to relax a bit, seeing as I was not being treated as a captive of some sort.

The whole room was filled with medieval décor – down to the mats and beds, but it wasn't as gorgeous as the palace rooms I had always dreamed of. It was more of a realistic version, if that makes any sense.

It was while I was chilling on some fluffy, purple pillows that I unsuccessfully tried to figure out how in the world these wizards had summoned me here.

I wonder what I can do to help them, I thought, I must have some special power here!

I reached forward to a table of various small foods and took a bite of a strange fruit. It was actually very good.

I guess that I'll just have to find out! I said to myself.

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It was very early the next morning when I was awoken by something tapping rather violently on the door of my room.

"I'm very sorry ma'am," Joel said when I had opened the door, "But Zadok wants to see you in the dining area in a hurry. Something about visiting someone today?"

I groaned, "Fine, fine."

"And there's a... more appropriate set of clothes in that dresser over there," Joel added, pointing to a slightly old closet of sorts in the corner."

I nodded.

Joel bowed once more and left hurriedly. It was actually more of a chore to dress in the new clothes than I thought because they were all heavy. I couldn't remember in my reading of medieval times that there was armor for females, but the dress I was attempting to put on was a combination of heavy leather and chainmail, so I assumed that the fiction books were wrong. By the time I had squeezed myself into the dress, which was a little big for me, and made it out of my room, it had probably been a good half hour at the very least. Joel was waiting directly outside my door as he had promised.

"I'm ready, Joel," I told him, "Take me to Zadok."

Joel immediately turned and walked stately to the dining room. Despite doing a bit of supervised exploration yesterday, I was still more or less confused about the map of the palace that I was in. Once again, it wasn't like the palaces that I read about in books. Instead of

gloriously lit hallways lined with portraits of kings and shields, the hallways in this palace were much darker with no paintings and only creepy suits of armor every now and again. It was a bit more of a darker version of the cheery ones seen in Disney princess films which made me assume that these wizards were not necessarily “good guys.” Weirdly enough, it didn’t bother me as much, but I did wish that Leo and Lea were here to see me now!

We eventually reached the dining room, and Joel threw open the doors as was his custom.

“Alina!” Zadok called out to me from across the room. He was sitting with a bunch of important looking generals.

“Heyo!” I said to them, “You wanted me?”

“Yes,” Zadok said, while chewing on a chicken leg, “We think that it may be a good idea for you to visit a certain dwarf that knows the prophecy of the deliverers very well. Maybe she would be able to help you find your special powers?”

“Worth a try,” I shrugged.

“She’s quite a ways from here though,” Zadok continued, “which is why I thought it best to wake you up early so we can make the trip in the light of day.”

“Understandable,” I responded.

“Great!” Zadok stood up, “Then finish up your breakfast while the rest of us get the cavalry ready. We want to hurry since the dwarf lives too close to the elf territory for comfort. You know how to ride a horse?”

“Psssh, of course. I’ve taken lessons for several years.”

“Excellent.”

After a fairly decent breakfast consisting of foods that I didn’t ask about, Joel led me to the stables outside where I was assigned a brown horse with a white star on his forehead. Now that I was outside of the palace, I got a better idea of where I was. The palace was a very large structure made mainly of stone and wood, while all around the palace were several buildings and a very tall and strong stone wall around all of that. By peering out of the main gate, I could see some of the city, but, like the castle, it was pretty dingy and a bit run down. The courtyard that I was currently in was currently filled with black clad knights on horseback.

Zadok, riding a large monster-like creature, broke through this crowd of horses and riders and made his way over to me.

“You ready?” he asked, as I rode my horse around in a tight circle to get a feel for how the horse behaved.

“Yeah, but what *are* you riding?” I asked Zadok.

“A rare and ancient creature,” Zadok said, “I found it many years ago in the forbidden mountains of Azules.”

“Oh.”

“Now, if our deliverer is ready, let’s begin!” Zadok shouted to everyone.

There was a terrific roar and our band started down the crowded streets of the city.

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Four hours later, I found myself wishing that I had taken longer horse riding lessons – my legs were already starting to hurt.

“Are we getting close?” I asked Zadok as we cantered along on a dirt path through a thick forest.

"About three quarters of the way there," Zadok said, "More or less."

"Good," I answered him.

At that point, a rider came galloping down the forest road toward us, who were in the front of the pack.

"Ah! A dark knight messenger. I wonder what news he brings to us," Zadok announced for my benefit.

"Sir!" the messenger said a minute later when he reached us, "Xee's army is approaching from the north. Their campaign was successful!"

"Excellent!" Zadok replied cheerfully, "Did you hear that Alina? Xee's army conquered a white knight castle and surrounding countryside!"

"Great?" I said, trying to figure out if that truly was a good thing.

"AND," the messenger said, "He's bringing with him the swordsman deliverer!"

"What?!" Zadok responded, surprised.

"Yes!"

"I thought the swordsman was against us," Zadok replied suspiciously.

"Apparently Xee thinks that he has or at least can turn him!"

"Amazing!" Zadok crowed, "And word about the scepter?"

"Nothing. Not even a rumor," the messenger replied.

"Very well then, we'll just have to keep looking," Zadok responded, "You are welcome to follow us; we are going on a quick journey to the prophetic dwarf of the north."

The messenger nodded and fell into line behind us.

Presently, I saw a thick dust cloud approaching on the horizon, and by the time we had reached a landscape that was barren of life except for a few scrub bushes, I could make out the individual riders leading the army.

"Zadok!" a deep voice called out over the scrubland, "What brings you here, friend?"

"Xee! We have successfully summoned the traitor!" Zadok announced, gesturing to me.

We came to a halt a few feet from a tall, bare chested warrior on a horse. The warrior had an expressionless face and a tremendous axe on his back. He was flanked by a bevy of elite dark knights, and to his right was a tall, skinny knight as well as a young, female elf riding a black and white unicorn respectively.

"And what is your name?" Xee asked me.

"I'm Alina," I answered, "Pleased to make your acquaintance."

"And the feeling is likewise," Xee answered, but he was cut off by the skinny knight nearby who maneuvered his steed over to us.

"Alina?" The voice came from the knight, and it was strangely similar to Leo's voice. He then flipped up his visor, and it was Leo!

"Leo?!" I yelled, "What are *you* doing here?"

"I'm the fighter," Leo replied proudly.

I squinted my eyes and nodded, "Okayyyyy, that's the deliverer who is the swordsman, right? Also, where's Lea?"

Leo shrugged his shoulders, "Yes, and I don't know. I thought you and her were back in the forest in that abandoned house, but now I'm not so sure."

"You know what this means, right?" I addressed Leo, "Lea's probably here too and is the infamous scepter."

"Yeah, I came to that conclusion just now too," Leo replied, waving it off quickly, "I hope I can find her."

I shrugged, "Whatever, just don't get in my way."

"In *your* way," Leo scoffed, "Don't get in *mine*. You're the traitor. I always knew I couldn't trust you!"

"Joel, would you please escort my cousin to a safer distance?" I asked my bodyguard, miffed at Leo's ego and comments.

Joel swiftly maneuvered his horse in front of mine and forced Leo backwards. However, no sooner had he done this, than the female elf bumped her unicorn into the side of Joel's horse.

"Don't you *dare* force Leo around!" she said fiercely.

Joel responded, "I do as I'm told by Alina, the great deliverer."

"And I watch out for the great swordsman!" the elf yelled back.

"Don't make me fight you!" Joel growled, a hint of anger starting to surface.

"I'd dare you to, I don't think you have what it takes to beat an ant!" the elf smirked.

Joel roared with anger and swung his axe down upon the elf. However, the elf neatly stepped her horse out of the way, and Joel's axe was grabbed by a nearby hand – it was Xee.

"Tsk, tsks," Xee said, "No fighting amongst ourselves. We already have our hands full looking for this 'Lea.'"

Leo glared at me, and I noticed that Joel glared at the elf.

"Well, it was good to see you Zadok," Xee continued, "Leo and I are just heading back to the palace to make a plan of action for our next steps."

"And Alina and I are heading to the prophetic dwarf of the north to ask about Alina's powers," Zadok responded.

"Be quick and careful then," Xee replied; then gestured towards Leo's elf-guard, "Those elves are ferocious."

Zadok nodded quickly; then slapped his monster to hurry forward again. The rest of our band continued onwards as well.

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We found the dwarf's house a few hours later, and one of the soldiers banged on the door until she came outside. Upon seeing our band of warriors, the dwarf jumped a foot.

"No need to fear," Zadok told her graciously, "We come in peace. We want to know if Alina has any powers?"

"Alina?" the dwarf asked.

"Our deliverer," Zadok laughed, pointing to me.

"Oh?" the dwarf said as I dismounted.

"Come closer dear," the dwarf said.

I moved in a bit closer, and the dwarf stared me in the eyes.

"Aha! So she is," the dwarf said, "And which of the three is she?"

"We think she's the traitor," Zadok responded briskly, "Now, what do you know about the traitor?"

"Not much I'm afraid," the dwarf answered, "But she apparently has the power to 'harness anger and hatred.'"

"That's it?!" Zadok cried out, "Just that?"

"I'm afraid so," the dwarf said, "I've read the prophecy over and over again and found many versions of the original prophecy, but there is not much on the traitor."

"What about the scepter?" Zadok quizzed the dwarf lady.

"Oh, there is much more about her!" the lady responded, sitting down on a small stool amid a patch of potato plants, "She will be a great leader and have the power to see into the future."

"No!" Zadok said, "Are you sure?"

"Very," the lady responded, "Of course the prophecy doesn't directly say that, but I've studied it enough to get the general idea!"

"Interesting," Zadok said, stroking his beard, "Can you show me this scroll?"

"Well, uh, I don't have it," the lady responded.

"And why not?"

"Because, uh, I lost it in Graezemum," the dwarf replied nervously.

"And why would you lose a valuable prophetic scroll in a low-down city like that?!" Zadok insisted, getting closer to the dwarf.

"It wasn't on-," the lady began but was cut short as Zadok grabbed her and hoisted her up to his eye level.

"TELL ME WHAT ALINA CAN *REALLY* DO OR SO HELP ME I WILL FEED YOU TO MY MOUNT!"

The monster that Zadok had previously been riding growled on cue.

The dwarf gave a little squeak and said, "Okay, okay, she can summon a dragon."

"A dragon?!" I cried out, "How?!"

"I... I honestly don't know. I think you have to figure it out!" the lady replied desperately.

Zadok shook the dwarf lady very hard at that point, "SAY!"

"I don't know!" the lady screamed, "I can't know!"

Zadok threw her to the ground and pointed his staff at her. Without any warning, she was instantly sucked into his staff.

"Well, that's that," Zadok crowed, "Poor fool had it coming to her."

A few of the soldiers nearby cowered in their saddles.

"If what she said is true," Zadok said, "You have much power. Not one wizard in the realm can summon a dragon, and no one has seen a dragon in decades!"

"But how do I do it?" I asked Zadok, "I've never summoned one before!"

"We'll figure it out," Zadok responded, "I have a few ideas... But for now, let's get out of here before the elves arrive."

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"Well, this is unfortunate," Zadok stated later as we were on our way home, "It's too dark to ride much further. We'll have to make our camp out in the open here."

"Isn't that dangerous, sir?" Joel asked Zadok.

"Yes, but it's even more dangerous to continue on in the dark!" Zadok responded.

"What's that!?" a soldier yelled to us from the front, "I see smoke!"

Sure enough, not more than a mile ahead of us, I could see a thin column of smoke rising above the tops of the trees.

"We approach cautiously!" Zadok said, "Soldiers, on guard!"

I was quickly flanked on all sides by a bevy of soldiers as we proceeded towards the source of the smoke.

It turned out to be the wreckage of a campsite and standing right in the middle of the mess was Xee.

"Oh no," Zadok mumbled, "This doesn't look good."

When we reached Xee, all he had to say was one word.

"Elves," Xee spoke softly, "Caught us by surprise as we were setting up camp."

"I thought you would be at the palace by now!" Zadok spoke.

"We would have, but we just heard word that the palace is under attack by the white knights!"

Xee responded.

"And you didn't hurry up to help the dark knights there?!" Zadok responded.

"No, it's the white knights' imperial army," Xee answered angrily, "We sent for reinforcements from the Minotaurs, but they couldn't come right away!"

"Well, that's just great," Zadok grumbled, "I suppose that's why your victory was so smooth – most of the defenders were on their way to *our* stronghold!"

"Probably," Xee sighed, "But that's not the worst part!"

"What could possibly be worse!" Zadok snapped.

"The swordsman was kidnapped!"

Chapter 7: Lea's Trek

"We're finally here!" Yrited declared as we slugged through the pitch dark towards an unknown destination.

"What is 'here?'" I asked her, "I feel like I've walked around the earth at least twice!"

"We *have* walked about ten miles," Yrited admitted, "But there just isn't much out here. Anyway, she'll be able to help us get to my uncle's kingdom."

"What is your uncle's kingdom and who is she?" I exclaimed.

"Nevermind. I'll tell you later!"

When we finally left the forest, the faint moonlight illuminated a large clearing that bordered a small house with a wisp of smoke blowing from its chimney.

"Hurry!" Yrited said, pulling me along.

The house actually appeared smaller the closer that I got to it, and when we finally were on the front porch, I noticed that the door was quite short. I wasn't tall, but even I would only barely fit through the frame. Yrited knocked lightly on the dark.

Instantly, there was a bunch of clanging and commotion inside as well as a bunch of fierce talking, and it took like a full two minutes before the door finally opened - and only a crack at that.

"Who is it?" a voice demanded from inside.

"It's me, Yrited, princess of Gravelheim," Yrited said, "My friend and I need some help."

There was silence for a moment; then the door was thrown open.

"Honey! It's two poor girls. Let them in!"

The open door revealed a dwarf couple. The man was still squished up against the door frame from where he had been talking to us, but the dwarf lady, who had just swung open the door was already pulling Yrited inside, and I followed – mostly because the warmth emanating from inside was all too inviting, and my tired and cold body was feeling pretty sluggish.

"You're both freezing!" the lady said, rushing around the small house to grab various blankets and towels, "Get near the fireplace now!"

Yrited and I needed no coaxing.

"Honey, are you sure that this is the best idea? Inviting perfect strangers into our-," the dwarf man began but was cut off.

"Charleght, really! It's Yrited!" the lady scolded him, "You know! The little princess whose father generously gave you your horse cart!"

"OH! Now I know," Charleght exclaimed, "That's a whole different story. Welcome, welcome both of you!"

The dwarf lady rolled her eyes and wrapped a blanket around me, "Now who are you quiet one?"

"I'm Lea," I replied gratefully, snuggling into the warm blanket.

"She's a deliverer," Yrited added, warming her hands over the fire, "She showed up right before the dark knights attacked."

"The dark knights attacked!" Charleght exclaimed, "Those dirty, rotten fools!"

"You haven't seen my parents have you?" Yrited asked.

"No dear," the dwarf lady said, "but what is this about Lea being a deliverer?"

"She showed up mysteriously just about eight or so hours ago. Her brother also appeared, and he is certainly the fighter," Yrited explained.

"How do you know?" Charleght challenged.

"Because he could shoot blue orbs of energy out of his sword!" Yrited explained, "It was pretty epic!"

"Then you must be the scepter!" the dwarf lady told me.

I nodded my head, "And my brother and I think our cousin is here and is the traitor."

"Your cousin?"

"Yeah, she went with us into the old house," I told them.

"Old house?"

"It's not really important," I quickly answered, "It's sort of how we all got here."

"Where is the fighter?" Charleght quizzed us.

"I don't know," I responded, "Last I knew he was with the dark knights who mistook him for one of theirs, but there was this elf girl that went back to get him and neither of them have returned."

"Oh bother," Charleght groaned.

"He'll be just fine," the dwarf lady insisted, "I have studied the prophecy scrolls for years, and not one of them has said anything about the deliverers dying."

"I hope your parents will be okay too!" I said to Yrited, but when I turned to her, I saw that she was already asleep on the ground.

"Sleep right here," the dwarf lady insisted, "And we can talk tomorrow."

I laid down on the ground – really wound up over the day's events, but the long walk had sucked the life out of me, and my eyelids closed quickly.

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I awoke the next morning to the sound of thunder. I groggily came to and opened my eyes, but I was still near the fireplace where I had fallen asleep. Charleght was not in the house, but the dwarf lady was making breakfast. When the thunder got a bit louder, she looked up in fright.

"Girls!" she whispered hoarsely.

"Wuuu, huh?!" Yrited said, rolling over.

"Hurry, we haven't much time!" the lady said, hustling us towards the back of the room where a large wooden closet stood. I was still trying to wake up, but the dwarf lady was much stronger than she appeared and Yrited and I were pushed over to the closet. The lady then proceeded to open it up and boost us into it. It would have actually been quite spacious inside if it weren't for the myriad of furs, dresses, clothes, and various outfits jammed inside.

"You must hide and keep very quiet," the lady said, closing the doors back on us, "Don't make a sound!"

"Who's out there?" I asked quickly.

"Sssshhh," the lady whispered.

Yrited and I worked our way to the back of the closet and listened intently. In another few minutes, the thunder was very loud, but intermixed with it, I heard the shout of men's voices and the whinnying of horses.

"It must be the dark knights!" Yrited whispered to me, "Somehow they must have tracked us!"

There was a sudden explosive knocking on the house's door, and the dwarf lady went to open it. We heard some fierce talking, and the door was closed – presumably the dwarf went outside to talk to them.

The problem with being in the very back of a very full closet is it's hard to hear anything but the loudest noises. Thus, it was impossible to tell what was going on inside.

"How will we know when we can come out?" I asked Yrited.

"Beats me," she replied, "I would assume we wait for her to let us out."

After another five or so minutes, we heard a few shouts; then there was a clamor of noise and a thunderous din of horses, riders, and wagons moving away. After another ten or so minutes, we couldn't hear them anymore.

"She should be coming back any minute now," Yrited said to me, "I heard the sound of Zadok's monster, so it must have been them."

"But they didn't even bother searching the house!" I whispered back to Yrited, "if they were after us, assuredly they'd search every barn, shed, and house!"

"Maybe they thought that if most of them left, the others could stay and hide and catch us when we came back out," Yrited replied.

"That would explain the dwarf's not coming back," I responded.

However, she *never* came back. Yrited were just about ready to leave the closet – assuming something had happened to her, when we heard some rustling outside the house and the door opened with a loud bang.

I jumped and burrowed backwards into the closet. There were some heavy thuds and a few pots were banged together; then, the worst possible thing happened; the closet door was thrown open.

Yrited's eyes grew very wide as we heard heavy breathing and heard someone shuffling through the various articles hanging in our closet.

"Ho hum," the mysterious person said, "I could swear I left my jacket in here."

"Charleght?!" Yrited explained rushing forward. I quickly followed her forward, through the closet.

We emerged into the bright daylight – causing me to squint my eyes, but poor Charleght screamed in terror and stumbled backwards – tripping over a three-legged stool and falling backward onto the ground.

"My word!" Charleght exclaimed, "What in the world are you doing in my closet! You nearly gave me a heart-attack!"

"I'm sorry!" Yrited said, helping Charleght up, "But some dark knights came over here and your wife told us to hide in there."

"But she never came back!" I added, "Did you see her outside?"

At this, Charleght grew very serious, "You say she went outside to talk to them but never came back for you?"

"No?" Yrited said, worry growing in her voice.

"Poor thing," Charleght said gravely, "I can only hope she's okay!"

"You mean... you mean she was captured?" I exclaimed.

"Or worse," Charleght said, "let's just hope it wasn't Zadok, because he doesn't keep prisoners." Yrited stifled a scream, but Charleght didn't notice.

“Let’s get you two to the local castle; I don’t want *you* getting caught too,” Charleght said, “Hurry! Let’s go!”

Charleght threw back open the door and rushed outside where an old horse, hitched to an even older, wooden cart, was waiting.

“Hop in among all that hay!” Charleght told us, “And we’ll be on our way in a jiffy!”

The hay was very scratchy and caused me to itch something terrible, but I finally managed to wedge myself in between two particularly large bales with Yrited behind me. With a click to his horse, Charleght quickly started off down the dirt road.

Charleght drove the cart hard all day, and except for a small lunch, we never stopped. About mid afternoon, Charleght said we could ride on top of the bales of hay because we were well within the white knights’ territory. I verified this because I saw several white knights go by on horseback as well as various peasants and such. Yrited had a great time pointing out to me the various villages we passed, what their names were, and how she knew about them. Shortly, Charleght turned into a large, cobblestone road (in contrast to the dirt road we had been on) which was promptly interrupted by a large sentry tower with a massive wooden gate blocking the road.

“Who goes there?!” a voice called out from the top of the tower.

“Charleght the dwarf, Lea the Scepter, and Yrited, princess of Gravelheim,” Charleght called back out.

There was silence for a minute; then the door at the bottom of the door was flung open and a few soldiers raced out. They surveyed us carefully.

“Why, it is Yrited!” the head soldier called out, “It brings me such joy to see you alive and well!”

“As do I,” Yrited responded, “Charleght has been so very helpful in getting us here, and we fear his wife has been captured by the dark knights!”

The leader shook his head, “That is sad news indeed, but we will see that Charleght is amply compensated.”

Yrited nodded, “As for now, have you heard anything about my parents?”

The leader helped Yrited and us down from the cart and said, “We will talk of that later. Right now, we must escort you post-haste to the castle for your own protection, and who is this girl?”

“I’m Lea!” I told him.

“She’s the deliverer known as the scepter,” Yrited responded.

At this, several of the other soldiers jumped in surprise and stared at me.

“The eyes!” one of them said.

“Are you sure?” the leader said, staring at me.

“Very much so,” Yrited answered, “And the swordsman has also been confirmed, as well as a suspicion as to who the traitor is.”

“Oh my, oh my indeed!” the leader said, holding his head, “This is most exciting, but also very confusing. We must go speak with the king at once!”

“Jack, Derik! Escort these two girls to the castle at once!” the leader told two of his soldiers.

The soldiers promptly ran back into the tower and proceeded to unlock the large wooden door – which swung open a moment later.

The two soldiers then hustled us into a modest looking wagon of sorts – pulled by two perfectly white horses. Meanwhile, Charleght and the leader stayed behind to talk.

The ride was much quicker now that we were on cobblestone and had *two* horses pulling us, and soon the castle came into sight.

It was significantly larger than the one that I had been transported to when I first arrived in this world. There was a massive moat around the castle – at least a couple hundred meters wide with a terrific drawbridge. Lining the drawbridge and all around the castle at various points, were stationed many guards and catapults. By the time we had crossed the drawbridge, the portcullis had been raised and our carriage fairly flew into the main castle grounds. We took a few hair-pin turns and came to a stop right outside a pair of imposing double-doors. Derek promptly jumped off the front of the carriage and helped Yrited down; then I.

“Jack will take the carriage to the stables, but I will personally escort you into the throne room,” Derik told us, “We are having a great banquet and dance tonight, so the king has no prior meetings to attend right now.”

I could only gape and stare at everything as Derik led us down even more passageways, hallways, and beautifully ornate rooms. Yrited seemed right at place, smiling at maids and curtsying to important generals, but I had no idea about these customs so I just copied Yrited’s manners as best as I could.

Finally, we arrived at the throne room, and Derik led us in. The throne room had large red carpets everywhere on the ground and the king himself sat in a massively ornate throne throne at the back of the room, flanked by two soldiers holding heavy spears. The throne was so awe-inspiring, that it looked like the king was sitting on an explosion of creativity and artwork.

“Welcome Yrited and friend!” the king said, stepping down from his throne and over to us, “I have heard many rumors since your arrival!”

The king was not exactly old, but he walked with a limp and used a tall, golden cane.

Yrited curtsied and bowed her head, and I tried my best to follow suit.

“We have disturbing news about my parent’s castle and lands,” Yrited announced.

“Ah, so I have heard. The news has already reached us,” the king responded, “I am very sorry about this, and I promise to help out my friends as best as I can. However, now is not the time to worry as I have received news that some of the deliverers have arrived, and we are celebrating our Victory Day today!”

“Yes your majesty,” Yrited answered him.

“You are both welcome to join us,” the king said gallantly, gesturing to a nearby maid that had followed us into the throne room, “Sarah here will show you to your guest rooms.”

With that, the king waved his hand at us and turned around, indicating that our conversation was over. Meanwhile, Yrited and I were quickly whisked away by Sarah.

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“Owe!” I cried out, “You’re pulling too hard!”

“But honey!” Sarah told me, “This is the widest waist dress that we have!”

“My other dress wasn’t this bad!” I complained, pointing to the one that I had been wearing earlier.

“That’s a simple hand maiden dress,” Sarah scoffed, “Even I wear something fancier than *that* during a banquet!”

“But why squeeze my waist so?!” I repeated

"That's just how we do it," Sarah insisted, "You're not going to get a husband while sporting a waist like that."

"But I don't want a husband," I said as Sarah pulled once again on my dress – practically squeezing my insides out.

"But dear, you're at least sixteen! You'll be married in another year!" Sarah said, pulling one last time and tying the dress in the back.

I groaned and gritted my teeth – sure that this was going to leave a permanent scar on my stomach.

"That's preposterous!" I said, "We don't marry until we are at least twenty!"

"You don't?!" Yrited said, stepping from behind the curtain where she had been dressing, "By eighteen, we're already having kids."

I wrenched my face up into a look of horror but didn't say anything.

"You look beautiful!" Yrited exclaimed, directing my attention to a nearby mirror.

Upon seeing my reflection, I couldn't exactly disagree, but I looked like toothpaste that had been squeezed relentlessly out of a tube.

"Perfect!" Sarah cried out, "Now for the hair."

"Rest in peace my hair," I mumbled to myself.

"And you look gorgeous too," Sarah complimented Yrited.

"Why thank you," Yrited said, "There are so many more dresses here than at my castle."

"That's because King Greg has had many daughters," Sarah noted.

"They're hardly worn!" Yrited added, spinning around a few times.

As Sarah continued to pull the hair out of my scalp, Yrited started talking about the banquet.

"I just love parties!" she said, "And I heard that several of my relatives and other white kings will be here!"

"That is true," Sarah said, "And several of their sons will be coming too!"

"Oh, oh!" Yrited said, "I do so like Verner – he's so handsome!"

"You like Verner?" Sarah said, "I thought you liked George."

"No," Yrited said in disgust, "He just likes me."

"But George's father's kingdom is much larger than Verner's," Sarah said.

"Eh," Yrited acknowledged, "I guess, but I don't really care to rule a large kingdom."

"Your loss," Sarah said, "If I was royalty, I'd go for the guy with the biggest kingdom."

I rolled my eyes.

"Do you have a suitor?" Yrited asked me.

"A suitor?" I repeated.

"You know, someone who *likes* you?"

"Uh, no," I said. I started to say, "I'm only sixteen," but then thought better of it.

"I will introduce you to several of the best boys," Yrited announced to me, not even bothering to ask if I wanted to.

"I just hope Leo and Alina are okay," I told Yrited, "I'm worried about them."

"Don't worry about Leo," Yrited told me, "He can take care of himself."

"That's what everyone always says," I groaned, "But what about Alina too?"

Yrited shrugged her shoulders just as Sarah pinned a massive ornamental object to my hair to keep it together.

“There!” Sarah announced, “Now I’ll go check on the festivities to see when you should come out.

After Sarah left, I promptly started adjusting my hair and outfit to maximize my chances of surviving the night.

“I’m sure Alina will be fine,” Yrited insisted, “If she *is* the traitor, then the dark knights wouldn’t dare hurt her – they’d work with her, and if she was found by us or the Elves, we’d just hold her captive. If she was found by anyone else, they wouldn’t know who she was probably.”

“If you say so...,” I said.

“Wham!” the door was thrown open and Sarah rushed into the room, out of breath.

“The...king...requests your presence immediately!” She told me, “You are to sit with his family at their table!”

“Oh my, what an honor!” Yrited exclaimed, delighted at the prospect.

I was frankly horrified. I had no idea of medieval manners, and now I had to sit with one of the most powerful kings of the land?! I guess, on the bright side, I would not have to worry about pigging out on food because I currently had no room in my stomach.

Trying not to snag my long dress on anything, I hurried to keep up with Yrited who looked completely at home amid the swarms of fancily dressed royalty outside our guest room.

Sarah led the way through a few hallways into the main ballroom where insanely long, wooden tables had been set up. In one corner of the room was a pile of pillows and golden cutlery where the king and his family were lounging.

“That’s the king’s daughters and their husbands,” Yrited whispered to me as we approached them, “There’s Naphtali, Natali, Nigeli, and Naomi.”

I nodded my head, but promptly forgot all the names.

“Yrited and Lea!” the king called out, “We have a spot saved for you right here!” The king pointed to a conveniently empty spot across the short table from him. Yrited practically pranced right over and laid expertly on the ground, plucking a fig out of a gold dish. I, very self consciously, attempted to do the same, but tripped on the third fold of my dress and face planted into a nearby pillow. If the others noticed, no one said anything.

“It is nice to have you, Lea,” the king said, drinking from a golden goblet, “We have been waiting a long time for the deliverers!”

I smiled faintly and tried to find a comfortable position while keeping my head straight so the ornamental pin on my hair wouldn’t puncture my scalp.

“Legend says the scepter has wisdom in abundance and foresight about the future,” the king added.

“Lea hasn’t completely found her potential yet,” Yrited spoke quickly, trying to take some pressure off of me, “But she’ll find it shortly!”

“LADIES AND LORDS, I AM PLEASED TO ANNOUNCE THE BEGINNING OF VICTORY DAY! MAY YOU ENJOY YOURSELF THOROUGHLY. TONIGHT WE HAVE THE PRIVILEGE TO BE IN THE PRESENCE OF THE LEGENDARY DELIVER – THE SCEPTER,” a very tall man yelled into an ornate horn across the room from us.

There was a faint applause and literally everyone looked my way.

“AND, I AM ALSO PLEASED TO ANNOUNCE THE ARRIVAL OF THE DELIVERER – THE FIGHTER!”

I gasped as, far to my right, Leo and Ember emerged through the ballroom's double doors – at least, it looked like Leo, but he was wearing a very strange suit of armor.

Chapter 8: Leo's Kidnapping

Needless to say, it was rather hard to get my thoughts collected, what with my arms and legs tied up, wearing an uncomfortable suit of armor, being draped over a galloping horse, and having a dirty sack tied over my head. It had just been about an hour earlier that Xee's army had heard of the attack on their castle and had decided to set up camp. Being tired from the day's events, I had taken a short nap against a tree nearby. Unfortunately, when I awoke, I was already being tied up, and the last thing I saw before having a bag shoved over my head was a hail of arrows raining down on Xee's militia. Now, I was being inhumanely kidnapped to an unknown destination, by unknown captors.

When I was so shaken up and bruised that I probably couldn't stand, the horse that I was riding on (or at least I guessed it was a horse) finally came to a halt. I heard some muffled talking; then the horse started moving again. Now, it was just a bit longer before the horse stopped altogether, and I was roughly whisked off the horse and thrown onto the ground. That's when they removed the bag on my head, and I could finally breathe again.

My poor body was so sore that I didn't even make an effort to get off the surprisingly smooth, tile floor. I just lied there and turned my head to see where I was.

Apparently, I was in the land of the elves. There was a bit of a racket behind me, and something fell right onto my back – sending a second shockwave of pain through my inert form. I hollered and jumped to my feet – promptly falling over again, due to my tied up legs. Not being able to cushion my fall because my hands were tied behind my back, I slammed painfully into the floor again. With a loud moan, I wiggled around and managed to at least sit up.

"Stupid elders!" Ember shouted from beside me. Apparently it was her that had fallen on top of me, "What is the meaning of this betrayal? What is wrong with you guys?!"

I gazed at my surroundings and noticed that Ember and I were now in a center courtyard that had a dozen ornate chairs at the front of it - nine of which were occupied. Behind us were many Elven soldiers – both male and female.

"You have turned on us and brought slander to the Elven name," one of the Elven elders declared

"Turned on *you*?!" Ember challenged him, "Who has turned on who here? I don't see us kidnapping you, and I especially don't see you acting as a spy for the dark knights! You're all bark and no bite, Karlyle!"

"I'll bite you if I have to," Karlyle shot back.

"I'd like to see you try old man!" Ember snapped.

Karlyle jumped to his feet, bow at the ready, but a few of the older elders held him back, giving me time to finally speak up.

"So, uh, what is wrong?" I said out loud, "Why have you brought me here!"

"We brought you here," said one female elder with long hair, "Because you are also not a dark knight but were with them in their army."

"My humble apologies for this seemingly evil intent," I said, using my best manners, "But your humble servant had no intentions of actually helping them. I was simply gathering information

about their inner workings. I do not know much about this realm as I am a deliverer from a faraway place. I did not know that I should stay away from the dark knights to avoid giving a wrong impression.”

“What blaspheme is this?!” another of the elders cried out from my left, “He even claims to be a deliverer!”

“You are an idiot,” Ember snapped, “Give him a sword and watch!”

“You’re the idiot!” the leader yelled back, “Of course we aren’t giving him a sword!”

“Then you believe he is the fighter?” Ember smirked.

“RAURGH!” the leader yelled, “Can someone *please* shut her up?!”

As the leaders looked on, two of the elf soldiers from behind us strode up to Ember. I assumed they intended to just stick a bag on her head as one was holding a sack, but before they could do it. Ember spun around and smacked them hard in their torsos with her tied up feet. This move caught them off guard, and both of them collapsed to the ground – dropping their weapons. Quick as a flash, Ember rolled over and seized a spear – plunging it into both my hand and leg ropes simultaneously. Although the ropes were thick and strong, the spear was stronger, and my binds were sliced in two. With my appendages freed, I leapt over and snatched up one of the soldiers’ swords.

By this time though, the elves had obviously realized what we were up to, and more of the soldiers from behind converged on us, while some of the elders pulled out their bows.

“HEEEaarGH!” I yelled, plunging my sword into the ground.

Instantly, a blue orb of protection built up a dome around Ember and I – about two yards in diameter.

A hail of arrows and an entire squad of soldiers all collided with the dome milliseconds later and bounced painfully off of it. Meanwhile, Ember used her spear to slice off her binds as well.

“Well, that went better than could have been expected,” Ember commented, looking out upon the mess of elf soldiers trying to disentangle themselves from the dog pile that had occurred outside of the dome.

“Yeah, thank goodness Xee helped hone my sword powers,” I said, wiping some sweat off my forehead, “Any longer and we would have been toast.”

“There’s only one other problem,” I admitted, “We can’t sit here forever.”

Outside, all nine of the elders had arisen from their chairs and were now standing around the dome, looking at us with very sour expressions.

“Told ya he was the fighter!” Ember shouted out to them.

“Take down your shield now!” the head elder told us. On the outside, I could tell that he was shouting at us, but from inside it was barely more than a whisper.

“Not unless you start acting civilized!” Ember shouted back, “We’re not here to harm anyone. In fact, we weren’t even *supposed* to be here!”

The leaders backed off to talk for a minute; then came back.

“We will give you our word that we will not harm you if you take down the shield,” the head elder said, “If you give us your word that you will not leave the premises unless I give you permission.” Ember considered this for a minute, then said, “It’s a deal *if everyone* agrees to not lay a hand on *either* of us!”

The thought that although the leaders wouldn't touch us, their soldiers would, crossed my mind, so I was glad that Ember saw through that ruse.

The head elder frowned at this but shouted, "I give you my word then!"

Ember and I personally witnessed the rest of the elves around us say that. Then, I reached down to the sword (which I had left in the ground) and pulled it straight out. Just as quickly, the blue shield dissipated, but I squeezed my sword tight in case the elves tried any other such tricks.

There was complete silence.

"Look guys," Ember said to the elders, "Either we can work together, or we can fight amongst ourselves and let the dark knights win."

Still silence.

"This is getting a little awkward," I whispered to Ember.

"You may be my elders," Ember continued, "But that *doesn't* mean I follow you blindly."

With that, Ember tossed her hair over her shoulder and marched out of the courtyard.

I was slightly unsure of what to do, and I didn't know what the "premises" were so I didn't move.

"So uh, what exactly are the 'premises?'" I asked.

"It means, you can stay anywhere in the city as long as you are visible or at least not hidden," the head elder said directly, "You better be glad that... nevermind."

The head elder waved his hand at me and walked off into the main portion of the Elven castle.

A few of the other elders followed, but the rest just followed Ember outside or dissipated amongst the castle guards. I ran after Ember who was just disappearing outside of the castle's gates. Actually, the elf castle wasn't really a castle, it was more like a giant temple of sorts, or it at least looked that way.

When I caught up to Ember, she said absolutely nothing but continued marching down the main street. To my left and right, many of the "peasant" elves were staring at me like I was some weird ghost.

"I think I need different armor," I told Ember, "I still look like a dark knight."

"I have some armor in my house," Ember said, "that you can use."

"You have a house?!" I exclaimed, "But you're only like... seventeen?"

"Eighteen," Ember corrected.

At almost the outskirts of the city, Ember turned onto an off-street that was more rough in its cobblestone feel. We walked down this for a bit until Ember stopped at a rope ladder that led into a tree house.

"You live in a tree house?" I exclaimed.

"Pssh, of course," Ember said, "Most of us do. Just look around."

After a pathetic attempt at climbing the rope ladder, I looked around from Ember's porch and saw that, in fact, many of the houses were in trees. The city was a mishmash of on-the-ground houses and tree houses.

"Come on in!" Ember said to me, opening the front door.

When I walked inside, I saw that although the house itself was small, there was little in the house itself so it was actually quite spacious. On the walls, though, were a few paintings that were amazingly well drawn.

"These are your parents?" I said to Ember pointing to one portrait.

"Yeah, but they died in a battle about ten years ago," Ember told me.

"Oh! I'm so sorry!" I said.

Ember shrugged her shoulders, "It was more of the elves' fault than anyone else's. My parents got separated from the main army, but the leader wouldn't go rescue them because it could endanger more lives."

"Oh," I said sadly, "Makes me miss *my* parents!"

"I mean, I get it, but still, it's my parents," Ember trailed off, "Anyway, there's a store downtown that has some elf clothes that we may be able to fit to you."

"Won't I look weird in it though?" I said, "specially since I'm not an elf?"

"Maybe, but you already look weird."

"Hey!"

Ember disappeared into her room to get some of their elf currency, then returned. We scrambled back down the rope ladder and walked around the town.

Despite the weird stares that I kept getting, it was a lot of fun. I had always wanted to know what a town of the most elite medieval aged warriors used, and now I knew! I only wished that Lea was around to see it too!

"Aunt Marcella!" Ember called out to an older lady who was sitting outside the door of one of the street shops.

"Ember!" Marcella called back, getting up and giving Ember a big hug, "I heard that you were back! I'm so glad that you are safe."

"Me too, but the leaders weren't all that nice," Ember grimaced, "Thought I was a spy."

Marcella nodded her head and put a finger to her lips.

"And is this the fighter?" Marcella continued, indicating to me.

"I believe I am, ma'am," I said, "And I am very grateful to your niece for keeping me alive!"

Marcella laughed a very long laugh; then leaned in over to me and said, "And she is cute, is she not?"

My whole face reddened at this.

"Anyway," Marcella continued as Ember disappeared into the store, "I am a tailor by trade, going back to my great great grandmother, and I have the finest of clothing. I'm guessing you want something more...presentable?"

"Yes actually," I told her, "But I'll also need some sort of armor too, because I keep getting myself in fights."

"That you will," Marcella answered me, "What with you being the 'fighter' anyway."

We both chuckled, and she led me into the store which was filled, from top to bottom with various clothes and outfits.

"Now, what would you like?"

Two hours later, I finally was able to get out of that store. My new outfit was actually very comfortable, and although I looked awfully funny in it, Marcella told me it would be just as strong and protective as the old armor from Xee.

"Have fun, you two!" Marcella waved to us as we left.

"We will! Thanks again Aunt!" Ember called after us.

"C'mon Leo," Ember said to me, "I want to show you where I train as a scout and also where you can get a better sword!"

The training “center” turned out to be a large dirt clearing with various buildings scattered around it and a myriad of structures scattered about.

“We do a lot of training here, but most of our instruction comes from real experience on the field,” Ember informed me.

“What is that fenced off area over there?” I said, pointing to a massive green tree that sat next to a large boulder.

“Oh, that’s the grounds of the ancient fighter...,” Ember began.

She was cut off by three large elf boys that had just exited a nearby building.

“Hey! You two!” one of the boys yelled to us.

“Oh great,” Ember scowled, “the Rafat triplet.”

“Why is that ‘oh great,’” I said nervously.

“Because they’re always wanting to pick a fight,” she answered.

“What are you two doing over *here*,” the bigger of the triplet said to us as he walked up, “Trying to spy us out.”

“You know as well as anyone that we aren’t spies,” I told him.

“Like you could if you wanted to!” one of the other boys said, “All you can do is defense shields.”

“Not true,” I insisted, moving my hand over to my sword at my side - except that I quickly realized that I had left my sword at Ember’s house.

Ember and I started backtracking slowly, and she leaned over to me and whispered, “Get over to the grounds of the ancient fighter and get that sword out of the stone.”

“The what out of the what?” I asked.

Before she could answer, one of the triplets lunged at Ember, and they fell to the ground – arms and legs flailing. That was all I needed, I took off like a shot towards the tree.

“Hey you! Come back here!”

But I had no intention of staying back. With my new armor that was not nearly as heavy as the last, I felt like I had wings, and I covered the ground so fast that I would have made my track teacher proud.

I arrived at the tree and consequently boulder swiftly, but I was going so fast that I had to hurdle the stone. No sooner did I do that, than I saw one of the Rafat boys dive at me. Except, now I wasn’t in between him and the stone, so he just slammed into the stone with a large crack.

On the other side of this monument, I found the hilt of a beautiful broadsword sticking out of the monument rock. The hilt, even after how long it had been there, looked almost brand new and it had been designed to look like a bunch of vines twisted together in an ornate pattern.

“Don’t even think about taking that!” the Rafat boy called out to me as he stood up holding his head, “Only the true fighter deliverer can use that swo...”

He trailed off because it occurred to both him and I simultaneously that I could wield it.

I quickly reached out and grabbed it. Initially, I thought that I would need to tug to get it out, but it was actually quite easy to pull out. However, as soon as I did, something weird happened.

I can’t quite explain it, but suddenly I felt like a sword master. Through my brain raced literally hundreds of maneuvers and cuts and attacks that I could use.

Even as I just pulled the sword out of the stone, the Rafat boy attacked me with *his* sword.

Unfortunately, for him, he did not see my undercut followed by a head slam. He went spinning away and slammed head first into the tree – this time officially going unconscious.

Back in the training area, Ember was still fighting both of the other Rafat boys and losing, as she wasn't as big or strong. With my new found skill, I ran towards them with a new relish and was almost on top of them, before they realized that I had arrived. Leaping into the air, I brought down my sword onto the closest boy. He swiftly dodged and brought his axe up to block the blow, but my sword cut clear through his axe and embedded into the dirt below. The same second I thrust the sword into the dirt, a bolt of energy flowed through the ground, creating waves in the ground and knocking both of the triplet boys off their feet – including Ember. Although they may have been chickens for attacking Ember and I, the Rafat boys were also skilled, and they quickly recovered from the initial shock and loaded their bows to take a shot at me. Before I even fully realized what I was doing, my newfound instincts kicked in, and I ducked between both arrows; then wacked one of the boys on the head with the broadside of my sword while kicking my legs into the torso of the other. Both of them crumpled to the ground.

A few feet away, Ember slowly got to her feet.

"How...did...you... do that?!" Ember said, shocked.

"I don't know, but as soon as I grabbed the sword, I just knew..." I said.

"You truly are the fighter!" Ember replied, cheerfully this time, "Those Dark Knights are going *down*."

I smiled, "Now I just need to get back to Lea and see if we can get Alina on our side!"

"AAAHHHHHHHHHHH!" The screams of people nearby instantly caught Ember and I's attention.

"What is it *now*?" I asked, "Is there always non-stop excitement around here?"

"Something like that," Ember said, "But this time I expect the stone warriors."

"The stone warriors?"

"Yeah, there are some wizards up in the hills yonder that somehow summoned a massive army of stone warriors. The wizards have long since died, but the warriors haven't. We have dwindled down their numbers a lot, but they still attack us from time to time out of pure hatred. We have lost many good warriors battling them, and it's really hard to defeat them because of their stone composition!" Ember explained.

"Let's go then!" I said.

"We'll have to run fast though, because I'll bet they're attacking from the complete *other* side of the town!" Ember answered.

"You might need your steed then!" someone called out to me from behind.

Ember and I whipped around to see Xee come galloping through the forest on his steed.

"Shadow!" I yelled to my black unicorn.

"Eclipse!" Ember yelled to her white unicorn.

I ran forward and swung into Shadow's saddle like a pro now that I had my new sword. Amber did the same.

"Are you crazy?" Ember yelled to Xee as we pounded towards the village, "You know they'll try to kill you on sight!"

"I don't think they will," Xee said, removing his helmet.

Underneath the helmet, I caught sight of Xee's short hair, but what was even more surprising was that he had pointy ears.

"You're an elf?" I exclaimed.

"Half," Xee answered, "But before you ask any more questions, let's take care of these stone warriors."

"You know, conventional weapons don't work so well on them," Ember told him, "It's a good thing Leo is here with his powerful sword."

Xee looked over at me and noticed my sword that I had slung on my back.

"Nice sword," he told me, "And yes, but I've worked with wizards for a while, so I think I may know these stone warriors' weak points!"

"For your sake, I hope you do," Ember answered.

As we now raced our steeds through the village, I saw very few villagers as compared to an hour ago. Most of them appeared to be running for cover while a few courageous ones were sprinting towards the action like us.

It wasn't hard to catch sight of the stone warriors – they stood a good head taller than the average elf, and they were all carrying large bludgeons. Other than that, they all looked like walking stone humans. From what I observed, it appeared that they had entered the city through a large gash in the spiked, wooden fence around the city, and they were currently spreading out – being waylaid by a few brave souls.

"Aim for the tops of their heads!" Xee shouted at us, as we approached.

I urged Shadow to run faster, and we soon passed up Xee. Then, just at the last minute, I backwards vaulted off Shadow and stuck the landing right in the thick of the fray. I jabbed my sword into the ground, and there was a terrific upheaval of the cobblestone road. All elves and stone warriors were jettisoned into the air, but while the stone warriors collapsed back onto the ground, the elves were able to balance themselves and land on the ground unscathed. This then gave us a huge advantage.

"RAURGH!" Xee yelled, leaning to the right and whacking stone soldiers in the head with his massive axe. Meanwhile, Ember back kicked another warrior and Eclipse and Shadow went on an impaling stampede. I turned my back to Xee and produced a massive blue arc of energy by swinging my sword outwards and annihilated several of the nearby stone warriors.

"It's the fighter!" I heard a nearby elf yell.

One stone warrior attacked me on my left, but I jumped into the air, spun around and cut him and another one off at the torso – crumbling them to pieces.

"Great Boulders of Thunder! Your sword is powerful!" Ember yelled over to me, dodging under the legs of a particularly menacing stone warrior.

"Hiya!" I yelled, squeezing my sword and releasing a blue orb at another group of monsters.

"KABOOM!" The fallout of the explosion took out even more stone warriors, and Xee used the distraction to bash a few others on the head with his axe.

In a matter of minutes, the situation was already quite under control. The rapidly dwindling numbers of the stone army refused to give up but couldn't withstand my sword's attacks. At one point, I was surrounded by a small squad, but I gripped my sword hard and swung around in a circle, neatly chopping the rock heads off the enemies, which promptly crumbled under the pounding hooves of Eclipse as she sped by.

In a last ditch attempt, the stone warriors grouped together in a corner of the street, with their backs to a small wood-working shop.

“Ugh! I can’t penetrate them!” Xee shouted, trying to get a swing in with his axe.

“Stand back!” I cried out, then I bent backward and slung a massive blue bolt of energy at them.

“KAABBOOOOMMMM!”

The pure concussion of the explosion made me go deaf for a few seconds, but when the smoke dissipated, there was only rubble left of the stone warriors, as well as there being a nasty hole in the side of the wood-working shop.

“Holy mother of nature!” Ember sang out, “You just took out a dozen stone warriors single handedly!”

Xee wiped the sweat from his brow, “Hopefully that’s the last of them.”

“It could be,” an elf soldier said from beside me, “We’ve been steadily taking them out for quite a few years now.”

“XEE!!!” a voice thundered above the cheers of the victorious elves, “Stop RIGHT there!”

I turned to my right to see two of the elf elders approaching us.

“The guts that you have to come to *our* city!” the older of the two said, “And then to work with our men to defeat the stone warriors. What are you thinking?!”

“Cut him some slack,” I told the leaders, “He was doing you a favor. Plus, he brought Shadow with him.”

I patted Shadow on the head, and he whinnied.

“Don’t forget about Eclipse!” Ember added, remounting Eclipse.

“Are those unicorns?” the second leader gasped, “How are you able to ride them?!”

“They’re attracted to power,” I explained, “And I’m powerful apparently! Also, I think Eclipse just likes Ember.”

The second leader stared with wide eyes at Shadow, but the first was still fuming mad at Xee for showing up.

“You had better get your sorry excuse for an elf out of here, before I make your insides appear on your outsides!” he bellowed, “And I’m only giving you this opportunity, because you did us a favor.”

Xee nodded his head and whistled to his horse.

“I’m not always the bad guy,” Xee said, mounting his horse, “If it wasn’t that the black knights took me in when you wouldn’t, my story would have been different!”

Xee turned to leave; then thought of something and turned back to Ember and I.

“I didn’t come just to return to you your mounts,” Xee stated, “I came back to tell you that you should go to the white knights and experience what they’re like. Maybe then you’ll see who the good guys truly are.”

With that, Xee galloped off into the night. No sooner was he gone, than a few of the other elf elders rode up on their horses, but the streets were starting to get full again as elves poured out of their various housing and resumed their lives.

“That was Xee?” a female elder cried out, “And you let him leave?!”

“He helped save our town,” another replied, “It is only right that we should grant him his life.”

“And it is also only right to grant our deliverer his freedom,” another voice spoke out.

I turned and saw the grand elf leader himself standing right behind me.

There was a great hush among the elves, and everyone promptly bowed. I followed suit quickly.

"I have heard of your exploits young man," the grand leader said to me, putting a hand on my shoulder, "And it is with a heavy heart that I apologize for the actions of my fellow elders. It is a troubled time that we live in, and any advantage is taken immediately. You are free to go and do as you please, for the prophecy states that you *will* save us."

"Thank you sir," I replied.

"With that over with, I would like to hold a feast in the deliverers' honor, for news has come to me that the scepter has also arrived in the white knights' camp!" the grand leader continued. There was a mighty cheer as all the elves excitedly raced to make their preparations.

"But sir," one of the elders commented, "We haven't had a feast in a while!"

"We must celebrate even the smallest victories!" the grand leader stated, "Or the smallest defeats will end us all."

The elder screwed up his face, trying to comprehend this, but said nothing.

"Hurry up Leo!" Ember said, riding up to me on Eclipse, "I'll show you how to make Mom's famous apple cobbler!"

Chapter 9: Lea's Vision

Upon entering the ballroom, Leo quickly surveyed the room. I hoped he would notice me and come over, but he didn't. I assumed that with my new outfit, style, and being partly buried in red pillows, even my parents wouldn't be even able to recognize me. Leo and Ember then followed one of the guards over to a table where several of the generals and their wives were sitting.

"Didn't look like your brother recognized you," Yrited chuckled.

"Yeah, you think?" I laughed, "I'll have to go over to him soon enough."

"They'll have the dancing soon," Yrited added, "And then maybe you can get up."

I nodded and reached for my glass cup nearby, but as I lifted it up to my face, I realized that it was more of that wine.

"What?" Yrited said, "You're looking at the drink like it's poisonous!"

"I need juice," I whispered to Yrited.

This time Yrited groaned, "Here, have one of these pomegranates – it has a lot of moisture in it."

I had never tasted a pomegranate before in my life, but it turned out to be quite good. Originally, I had thought that I would only have one or two of the foods, but the discussion between the king and the princes was getting to be very long and tiresome, and I kept getting hungry. It was while I was reaching for a third pastry with some sort of berry jam filling that the king stopped talking to his family and turned to Yrited and I.

"So, Yrited," he said, "What is your theory on the attack on your kingdom?"

"I'm not sure. It was a surprise to all of us!" Yrited responded, "None of us, at least as far as I know, expected it!"

"That is weird, and I'm not sure why they would attack such a remote castle," the king chewed on his nut contemplatively, "It's isn't the most strategic fortification."

"That's what I have been thinking," Yrited continued, "And we have some really strong guards and soldiers as well! The dark knights probably lost a good number of their warriors in the process."

"If anything, they harmed themselves just as much or more than they harmed you!" one of the princes chimed in.

Yrited shrugged her shoulders, "Have you heard anything from my parents?"

"They were captured," the king asserted, "and the dark knights are asking a ransom for them, but I've already paid it. Your parents should be back here in a few days or so."

"How much was it?" I asked.

"Ha ha, not nearly as much as Yrited's parents are worth," the king laughed jovially.

"That reminds me of the time when I was captured by a band of marauders in the south," one of the princes began, launching into an obviously exaggerated story of his travels.

Presently, some men and women with weird looking instruments arrived in the ballroom and began to play a strange form of music. I had heard this type of music once in one of my music classes at high school, but it had been a while.

"I hope Verner asks me to dance," Yrited whispered to me.

I giggled, "Well then I hope that for you too."

"And I need to introduce you to some of the other eligible boys," Yrited responded.

"That really isn't necessary-", I began, but I was cut off as Yrited gasped.

As soon as the music had started, some of the castle's servants had started clearing away tables while a few of the royalty had started to dance. From among the crowd of people at the banquet emerged a tall boy dressed in purple robes and with a small leather belt around his waist.

"Oh no," Yrited gasped, "It's George!"

"But wait," I told Yrited, "There's another guy coming behind him."

"That's Verner," Yrited groaned.

"What's bad about that?" I asked as the two men approached rapidly.

"George will get here first and ask me to dance first!"

"That's not that bad," I said, "Just reject it."

"I can't," Yrited said, "Refuse the son of one of the most powerful kings of the white knights?!"

"Uh, yeah?" I said, still confused why that was a bad idea.

Just at that time, though, a few of the king's daughters and their husbands got up and started to walk towards the ever-growing group of dancers. This caused the two boys to have to stop and bow as the princesses and princes walked by.

"Quick!" Yrited told me, "Go talk to George and keep him distracted!"

"Me?!" I cried out, "Why me?!"

"Because if he is busy with you, then he can't talk to me!"

"But that's just awkward," I resisted.

"C'mon, Lea," Yrited begged me, "For me? I'll owe you big time!"

By this time, the princesses had reached the crowd of dancers and Verner and George were only a few meters away from where Yrited and I were reclining.

I sucked in a large breath of air, stood up, and bravely approached George.

Chapter 10: Leo's Observations

Don't get me wrong, I had tried really hard to spot Lea, but I had had no luck – even Ember had not been able to pick her out.

"Where do you think she is?" I whispered to Ember as we followed the guard towards one of the tables.

"Not sure, there are too many people here," Ember whispered back.

After the great feast in the Elven kingdom, I had gotten news of Lea's arrival here at the castle. Immediately the next morning, I convinced Ember to escort me over here so that I could talk with Lea. Turns out that the white knights were very hospitable and were quite excited to see me.

"We are very glad to have you here," the eldest general said, bowing slightly to me as Ember and I arrived at his table.

"And I am as well," I responded gallantly, taking a seat opposite him.

At the table were several soldiers and their wives (I assumed).

"It has been the rumor that you have been with the dark knights!" one of the other soldiers commented.

"I have," I told him, "And I found out that not all of them are as blood thirsty as you may think!"

"Are you serious?" another soldier gasped, "You are kidding. Right?"

"Not at all," Ember added, "Xee even helped get Leo and I out of a tight spot."

The general's eyes narrowed, but he seemed intrigued by this.

"So they weren't interested in you being on their side?" the general quizzed me.

"I mean, sure. Xee even said that if I spent long enough with you, I'd come back to the dark knights, but he didn't prevent me from leaving. I would even say he encouraged me to leave!" I answered the general.

"Very intriguing indeed!"

"That reminds me," another of the soldiers said, "Jeff found a great stand of trees near our border with the trolls which could enable us to create an ambush..."

This new conversation then attracted the attention of the soldiers at the table and allowed Ember and I to talk between ourselves.

"Most of this food is inferior to ours," Ember said, poking at the dishes of various meats and breads.

"I like these fruits though," I said, shoving one into my mouth.

"That is one thing that these white knights have going for them," Ember admitted, "They have lots of good fruits and nuts. I think they import them from the merchants."

It was while I was chewing through my third exotic nut, that some musicians arrived in the great hall and started playing. Promptly, many of the couples left to go dance.

"Look!" I said to Ember, "I think that's the king over there."

"Yep, and those are his daughters and their husbands," Ember added.

"Who are those guys?" I asked Ember, pointing to two young gentlemen quickly walking towards the king.

Ember laughed, "That's George and Verner. Yrited likes Verner, and George likes Yrited. We'll see who reaches Yrited first."

"Whoa! She's just jumping up right away!" I said, noticing Yrited quickly stand up and stumble a little on her dress.

"That's not Yrited," Ember said, squinting her eyes a little, "That's...that's Lea!"

"Lea?!" I exclaimed as she headed straight for George. Lea then said something to George which caused George to stop. Verner quickly passed up George and walked over to another girl who I assumed was the actual Yrited.

"Yeah that other girl is Yrited," Ember said, "Why is Lea talking with George?"

"I have no idea," I laughed, "Lea has never been interested in boys, and no wonder I didn't notice her. She looks *completely* different!"

Ember and I gaped as George then linked arms with Lea, and they walked over to the crowd of dancers – Verner and Yrited following behind.

"What... apparition...am I seeing?" I mumbled to myself.

"Does Lea dance?" Ember said, "Seeing as you are from the future."

"Lea is a great dancer," I told Ember, "But I don't think she knows this sort of dance..."

"She's learning fast though!" Ember said, indicating Lea who was sort of "winging" the dance.

"Good for her," I commented, "I can't dance to save my life. Do you dance?"

"Yes, but only Elven dances," Ember answered, "This sort of dance really isn't my thing."

I reached for another fig and leaned back a bit in my wooden chair, "All the soldiers left."

"That crowd is growing as we speak," Ember said, "We probably should get up soon since the servants are clearing out all these tables."

It was while I was disentangling my legs from the table and trying to grab as many dates and nuts to-go as possible, that I heard a quiet thud over the din of dancing feet and music.

I promptly whirled around to the source of the noise. What followed was a chorus of screams of ladies and yells from men.

"Too much wine for someone," Ember grimaced.

"Or too many nuts," I commented, shoving another into my mouth.

Ember rolled her eyes.

From the crowd of people that were grouped around where the noise had come from, emerged one of the soldiers who swiftly ran over to Ember and I.

"It's Lea!" he yelled to me, "She's fainted!"

I gasped and raced over to the group of people, furiously pushing through them. There on the ground laid Lea. George, Yrited, and a few other men were bending down over her. What was weird was that she was breathing and had her eyes open – she hadn't fainted, but she made no movement.

"Lea!" I said to her, patting her on the head, "Talk to me!"

I waited a few seconds and was about to pat her harder on the head when her eyes blinked and she sat up very quickly. Knocking her head with George's.

"Wha-what is going on?!"

"That's what I want to know!" I said to her, bending down to her, "I think you had a seizure!"

"Leo!" she exclaimed, giving me a big hug, "You came over!"

I nodded and asked, "What happened?"

Lea screwed up her face and said, "I had the most realistic dream that I have ever had!"

"What happened in it?" a booming voice said from behind me. I turned around to see the king himself standing there.

"Well uh, I was just dancing here with George when suddenly I found myself in this large field. I was confused, so I looked around and saw a massive army of ogres and trolls and other weird creatures marching towards me. Of course, I was scared, so I ran towards a clump of trees nearby," Lea described, "And that's when I woke up again."

"What kind of field was it?" the king questioned.

"Well uh, there were these small pink and orange flowers every so often and there was shin-length, green grass," Lea responded.

"What about the trees?" the king quizzed.

"Uh, they were evergreens," Lea said.

"Evergreens?" the king said, confused.

"Large green trees with needles for leaves," I described.

"Oh dear," the king mumbled.

"What is it?" one of the princes asked.

"Don't you see?!" the king's voice boomed across the now silent hall, "I want every nearby white king and his army to get contacted as soon as possible!"

Several of the soldiers jumped to their feet.

"Tell them we are about to be attacked, and that they should get here as soon as possible," the king continued, "and tell them to hurry and get over here *fast*."

"Yes sir!" the messengers exclaimed, racing off.

"I don't understand," the general spoke from nearby, "How do you know this?"

"Does no one study ancient prophecies?" the king sighed, "Lea i's the scepter. This means she will be able to see the future."

"Oh," Ember said from beside me, "She just saw Grower's field!"

"And those trees were the small clumps that one of my men was just talking about!" a general exclaimed, "That's why the trolls and ogres were not at our siege on the dark knights' stronghold – they were preparing to attack us!"

"Precisely," the king sighed, "I want all of you to prepare for battle posthaste. Get as many provisions as possible locked up in here as you can."

"And you," the king said, pointing to Lea and I, "Need to get some rest, because we are going to need you."

Chapter 11: Alina's Advance

Honestly, I thought that the dark knights had done a pretty bang-up job with their plan. The attack and capture of Zadok's stronghold was certainly unfortunate, but once our group of men and Xee's met up, we were then able to form a formidable army. It was at this time that we heard of the trolls and ogres' plan to attack and invade the territory of the white knight kingdom nearby.

I now found myself on the back of my brown horse next to Xee and Zadok as we marched on a wide, dirt road towards the castle. Every now and again, we met up with a sentry tower, but they had all been abandoned.

"This feels wrong," Zadok said after the third empty sentry tower, "These towers should have been manned."

"Pssh," Xee laughed, "Of course they're empty. The king almost assuredly drew all of his men back to protect the castle."

"But how would they know we're attacking?" I asked, "We've captured all the soldiers that we've seen – so no one could have alerted them."

"Yeah, but they have the scepter over there," Xee told us, "So they know our every move."

"Wait, the white knights have the scepter, too! Already?!" Zadok exclaimed, "How do you know that?"

"Because I heard of her arrival when I was over at the elven kingdom," Xee replied.

"How in the world did you hear that? Surely it wasn't common news on the street!" Zadok stated.

"No, but after I helped the fighter to defeat all those stone golems, the Elf leader came by and made the announcement."

"You helped the fighter to defeat the stone golems?!" Zadok screamed, "Are you bound and determined to incriminate yourself?!"

"Not at all," Xee replied calmly, spurring his horse to gallop a little faster, "I was more clever than that."

"You had better," Zadok replied, sarcastically, "Those golems were put there on purpose – to keep those annoying elves busy."

"But here's the thing," Xee replied, "I convinced Leo to not come back with me and instead go to the white knights."

"Uh, why?" I asked.

"Is it not obvious?" Xee replied, exasperated, "Now we have *both* of the other deliverers in the same spot!"

"That's the worst plan of all!" Zadok told Xee, very much annoyed, "How are we going to beat an entire army of white knights plus both deliverers?!"

"Is fighting the only thing you think about?" Xee spat back, "We don't fight – we win with diplomacy and just a bit of fighting. Look, when I helped the fighter to defeat the stone golems, I earned his respect. Now, we can ask for a meeting with the king of this realm and the

deliverers. When we can get a small gathering, we then just murder the few people there, and ta-dah!"

"But they're my cousins!" I quickly said, "I don't want them killed!"

There was silence for a minute, then Zadok spoke, "We wouldn't kill them unless we had to."

"But we don't have to!" I exclaimed.

"Unfortunately, we do," Xee spoke up, "His eminence told us that we have to."

"His Eminence?"

"Yeah, he's this mysterious guy that gives us orders that we have to follow, or we get killed," Zadok answered.

"And no one knows who he is?"

"Nope."

"Then why don't you all just revolt?"

"Because whenever someone *does* revolt, they are always found dead. Everyone is afraid to revolt because they end up dead," Xee said.

"But if you *all* revolt, surely he can't kill everyone!"

"Yeah, but they're all scared that they'll be the unlucky one," Zadok answered me.

"I still won't help you kill my cousins," I stated bravely, "I'm sure they wouldn't hurt us if they could avoid it."

"But they are probably convinced that they're on the right side now. Don't think they wouldn't kill you," Xee replied gravely.

"They wouldn't!" I responded confidently.

"Are you sure? They could save a lot of innocent peasants' and soldiers' lives if they did kill you," Zadok told me.

"But...but I'm their cousin!" I said, getting a bit scared.

"One life isn't worth as much as several," Xee replied sadly.

At this point I was just mad. Mad that things had gotten to this point; mad that my cousins hadn't stayed around to help me; mad that I would be fighting against them; mad that I had even gotten myself into this mess.

"ARRGGGHHHH!" I growled.

Then, as if on cue, I had the strangest sensation – as if I should call out to something. I felt like I had to put my arms out and wave them around. So I did.

Xee and Zadok watched in amazement as a red glow appeared around me; then, almost instantly a massive shadow fell over us all.

The army of ogres, trolls, minotaurs, and dark knights stared up in horror as the biggest dragon that we had ever seen descended in front of us. It's body was probably two hundred meters long, with a tail of proportional size. It's colossal head was outfitted with several spikes and sported two squinted eyes and an imposing jaw. The dragon raised his head to the sky and released a massive cloud of fire that burned and sizzled in the late morning air.

The soldiers stepped back in alarm, unsure of what to do, but Zadok smiled evilly.

"Looks like our deliverer here has finally found her form," Zadok crowed.

"Forward men!" Zadok cried, "For His Eminence!"

The army started to move forward again, but I stared at the dragon.

"I don't know how to instruct it though," I told Zadok.

“Just talk to it, probably,” Zadok said.

“Uh, dragon?” I called out to it, “Could you, uh, move out of the way for us?”

Instantly, the dragon flapped his strong, gray wings and rose into the air – demolishing some of the forest on the sides of the road in the process. It then proceeded to hover over us as we urged our mounts forward.

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It took at least another few hours before the castle came into sight. It was certainly the biggest castle I had ever seen (mostly because I had never seen a castle before in real life), and it was surrounded by hundreds of thousands of white knights, catapults, archers, and various other contraptions. They spotted us at roughly the same time as we spotted them - as it was hard to miss a colossal, dark gray dragon flying over the top of a several thousand horde of enemy soldiers.

“What’s the plan again?” Zadok asked Xee.

“A few of our elite soldiers, Alina, and I will wave some white flags and request a meeting with the king. There, we’ll stage our murder,” Xee affirmed.

“But my cousins,” I said again.

“They’ll have to go,” Zadok told me, “We have no other choice.”

As much as my cousins annoyed me, I couldn’t possibly allow them to get killed, so I made a mental note to let the white knights know about Xee’s plan. After commanding my dragon to wait with Zadok, I followed the group of two dozen elite warriors down to the valley where the castle stood. Every single one of us was given a white flag to wave in the air, and we did so quite prominently. As we approached the first line of soldiers, we received a lot of sneers and insults, but they let us through when Xee said he wanted to speak with the king. The progress was very slow as we had to trek around all the catapults and defensive walls, but eventually we made it to the castle’s drawbridge and the portcullis was raised just long enough for us to slip through. We were then escorted by a squadron of white knights to a large, stone building whose double doors were standing wide open.

“You and the deliverer may come inside, but the rest of you are required to stand outside,” the officer told Xee.

“Very well then,” Xee answered, “But I request that my and Alina’s bodyguard come as well.”

“Just them,” the general answered.

We dismounted and walked into the meeting hall. Inside sat the king, several officers, Leo, and Lea, as well as a variety of other soldiers standing around the room. Xee sat down opposite the king with his bodyguard on the left. I sat on Xee’s right with Joel on my right. I had forgotten that Joel was with us, but he had been hand-picked by Xee to come with us, and I was glad about it.

“Alina!” Lea exclaimed, “I’m so glad you are alright!”

“Me too!” I laughed nervously, “I trust that you guys are okay?”

“Yep,” Leo said confidently, forgetting that he probably shouldn’t be speaking, “I got kidnapped by some elves, but Ember and Xee here helped me escape.”

I looked up and saw Leo’s annoying bodyguard elf behind him.

“Uh huh,” I answered, “Hey, are you guys going to join us?”

"No way," Leo said, "Sorry Xee, but the white knights are much nicer than the dark ones. I was hoping you'd join us Alina! We're cousins after all, and we could use your epic dragon!"

"Ahem," the king cleared his throat, "This is not exactly the best time for catching up. We have a few *matters* to discuss."

"Exactly," Xee spoke up, "I was thinking that to avoid bloodshed, we should work out a treaty. Our great Eminence requests that we be given the other two deliverers."

"That ain't happening," the king laughed, "You really don't think that we're *that* stupid. Do you?"

"No," Xee replied sharply, "But otherwise, we'll be forced to obliterate you in battle."

"You wish," the king scoffed, "How about this? You give *us* the traitor, and we promise to not fight you."

"Fat chance," Xee chuckled, "We need her dragon, and *her*."

Leo banged his head on the table in frustration, "No one told me this was going to be so booooooring."

Apparently Leo was back to thinking he was such a big shot and was being incredibly rude.

"Well, then," the king replied, a bit annoyed, "Why don't you and your sister and cousin go outside to catch up, as I talk to *this* gentleman here?"

"It's okay with me," Xee said quickly.

"Great idea!" Leo said, jumping up from the table, "C'mon sis!"

I was secretly glad to get away from the meeting, as I predicted it would go on for a while with no real decisions being made. It was while I was leaving the building that I suddenly realized why Xee had been so quick to let us go outside. I quickly glanced over at the group of dark knight warriors outside being watched by the white knights and noticed some of them reach for their weapons. As Joel and Ember were distracted talking with one of the door guards, I quickly jumped over to Leo and Lea.

"Guys," I whispered to them, "I need to tell you something urgent."

"What?" Lea asked innocently.

"You're about to get murdered," I told them.

"What?!" Leo said, yanking the sword off his back and lunging backward into a defensive posture. Seeing Leo pull out his weapon, Ember immediately assumed that I had originally attacked Leo, so she jumped on top of me – tackling me to the ground. Joel then, upon seeing me attacked by Ember, ripped Ember off my back and punched her hard in the head.

"Wait!" I told Joel, grabbing him by the arm.

"Watch out!" Leo cried out, launching himself at all of us as the dark knight warriors suddenly attacked him and Lea. No sooner did Leo, pulling Lea, reach out and grab my arm than the strangest thing happened; we immediately found ourselves on decrepit, wooden floorboards. Joel flung Ember away from him and pulled out his axe to attack Leo – intending to help his comrades, but Leo met the attack with his sword and dodged.

"Guys! Stop fighting!" Lea screamed, "We aren't in the same place!"

Taken aback, Joel stopped his furious attack and whipped around. I got to my feet and looked around too. We were in a very old shack now.

"Uh oh," Leo said, "We're back in our world."

"We're where?" Ember cried out from the corner.

"In our world," I repeated.

"What's that mean?" Joel said, lowering his axe.

"It means, we all need to find a way to get you and Ember back to your world," Lea stated.

"How?" Leo said, "I don't even know how we got here from *their* world!"

"Well we simply can't have them here!" Lea argued.

"I'm confused," Ember said, "So this is where you came from? A funky shack?"

"Sort of," I told her, "It's kind of a long story."

"Let's try the door again," Leo told us, leading the way to the forest outside.

"I don't think I'd ever be so happy to see this creepy forest again!" Lea cried out, dancing around.

Ignoring his sister, Leo carefully closed the old house's door and reopened it - stepping into the house.

"Rats," Leo said from inside, "Nothing happened."

"Let me try," I said, opening the door. I stepped through but only found myself surrounded by the usual rotting wood.

"This is so not good," Leo groaned, "What are my parents going to say?!"

"We're HOOMMEEEE!!!!" Lea shouted ecstatically from outside, "Yippee!"

"Maybe we should wait for a day and then come back?" I said hesitantly.

"But what are we going to do with them," Leo moaned, opening the door back up and pointing at Joel and Ember who were glaring at each other.

"Don't look at me," I stated, "I've never been the brains of any operation."

"Cousins," Leo sighed, "Do you think we could convince my parents to have a sleepover? Maybe we could try again tomorrow to get back to their world."

"I mean, maybe," Lea said slowly, finally calming down, "but how do we explain an elf and an overly-buff warrior?"

"We could say they're from our school's drama club?" Leo suggested.

"None of our drama club members are this realistic," Lea sighed.

"It's the best we got," I stated.

"Can't we just leave them here in the forest?" Leo said.

"Not a good idea," I said, "Who knows what trouble they could get into!"

"Hey, I'm still here!" Ember spoke up, "I'm not invisible!"

"But you have no clue how to act here!" Leo said exasperated.

"It couldn't be that hard to adjust to," Joel spoke up as a jet plane flew overhead.

"DRAGON!" Ember cried out, jumping into the bushes and pulling Leo with her.

"Owe!" Leo cried out, "That's not a dragon, that's an airplane!"

"What's an airplane?" Joel said, hiding behind a nearby tree.

"It's a man-made contraption that flies," I replied dryly.

"Like a bird?" Ember said from the bush.

"Yeah, but flown by a human," I finished.

"Doesn't look like much or any time has passed since we first were here," Leo said, "If we hurry back home maybe we can get there before the parents do and give the others a crash course in modern living."

With no objections having surfaced, Leo led the way back through the forest. Ember followed him closely while Joel stuck next to me. Lea walked in between us to prevent any unfortunate

run-ins between Joel and Ember. Presently, we arrived at the vacant lot that was a few blocks from my uncle and aunt's house.

"What in the name of Vargu's rotten teeth?!" Joel exclaimed upon seeing all the houses and roads, "What is this?!"

"It's where they live, dummy," Ember said, "Though I'm confused what those monsters are that keep roaring by."

"Those aren't monsters," Leo groaned, "Their cars."

"Cars?"

"Yeah, like self-moving wagons," Leo said, "Without any horses or donkeys or anything."

"But, how is that possible?" Joel said, confused.

"I'm not gonna explain," Leo sighed.

"It's...it's magic?" Lea suggested.

"Well, well, well... if it ain't the three stooges!" I heard a voice from my right call out. I turned to see four of the neighborhood bullies step out from behind some trash cans.

"Leave us alone," Leo growled, "We haven't done anything wrong."

"Where did you find these costumed fools?" the leader said, pointing to Joel and Ember.

"You wouldn't believe us if we told you," I added.

"Oh sure," the leader cackled, "You've probably been playing dress-up and tea party out in the woods."

"Very funny," Leo spat, "now scram."

"Oh well, then, we wouldn't want to bother you," the leader taunted, moving in on us, "It seems like you need to know who's boss around here, Leo."

"Stay away from Alina," Joel said, stepping in front of me.

"Your cuz got a bf?" one of the bullies laughed, "He looks like he needs to buy himself a bigger shirt."

"And you look like you got yourself a girlfriend finally," one of the other bullies said, pointing to Ember who was standing close to Leo.

Leo's face reddened.

"Leave us alone, or you'll pay," Ember growled.

"I'm not afraid of hitting pussy girls," the leader laughed, "Take this!"

With that the leader lunged forward and smacked Ember hard in the stomach. Ember keeled over.

"Bahahaha!" the other bullies laughed.

"Whump!" The leader bully was suddenly launched into the air as Ember spun around and smacked him hard in the side. He flew through the air and collided painfully with a nearby concrete wall – bouncing off it and crumpling to the ground. The other bullies then converged on Ember, but she was now warmed up, and the bullies were not prepared for her skills. Joel wasn't even able to lift a finger before all three of them were lying on the ground in various states of pain.

"I didn't know we had a karate club for girls at our school," the main bully groaned.

"They don't," I told him, "She's from my school."

"Uh, yeah, that," Ember added.

"C'mon," Lea said to us all, "Let's hurry and get home before the parents do!"

"Now, here you have to be on your *best* behavior," Lea was insisting as we walked alongside the surbaban neighborhood that my cousins' lived on, "No more fighting!"

"Are most people here like those boys?" Ember asked.

"No," Leo quickly replied, "In fact very few of them are!"

"That's debatable," Leo added.

"Shush," I told him, "Don't confuse them."

"Look!" Joel cried out, "That young lady caught a wolf and is dragging it away!"

"That's not a wolf," I told him, "That's a pet dog, and that lady is his owner!"

"Oh, we have something like that at home," Joel quickly said, trying to save face.

"What funny trees though!" Ember commented, pointing to the light poles.

"No, those are light poles," Leo stated.

"What are light poles?" Ember asked.

"They're like magic torches that turn on at night," I said in simple terms.

"And what is that guy moving across that grass?"

"Uh, that's a lawn mower, it automatically cuts grass," I said.

"Everything is such self-propelling!" Joel said in astonishment, "You must be so bored!"

"Well, that's sort of true," Leo chuckled.

"I love your costume dearies." Leo and Lea's older neighbor lady called out to us from her porch where she was rocking in an old, wooden chair.

"Why thank you," Ember replied, curtsying.

The older lady stared in shock at this, but quickly recovered to say, "Such manners! You really need to teach that to your friends there." The lady then stared pointedly at Lea and Leo who looked away just as quickly.

"C'mon guys," I told them, "We need to get to your house."

A block later, we reached my uncle and aunt's house, and Leo let us in through the side gate and the unlocked back door.

"Take your shoes off!" Lea told Joel and Ember, "and do wash off your hands!"

"My shoes?!" Joel asked in amazement, "Why would I do that?!"

"Because that's the parent's rules," Lea replied.

"Okaayyyy," Joel said, removing his leather boots. Immediately the smell of several weeks' worth of unwashed feet filled the room. Lea doubled over coughing.

Ember removed her shoes as well, but thankfully her feet didn't smell, or at least it wasn't noticeable over that of Joel's.

"You can wash your hands over here," Leo told Ember and Joel, directing them over to the sink. It was almost comical seeing them try to figure out how to turn the water on, wash their hands, and use a dish towel.

"Oh, and you should probably leave your weapons in the garage," I added, smirking, "Uncle and Aunt probably wouldn't like you carrying those all around the house."

"But I always carry my bow and arrows with me!" Ember replied, offended.

"Don't worry, you won't need them," Leo insisted.

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It was while Leo and Lea were attempting to show Ember and Joel how to play "Robotic Doomsday 4" that my uncle and aunt came home.

"We're home!" Uncle Carl called out, pushing open the door and dropping a heavy grocery bag of cans down on the floor.

"I'll help!" I shouted racing over to the bag and lifting it up.

Ember immediately left her console on the couch and went over to my relatives, bowing deeply.

"Thank you for your hospitality today," Ember told them, "I am very glad to meet the parents of the esteemed deliverers."

Aunt Carlina was just entering the house carrying bags of vegetables, and at this she practically dropped her bags.

"Why thank you?" Carlina said. Then, looking over at me, mouthed the words, "Who is she?"

"I'm so sorry, Mom," said Leo, coming up beside me, "But Alina invited over some friends from her drama club to have a sleepover tonight."

I could have punched Leo for blaming me for the visitors, but at least the excuse made some sense.

"Epic costume!" Carl said, gesturing to Ember's elf outfit, "Looks so realistic too!"

"It was made by the finest Elven craftsmen!" Ember beamed proudly.

"So it is!" Uncle chuckled.

"Why is this character I'm controlling here only have a weird stick?" Joel asked from the couch where he was desperately trying to understand what a video game is.

"That's a gun," Lea told him quickly, "You use it like a bow and arrows, sort of..."

I deposited my bag of groceries on the floor in the kitchen and came back into the living room.

"I was thinking of making chicken sandwiches tonight," Carlina stated, "With some carrots and Doritos."

"I can pluck the feathers off the chicken!" Joel offered from the couch.

Carl doubled over laughing, "Oh, my goodness, that's a good one!"

Carlina raised her eyebrows but said, "Oh, that won't be necessary."

Ember was interested in how dinner was made, and I walked her through it as I helped Carlina make it. Leo and Lea stayed in the living room to help Joel with their video game.

"And this bread is just pre-sliced?!" Ember was saying, as she placed slices out on the counter like Aunt had told her too.

"Yep, and we use this to pour out mustard on the slices!" I said, squeezing out a thin line of condiments from my mustard bottle onto the bread slices.

Carlina then removed a steaming platter of chicken breasts from the microwave and carefully placed one on every other slice of bread.

"Wait, how did you get those cooked?" Ember wanted to know.

"Oh, I just used the microwave," Carlina replied, confused, "It's quicker than using the oven."

"Is the oven what you call a fireplace?"

"Uh no? The fireplace is in the living room," my aunt said.

"We cook things via the microwave," I said, "Kind of a long story."

"Doesn't your family have a microwave?" my aunt asked Ember.

"No, I don't have a family, and I just use the community fire pit," Ember explained.

"Your community has a fire pit?!" Aunt gasped.

"It's part of her character," I remember Aunt.

"Oh," Aunt said, "And don't forget the cheese!"

I searched through the newly-stocked refrigerator and pulled out a block of cheese.

"What's wrong with the cheese?" Ember said with wide eyes, "Why is it square and yellow?"

"Because it is," I laughed.

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Dinner was an even more interesting affair.

At this point, Joel and Ember were starting to show symptoms of shock, and thus stopped asking as many questions. Instead, they started trying to copy whatever we were doing.

Luckily, we were having sandwiches which was finger food that Joel and Ember could handle, but when we got around to having small bowls of fruit salad, they were at a loss on how to wield a fork.

"The store was crazy busy today," Uncle Carl was saying as Leo whispered instructions to Ember on how to hold her fork, "And the clerk took forever to scan our groceries. He must have been new."

"Owe," yiped Joel, stabbing his mouth with his fork.

"Oh! I'm sorry," Aunt Carlina added, "I should have given y'all spoons. These fruits are too small."

"Well, I always say...", Carl began.

"The bigger the better," Leo finished.

"Precisely!" Uncle added, pointing at me with his fork, "The chunkier the fruit, the easier it is to eat it!"

"I'm not sure if that's...", I began.

"Of course it is," Uncle interrupted, "We don't live in the medieval ages here."

It was a good thing that Ember and Joel didn't know the name of their era, or they might have been offended.

"So, uh, Dad," Lea began, "So uh, could we borrow some blankets and pillows for our sleepover?"

"They didn't bring any?" Mom asked, surprised.

"It was sort of spur of the moment," I quickly said, "Their families are traveling in RV's, and it's really cramped in there."

"Oh, I see!" Dad admitted, "I've always thought RV's were a scam."

"It's quite sad," Joel added, "Very small and cramped. No room!"

I was positive Joel had no idea what he was talking about, but it at least backed my lie up.

"Sure, I think I have some more somewhere," Aunt laughed, "I always do!"

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My uncle and aunt went to bed early that night, so it was a great time to party in the living room, but, unfortunately, we were all exhausted from the days' events, and we quickly fell asleep.

However, in the middle of the night, I awoke to the sound of the back screen door creaking open. I groggily sat up, adjusting my eyes to the darkness.

I could see Leo sprawled out near the TV – with one hand on his precious console, Lea was sleeping next to me – completely buried in her blankets, and Ember was over in the corner – sleeping while sitting up which was probably some emergency reaction time saver or something, but Joel was nowhere to be seen – although his sleeping bag was still lying there on the ground.

I stealthily disentangled myself from my own sleeping bag and tip-toed to the back door – which was still open by a crack. I then carefully opened it and slid out – almost running into Joel. Weirdly enough, he was just sitting in one of the lawn chairs on the back porch – staring out into the forest.

“Joel?” I asked him, “What’s up?”

“Oh, oh!” He said, startled, “I was just...I was...I was just thinking I guess.”

“About what?” I said.

“About how nice it is here.”

“Whaddaya mean?”

“I mean, even though my ‘age’ as you call it is all I have ever known, it’s so bloodthirsty,” Joel explained, “And even though I’m a seasoned soldier and bodyguard, I guess I have always wished for a peaceful place like this – where no one carries around weapons and apparently everyone only has your best interest in mind. Even in the dark knight camp, someone was always after my rank, or my weapon, or my stuff or something!”

“I can see that,” I admitted.

“I now know why you like it here,” Joel lamented.

“Well, honestly, it is a bit of a pain living here – my cousins are super annoying most of the time, and there isn’t much to do here. I really liked your world with all of its intrigue and excitement,” I told Joel.

“Yeah, but you haven’t had your family taken from you in some of the most brutal ways possible,” Joel argued, “You’re lucky to even have an uncle and aunt – let alone *know* them!” It was while I was considering this, that the screen door creaked open behind me, and I turned around to see Leo, Ember, and Lea.

“What are you guys doing out here!?” Leo asked suspiciously.

“Well, um, uh, we were uh...,” Joel said, embarrassed to be caught in such an emotional conversation.

“Just about life,” I finished.

“I thought something had happened to you two,” Lea explained, “So I woke up the others.”

“We’re totally fine,” I replied, “Nothing weird going on out here.”

“I heard you talking about not wanting to go back to your world,” Ember finally spoke up.

“You did?” Joel said.

“But that’s crazy,” Ember said, “We don’t even belong here!”

“I know, I know,” Joel answered, “But don’t you wish to be in a peaceful place like this Ember?”

“Not really,” Ember said, “I mean, there’s a lot of good stuff about this place, but I’m not used to it – and it’ll get boring pretty fast.”

“Wow Joel!” Leo chuckled, “I’ve never seen you anything but aggressive!”

“It’s that stupid ‘His Eminence’,” Joel exploded angrily, “Always bossing us around!”

“His what?” Leo said.

“His Eminence, the dude that tells us to go on all these battles,” Joel said.

“Wait, I thought it was always Xee’s and Zadok’s ideas...,” Ember said.

“Well, maybe some of the time, but most of the big expeditions aren’t those guys. If it wasn’t for that ‘His Eminence,’ we probably wouldn’t be doing all that much fighting,” Joel sighed.

"That sounds like the white knights," Ember laughed, "They have some sort of 'His Majesty' hogwash that they keep on talking about."

"What?" Lea replied.

"You didn't hear?" Ember explained, "They apparently get orders from some king guy that none of them seem to have ever met, but if they don't obey, they're all afraid he'll hurt them."

"Your place is screwed," Leo said, "Two random dudes you don't know who making you do their bidding. Sounds like a funky game of chess."

"I know," Ember stated, "That's why we Elves take no orders from *anyone*."

"Wait a minute," Lea said slowly and thoughtfully, "Joel, do you know who told you to attack Yrited's kingdom."

"You mean who told Xee to?" Joel replied.

"Yeah... I guess?"

"It was that Eminence dude," Joel growled.

"And what exactly did he say?"

"I dunno, I never hear his commands first – it's usually passed to the generals by some random order of guys," Joel explained.

"And they just said, 'Attack them!'"

"Something like that I guess," Joel said, confused.

"Doesn't it strike any of you as weird that the two main enemies would *both* have a mysterious commander telling them what to do?" Lea asked us.

"Well, yeah," I said, "But the whole land is off."

"But what if those mysterious guys were not guys..." Lea explained.

"BAHAHAH!" Leo laughed, "Girls? No way."

Ember gave him a piercing glare which shut him up right away.

"No, not girls!" Lea cried out, "Guy! What if it's the same guy!"

"But that's even more insane," Joel argued, "Why would one guy be pitching his two sides against each other! All he's doing is hurting both sides!"

"That's the point!" I gasped, "He *wants* to hurt both sides."

Lea smiled, "Alina's on to it!"

Ember frowned, "But why?"

"Because if there are two weak sides, he can then finally reveal himself, and he'll be too strong to stop," Lea finished.

"Still not sure about all that though," Leo said slowly.

"Think about it," I said, "Joel here says that those that disobey get killed off, but that's just hit and run missions. If *everyone* revolted, there's no way that the mysterious commander would kill everyone."

"Okay," Ember said, "So?"

"So, if he wants a firm control on both sides he has to weaken them to the point where if he finally steps out of the shadows, they'll be too weak to stop him. Then, he can have firm control of *both* sides!" Lea explained.

"Hmmm," Joel said, "That's plausible at least."

"How could we be sure about this though," Leo questioned.

"Let's all revolt!" I exclaimed, "And see what happens!"

"Kinda risky," Ember admitted, "But then again, we've never seen any of this mysterious commander stuff, so I'm not worried about it."

"I guess," Joel said slowly, "But good luck convincing Xee and Zadok."

"And that's only if we can ever get back!" Leo told us, "We still don't know if we can!"

"We'll try again in the morning," the ever-hopeful Lea stated, "Surely whatever weird thing we did to these universes can't stay this way forever."

"My brain just hurts thinking about how this happened," I admitted.

"And mine is still asleep," Leo stated, "I'm going back to bed."

Chapter 12: Leo's Destiny

The next morning, we introduced Ember and Joel to cold cereal. They probably had not had that much sugar in their entire life before - because afterward they were really energetic.

"Let's go to the forest *now*," Ember was saying, "We need to tell the king and the dark knights!"

"Just a minute!" Lea exclaimed, "I want to grab my water bottle because I like my *clean* water!"

But Ember was already out and running. By the time I caught up with her, she was already at the abandoned house.

"So how does this work?" she asked me.

"Well, last time, we just opened the door and stepped inside, but I have no idea if that'll work this time as well!" I stated.

"Wait up guys!" Alina called after us, "We can't run as fast!"

I reached forward and turned the rusty knob on the house, opening it ever so slightly.

"Aha!" Ember crowed triumphantly, "I can see the castle through there!"

"Hurry everyone!" I yelled into the forest, "We may be able to enter at the same place this time!"

A few seconds later, Lea and Alina jogged up, breathing heavily. Ember shoved them through, and Joel and I followed.

I closed the door behind me and saw that we were, indeed, back in the medieval world.

"There's no one around," Joel stated, looking about, "Where did they all go?"

"Not sure," Ember replied slowly, "Let's go to the main throne room."

"It could be we arrived some time after the last time we were here," I stated, "We all arrived in weird places and times on our first arrival."

There was a collective sigh when we arrived at the doors leading to the main part of the castle, for there were several white knights standing around.

"Hey! They're back!" one of the knights called out, upon catching sight of us.

"How long have we been gone?" I asked.

"Uh, just a few hours? Why?" the soldier asked me.

"Just wondering," I replied.

"We need to talk to my leaders and yours immediately!" Joel told the soldier, "It's important!"

The main guard at the doors raised his eyebrows, but said, "Well, you're in luck. They're having a meeting here right now."

"Great!" Lea exclaimed, "Can you let us in?"

"Maybe," he said, "But where did you guys all go? We've been looking for you for a long time."

"Same place we originally came from," I told him, "Kind of a weird way of coming to and from this world."

The poor general still looked confused, but decided it would be a good idea to let us in, so he unlocked the door and gestured with his hand. We quickly ran down the main hall and burst through the doors of the meeting area - which was not the same as the throne room. Inside, were several important White Knight generals, the king, Xee, and a few of his warriors all talking. When we burst in, the conversation immediately stopped.

"Where in the world have you guys been!" Xee roared, "We just spent a few hours looking for you!"

"Sorry," Joel said, "We got transported in an unavoidable way."

"Where?"

"Their world," Ember said - hooking her thumb at me.

"What was it like?" the king asked Ember.

"Crazy," she answered, "But that's not why we are here. We have an idea on how to end this warfare."

"Huh?" Xee said, confused.

"You both are given orders by a mysterious man who threatens you if you don't obey!" Lea told them, "We think that it's probably the same man who is pitching you against each other to weaken you. Thereby, he can gain complete control at some point."

"What...?!" the king said, "That's pretty crazy."

"But think about it," Ember said, "Why else would he send you on such bloody missions - instead of strategic ones?"

"She's got a point," Xee said slowly, "But how do you think we should avoid getting killed by this guy."

"Everyone should revolt at once," I said, "If he isn't powerful enough to come out yet then that probably means he isn't powerful enough to kill everyone."

There was silence for a few minutes as the leaders turned this over in their minds.

"Well, they are the deliverers after all," Xee finally said, "And this is a long time in coming. I'm game for it, and I bet Zadok would too."

"I'll give it a try," the king said.

"Alright then," Xee concluded standing up, "We'll leave here at once. If you have problems with this mysterious man, send me a message, and I'll come running."

"Done," the king agreed, "And likewise here."

"Let's sure hope this works," Xee said to us, as he brushed by, "Or we could be in big trouble."

Because the meeting was adjourned, all of us hurried out of the room and into the main hallway.

"I can't decide if I should stay or leave with Xee," Alina said, "I feel like I should stay and bunk with Lea."

"Inviting yourself huh?" Lea said.

"Well, I'd rather not disturb people to find my own guest room," Alina replied.

"Good idea," Lea said.

"So, uh, what should we do?" I asked them.

"I dunno," Joel said, leaning against the wall.

"I'd head back to my town, but I'm feeling a bit lazy after yesterday," Ember admitted.

"I'm going to go see Shadow," I finally decided, "He's probably missing me."

"How come I don't get a unicorn?" Lea wanted to know.

"Because you're not powerful?" I kidded her.

"Very funny," Lea replied drily.

"Just sayin'," I told her, "Pays to be handy with the sword!"

I raced away before my enraged sister decided that she was handy with her fists. I had to ask directions to where the horses were stabled, but I finally managed to find my way to the main stables. It was actually quite large with at least two dozen stables. Shadow was about halfway in the middle - next to Eclipse's stable.

"Hey boy!" I said to him, "How's it going?"

Shadow, excited by my presence, pranced in his stall.

"We should go for a ride," Ember said from behind me.

"Ack!" I yelled, scared, "Don't sneak up on me like that!"

"Sorry," Ember said, "I'm an elf after all!"

"I have no idea how to properly saddle a horse though, let alone a unicorn!"

"It's easy, I'll show you," Ember said.

Unfortunately, she underestimated the time that I needed to saddle Shadow.

A half hour later, we were riding out of the stables and towards the front gate.

"Let's go down to one or two of those sentry gates," Ember told me, "I'm hoping they re-established their guards there."

"Race you there!" I said, slapping Shadow's reigns.

"Wrong move, Leo!" Ember called to me, "I can ride like you wouldn't believe."

"You wish!" I shouted gleefully as Shadow flashed by the nearby catapults and raced along the cobblestone road. All around the road were the many dark knights and warriors, but they were very busy packing up their own tents and hooking up their portable catapults.

"Looks like the news has traveled fast!" Ember said as she rode up alongside me, "I guess Zadok agreed with the decision!"

"It's cool that you are all going to be free to live in peace now," I said, "You'll enjoy yourselves!"

"Yeah, but I'm going to find that mysterious man if it's the last thing I do!" Ember declared loudly,

"He deserves to pay for enslaving all of us for so long. In a weird way, he's responsible for my parents' death too!"

"Be careful about revenge though!" I said.

"Look, the first sentry tower!" Ember said, pointing to the stately tower.

"Doesn't look like anyone is there yet," I said, riding up to Ember and dismounting Shadow, "Still no one home."

Ember strode up to the back door and tried the handle - the door creaked open.

"Woah!" I said, "Seems weird they'd even leave the doors unlocked!"

"Not really," Ember explained, "They probably were in such a hurry to leave because of the news that they didn't bother with it. The dark knights could have easily brought down the door anyway."

Having never been in a guard tower before, I obviously had to climb the stairs to the top, and when I reached the top, I also had to check out the gate opening mechanism. It was rather crude as far as mechanisms go, with a winch and chain and pulley, but for its time, I'd bet money on it being complex.

"Look at how it works!" I called Ember, "See these thick chains connect to these two pulleys, and these two pulleys are connected by what looks like..."

"Uh, Leo," Ember said to me softly.

"Some very thick iron rods - which in turn are connected to this latch," I continued.

"Leo!" Ember said fiercely, "There's a lot of things in the forest over there!"

"Wait, what? Where!" I said.

"In there," Ember whispered, "I keep hearing the crunching of leaves and stuff, and it couldn't be a dark knight or white knight because they'd be using the normal trail."

"The mysterious man?" I guessed.

"Hmmm, maybe," Ember said.

And with that, out marched an entire group of stone soldiers.

"What?" I whispered to Ember, crouching in the tower so as to not be seen by the soldiers, "I thought we got all of them!"

"I thought so too, but what about Shadow and Eclipse?" Ember whispered back.

At this point, the stone soldiers had breached the forest and were now heading for the cobblestone path that would lead them to the castle. Shadow and Eclipse were on the opposite side of the tower, but, sensing trouble, had flattened themselves against the tower and remained motionless.

"They're smart at least," Ember said.

"But look! More just keep on pouring out!" I exclaimed to Ember, "How many of them are there?!"

"I have never seen so many before!" Ember exclaimed, "There must be hundreds!"

"You don't think this has to do with the mysterious guy do you?" I said.

"How could he find out so quick?!"

"What if...what if he's one of us?" I offered, "That would explain it."

"But it would then hafta be someone who has awesome wizard powers," Ember argued, "And none of us do."

"None of *us*," I said slowly, "But I do know of a powerful wizard."

"Zadok?"

"I mean, it could be," I said slowly.

"He *is* very sketchy," Ember admitted.

"Well, uh, so, we kinda need to get back to the castle to warn everyone very soon," I told Ember.

"Yeah," Ember agreed, "We're going to have to make a break for it."

"Let's just burst out of the door down there, and I keep them busy while you get the unicorns," I suggested.

"Well, unless you want to try to shinny down that chain, I guess that's the best we got," Ember replied.

"Lez go!"

With Ember in the lead, we raced down the stairs and threw open the door at the bottom. The door promptly swung open wide and knocked down the closest stone soldiers. The other ones nearby turned around in alarm.

"Take this!" I howled, blasting them apart with a hasty swing of my sword's blue plasma.

I followed this up with an inverted back twist and quick chop to the stone soldiers on the opposite side of the door. There was some incoherent mumbling from the rest of the stone soldiers as they realized that they had been discovered; then chaos. To me, the more enemies in a certain amount of square feet, the more enemies I could knock out with a swing of my blade. Thus, in the few seconds it took Amber to bring the unicorns back around, I had already annihilated a good few dozen of the soldiers.

"Climb on!" Ember called out to me, atop Eclipse, "The other soldiers are still making good time towards the castle!"

If we hadn't been going fast when we had originally raced to the tower, we were certainly going fast now. Shadow almost tore up the road as we raced by the long line of stone soldiers that had mysteriously come out of the forest. Obviously, the warriors did notice us as we flew by, but their reaction time was slow enough, and we were traveling fast enough that they really couldn't do anything to stop us. We were about halfway to the castle when we passed the front wave of stone soldiers and in another two minutes we had reached the first of the dark knights.

"Hey guys!" I yelled to them, "Watch out! We got like a dozen..."

I trailed off when I noticed all of the warriors and creatures running about like chickens with their heads cut off.

"What's up with them?" Ember wanted to know.

"Let's hurry and go to the castle," I said, "We don't have time for this."

I spurred Shadow onward, and we galloped into the main courtyard soon enough. The problem was that the courtyard was full of white knights - including the king and Lea and Alina.

"What's going on?!" I exclaimed, reigning a very excited Shadow in.

"Zadok was found dead in his tent!" Lea exclaimed, "Well, his staff and clothes were found in a heap and a note was on top saying 'This is what happens to those who defy my orders.'"

"So, we can pretty much say that it *is* one guy now?!" I said.

"Yeah," Alina spoke up, "But now everyone is really scared."

"Well, prepare to get more so, because there's a massive army of stone soldiers on their way here!" Ember shouted out loud, "So get to your positions everyone!"

"More trouble?!" the king cried out, "This was a very bad idea!"

"We couldn't have known!" the main general cried out from nearby, "Why hasn't the mysterious guy summoned all these stone soldiers earlier if he has so many?!"

"I think that's everyone's question," I said.

"Alright, I want all of you to start closing up the castle, and I want all the archers and consequent deliverers up in the castle towers sniping off all the stone soldiers when they arrive," the general spoke out, "But wait to raise the drawbridge and close the portcullis until all the dark knights get in that want to."

The king nodded his head in approval, and I slipped off Shadow and handed the reins to Alina.

"Get him into the stables. I'm heading with Ember to the castle's watch towers," I told her.

"I'm sure coming to!" Alina told me, shoving the reins in Lea's hands, "I got a massive dragon! Remember?!"

"Of course, of course," I told her, "Lez go!"

A few nearby archers led the way to the castle's front right tower, and the rest of us followed. It took quite a while to scale all those steps, but eventually we reached the sheltered top of the tower and got a good look around. I preliminarily couldn't see any of the stone soldiers, but a few of the dark knights were running towards the castle while others fortified the clearing with more fencing and a few daring ones ran off down the road.

"Look!" Ember cried out, "There's stone soldiers coming from the west too!"

Sure enough, a massive horde of stone soldiers had already emerged from the west and were rapidly approaching the clearing where knights were readying their catapults.

"We're probably surrounded," another of the soldiers said, "I'll bet that mysterious guy has set this whole thing up!"

"Oh joy," I commented.

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Five hours later, it was late evening and starting to get dark, but the stone soldiers had not stopped pouring out of the forest. They had now advanced three quarters of the way through the clearing around the castle. The general had decided to leave the portcullis up and the drawbridge down so that we could switch out soldiers as they grew tired out on the battlefield. This worked well for them, but I was in high demand, and I couldn't be replaced. In addition, poor Lea was having those visions in quick succession, so the king had decided that she should just lay down. Each vision told us where a surge of stone soldiers would attack. Then, the messengers would rush out, pull me out of the current tower and position me in the one closest to the direction of the assault. This allowed us to keep the stone soldiers busy for quite a while. However, it was soon getting dark, and it was now very hard to see where I should aim. Ember and the other archers, even though they had better eyesight, were starting to have similar difficulties. The stone soldiers were also apparently having difficulties as they kept stumbling into wooden spikes and catapults and some even into the moat, but there were so many of them, that a few casualties didn't matter.

"Leo!" the messenger yelled to me, rushing up the stairs for the umpteenth time that day, "You need to go to the west tower!"

"Ugh," I groaned, "I won't be able to grip *anything* for a week after this!"

Ember gave me a stern look, and I quickly followed the messenger down. Outside, the entire castle courtyard had been turned into a medic and recuperation zone.

I had just about made my way through the maze of blankets and cots when I heard a bark of orders to my right.

"Wait!" the king called out, "I'm calling all the soldiers in. We'll camp here for the night and resume in the morning!"

"But the stone soldiers will then be able to walk onto the castle!" the king's wiry assistant chirped.

"There's a massive moat to protect us," the king reminded him.

"But at this rate, they'll have filled it in with their bodies in only a dozen hours!" the assistant argued.

"That's all we need," the king said, "In the meantime, we can probably squeeze a few more hours of work from Leo before he drops dead."

"Hopefully not literally," I muttered.

It was while I was blasting away at the darkness around the castle - losing all will to aim precisely, since it really didn't matter, and with Ember smacking me every minute or so to keep me up, that I noticed the light being emitted from the forest.

At first, it was barely noticeable, but to my bloodshot eyes, the light was bothersome. Then, it got brighter, and Ember noticed a trail of smoke above it.

"Are they setting the forest on fire?!" I exclaimed, waking up.

"That's just cruel," Ember scowled.

This was then followed by a massive shaking of the earth; then, something tall and black rose up from the forest. In complete shock, I watched as the massive shadow grew taller and taller, finally dwarfing the forest below.

"It's like a massive stone soldier, with fire in its hands!" Ember cried out.

We stared in shock as it stepped forward - crushing an entire patch of trees and small stone soldiers in the mix. Furiously, I fired at it with my sword - causing an entire cascade of explosions on its stone armor. It did look like I was doing a good deal of damage, but it only took a half minute for the monster to reach the moat, and in that time, I was only able to chip away a bit of the main torso - despite my best efforts.

"Wait... look!" Ember said, "There's someone standing on its head!"

"What's going on, what is going on?!" a soldier shouted to us, as he and a bunch of men thundered up the steps.

"That *thing* just came out of nowhere, and there's someone there on the top," Ember told them, squinting.

"Ah, yes, It is I!" the voice cried out. It was Zadok. His voice was much louder than normal and must have been enhanced by some spell or something, because I could hear it very close to me - despite him being far away.

"But, I thought he died," a nearby soldier whispered to us all.

"You have lasted longer than I thought, but it's growing dark," Zadok said, "And I'm tiresome of your deliverers here - especially that dragon that won't leave me alone."

Zadok gestured to Alina's massive dragon that was swirling around the monster and blasting it with fire every few seconds.

"It is my pleasure to demolish them in your very sight!" Zadok sneered.

"You try that!" Ember screamed out across the moat.

"I will," Zadok said, "But I can't kill them from this distance. I think I'll just steal their powers!"

With that, the small figure of Zadok started dancing around and chanting something very creepy sounding.

"Get him now!" Ember hissed in my ear.

Summoning all my strength, I estimated the angle needed to knock him off the stone monster and released a bolt of energy. Unfortunately, my estimation was off and it sped over him with a few meters to spare. My next try was even closer - just barely missed him.

"Za-wa-he-hi-za-wa-hummmm!" Zadok shouted, slamming his staff into the stone warrior's head. At the very same time, I steadied my arm, squeezed my sword's handle with all my might and let it fly. There was a brief moment of silence; followed by a very powerful concussion and a gut-wrenching scream.

When the smoke disappeared in the last light of the day, I saw the great monster's head dislodge and fall straight into the moat - creating a tidal wave of water that knocked several of the stone warriors on the shore nearby, off their feet.

"Is that it?" a nearby soldier breathed after a minute, "Did we win?"

"Kaboom, kaboom, KABOOM!"

As if on cue, three more massive, stone soldiers just as big as the first jumped up from the forest and advanced on the castle.

"They just don't stop!" I groaned, squeezing my sword again.

"Aim for the head again," Ember advised, "That seems to be the weak..."

Ember trailed off as Alina's dragon, which was just flying by our tower towards the oncoming

giants, suddenly disappeared in a massive cloud of mist. At that same time, the blue glow around my sword, as I squeezed it, fizzled out as well.

"Uh oh," I mumbled.

"Don't tell me!" Ember groaned.

"I think Zadok's spell worked," I said quietly.

"We're toast," one of the soldiers said.

"I need to go see Lea and Alina!" I said, racing back down the tower's steps.

I exploded out of the tower's door and raced across the main square where I had last seen my sister and cousin.

"Guys!" I shouted to them.

"I know!" Alina shouted back, "Zadok stole our powers!"

"This is not good," the king stated, his head in his hands, "There's no way to stop Zadok now."

"We'd better surrender now when we stand a small chance of getting off easy," a nearby general warned, "Zadok's probably mad as is."

"Did I get him though?" I asked the king, "When I sniped that monster's head?"

"Not sure, but he's already died before," the king replied, "And turned out not to be."

"Krabooooommm!"

The west wall on the castle thundered loudly as it was slammed by the three massive monsters. The wall guards gave a shout of alarm.

"You deliverers had better go back to your land," the voice called out from behind me.

I turned around to see Xee standing there.

"Xee!" Alina said, "I didn't know you were still here!"

"I was out there for the entire time until those massive monsters showed up," Xee said, wiping sweat off of his forehead, "And since you guys can't help us - you had better leave. We can't afford to have you die too."

"But I don't know if we can come back!" Lea exclaimed, "It was totally random that we got back the other time!"

"Look," the king said, as the monsters smashed out the castle's west wall, "We don't have time for this. You go back *now* or things could get very hairy for you - and that's just not necessary. You're still kids after-."

The king was cut short by a voice that came from the portcullis.

"You surrender now?!" Zadok shouted out, "It's harder to kill me than you might think!"

"Hurry!" Xee said, shoving me against Alina and Lea.

"Grab hands!" Lea said, reaching out for Alina's.

Alina then reached out her hand for mine, but I had one thing to do.

"Wait, just a minute!" I said.

I spun around and, searching out Ember in the crowd of soldiers staring at Zadok, I ran up and gave her a hug.

"Thanks for everything!" I said.

Ember stumbled backward in surprise, "Leo! This is not the time for this, but... you're welcome. Now hurry!"

I nodded my head and ran back to Lea and Alina - their arms outstretched. I slapped my hand into Alina's, but just as I did so, there was a slight tug on my right leg - something that pulled me

right out of Alina's grasp in that split second. That's when I saw Alina and Lea disappear from in front of me - and I, in turn, face-planted into the cold, cobblestone square

Epilogue:

“And that’s how I’m still here,” I finished, bouncing Zareline on my lap.

“But daddy! That’s not a happy ending!” Zareline frowned, “What happened to your sisters?”

“Why, he doesn’t know!” Ember exclaimed from the other side of the room where she was sewing a shirt of mine, “And it sort of is a happy ending because if he had left we couldn’t have had you!”

“But that’s so sad,” Zareline sniffed, “What about your parents?”

“I don’t know,” I replied, “But I do hope to see them again!”

“Why couldn’t you go back?”

“Whatever magic got me here could not get me back, I suppose.”

“Who pulled you back from your sisters?” Zareline asked again.

“It was Zadok’s spell,” I answered her.

“Why did he let you go after preventing you from going home?” Zareline interrogated me.

“That’s a story for another night!” I told her, “For now, a certain girl I know needs to get to bed!”

“DADDDDD!” Zareline whined.

“Ssssh,” I said, “We’re going on a trip tomorrow outside of Elven territory, and you can ride Zebra!”

“Oh!” Zareline exclaimed with delight, “I’ll go *right* to bed!”

I winked at Ember; then followed Zareline to her room.

Author Bio

Kaiser Slocum:

Kaiser is a published author located in the United States of America. He is a Senior at the University of Oregon and is majoring in Computer Science with a minor in Math. In addition, he runs a small business, volunteers at his church, and works a part time job at a local gluten free bakery. In his spare time, Kaiser likes to play board games, program applications, build Lego, watch his favorite TV series, and write more books.

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Three kids find themselves caught in the middle of medieval era intrigue and apparently everyone thinks they are the great "Deliverers." The only problem is who is The Sword, who is The Scepter, and who is the infamous Traitor?!