

The Deliverers

Elven Decimation

Version 0.8

Dedicated to God

Chapter 1: Alina:

"Thanks for calling Best Construction Incorporated," I said into my headset for the countless time that day, "What can I do for you?"

"Hey, uh, my name is Joe," the man on the other end informed me, "I didn't get paid this week."

"What's your last name, Joe?" I droned on, quickly pulling up the employee payment records on my computer.

"Weinheymer."

"BEEEEEP!" the shrill ring of another caller on the line blasted my sensitive ears – making me jump in my chair.

"Excuse me, Mr. Weinheymer, but could you hold for a minute?" I asked politely.

"Uh, sure, yeah, that's fine," Joe stammered.

I quickly reached down and switched my phone to line two.

"Thanks for calling Best Construction Incorporated. What can I do for you today?"

"Have you guys done any work with corrugated steel beams?" a gruff voice on the other end demanded of me.

"I believe we have done some work with pleated steel beams in conjunction with storm water drainage ditch pipes," I answered briskly.

As the man thought on this for a second, someone burst through the door of the office. He was dressed in casual business attire, but his face was red and perspiring.

"I'm sorry, ma'am, but I need to speak to Mr. Grant!" He interrupted me, leaning over my desk.

"I've got some problems with corrugated steel beams at my factory development project on the riverside," the man on the phone line explained, "When can you get a guy out to provide a survey of the work needed."

"I know I'm ten minutes late," the business man in front of me continued, "But the traffic is *awful* out there!"

I nodded politely and gestured to the nearby chairs while I spoke into my mouthpiece.

"And what is your name sir?" I asked the factory development guy.

"Jerry Smith," the man answered.

"Can I put you on hold for a second?"

"Make it quick," Jerry snapped.

Even while Jerry was replying, I was already pulling up my boss' meeting calendar. Sure enough, he should have started a meeting with Mr. Varl at 2:30.

"Are you Mr. Varl?" I asked the man pacing rapidly back and forth in the lobby.

"Yes, yes! Can I still get in?"

"One sec," I told him, switching my phone line to the direct connection to my boss' office.

"My. Grant?" I spoke into his intercom, "I have a Mr. Varl here to see you?"

"Late as usual," Grant grumbled, "I'll be out there in a minute."

"He'll be out in a minute!" I informed Mr. Varl.

I then quickly switched back to line one.

"Mr. Weinhe...Weinyem?...," I stuttered, forgetting his last name.

"Weinheymer," Joe corrected me.

"Yes, well, it appears that we did attempt to transfer your wages to your Money-Now account, but it failed, is your account number 152563?"

"Uh, lemme check, just one second," Joe answered, shuffling around some papers right in the earpiece of his phone.

I sighed.

At that time, Caribbean music filled the ambience of the room, signaling me that my personal phone was now going off.

"My account number is actually 15256..6...67?" Joe told me, "Wait no, that's my wife's, let me see..."

I gritted my teeth as the red light for line two bleeped violently. Muting my microphone, I swiftly picked up my personal phone.

"Hello? This is Alina."

"Alina! This is Aunt Carlina!"

"Hi Aunt!" I said, "What can I do for you?"

"No, it's definitely 152564," Joe confirmed.

I immediately muted my phone's microphone and unmuted myself on the business line, "Alright, Mr. Weinheymer, I'll try again to get that money to you."

"Thanks," Joe grunted, quickly hanging up.

"I've got some bad news," Carlina continued on, not realizing I wasn't paying attention anymore, "See..."

She was interrupted as Mr. Varl, furiously pacing the lobby, rushed over to me, crossing his arms on the counter.

"Is Grant coming?" he begged.

"Mr. Grant will be here shortly," I assured him.

"Good, good."

"And that's why I was wondering if you could take the next few months off," Carlina finished.

"Uh huh," I replied absent mindedly, temporarily unmuting myself on the phone so that I could continue answering line two.

"Jerry? Are you still there?" I asked.

"Yeah," he replied irritably, "What took you so long."

"I'm sorry sir, it's busy today," I explained.

"Great!" Aunt Carlina said, "And the pink flamingo has a diaper rash!"

"Of course," I answered my aunt, completely distracted with my other phone call.

"I can get Mr. Grant out to check your development on...what?!" I exclaimed, finally "hearing" my Aunt's comments.

"You're not listening," Aunt accused me.

"What?" Mr. Smith snapped, "I didn't say anything."

I quickly muted him and unmuted my phone, "I'm sorry, Aunt, but it is so crazy busy today at the office. What did you say?"

"Carl's got stage four liver cancer," Aunt told me succinctly, "I was wondering if you could spend some time with us in the next few months."

"How did this happen?" I shrieked, "Why am I just now hearing about this?"

"We didn't know!" Aunt replied, "I just noticed that his appetite was really dropping off, so we went to the doctor and just now found this out."

"This is terrible!" I exclaimed, "Is there any treatment?"

"None that will extend his life by more than a few months," Carlina sniffed, "The doctor says that without special treatment, he will only live another six months at best."

"No," I answered softly, the gravity of the situation dawning upon me.

"Can you take any time off?" Aunt Carlina asked me again.

I looked at the furiously beeping red light on line two, gazed at the extremely impatient Mr. Varl in my lobby, and picked up on the sound of my boss slamming his door, "Um, not exactly?"

"Your uncle is dying!" Carlina exclaimed loudly in my ear, "And you cannot make time for him?"

"How am I going to pay my bills?" I whined.

"You're in Carl's will for heaven's sake!" my aunt informed me, exasperated, "And you're going to make enough off the life insurance to support an entire African village!"

"I'm in his will?" I gasped.

"Of course!" Aunt insisted, like I should have already known that, "Now what do you say?"

"Give me a minute!" I told her.

At that point, my boss strode into the room. He quickly noticed me on my personal phone and glared at me – giving me a significant look of disapproval. Lucky for me, he was immediately accosted by Mr. Varl.

"Mr. Grant!" I yelled to my boss, cutting off the businessman.

"Yes?" he answered me, obviously annoyed.

"I'm quitting," I told him, "Here's my headset..."

"What?!" my boss exclaimed, scarcely believing his ears, "But I pay you well!"

"My uncle is dying of cancer, and this job sucks on more levels than a soap opera has episodes," I informed him, "A Jerry Smith is on line two by the way and needs to know when you can come out and check on his factory! Have a nice day!"

With that said, I scooped up my oversized purse and hustled out of the office. I half expected my boss to chase me down, but as I shoved my body behind the wheel of my 1995 Nonda Vivir, I caught a glimpse of the office and no one came out after me.

"Welp, that's a sign that I'm making the right decision," I asserted, backing my car out of the parking lot and onto the busy street.

Thirty minutes later, I found myself driving through the quiet little neighborhood of my relatives'. Unfortunately, someone's large RV was pulled up alongside the road, so I had to park a good block from where their actual house was. Jogging down the sidewalk, I quickly realized, however, that the RV was not just any neighbor's new set of wheels, it was my uncle's.

"Alina!" Lea called out to me, hooking a thumb at the RV, "Check this out!"

"I know!" I exclaimed, "It's HUGE!"

Carl, upon hearing my voice, quickly ran over and gave me a big bear hug, "It's good to see you Niece!"

"And you too!" I told him, "I'm so sorry about the news!"

"That's quite alright," Uncle told me cheerfully, "If anything, I have a renewed vigor for life, and I literally cannot wait to get on the road and see some wonders of the nation!"

"You got enough time off from your boss?" Aunt asked me, coming out of the RV with a basket of towels.

"All the time in the world," I laughed, "I quit, and I believe that I'm better for it."

Uncle punched me lightly in the arm, "There's no time for work when there's *fun* just around the bend! Am I right?!"

"Absolutely," Lea agreed, "But right now, some fried chicken is calling my name."

"Wait a minute!" Carl interrupted, checking his watch briefly, "We need to stop by the mystery shack first."

"Mystery shack?" I asked, confused.

"You know. The one you said Leo disappeared into?" Aunt reminded me.

"Oh, *that* one," I mumbled, "I kinda wanted to forget about that."

"It's not your fault," Uncle said tenderly, "I know you're telling the truth."

"Why now?" I asked.

"Because they're going to tear it down tomorrow to make more room for housing developments," Lea informed me, "It's been like fourteen years since Leo's disappearance, so the police gave the all-clear for them to bulldoze it."

"*But*, I used some of my connections in the demolition business and got permission to walk around it one last time," Uncle smirked.

"Let's go then," Aunt insisted, "I'm hungry myself."

"And so begins the first but not last adventure," Carl said grandly, leading the way down the street to the vacant lot.

After trekking across two acres of razed forest, we made our way to where there were several construction trucks and orange fencing. Near an opening in the fence stood two workers wearing brightly colored jackets and chatting over cups of what I presumed to be coffee.

"Ahoy there!" Carl called out to them, "I'm Carl... I'm here to see that run-down shack?"

"Oh, sure man," the older worker nodded his head, "But it's really unstable, so we'll come along to make sure you're safe."

"Fine with me," Uncle replied.

"Hey, the other worker said, "Are you the family of that kid that disappeared there a long time ago?"

"Yeah," Aunt answered curtly.

"Oh... uh... that sucks," the worker mumbled.

The shack was in even worse condition than it had been many years ago. Now, there was hardly any roof left, and the walls were like glorified Swiss cheese, but the door was still intact.

"I'll go in first," Dad insisted, "Just for old times' sake."

"What old times sake?" Lea asked.

"You do *not* want to know how many times I went in here when Leo first went missing," Uncle informed her.

"Well, I want to go too!" I insisted, pushing my way behind Carl into the house.

Lea and my aunt followed suit, but quickly realized there was nothing of interest. The floorboards were almost entirely nonexistent and the walls were so paper thin that they swayed with every breath of air.

"Cool breeze tonight," Carlina noted after several seconds of silence.

"I can almost feel Leo's presence," Uncle breathed, getting sentimental.

"Wham!" The rotting boards that composed the shack's door slammed shut as a particularly powerful gust of wind rolled across the landscape.

"Hahaha," I laughed, "That scared me..."

Before I finished my sentence, all four of us suddenly found ourselves in the midst of a dense forest. A dozen meters ahead, I noticed a rolling valley of grass and hills through a break in the trees.

"Uhhhhhhhh....," Aunt gawked.

"Wuuuuut?!" Uncle gasped.

"Huh?" Lea said, confused.

"Oh boy," I exclaimed, "Here we go again. Just my luck."

"What does this mean," Lea said to me slowly.

"I think this means we're needed back here," I replied.

"What kind of joke is this?!" Aunt yelled at Lea, "This isn't funny!"

"This ain't no joke," Uncle interrupted her, "See this grass?"

Carl then proceeded to remove a tuft from the ground and shoved it under Aunt's nose.

"Ewe!" She cried, "That smells weird!"

"It's a rare type of grass – only found in certain places in Europe," Carl geeked out, "It used to be much more plentiful until our modern type of grass, which is more hardy, largely choked it out."

"So, why is this important?" Lea asked.

"Because this means, we are A. In Europe. And B. In Europe a good many years ago," Carl said excitedly, "Is this where you guys swore you went so many years ago?!"

"Pretty sure," I answered, "But I can't be sure until we ask around."

Lea stared at her father in shock, "But how do you know all that?!"

"I'm a history and agricultural buff," Carl defended himself, "I can't help it that I know random facts."

After shaking her head in amazement, Lea pointed to something on the horizon, "There's a small column of smoke over there behind that large Oak tree. I'm guessing that it may be a campfire with people nearby. Maybe they can help us!"

"But, but, but...", Aunt stammered.

"Don't worry, Honey," Uncle told her, slinging his arm around her shoulders, "We'll be fine. We stand a two out of three chance of coming back alive to our world."

"Based on what happened last time anyway," I mumbled.

"Let's go," Lea told us all, "But be *careful* because this world has lots of dangerous characters."

Aunt whimpered, but we trekked through the rest of the forest and into the meadow anyway. As we crested the hill, I spotted a small collection of individuals farther down the valley below.

"Hey! Let me look!" Lea said, standing on her toes to see over my shoulder.

"Shhsh!" I shushed her, "They can hear us, maybe."

"Hey!" Lea shouted, ignoring me, "That one person looks like a...!"

With an extra hard shove, Lea managed to push me out of the way. Unfortunately, she also managed to completely unbalance me – and since I was right next to Uncle Carl and Aunt Carlina we all flopped over into the grass...and rolled down the hill.

If that wasn't enough commotion, Lea also started running down after us shouting, "GRAB MY HAND!"

Grass, sky, and human bodies alternated across my eyes as I flopped, rolled, and spun down the hill at an alarmingly fast pace. Just when I thought I'd have a permanent concussion, I ran straight into something very solid.

“Whump! Bump!” Uncle and Aunt ran into me from behind and squished me even more.

“Uh oh,” Lea announced, sliding to a stop beside me as I slowly disentangled myself from my relatives. I stood up to find myself in front of a hooded figure – carrying a very sharp sword.

Underneath his hood, I saw a very scarred face and only one eye.

“Who are you?” he demanded, fiercely.

“Uh, Alina?” I quickly responded, “Who are you?”

“None of your business,” the man snapped.

As Aunt and Dad finally managed to sit up, several other similarly dressed men surrounded us – all drawing their swords or axes.

“What’s your affiliation?” the scarred man demanded of us.

“Uh, what exactly do you mean?” Lea timidly asked.

The scarred man’s eye narrowed; then suddenly popped wide open.

“Your eyes!” he gasped.

Around us, some of the other men expressed surprise as well.

“Apprehend them immediately!” the scarred guy shouted, “They’re the deliverers!”

Before I even knew what was happening, I was pinned to the ground and having my hands tied firmly behind my back.

“Uff, ungh!” Dad cried out, his face smashed into the ground.

“Varlyle will be very happy to see you,” the scarred guy sneered, “Your ransom will be quite high.”

I tried to say something, but a gag was quickly shoved over my mouth as I was dragged to my feet. Then, all four of us were prodded and poked along a well-worn, dirt path to a large campsite where several tents and a few misshapen buildings had been hastily constructed. In the very center of the camp was the massive fire pit that we had seen as well as a lot of similarly cloaked figures milling around it and talking in low voices. However, we were shoved onwards to a particularly imposing, spiked fence. There, we were accosted by the largest warrior that I had ever seen.

Xee would have looked like a dwarf compared to him. He was at least eight feet tall with muscles the size of coconuts and wearing a suit of armor that made his already thick frame even larger. On his head he wore a modest, but insanely thick iron helmet, and on his back he carried an ax the size of a small tree.

“Well, well, well,” the deep, throaty voice of the warrior called out to us, “Who do we have here?”

“Deliverers, Sir Varlyle” the scarred man informed the warrior.

“Indeed,” Varlyle said, stroking his massive, black beard, “But I have not seen these before, only the sword dude. Remove their gags.”

As soon as our gags were removed, Aunt had something to say, “The nerve you have! Kidnapping us!”

“Eh,” Varlyle stated, “I guess maybe. But you’ll fetch a good price, so it’s worth the trouble.”

“Great,” Lea mumbled sarcastically.

“Who even are you?” I addressed Varlyle, “I mean, I know your name, but like who are these people?”

“We are the great bandits, born out of the toughest of the toughest,” Varlyle declared proudly,

“We side with no one. The only people we look out for are ourselves!”

“Kinda risky, ain’t it?” Dad said, “Only looking out for yourselves that is?”

Varlyle grunted, "Take them away and tie them to some trees. We'll send them off to Zadok later."

"ZADOK?!" I cried out as a nearby guard started to re-gag Lea, "Oh Heaven no!"

"Oh yes," Varlyle sneered, "Oh yes indeedy!"

As Lea and I stared at each other in horror, a young, feminine voice spoke out from behind us, "You won't be taking those people *anywhere*."

Apparently, no one had seen her sneak up behind us; so all the guards, bandits, and us whipped around in surprise. Standing right there was a young Elf girl carrying an ax with blades on both ends of the handle. Around her waist was a belt of daggers, and on her back was a bow and some arrows, but on her face was a look of pure determination and defiance.

"Wha, whaat?" Varlyle gasped in surprise, "You? An itsy bitsy girl?!"

With a laugh that was more like a small roar, Varlyle slapped the scarred man on the back – bowling him over, "What joke is this?!"

"I may be small," the girl said, pulling out a dagger off her sheath, "But I've got some fight in me!"

With that, she snapped her wrist forward, and her dagger sliced right through the air. It promptly embedded itself in the scarred man's forehead – resulting in a muffled scream, followed by the clatter of armor as his clothing fell to the ground.

"Oh," I whispered to my horrified parents, "I forgot to tell you that when people die here, they just disappear."

At this, Varlyle roared in anger and raced forward, attempting to bring down his massive axe upon the Elf girl, but she easily evaded the blow. Three guards then attacked her from behind, but she jumped into the air and maneuvered into a horizontal position, pressing her hands against one guard's chest and her feet on another. The third ran straight into her and promptly tumbled over the Elf girl; landing painfully on his back as she then forced her hands and feet outward, throwing the other two guards in opposite directions. Following this up by neatly taking out another bandit at the legs, she then continued to single-handedly battle the bandits all at once. What was crazy was that she couldn't have been more than eleven years old! Aunt was staring with wide eyes, and Dad was jumping up and down in excitement.

"Whump!" Varlyle suddenly crouched low and plowed his ax handle into the girl's back, sending her spinning out of control. She collapsed in a heap on the ground.

"MWAHAHAHAaaaa," Varlyle gloated, "That imp had it coming to her! Her nerve! She took out my best general!"

Varlyle raised his ax above his head, intending to mutilate her, but he was stopped when another warrior leapt into view. This warrior, although only a few inches over six feet and with a much smaller frame, was also insanely buff and carried a sword of similar size to Varlyle's ax.

"Leave my daughter ALONE!" he yelled at Varlyle, "You're messing with the wrong person!"

Varlyle jumped back in alarm, "She's your daughter?!"

"Hell yeah!" the warrior said, whacking out bandits left and right with perfectly precise maneuvers, "And I am not pleased."

"Mph!" Lea said, "Mphh perhp fffffwert!"

I couldn't tell what Lea was going on about, but I didn't really care anyway, because I was sure that I had seen this fighter before. Plus, I recognized his voice.

Another bandit jumped the fighter from behind, but the fighter nailed him so hard in the helmet with the broadside of his sword that the bandit back flipped through the air before sinking to the ground unconscious

"You've messed with me for your last time, Varlyle," the fighter said again, advancing on him.

"Leave me alone, Leonard," Varlyle threatened, "I won't go easy on you just because you're a deliverer!"

Leo! I thought No wonder I recognized him. That was my cousin; except, a whole lot more epic and mature version of the Leo that I remembered.

"RAAAUURRGH!" Varlyle shouted, jumping at Leo with an incredible ferocity.

Leo calmly side-stepped Varlyle and returned with a well-aimed sword slice, but Varlyle caught it and fought back. It was very evenly matched because although Varlyle was a lot bigger and tougher, Leo was a good deal faster and more skilled.

"KlanG!" "BErrrranG!!!"

Steel met steel as Leo and Varlyle violently battled it out. A few of the remaining bandits came running up but were unsure of whether to interrupt the fight. Across from us on the ground, the Elf girl slowly pulled herself to her feet.

"You okay, Zareline?" Leo called out to her, blocking a particularly strong blow by Varlyle that would have knocked me out cold.

"I'll be fine," she grunted, "but we've got company!"

Seeing Zareline standing up, the nearby bandits all converged on her. Zareline, although injured, managed to still hold her own. However, more and more bandits kept on arriving. It was as two bandits attacked Zareline simultaneously that a single arrow sung right over my head and took out both of them. They immediately dropped out of sight, enabling Zareline to pull out *her* bow and arrow and nail a few more bandits.

"YURGH!" Varlyle growled, attacking Leo for the umpteenth time but still having no luck.

"Give up now," Leo smirked, "Or I'll ensure it."

"I never will!" Varlyle spat, "And you'll be worse for it!"

"Come and get me!" Leo challenged while waving his sword around and aiming it at Varlyle.

"Gladly!" Varlyle roared, charging Leo.

At the last second, Leo leapt out of the way – grabbing and pulling off Varlyle's helmet at the same time. Having no time to stop, Varlyle flew right into the spiked, wood fence that was the bandits' camp perimeter. Leo immediately capitalized on the situation to swing his sword like a very deadly baseball bat into Varlyle's now unprotected head.

"And thus ends Varlyle's reign of terror," Leo announced a second later, wiping sweat from his forehead. With no more bandits in sight, Leo sheathed his sword and came over to us.

"Welcome family!" Leo exclaimed, working at our binds, "Why *are* you here?"

"I could ask you the same!" Aunt quickly responded.

"Your family?" a familiar voice spoke out from behind us as an older version of Ember cartwheeled into view, "Wow, it *is* you!"

"Nice of you to show up!" Leo addressed Ember, "Took you long enough!"

"Hey! I was dealing with the guards on the other side of the camp," Ember defended herself, "That took some time!"

"Did we really just annihilate the entire bandits' group all by ourselves?" Leo asked Ember while slicing off my binds.

"A few just ran off," Zareline pointed out, "But Dad, are these your sisters and parents?"

"This is my cousin actually," Leo said, pointing to me, "But the rest are as you said."

"Dad?!" Aunt Carlina exclaimed.

"That's my daddy!" Zareline said excitedly, "He's the best!"

Aunt stiffened.

Ember, noticing Zareline limping, quickly bent down to her and checked out her leg, "Did you get hurt, Zary dear?"

"Only a little!" Zareline lied.

"She got whacked by Varlyle," Leo answered, "But I think she'll be fine."

"How many times have I told you to stay away from him?!" Ember scolded Zareline.

"Only a dozen," Zareline replied cheerfully, "But these people needed help!"

"You have a good heart!" Uncle told Zareline, "And you're so cute!"

Lea snickered, and Zareline looked a bit confused.

"How old are you?" Carl asked her.

"I'm ten!" Zareline said proudly, "And since you are Daddy's dad, that makes you my grandpa! Yeah!"

"Wait, so I have a grandchild?!" Dad exclaimed, totally excited at the prospect.

Leo laughed and introduced Ember to his parents, "This is my wife, Ember."

"Your *wife*!" Aunt stammered, appearing more than a little shocked and upset.

"That's a bit of a story," Leo said, turning a bit red in the face, "Why don't we go back to my camp, and I can explain."

Ember led the way out of the camp and through the forest, while Zareline chatted happily with Uncle Carl who seemed to be having the time of his life. Lea commented to Ember on her outfit and that got Ember going on a long tangent about Elf styles, while Aunt and I quietly walked along. Leo, meanwhile, remained fully alert, giving the forest a full scan every few seconds. Presently, we exited the forest again and emerged into a large, rolling valley full of green grass and blue flowers. A little ways away was a small party of people sitting around a roaring campfire.

"Where did all these people come from?!" a deep voice from nearby spoke. Emerging from behind a tree appeared another massive warrior with a large spiked helmet – that could have only meant one person.

"Joel?!" I exclaimed, "What in the world?! You've gotten older!"

"So have you!" Joel announced, "Like quite a few years older!"

"You know this man?" Dad said to me.

"Of course!" Lea stated, "This is Joel. Remember when he visited us at our house?"

"", Dad said slowly, "The guy who volunteered to pluck our chicken!"

"Huh?" Joel replied.

"Nothing," I quickly told him.

"Well, well, well," another familiar voice spoke out, "If the gang isn't back together."

This time, I noticed Yrited walking towards us, or at least I was fairly sure it was her. Next to her was a tall, thin man dressed in ornate robes and with a small crown on his head. Behind Yrited and the man was another king accompanied by two guards.

"Whoever are all these people?!" Aunt asked, completely lost.

"Well, you've already met Joel here," Leo began, pointing to the muscular warrior standing nearby, "He's one of Zadok's main generals. Then, there's Yrited and her husband Verner." "Ooh!" Lea exclaimed, "So you guys actually..."

Lea's face turned red as she mumbled off, but Yrited just smiled and nodded her head.

"And this is George," Leo continued, "George rules a very large kingdom to the North and Yrited and Verner rule a now merged land which is what we are all standing on right now. And this is Zareline and Ember, my daughter and wife."

"Oh, I know Ember!" Carl said, putting the pieces together, "You were that Elf girl who stopped by at the house too!"

Ember nodded her head.

"Granddaddy!" Zareline spoke up again, "I want to know all about you, and I want to hear all sorts of stories from you, and I want to show you all my stuff, like my knife collection, and bows and arrows, and my shield, and my house, and my friends, and where I train, and my unicorn, and..."

"Whoa whoa whoa!" Carl interrupted Zareline, "You have a unicorn!"

"Of course!" Zareline laughed happily, "He's right over there!"

I turned to see a herd of horses far over to my right.

"I'll call him over," Zareline said, putting two fingers in her mouth and whistling loudly, "His name is Zebra!"

"Wait," Aunt said, as things started to fall into place for her, "So you married this Elf, but never invited me."

"I *am* in my early thirties," Leo reminded her quickly, "And you weren't around to invite."

"But, uh, um," Aunt couldn't come up with anything to say about that.

However, Uncle Carl stared with rapt attention as a striped unicorn broke from the pack of horses and thundered over to us, his horn shining in the evening sunlight.

"Whoa...", Dad gasped, "He's huge!"

"His name is Zebra," Zareline continued, "Because he's all white with some black stripes.

Daddy told me that there are creatures in your world called zebras that look similar."

"That's true," Lea said, "though they don't have horns."

Zebra came to a perfect stop right next to Zareline. He tossed his long mane and curiously sniffed Lea and I. Content that we were not a threat, he whinnied loudly.

"Saaaaa?" Zareline said, "Do you like him, grandfather?"

"Of course!" Carl whispered in awe, "He's... he's *beautiful*."

"I know, I know!" Zareline answered, "You must come for a ride on him!"

"You ride unicorns?" Uncle responded, "I thought that was just for horses."

"Don't be silly," Ember laughed, "Unicorns are just a more powerful version of a horse."

"And a whole lot more vain and hard to work with," Verner mumbled.

Finally starting to regain her normal character, Aunt attempted to start a conversation with her newly discovered daughter-in-law, "So, how did you meet my son? I never heard that story."

"Yeah, and why are you all here?" Lea added.

"And why do you look just about as old as I am?" I couldn't help asking, "It feels like our time lines have matched up perfectly!"

"And I could ask you why you just now showed up!" Leo questioned us.

“Maybe we should sit down,” George suggested, “It would appear we have a few things to talk about.”

Chapter 2: Leo:

When we had all sat down at the small fire pit, I began the story.

"Well, as you know, I didn't quite make it back with you guys to your world," I began.

"*Your* world," Mom said, "It's *our* world."

"Oh, of course," I quickly answered. It was kind of weird, but now that I had been here for so long, I viewed it as my normal world – just like I had viewed their world as mine when I was a kid.

"Anyway, it turned out to be some weird spell by Zadok that had yanked me away," I informed them, "And of course, all the generals and kings around surrendered shortly thereafter."

"But Zadok left everyone alive?!" Alina asked, surprised.

"Well, not everyone," I answered quietly.

"Zadok bound Leo and quite a few other important white knight leaders up and moved them to his dungeon," Yrited said, "While he outright killed a select few..."

"That included Xee," I stated sadly, "As well as Verner's, George's, and Yrited's parents."

"That's terrible!" Alina said angrily.

"It was even worse because Xee was half Elf and helped us out several times," Ember reminded us, "And of course all of their parents were the sweetest, nicest people!"

"What happened to you, Leo?" Dad asked me.

I shook my head, "I don't really like to think about what they did to me."

"They literally tortured him," Ember explained.

"They *WHAT!*?" Mom cried out.

"When Zadok let him go about six months later, he was so emaciated that I thought he was a living skeleton," Yrited added.

"Oh ho!" Mom said, furious, "Let me get *my* hands on this 'Zadok'!"

"Joel was able to sneak me some food and water every now and again," I said, "He probably saved my life."

"I felt like I owed it to you," Joel said, "They whipped you, stretched you, starved you, slapped you..."

"When I got out," I interrupted him, "The white knights kindly took me in, and Yrited's parents helped nurse me back to health."

"He was very resilient," Yrited added.

"Where does Ember show up again?" Lea wanted to know.

"He started dating me about half a year after being let out of Zadok's prison," Ember answered Lea, "Once he was actually able to walk and talk and do normal things."

"I waited for another two years or so, but when you guys never came back for me," I continued, "I figured that you may never come back, so I asked Ember to marry me."

"And I accepted his proposal," Ember said, "When we got married, he moved in with me in the Elf kingdom."

"Awe," Dad said.

"And ever since, Zadok has required that I stop by his fortress and let him interrogate me every year," I finished, "And that's about it."

"When did you get married, Yrited?" Lea asked.

"About three years ago," Yrited said, "Since the death of our parents, both Verner and I were entrusted with our respective kingdoms, but it was too much work for ourselves, so we decided to marry and merge our kingdoms."

"I don't regret asking her to marry me," Verner laughed.

"What about you, George and Joel?" Alina spoke to them, "Have you guys married?"

"Nah," Joel said, "Zadok doesn't like his generals to marry."

"Not yet," George stated, "I haven't found a worthy queen yet."

"Zadok is a bad man," Zareline stated matter-of-factly, "But Daddy is strong, and he and Mommy and I will defeat him some day!"

"That's the spirit!" Ember spoke up.

Joel grinned, "Now we're talking!"

"That's why we're here in fact," I added, "We're scheming to murder Zadok."

"Whoa!" Dad said with a grin on his face, "I never took you for the scheming type, Son!"

"There's more to me than you may know," I smirked.

"Sorry to interrupt," one of George's guards cut in, "But it'll be dark soon, and we all need to split soon to avoid suspicion."

"Right you are," George said, standing up, "Let me know if there are any new complications. You know where I'll be."

"Of course," Ember assured him.

"And Leo," Yrited spoke to me, "Be careful when you talk with Zadok tomorrow. We need you back in one piece."

"You have to go talk to Zadok tomorrow, Daddy?" Zareline spoke to me, worry in her voice.

"I'll be fine," I told her, "Nothing different now... Well, not too much anyway."

"Can I go along to protect you?" she asked me.

"I'm not sure that's the best..." I began.

"Absolutely," Ember said, "It's time for you to meet Zadok yourself."

While my mom suddenly looked mortified, Zareline started to grin from ear to ear, "Thank you Mommy!"

"You let your ten year old daughter go into evil, enemy territory?!" Mom exclaimed.

"Of course," Ember said, obviously confused, "How else will you train your offspring to be valiant fighters?"

"You train your children to *fight*?!"

"Of course!"

If Dad hadn't grabbed Mom firmly by the shoulders and led her over to where Lea and Yrited were chatting up a storm, I think Mom would have done something drastic.

I laughed, "Don't worry about it Ember. Mom's got her opinions."

"Apparently so," Ember said, "I don't remember her being like this."

"She's just protective of her new grandchild," I reminded Ember.

"Daddy?" Zareline called to me, pulling my hand, "Can grammy and grandpa come to our house tonight? Please?"

"Go ask them," I said.

"Yeah!" Zareline shouted excitedly, running over to talk to my parents.

"Are you sure that's a good idea?" Ember whispered to me.

"It'll be fine," I assured Ember, "I think that Alina and Lea will go with Yrited anyway, so it won't get too crowded."

"Saddle up people!" George's guard called out to us from atop his horse, "We need to beat the dark."

Zareline hurriedly pulled Dad over to me.

"They're coming, they're coming!" She told me excitedly.

"Great!" I said, "You can ride with Ember, Dad. And Mom can ride with me."

"I've never ridden a unicorn," Mom said doubtfully.

"It's just like a horse," I told her as I helped lift her into the saddle, "Very little difference."

"Leo!" Lea called over to me a moment later, "Yrited invited me over to her castle."

"Nice," I said, "Alina is also going?"

"Yeah, I guess," Alina said, mounting Verner's horse, "But I wanna go with you to Zadok's castle."

"I'm not sure that's wise," I told her, "We don't want to be in the same place for safety purposes."

"I'm going, and that's that," Alina scolded me, "I'll be at your house in the morning."

"Five a.m. then," Ember smirked, "Cuz that's when we're leaving."

Alina saluted as we all parted ways.

"Look at me, look at meeee!" Zareline shouted to Dad as she bounced by on Zebra, "We can trot *backwards*."

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I was woken the next morning to the creaking of our front door opening, and Ember loudly arguing with whoever was there. I groaned and rolled over, intending to get some more sleep, but was then promptly interrupted again.

"Daddy! Wake up!" Zareline insisted, poking me in the arm, "Mom's almost done with breakfast, and she wants to see you now because of some people at the door!"

"Unghf," I groaned, rolling over, "Just one more minute."

"No, no more minutes," Zareline continued, "We've got to get the unicorns saddled and ready to go too!!!"

"Uh huh," I mumbled, snuggling back into my blankets.

"WHUMP!" Zareline shoved me out of bed, and I hit the floor with a loud bang.

"Ouch!" I cried out, "What was that for, Zary!"

"Time to get up!" Zareline told me.

I groaned and stood up, "Fine, let me get my armor on."

I groggily sat up and fumbled around in my closets for my armor. I always slept in my normal clothes so that, technically, I would be ready for action at a moment's notice. In reality, it was hard to awaken me, but regardless, I put on my strongest armor in preparation of meeting up with Zadok. Although the armor was heavy, it was weirdly comfortable (as long as I wasn't running for my life, and it wasn't too hot). By the time that I finally made it out of my room and to the small living room of our tree house, I could hear the groans of Dad as Zareline attempted to wake him up as well.

"Leo!" Ember shouted to me, "Get over here!"

"What's up?" I asked, quickly jogging over. I immediately noticed Von and Roary.

"Something has come up at the council," Von informed me, "We need to have an emergency meeting."

"Again?" I exclaimed, "What's so important *this* time?!"

Roary shrugged, "I'm not allowed to say."

"It's about our underground fortress," Ember revealed, "Apparently, they want to dig another access tunnel."

"Hey!" Von said, "That's supposed to be a secret!"

"It's never been a secret," I stated, rolling my eyes, "Literally every Elf knows that."

"But you're not an Elf!" Roary reminded me.

"Really?! I didn't know!" I replied sarcastically.

"Anyway," Ember continued, "This'll mean I won't be able to come along."

"That's fine," I groaned, "I'm sure there'll be plenty of guards coming with Alina."

"Wait, Alina is going with you to Zadok?!" Von gasped.

"Yeah, probably not the wisest idea," I stated, "But Zadok doesn't know she's here, or at least I don't think he knows..."

"I know," Roary told me.

"I know you know," I answered, "But that's only because nothing stays secret around here. Literally nothing."

"That's not true!" Von insisted.

"You ate some lamb stew yesterday," I informed him, "While gambling over a few fine ware pottery with some of your friends."

"Fine. Good point."

"I'll meet you guys in an hour," Ember told them, "I have a few things to finish up around here first."

Von and Roary nodded their heads in approval and left, climbing down the rope ladder; while Ember sighed and headed back to the kitchen to make sure her bread hadn't burnt. Ever since Ember had been elected to the Elf council a few years ago (After convincing the general public to elect her), she had been quite busy participating in all their meetings, but it was nice that the Elves were finally taking her seriously again. Marrying a human had not exactly done wonders to her reputation, as it was forbidden in the law, and many had felt that marrying a deliverer was a double sin.

Knowing that I needed to saddle up our unicorns for the long trip, I followed the other Elf elders down the rope ladder. I then veered off to the left, where the stables were.

"ZZEEEBBRRRAA!" Zareline called from behind me, "I've got a carrot for you!"

"Did you wake your grandparents?" I asked her, unlocking the stable door.

"I tried," Zareline told me, "But I'm not sure if they actually woke up. They're more stubborn than you."

I chuckled to myself as I pushed open the sturdy, wooden door to the stables, and Zareline rushed in as an excited whinny broke the silence. I still felt a little bad for keeping a lock on the door, but it was more to keep people out than keep the unicorns in as the unicorns were more than able to fend off intruders. I didn't want anyone getting unnecessarily hurt.

By the time I had let myself in, Zebra had already consumed his special treat and Shadow and Eclipse were looking jealously at him.

"Don't worry," I told them, "I've got some carrots for you too."

Shadow quickly turned in my direction, trying to beat his mate to me. Unfortunately, Eclipse won and got the first carrot.

"Now, Zebra," Zareline told her unicorn, "You need to be on your *best* behavior. We're going to meet the grand leader himself, and he won't hesitate to execute us should we misbehave!"

Zebra snorted his approval and bent down as I slapped his saddle on and tightened the girdle.

"I'm sure he'll be just fine," I assured Zareline, "He's always on his best behavior."

"Yes you are, lil' boy, yes you are," Zareline crooned, scratching Zebra on the head, while I saddled Shadow.

"Ember's not going to be able to go with us," I groaned, "But I guess that's okay since someone needs to be around to keep an eye on my parents."

"I'm sure they can handle themselves," Zareline told me.

"Well, in their world, sure, but in ours...", I began, "Probably not."

Zareline nodded her head, "I'm going to go check on mommy now."

"I'll be there in a second!" I yelled after her.

After a delicious breakfast of fig bread, eggs, yak bacon, and some seasoned cabbage, and seeing no sign of my parents, Zareline and I headed outside with Ember.

"Promise me that you'll keep an eye on my parents," I told Ember, "I don't want them getting themselves into any tight situations."

Ember laughed, "I'll write them a note and maybe I can even get them into the palace too."

I kissed her goodbye while Zareline gave her a big hug; then, I jumped on Shadow and galloped out of the city's front gates and into the early morning sunshine. However, we had only gone a good mile before I noticed some approaching riders in the distance.

"Who's that?" I said, squinting in the bright sunlight that was just appearing over the horizon.

"Probably Aunt Alina," Zareline deduced, "And some escorts."

"Leo!" A mid-sized knight called out to me from atop a perfectly white horse, "Sorry I'm a bit late!"

"Wait, that's you, Alina?!" I exclaimed, "I would have never guessed!"

"This suit of armor is really good at hiding my features," Alina said, "Zadok will never know it's me!"

I nodded my head, "And it looks like you brought some backup!"

"Yrited insisted," Alina told me, gesturing to the six elite knights that were accompanying Alina.

I bowed slightly to them and thanked them for their help as they returned the greeting.

"C'mon guys!" Zareline said, prancing around on Zebra, "Let's Gooo!"

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We arrived at the great home city of the Dark knights, Var Helmar, around noon and were instantly accosted by a dozen or so dark knights.

"State your business!" the leader snapped, pointing his spear at me.

"I'm Leo," I graciously replied, "It's time for my yearly check-in with Zadok."

"Oh yeah," the leader said slowly, pulling open the massive, iron gates leading into the town,

"He did tell me about that."

As soon as they were opened, I urged Shadow onward, but a good portion of the Dark Knight guards followed after us to ensure that we were heading for Zadok's castle. It had been a while since I had last visited Var Helmar, but the city was not too much different from what I remembered. It was crowded with the smells of cooking meat, rotting vegetation, and lots of body odor since the Dark Knights and their allies were not fond of taking baths. Across from me, I heard Alina cough from the awful smell.

Apparently, seeing a bunch of Elves and white knights on horseback and with unicorns was not a usual sight in Var Helmar, which meant we were stared at for most of our trip through the crowded streets of the popular trade town, but we finally made it to the imposing, stone wall around Zadok's palace by early afternoon.

"State your business!" another burly guard demanded of us as we came to a stop in front of him.

"I'm here to see Zadok," I informed him.

"Very well," the guard said, nodding his head, "But you'll have to leave your mounts at the official stables out here."

We were then led to a very large, yet decrepit structure that apparently served as the official stables. It was a massive, wooden building and smelled like it had housed horses for years without ever being cleaned.

"Yuck," I grimaced, "This place smells *awful*."

"Psh, like your stables smell any better," a nearby Minotaur laughed at me.

"Actually, they smell *a lot* better," Zareline said.

The minotaur growled at her, but I quickly pulled her along before any fighting could start. Eventually, we were directed to a small, enclosed area where we were instructed to tie up our horses and unicorns. After a lot of arguing, I finally managed to get the guard to allow Zareline and I's unicorns to be left there without being tied to a post, but I had to leave two of the elite, white knights guards with them to make sure that they would not be bothered and wouldn't harm any of the dark knights' mounts. I knew that Shadow and Zebra were perfectly harmless if not provoked, but unicorns had a bad reputation as previously stated and really detested being tied up. We were then all marched back to the castle, through the main gates, and across the dirt courtyard to the massive throne room. Joel was in charge of hand-selecting the elite warriors that guarded the throne room and Zadok. Thus, he had given me a good description of the building. Unlike most castles, Zadok's palace did not have the throne room; instead, the throne room was its own, separate building. I wasn't perfectly sure why this was, but very little of what the Dark Knights did made any sense.

A colossal minotaur and two burly guards stood outside the door while the rest of the Dark Knight squad escorted us inside.

"Well if it isn't Leo," Zadok addressed me as I entered and bowed.

"It is as you say," I answered, politely.

"Tell me, Leo," Zadok said, "What is going on over where you live?"

"Not much," I answered, "I've been helping the Elves to rebuild part of the temple and also doing some training with the young, white knight recruits."

"I see," Zadok responded, "And who is this young girl?"

"I'm Zareline," Zareline answered Zadok, "And I'm Daddy's girl! I know more than a dozen fighting techniques!"

"Impressive," Zadok grunted, "Show me what you got against my guard here."

Zadok waved one of his bodyguards over to Zareline and I.

"Give her all you got!" Zadok declared, "Let's see if she's lying."

"Hey!" I shouted, "This wasn't part of the deal! You're checking up on *me*, not my daughter!"

"Well, you never told me that she was coming, so it's fair," Zadok laughed maniacally.

Fortunately for me, Zareline needed no help. Whipping her ax from her back, Zareline easily outmaneuvered the bodyguard and had him lying on the ground in pain in mere seconds.

Zadok looked surprised, but tried to hide it.

"Impressive," he mumbled, "But tell me, Leo. Where is your family now?"

"My family?" I said, confused, "You mean Ember and Zareline?"

"You know quite well!," Zadok addressed me angrily, "Your sisters and parents have arrived here in our realm."

"Umm, they're still in their world," I said slowly, trying to figure out if he was bluffing or truly knew what had just transpired yesterday.

"Really?" Zadok declared, "Because I just heard that they are back!"

"Don't toy with me," I told Zadok angrily, "My sisters have long since gone, and I doubt that they'll ever come back!"

"You're lying," Zadok stated, staring me straight in the eyes.

"I'm not!" I argued, "Whoever your 'informants' are, they're wrong."

"Come closer then," Zadok challenged me, "I can tell if you're truly wrong or not by only staring into your eyes."

"Fine," I replied, nervous, "Stare all you..."

I was cut off as Zadok pointed his ornate staff at me and yanked me through the air using some invisible magic spell.

"Daddy!" Zareline cried out.

"Hey!" I yelled at Zadok, "Let me down!"

"I *know* you're lying!" Zadok screamed at me, sitting up in his chair, "Tell me where they are or I'll have you beheaded on the spot!"

"I can't tell you where they are if they aren't here!" I whined, completely powerless against Zadok's spell. Things had gotten out of control much quicker than I expected.

"Guards," Zadok calmly told the squadron of black knights standing nearby, "Would you kindly escort these white knights to the dungeon."

Immediately, *my* escort went on high alert, falling back into defensive stances.

"If you don't go nicely," Zadok warned them, "Then I'll choke Leo to death...SLOWLY!"

Seeing no other better alternative, the guards placed their weapons on the ground.

"Move them out!" Zadok screamed at his guards, "And I want them locked up *firmly*! That one girl is very powerful!"

As I watched, completely helpless, my friends, cousin, and daughter had their hands tied behind their backs and then were shoved out of the room, the doors slamming shut behind them.

"Now that that's over," Zadok told me smugly, wiping his hands together, "We can have a nice chat about your family."

Chapter 3: Alina:

I was still a bit confused about everything that was going on. Leo had told us that it was simply a regular checkup with Zadok. The fact that I was now being marched to a dungeon, with my hands painfully tied up, seemed to imply the opposite. It also seemed that Zadok had somehow found out about my arrival, although simultaneously displayed a lack of knowledge of my exact whereabouts.

"Move it!" the dark knight behind me ordered, whacking me in the back with the handle of his mace, "I ain't got all day!"

"Shut up, you stupid old fool," I grumbled under my breath. I picked up my pace and reached Zareline, who was leading the pack of us prisoners, just as we entered the main castle and descended down several flights of stairs. This far underground, it was extremely cold and wet.

"This way," another of the dark knights gruffly demanded of us, indicating a room full of cells.

"Auntie," Zareline addressed me, "Are you skilled in combat?"

"What's that supposed to mean?" the head dark knight demanded of her after overhearing what she said, "What are you thinking?"

"I mean, not exactly..." I trailed off.

"You're a white knight escorting the infamous deliverer, and you say that your abilities are 'not quite'?" one of the other dark knights guffawed (mistaking me for an average knight), "White knights are so lousy."

"Can you duck though?" Zareline continued, ignoring the snide comments of her captors.

"I mean, sure," I answered, still confused.

"Then DUCK! Zareline yelled, whipping into the air and kicking the nearby knights in the back of their heads. The dark knights, who had just a minute ago been laughing their heads off, now collapsed onto the floor – their weapons scattering across the ground. In as much time as I could say the word, "Idea," Zareline had already scooped up a sword and sliced off her binds. The other dark knights quickly attacked her, but Zareline evaded their blows and swiftly sliced the chains off our fellow white knights. Chaos then ensued.

"Oof!" "Ouch!" "AAAAHHH!" Get herrr – ugh!"

Zareline demolished the head dungeon master while my comrades took on the rest of our captors - finally managing to overpower them.

"C'mon guys!" Zareline pleaded with us as she worked on my ropes, "We've got to get back to father!"

"I'm right behind you!" one of the other white knights said, plucking a large sword off the ground and charging back up the staircase. At the top, we ran into a wizard who was carrying a pile of scrolls, but he was quickly overwhelmed. We then ran directly for the front castle entrance and burst through it; heading straight across the courtyard for the throne room. Around us, more dark knights, who happened to be walking by, suddenly observed an angry mob of white knights making a b-line for the throne room.

It was then that I heard the sound of warfare erupting from the throne room. Putting on a burst of speed, I lunged for the open doors of the throne room. At the exact same time, there was a sudden hiss and a cloud of dark fog suddenly flooded the area.

I screamed, grasping around in the darkness for my friends. My right hand quickly found someone, and I grabbed on, not wanting to be left alone. I had originally thought the fog would clear quickly, but it didn't.

"Hey!" Zareline shouted out from next to me, "That hurts!"

"Sorry!" I whispered, letting up.

"What just happened," one of the nearby white knights added, lightly touching me on the shoulder, "Where did all this fog come from?"

"I'll bet it's one of Zadok's spells!" a second added, "Seems like Leo must have got a jump on him somehow."

"I hope Daddy did!" Zareline said fiercely, "Zadok is a bad man!"

No sooner had she said this, than I had the weirdest feeling. It felt like I was being empowered by some invisible force, and I noticed that I was starting to glow red.

The knights around me gasped, "What's happening to you!"

"I don't know!" I exclaimed, "What *is* happening to me?!"

"There's somebody to my right!" Zareline interrupted us, a faint outline of herself being illuminated against the red glow around me.

Instantly, there was a bright flash of blue, and a voice yelled out to us, "Who's there?!"

"DADDY!" Zareline screamed, instantly letting go of me and running towards his voice, "I hear you!"

"Leo?" one of the guards called out, "Are you the blue light?!"

"Not just that!" Leo told us excitedly, forgetting about the tense moment we were in, "But Joel just crushed Zadok's scepter, and I got my power back!"

"Wait, really?" I asked, excited.

The answer was a bright slash of blue light that flashed overhead and disappeared into the fog around us. A second later there was a small "boom" that echoed back.

"Let's go!" Zareline called to us, "I think we can get back to our horses if we use Dad's blue glow and Alina's red glow."

Leo, coming within only a foot of me, nodded his head in approval, "Let's use this fog to our advantage like how Zadok used it to escape."

"Wait, but I thought that you were the one captured?" I asked, running alongside Leo.

"Yeah, but then Joel dropped by just in time," Leo informed me, "And we quickly turned the tide. Joel had chosen all of the on-guard knights to be those solely loyal to Joel and not necessarily to Zadok. As soon as Joel had snatched the scepter, he broke it on the ground at the same time Zadok used his annoying fog spell."

"It did its job!" one of the white knights added, bringing up the rear, "I still can't see anything!"

"Body to my right!" Zareline chirped, smacking somebody to the right with the blade of her ax.

There was a startled yell as whoever had been nearby jumped away, and we continued running towards the stables. Fortunately, by the time Zareline had helped guide us (using her immensely powerful sense of hearing) to where our horses and fellow guards were, the fog was much less dense, and I was able to see enough to mount my horse.

With Leo leading the way, our small band of heroes raced off into the city, meeting very little resistance. As opposed to earlier, the streets were now almost completely abandoned.

"Did everyone just run away when the mist appeared?" I asked Leo.

"Seems like the streets are *too* empty," Leo muttered, urging Shadow to gallop faster, "Something seems more off than just my recent run-in with Zadok."

"Perhaps the dark knights all went somewhere," one of the white knights suggested.

Leo didn't answer, but we quickly approached the town's gates to find that they were standing wide open. We raced through them and found that there was only one guard on the other side, and he didn't even attempt to stop us - not that he could have if he had even wanted to.

"Uh, why are we traveling so fast?" one of the white knights asked us as we fairly flew across the dirt road beneath us.

"Well, first," Leo said, "We're fugitives. Second, Zadok wants us dead, and third, I have a very bad feeling about where all the dark knights went."

"But we were only in the castle for an hour at absolute maximum," I stated, "What could have possibly happened in so little time?"

"Did you notice that almost all of the horses were gone from the stables?" Leo replied.

"I did!" Zareline informed him, "And also I noticed that there were a whole lot of griffins by the stables when we had come, but they weren't there when we left."

"Okay, this is potentially getting worse," a white knight conceded, "But do we have any idea of where they went?"

"None," Leo mumbled.

"I'll bet that Lea knows!" I said, "Because if we all got our powers back now that Zadok's scepter is destroyed, she can see into the future!"

"That's nice," Leo acknowledged, "But kind of useless since she isn't with us."

Chapter 4: Carl:

I woke up to the smell of something cooking, but it wasn't exactly a good smell.

"What *are* they making?" I said out loud to Carlina, "And how are they cooking something in this *treehouse*?!"

"Mmm," Carlina mumbled, turning over on the velvety soft mattress, "Don't bother me."

Intrigued, I rolled off the flat, goose-feather mattress and stepped across the rough-hewn boards to the door of this guest bedroom. Outside was a short hallway that led to the dining room/living room which had a direct connection to the small kitchen. Due to all of the excitement yesterday, I was feeling kind of hungry, and it didn't take long to notice two plates laid out on the ornate, wooden table in front of me.

Upon closer inspection, I found two amazingly well-fired clay dishware with what appeared to be eggs, meat, and bread. Nearby were two clay cups of some type of juice. On the table was also a note written in very shaky English. I studied it while absent-mindedly munching on the chunk of bread and finally decided it read, "Do cause more trouble."

However, that meant little sense to me. Why would someone ask you to cause trouble?

After polishing off the delicious bread (that had a very interesting flavor) and eggs, I started on the meat, but it turned out to be very tough and stringy. As I attempted to choke it down, I noticed a stack of parchments neatly piled in a basket by the door, so, in order to distract myself from whatever I was eating, I methodically went through each paper. Unfortunately, it was written in what I assumed to be Elf writing, so I was unable to decipher it. I even pulled out my phone to decipher the writing before realizing that I couldn't get any cell service.

Despite this setback, there were lots of hand-drawn figures and sketches on the papers, which seemed to be showing some sort of tube system for human transport. I couldn't imagine what Elves would do with a tube system, let alone how they'd power it.

"What are you looking at?" exclaimed Carlina, having sneaked up behind me.

"Ack!" I said, "Don't sneak up on me like that! The last thing I need at my age is a heart attack!"

"Are those diagrams?" Carlina asked again, ignoring my previous comment.

"I think so?" I replied while rotating the current paper I was holding around in my hands, "It's kinda hard to tell, and I can't read Elf writing!"

Carlina shook her head, "Looks boring regardless. Now, is this our breakfast?"

"I think?" I replied again, "I'm kind of unsure what is going on. Everyone's gone I think."

"I think Leo said something about visiting the evil wizard guy yesterday, right? That bad guy?"

Carlina continued as she bit into her chunk of bread.

"Yeah, that evil dude," I added as I rustled through some more papers.

"Hey this bread is really good!" Carlina declared, "Ember can really cook!"

"Wait till you get to the meat though," I grumbled, "It tastes like octopus!"

"Seriously?" Carlina asked, "It's that bad?"

"It's certainly not bacon," I stated, "Even though it *looks* like bacon."

"Hmmm," Carlina replied with a mouth-full of bread, "I'll try it next then. Worst case is I wash the meat down with this delicious drink!"

"You know that's wine," I reminded her, "Right?"

Carlina, who was already taking a large sip of the drink, choked on it mid-swallow and burst into a coughing fit, "WHAT?!"

"You don't think they can just serve fresh and safe water all the time, do you?" I said,

"Remember what our pastor said about what they drank in the old times?"

"I *know* Jesus drank wine," Carlina said, "But I thought they had developed better methods of retrieving water by this time!"

I shrugged my shoulders, "I'm fairly sure they didn't."

Carlina grabbed my empty cup and stared into it, "You drank all of yours?"

"Of course," I replied, "Old wine wasn't made as strong as it is nowadays. You can't get drunk on a glass or two."

Carlina, who I knew was quite stubborn about alcoholic beverages, wrinkled her nose and shoveled some of the meat into her mouth.

"I give up," I finally declared after a few minutes, "I have *no* idea what these drawings are about."

"They probably weren't meant for you anyway," Carlina reminded me.

"Hmph," I said, rearranging the papers neatly in the basket; then getting up from the table, "I'm going to go investigate the kitchen now."

"You lied!" Carlina declared as I poked my head into the cramped kitchen, "This meat is actually not half bad!"

"That's just because you're used to eating tofu and that organic, grass-fed chicken stuff," I told her.

Carlina shrugged her shoulders. Inside the kitchen was a recently-doused fire in a brick fireplace. Nearby were a few iron pots and pans, a long counter-top like furniture and several cabinets with bread and other foods in them. I stole a particularly yummy looking clump of grapes out of one.

"Honestly, they don't eat too bad here!" Carlina announced from the other room, "And they have such a large house up here in the tree!"

"Yeah, well, I think it's actually two or three trees," I began, "But-."

"Hey, what's this?!" Carlina interrupted me, "Do...do...cause rubble??? What does this note say?"

"I think it says, 'Do cause trouble.'," I corrected her, "But that doesn't make much sense either!"

"Let's hope Leo didn't write this note," Carlina scowled, "Because if so, his literacy has really plummeted."

"Seems like people over here write in a different script," I noted, "All of our kids' friends were talking in English, so I would assume they also write in old English, but apparently that's not true for Elves."

"It could also be a code to confuse snoops like you," Carlina noted.

"I'm not a snoop!" I said loudly, "Just curious... Anyway, you wanna go exploring outside? I could use the fresh air."

Carlina scowled again, "You're supposed to be taking it easy!"

"It doesn't really matter," I told her, "If you're going to die anyway, you might as well have some fun before that happens! Plus, I *am* taking it easy - I'll only do a little walking."

"You're not going to die," Carlina said matter-of-factly, "Anytime soon."

"That's not what the doctor said," I reminded her kindly, "He said I have...like stage-really-really-bad cancer."

"Well...if I can't stop you, I might as well go with you," Carlina finally conceded.

"You stole that line from one of those detective mystery series, didn't you!" I laughed.

"Hey! It's not my fault I'm a big reader!" Carlina replied, "And anyway, if we can get down the rope ladder outside without killing ourselves, I'd say we were successful!"

As it turned out, we did manage to get back down the rope ladder, but not without a scary situation when I got my foot accidentally stuck on the second-to-last rung; then proceeded to nearly flop on my face.

"Well, to be honest, that went better than I expected - especially for an old man like me!" I told Carlina, but she didn't answer. Instead, she was looking behind me.

I turned around to see two, small elf kids staring at us from behind a stand of bushes.

"Hey!" I called to them cheerfully, "I'm Carl! What are your names?"

"We're not supposed to talk to strangers," the older kid promptly replied. With that said, he and his friend both turned around and walked off.

"Awe, sweet kids," Carlina said.

"Sweet?!" I gasped, "They were very curt!"

"Well, it's likely a different culture here," Carlina reminded me, "They're probably just doing what they're parents do."

"Great," I groaned, "If everyone here is just like those kids, we're going to have a terrible time meeting anyone."

"Well, if I remember correctly, there should be all the main shops and merchant stands just to the left up ahead," Carlina informed me as we continued to walk towards the East part of town. Sure enough, as we rounded the corner, we found ourselves in the midst of a steady stream of traffic moving briskly up and down this trade-heavy section of the great Elven city. The sounds of animals and general activity filled my ears, but as opposed to the typical salesman that I was accustomed to in touristy-type destinations, Elves remained perfectly quiet until a customer enacted a transaction.

"How do you even know where to go?" I asked Carlina as we followed behind an old Elf man driving an oxen-driven cart filled with squash.

"I don't, but when we came in here last night, I made sure to try and remember where everything was," Carlina responded.

"I was too tired," I admitted, "I'm an old man."

"You were just saying this morning, though, that you-," She began, while smiling.

"Well, you know...", I laughed.

Even though both Carlina and I stopped by several food stands and a few odds-and-ends vendors, none of them so much as greeted us; instead opting to silently watch us and answer in one-word replies when absolutely necessary. However, I also noticed that the vendors treated other strangers (that *were* Elves) similarly.

"Do you think they all know we're Leo's parents?" Carlina whispered to me loudly as we passed a particularly loud blacksmith shop.

"They must," I replied while staring intently through the clouds of steam at the busy Elves producing high-quality weapons and arrows, "Because otherwise, they'd accost us for sure."

"We have to go into at least one of these actual shops," Carlina insisted, "I would love to get a set of clothes as a souvenir."

"That's assuming we can get back to our world," I mumbled.

"Oooh, good point," Carlina lamented, "But Lea and Alina got back!"

"But Leo got left though," I pointed out.

"And married and started a family too!" Carlina announced, "And I had no idea all this time that I was a grandmother."

"Maybe that's a good thing," I chided her, "I feel old just thinking that I'm a grandparent."

"You and your old age joke," Carlina chuckled, "You really need to-."

She was cut short as a white-haired, aged Elf lady jumped up in front of us from her ornate, wooden chair on the side of the street.

"Hello there!" she addressed us, "You wouldn't happen to be Leo The Deliverer's parents, would you?"

"I would assume you already know the answer to that," I smiled broadly, proud of my son.

Not taken aback by my rather snide comment, the lady quickly followed up with a genuine smile and took my hand to shake it, "I'm Marcella, Ember's Aunt!"

"Oooh!" Carlina declared excitedly, "Ember never mentioned she had an aunt! It's so nice to meet you!"

Marcella, much to my surprise, then proceeded to hug Carlina in a big bear hug. Carlina, being the one that always hugged people at church, reciprocated.

"Come on in my clothes shop. You're always welcome!" Marcella insisted, "I have some of the best, high-end garments in the city!"

Completely sold, Carlina went on to peruse the shelves of dresses and outfits; some of which were hanging on wire hangers on long racks.

"I didn't think that hanger technology was something people had in this era," I told Marcella.

Marcella laughed, "I used to have everything hanging on hooks on the wall or folded in boxes, but Leo introduced me to this new way of displaying clothes, and I have loved it. Unfortunately, some of the other Elves are reluctant to embrace some of the new ideas that Leo has brought to the table, but I'm not one of those."

"Well then I have another question," I told her.

"All questions are welcome!" Marcella responded.

"Why are you so friendly?" I asked, "Because most of the other Elves just kinda ignore us!"

Marcella smiled again, as was something she did frequently, "We Elves pride ourselves on being only the most elite warriors, and because of that we try to be as guarded as possible as well as ready for action at a moment's notice. This may come across as aloof or rude, but from what Leo has told me about you guys and what I have noticed about the white knight clans, we just don't do things the same as you."

"But you are quite chatty," I told her.

"Well, I'm not your typical elf!" Marcella winked at me.

"Look at this gorgeous dress!" Carlina announced to me as she came by carrying a full-length dress complete with furs and silk on it.

"It may be a bit tight for you....?" I replied, hoping she wouldn't take offense at me.

"It's not for me silly," Carlina laughed, "It's for Alina!"

"Oh, oh! She'd look good in that," I said, although I had no idea if Alina truly would look good in it.

"Then it's yours," Marcella told Carlina, "Consider it a gift from me!"

"We couldn't," Carlina insisted, "We can pay for it."

"You have our currency?" Carlina asked us, surprised.

"Oh," Carlina realized.

"Don't worry about it," Marcella told her again, "After all, I'm quite attached to my nephew-in-law anyway."

"He's always been a good kid," Carlina responded.

"Well, he did have his spells of rebelliousness as a teenager," I recollected.

"Carl!"

"Sorry," I defended myself, "Just being honest! He has certainly changed from last time I saw him!"

"It's been tough for all of us," Marcella admitted, "Zadok's iron rule has certainly taken its toll on us."

"I keep on hearing about this Zadok guy," I told Marcella, "Who is he again?"

Marcella sighed, "He is an extremely powerful wizard who now rules all the white knight, dark knight, and a few other smaller lands. He rules very aggressively, and his insistence on expanding his kingdoms' borders puts us in danger constantly. It's been tough, and as of such, we've been even more on guard than normal."

"That's terrible!" Carlina chimed in, "Alina and Lea told us that they had almost succeeded in throwing off his rule last time they came."

"That was a very long time ago," Marcella replied, "But yes. We came so close from what I heard, but then Zadok pulled out some insane magic stuff. He made like twenty to thirty meter tall rock monsters! Like how do you compete against that?!"

"Is that why you guys are working on that tube transport system?" I realized.

"Tube transport system?" Marcella asked, "What are you talking about?"

"Oohhhhh," I get it, I replied quickly, "That's hush-hush."

"No," Marcella replied, confused, "That's not secret because we're not working on a uh...tube system"

"Now I'm confused," I admitted, "I wonder what those drawings were about then?"

"I told you that nothing good ever comes from poking around with other peoples' papers," Carlina reminded me.

"Papers? What are you guys talking about!" Marcella laughed, "Is this some sort of inside joke?"

"Noo, it's just that Ember and Leo had a whole bunch of papers that seemed to have to do with a large tube transport idea, but it was all written in some different writing, and I just assumed from the drawings...", I said.

After hearing this, Marcella started to laugh so hard that she nearly doubled over, "Nooooooo, we're making a large, under-ground tunnel that we'll be able to use for transport and emergency escape, and, although it's supposed to be a secret to anyone that's not a member of this city, it has leaked out a bit."

Carlina gave me "the look."

"I'm sorry about that, Carl just gets very curious," Carlina apologized, for me.

"No no, it's fine. All good - just don't tell Zadok about it, okay?" Marcella chuckled.

I nodded my head quickly, indicating that I certainly wouldn't.

"Now, I've been occupying you guys' time enough. You should get back out and do some more exploring! Maybe even check out the Elven palace!" Marcella advised, "Although you won't be able to go very far inside because the eldership is in session."

After Carlina decided to leave her new dress with Marcella while we continued to explore the city, we made our way along the increasingly crowded streets towards the imposing Elven palace.

"Honestly, it looks a lot more like the Taj Mahal than a palace," I noted.

"I thought the Taj Mahal was a palace," Carlina replied.

"Beats me," I shrugged, as some Elf children pushed past us in a high-speed game of chase, "I thought it was made as a tomb for this rich Indian guy's wife."

"I heard that too," Carlina agreed, "I also watched some documentary on it a while back, but I seem to have forgotten most of it."

"Hey! You're still young, that's something I should do," I laughed, "Forgetting stuff that is!"

Ignoring my question, Carlina pointed out the ornately-inscribed archway that led to the palace, "It's beautiful!"

"So advanced for this age too!" I agreed.

The guards at the gate gave us a cursory glance-over as we passed through, but didn't stop or search us thankfully. After passing through the gate, we found ourselves in a small, stone courtyard surrounded by a few fruit trees. Although the courtyard wasn't too heavily populated, there were a large number of Elves in long robes scribbling on even longer scrolls of parchment. I assumed that even these Elves involved in the governmental bureaucracy liked their fresh air. It occurred to me that a lot of modern day politicians could use more fresh air and a whole lot less hot air.

"Is that copper plating on those double doors?" Carlina whispered to me as we approached the palace's main entrance.

"That or some mixture of other metals to achieve a similar effect," I noted, "Ehhhh, but we'll go with copper."

The main entrance to the palace was flanked by two, burly Elf guards on either side of the doors who stopped us as we drew near.

"State your name and purpose," the taller guard demanded.

"We're Leo's parents," Carlina informed them, "We were just hoping to get a quick peek inside."

"If that's okay of course," I quickly added, noting the large biceps and massive frowns on each of the guards.

"Humph," the lead guard announced loudly, staring through my soul with piercing eyes that seemed to say he would gladly crush me if I misbehaved. After what felt like eternity, he slowly opened the door without a sound and gestured with his hand.

"Don't touch *anything*," he finished as Carlina and I scurried in like scared rabbits and said our "thank you's."

Once we had entered into the spacious lobby and the doors were closed behind us, I was able to get a complete view of two grand staircases leading to an imposing balcony that disappeared from view.

"I wish this was in my RV," I announced to Carlina, "That'd be truly epic."

"Pretty sure we'd need to get a bigger RV," Carlina replied, gingerly touching the polished wood railing.

"I mean, just look at each of these railing poles," I said, "Each one would take hours to carve!"

"I think there's a story in here somewhere," I noted as we emerged onto the second floor.

While Carlina decided to look over the balcony, I walked past another strict Elven guard who was standing menacingly in front of an identical set of double doors as that on the first floor and slowly shuffled into another massive room that was filled from floor to ceiling with books. I knew that there were books in the medieval era, but I didn't know that there could be so many. Not only were some of the books massive, but they were all carefully bound between leather covers and organized side by side on shelf after shelf.

"Oh my goodness Carl," Carlina gasped as she followed me into the library, "What in the world is there to write about?"

"Quite a lot actually," answered a wizened old Elf man with crazy white hair and a crude monocle, "We have a little about everything here."

I stared at him as I was not sure what to say, but Carlina did.

"How far back do you have records about this land?" she asked.

"Almost two thousand years ago," the Elf man replied.

Unlike the other Elves, this librarian seemed to not be bothered at all to talk with us. If anything, he seemed anxious to keep himself occupied.

"So how did this place start?" I had to know.

"You mean the land of the Elves or...?" the librarian clarified.

"Like, did God create it or...?" I began.

"Oh well, you see," the librarian began, "Many, many years ago there was-."

"You!"

Carlina and I spun around to see Ember's eyes barely clearing a large pile of books and papers that were stacked on her hands.

"What are you guys doing here?" Ember wanted to know as she carefully walked forward.

"Oh dear, oh dear!" the librarian worried, running back and forth between Ember and his oversized desk, "Be careful with those maps!"

"I am, I am!" Ember repeated several times before finally setting the stack on the floor.

"Oh thank goodness they're safe!" the librarian continued, more worried about the books than Ember throwing out her back because of everything she was carrying.

"Marcella said we should check the palace out!" Carlina informed Ember, "So we stopped by."

"You met my aunt?" Ember asked, "What'd you think?"

I quickly glanced back at the librarian who was now carefully pulling the top book off the stack and wiping down the leather cover with a cloth.

"She's much friendlier than everyone else here," I whispered to Ember, "No offense though."

Ember produced one of her rare smiles and chuckled, "Well, my aunt has always been fun-loving. She was a huge help when my parents died many years ago."

"What did you need all those books for?" Carlina asked next.

Ember sighed, "I was put in charge of warfare logistics - which is basically just a fancy term for meaning that I have to scour through hundreds of books of maps and come up with strategic defense posts, escape routes, attack routes, and various other tactics."

"Wow," I replied, "Sounds...intense?"

"What's even more frustrating is that half the time the other elders disagree with me; then I have to go back and redo everything!!!" Ember grumbled.

"Nine-A-B," the librarian said aloud to nobody in particular as he hurried by with his first book in an attempt to replace it in its rightful spot.

"So maybe you can tell me," I told Ember as she led us back out of the library, "Are the new tunnels for emergency or just general transport or something else?"

Ember quickly surveyed the area nearby to make sure no one was nearby.

"Mainly just for emergencies," she said, "But how did you guys find out about them?"

"There was a huge stack of plans for them by the door in your house," I replied quickly.

"Why do you keep asking everyone about them?!" Carlina asked me, "You're going to get yourself into trouble one of these days!"

Ember shook her head, "Leo has only said the best things about you guys. I'm sure you're trustworthy. In fact, you probably *should* know about them in case you need to use them.

Unfortunately, they aren't finished yet!

"Well, we may still be here when they do get finished, since no one seems to know how we're going to get back!" I stated firmly.

Ember pointed out some of the fascinating features of the palace before guiding us back downstairs and out some very thick, metal doors at the back of the palace. Then, she led us out the back gates of the palace and onto a very rut-filled, dirty trail which wound on for about a mile until it stopped at a massive cave/hole in the ground.

"This used to be a natural cave," Ember informed us as we descended on a long, earth ramp into the tunnel below, "Until we started enlarging it into a massive underground tunnel network."

"Woah!" I said in awe as we entered.

Not only was the roof of the tunnel at least twenty feet in the air, but the width was large enough for at least three average-sized carts to roll through, side-by-side.

"Does this go under the entire city?" Carlina wanted to know next.

"Like I said," Ember began, "That's the plan, but right now it pretty much just connects the East part of town to the West."

"Umm, Mrs. Elder," a nearby Foreman interrupted our conversation, "Would you mind moving out of the way a bit? We're trying to keep on task with our schedule."

"Of course, of course," Ember replied, embarrassed, as she motioned for us to stay to the right side of the tunnel as we began walking into the torch-lit tunnel.

Every hundred feet were massive, iron support beams that held up the tunnel ceiling, and in between these support beams were a great array of torches that kept the tunnel properly lit.

"This is crazy!" I told Ember again as a constant line of dirt-laden carts rolled by led by dirty workers and oxen, "All of this is hand-dug?!"

"Well we've used some tools," Ember said, "But yeah, almost entirely by hand."

"Imagine what you could do with a modern excavator or boring machine!" Carlina noted.

"Leo has told me about those machines," Ember stated, "But I still can't comprehend them!"

"To be fair," I admitted, "I can't really either. I mean, it's been explained to me, but there's no way that I could replicate it, even if I was given all the parts and instruments needed to put one together!"

Eventually, the tunnel forked into two paths, one veered to the left while the other was to the right. Ember explained that the one to the right was currently under construction, but we could

take the one to the left which would let us out near the Elf training facilities. Being so far underground was certainly disconcerting, but the soothing sound of Ember's voice and the ever-burning torches kept me sane.

Eventually, we ran into a long ramp that let us out of the tunnels, but I struggled to see in the bright sunlight enough to move out of the way of the continuous chain of workers streaming around me.

"Ooooh! Where are we now?" Carlina wanted to know.

"Now, we're at the Elf training grounds," Ember informed us, "This is where anyone can train and keep active, although it's mainly used by new recruits and seasoned veterans trying to stay in shape."

Across from us a bunch of teenager-aged kids with light, chainmail armor on, were fighting each other using wooden swords. For being as young as they were, they were incredibly lithe and fast.

"That one boy has a very good parry and twist," I noted, "Very good form!"

Ember stared at me in shock, "You know how to sword fight?"

"Only a little," I admitted, "I took a few classes when I was younger, but I think they were more stage-fighting than real fighting."

"What's stage fighting?" Ember asked.

"Uh, fake fighting," I replied, "It tends to be more choreographed with no painful consequences."

"And even then you only took a few, right?" Carlina pressed me.

I noticed that Ember too was closely following the practice brawl that the young elves were currently involved in. It appeared to be a two versus two person mock brawl, although no older Elves appeared to be overseeing the fight so I assumed they were just practicing.

I like that girl's attacking style, I noted again to Ember, "See how she fakes - then attacks?"

"I see," Ember acknowledged, "But swordplay really isn't my strong suit. Respect to them for using close-range weapons."

Another of the kids suddenly slipped beneath the legs of another and "stabbed" his friend from behind using his wooden sword. The technique was so excellent that I clapped.

"Shut up," the older of the four Elf kids yelled at me, "Can't you see we're busy here?!"

"Sorry!" I defended myself, "I'm just impressed with your technique!"

Another of the elf kids scoffed, "Of course you humans are impressed, you couldn't do any of this if you tried!"

"Hey!" I responded, offended now, "I may not be as good, but I could hold my own!"

"Pft, you must be like eighty!" the first kid laughed, "You'd soon collapse before even reaching me!"

Now sufficiently angry, I growled back, "Give me one of those swords, and I'll show you who's boss!"

"It's okay, okay, simmer down now," Ember interceded, separating us, "We'll be going now!"

"I wanna see that old man take me on!" the kid yelled over Ember, "He talking a whole lot of smack!"

"The only thing you'll be beating is the air if you try!" I retorted.

"Let me at him!" the kid cried out loudly, shoving Ember to the side to get at me.

The kid, fueled up on typical Elf anger, rushed at me while I fell back into a boxer's defense stance that I had seen many times on TV. Unfortunately for him, he didn't make it to me.

Ember had not been a fan of being pushed to the side, and as soon as the kid had done so, she grabbed his legs and slung him over her head - launching him through the air and over his three friends standing nearby.

"Don't *ever* push me around!" Ember snapped defiantly.

The other elf kids quickly backed up in alarm while the first one peeled himself off the dirty ground, blood oozing from his nose.

"I still want at that old man," he growled, advancing menacingly on me again.

"Elves do have a right to defend their honor," Ember told me, "You've gotten yourself into a nasty spot now."

"I'll take him on in a sword fight as long as I can get some decent armor," I told Ember, "I want to defend *my* honor!"

"Honey! You're supposed to be taking it-," Carlina began, but I shushed her.

Ember looked me over, but said nothing. Instead, she motioned for me to follow her to a large building where, inside, were hundreds of weapons and various armor.

"This suit of chainmail should be sufficient," Ember said, "You'll mostly just want to get a nice helmet."

"I'll take this shield," I added, "I heard somewhere that your shield is your greatest weapon."

"I'm not so sure that's...", Ember began, but was cut off by Carlina.

"Carl, I don't know how you became so much trouble!"

I plucked a nice, long steel sword out of a box on the floor and practiced brandishing it in the air,

"I'm making the most of my time here!"

Meanwhile Ember shoved my chainmail and a helmet into my arms and said, "You'll have to use a wooden sword though - I don't want anyone getting really hurt. Leo would kill me if you got hurt."

"Wait, could he really best you?" Carlina gasped.

"Probably," Ember answered, "If I had to stay around a fight and wasn't allowed to make a run for it."

Scarcely had I finished arranging all the chainmail armor onto my large frame when the ground started to tremble.

"What *are* those kids up to now?!" Ember grumbled, "I tell you - kids these days!"

Ember threw open the door and stepped outside to see what was going on - only nothing was going on at all. Instead, the small number of other Elves scattered among the training grounds were all looking at each other, confused and a bit worried.

The trembling of the ground got louder and louder until suddenly, a whole chorus of horns sounded from behind and to the side of me.

"What's that?!" I yelled, covering my ears with my hands.

"RUN!" Ember yelled to Carlina and I, "We're under attack - get to the center of the city!"

Ember whipped her bow off her back, loaded it with an arrow and sprinted back the way we had just come - diving into the tunnel. Meanwhile, Carlina just stared at me in shock.

"We may want to get going," I told Carlina, "I'm not exactly sure this is a safe place to be..."

As if on cue, the spiked wooden fence across from us suddenly blasted apart and an entire squad of black knight cavalry emerged from the smoke - heading straight for us, or rather the heart of the city.

With a sudden burst of speed, Carlina sprinted towards the general direction of Leo and Ember's tree house, almost leaving me behind. Things were about to get messy.

Chapter 5: Lea:

I slowly came to the next morning, feeling more than a little tired after the insanely long horse ride last night. However, there was light streaming through the window beside me, and a fresh-smelling breeze seeping through cracks in the walls. I would have slept in longer if it hadn't been for my hunger and that my pillow smelled kind of weird – I figured it had to do with the goose feather stuffing. I rolled myself out of bed; then sat up and looked over to where Alina was sleeping. Only she wasn't there; all that remained was a perfectly made bed.

Classic Alina, I thought.

I gazed over to my bed and noted that it was a total mess, but there were so many blankets piled on top that I gave up trying to make it before even starting. Over to my left were three large, wooden closets that I opened in turn. Inside was an array of various dresses. I wasn't normally one to wear a full-on dress as I preferred jeans or sometimes a skirt, but ladies in this world *always* wore dresses. After carefully investigating all of my choices, I finally selected a white dress with blue satin lining and a moderately short trail. One of the few things I still remembered from my previous visit to this medieval world was the difficulty of having a long trail on your dress as it always snagged and was easy to trip on.

Unfortunately, I also remembered one other thing, and that was the fashion to have very skinny waists. My whole family was of average width, but even for me, it was a tight fit. It took me a good half hour to figure out how to put the dress on, but when I was done with my hair, I felt OK about my appearance.

With a deep breath, I then carefully stepped over to the door of Alina and I's shared guest room and threw open the door. I was greeted by a loud "OOF!"

Someone had just been running by my bedroom and apparently, I had just thrown open my door at the worst possible moment. The person slammed painfully into the other side of my door just as I realized my mistake. Praying that it wasn't someone I knew or someone who was important, I quickly exited my room, closing the door behind me so that I could see who I had clobbered. The person was completely shrouded in black with a massive hood. After rubbing their head, the cloaked figure then got up and ran back the same way they had come while simultaneously clutching something in a brown sack.

"Hey!" I yelled after the mysterious person, "I'm so sorry! Who are..."

I trailed off as they rounded the corner down the hallway and disappeared from sight.

Surprisingly, it wasn't my worst beginning to a morning that I had ever had, but it came close. Looking around to make sure that no one else had noticed, I hurried (as fast as a lady in a full-length dress could) down the hallway towards where I hoped someone could give me directions. Verner and Yrited hadn't given me any instructions of where to meet them when I woke up, as we had all been too tired, but I figured that if I wandered around aimlessly for a long enough time, I would eventually find my way outside. It turned out that I was luckier than I thought, for, after turning down two side hallways, I found myself at the entrance to a large indoor garden and pavilion. Across from me were two guards slowly strolling between the large planters.

"Hey!" I said to them, "Do you know where Yrited is?"

The guards, quickly realizing who I was, offered to take me to the dining room where apparently everyone was having breakfast. Soon enough, I found myself escorted into a large dining area with several ornate pillars holding up the beautifully painted ceiling.

"Lea!" Yrited yelled to me from a table at the very front of the room, "Come join us!"

Holding the folds of my dress in my right arm, I speed-walked over to her, plopping down in an ornate, wooden chair next to my long-lost friend.

"Lea!" Yrited said again, "You're awake finally!"

"Yep," I announced, catching my breath, "And got dressed too, but this dress is *heavy*."

"Not quite the same as the outfits you are used to I presume?" Verner addressed me.

"Not at all," I replied, "Do you know where Alina is?"

"She went to meet up with Leo," Yrited reminded me, "She got up really, really early and left with some of our most elite soldiers."

"Ah," I said, as a servant placed a bowl of steaming porridge in front of me, "Now I remember."

"I have got a *great* day of stuff planned for us," Yrited gushed, "I want to show you *all* the sights around my castle!"

"Sounds cool!" I admitted, "But we're going to have to go slow if I have to walk around in *this* thing all day."

Yrited laughed, "Of course."

"And I would love to join you, but I have official business with some of Henry II's financiers,"

Verner informed me, "So I won't be able to go along."

"That is perfectly fine," Yrited said, waving her hand.

"Ah, but I feel awful," Verner said, shaking his head, "This is our third anniversary!"

"Really?" I exclaimed, "Congratulations!"

"Thank you, thank you," Yrited told me, "But all this time feels so short!"

"That's because of me," Verner smirked.

Yrited laughed and slapped Verner on the arm, "Of course you think that."

Although the porridge turned out to be some weird form of barley and berries mixed with grains of wheat, it wasn't half bad, and I quickly devoured it.

"Well," Verner told Yrited, "I do have a present for you to commemorate this day!"

"Really?" Yrited gasped, "What is it?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?!" Verner chuckled, "Hey, Derik!"

A nearby guard quickly stepped over to Verner who leaned over to him and whispered something in his ear. Immediately, Derik nodded his head and headed for the door – exiting in a hurry.

"Derik is going to get it," Verner said.

"So," I said, starting a new conversation, "How well does Leo and Ember get along?"

"Quite well!" Yrited informed me, "They are literally made for each other. Leo is very friendly and reserved when it comes to confrontation, while Ember is very tactically minded and skilled in all forms of fighting. I think Zareline got only the best qualities from both of them!"

"That is very true!" Verner added, "She's already such an amazing warrior!"

"I saw her nail a cherry off a tree from four hundred feet away using just her bow and a single arrow!" Yrited told me.

I shook my head, "I just can't quite wrap my head around the fact that my brother is *married*."

"And you have no trouble accepting that I'm married?" Yrited asked me.

"Not really," I laughed, "You just always seemed like marriage material."

"But," Verner said, seriously, "Ember has it very hard now that she's married to Leo."

"How so?" I said, "I mean, I thought she was always at odds with the Elves in some way or another."

"Because it's against the Elves' rule for a pure Elf to marry a non-Elf," Verner explained, "It also doesn't help that she disagrees with many aspects of how the Elven government is run."

"That's unfortunate," I agreed.

"However," Yrited quickly interrupted, "Just recently they accepted her into the Elves' council, which is a *huge* accomplishment!"

"How did *that* happen?" I asked.

"We still don't know," Verner told me, "We think she worked really hard to convince the general population of her good intentions, and I also suspect she 'greased' the works as well."

"Ooooh!" I smirked, "Though if that's true, I bet that Leo did most of that. He always had a way of getting things out of my parents!"

"Bang!" The doors to the dining room flew open, and Derik rushed in.

Surprised, Verner quickly stood up as Derik raced over and whispered something into his ear.

"WHAT?!" Verner exclaimed, "You're *serious*?!"

"Yes!" Derik cried out, "It's *gone*!"

Verner banged his hand on the table and raced after Derik.

"What's going on?!" I whispered to Yrited.

"I don't know," Yrited replied, "But whatever it is, I want to know!"

For being in an even larger dress than I was, Yrited got up quickly and ran with perfect ease – following her husband and Derik. Me, on the other hand, got up like a drunken sailor and tripped and hobbled after her.

Several minutes later I finally stumbled up to the large, heavy doorway of a room where Verner and Derik were interrogating a pair of guards standing nearby. The guards were visibly nervous and gesturing wildly with their hands.

"My present got stolen!" Yrited whispered to me as I attempted to catch my breath, "But the guards claim that no one entered or exited the room since Verner put my gift in it."

"That's strange," I said.

"Ugh, that is so frustrating!" Verner exclaimed to Yrited and I, "I know these guards are telling the truth, and yet, it's impossible to enter this room any other way! Look!"

Verner unlocked the door with his key and pushed it open – revealing a spacious room. In the very center of it was a small pillar with a velvet pillow perched on top and a massive glass box on top of the pillow.

"It was *going* to be a beautiful, bejeweled, golden crown," Verner informed Yrited, "Not that that matters anymore."

Yrited kissed Verner, "I'm sure that it was pretty though!"

Verner mumbled something and then slumped into a leather chair nearby while I carefully inspected the ground. I saw no visible scratches or dirt on the floor – indicating that the room had been cared for, but when I was on the other side of the room from the door, I ran into a series of very muddy footprints that led from a stained glass window in the wall to the empty glass case, and then back. The footprints were so muddy that I could visibly see the unique prints of the thief's shoes.

"Do you keep this room very clean?" I asked Verner.

"Of course!" Verner said, "This is where I always keep valuable artifacts!"

"Then what are these muddy footprints?"

Verner and Yrited, followed by Derik and the two guards quickly came over to me and inspected them.

"Ha, HA!" Verner triumphed, "The thief left footprints!"

"But honey," Yrited told him, "How did the thief leave the room though? This stained glass window hasn't been touched in decades!"

Derik softly knocked on the window but nothing happened. What was also weird was that the stained glass window was a good three feet off the floor, and there were no visible markings on the wall around it.

"Perhaps the thief removed the window and put it back?" one of the guards suggested.

"Unlikely," Verner said slowly, "This window would break if someone tried to remove it. It's already so fragile!"

"We could check outside?" Derik suggested, "If we see bits of glass then we have our answer!"

"Good idea," Verner said, "As the thief would have had to break it if he removed it."

Yrited looked skeptical, "If I understand what you're thinking, I don't believe the thief could have possibly been skilled enough to perfectly replicate the stained glass window and install it all without being detected and after having broken the first! If he was *that* good, he wouldn't have left muddy footprints on the floor!"

Verner shrugged his shoulders and quickly left via the door with everyone else following. I, instead, continued checking the room. However, after another minute of searching, the only thing I found was a faint ring of water on the floor near Verner's chair. It vaguely reminded me of something, but I couldn't quite place it.

"Lea!" Yrited called out to me, coming back into the room, "Hurry! You'll get lost if you don't follow!"

"Sorry!" I said, quickly following after her.

Yrited led me down some more corridors and then outside through a heavy metal door with iron bars for the window. Outside, it was a bit warmer in the sun, and the grass was halfway between green and brown.

Yrited noticed me looking at the grass and said, "It's been really hot lately, so the grass has been drying out."

I nodded my head, "We've been having droughts where I live too."

"Well," Yrited informed me as we made our way around the outside of the castle, "We're not necessarily having a drought. We just don't water the grass ever, so, if it gets hot, than tough luck."

As we rounded the nearest brick tower, I saw Verner and Derik a few meters in front of us, carefully scouring the ground on the other side of the stained glass window.

"Found anything?!" Yrited yelled to Verner.

"Nothing!" Verner yelled back, disgusted, "Not a splinter of glass!"

Derik tried digging a little bit in the dry dirt and produced a cloud of dust, causing them all to cough.

"Forget it," Verner groaned, "It doesn't really matter anyway. We're not getting it back."

Derik draped a bit of his cape over his head and got up, "I'm sorry, King Verner. I wish there was something that I could do about it! I feel so bad."

"It's not your fault," Verner told him graciously.

"Wait a minute," I said slowly, "Derik, your hood reminded me of this guy that I accidentally smashed my door into earlier this morning."

"Huh?" Yrited said, "You hit someone with your *door*?"

Slightly embarrassed, I said, "Well, when I got up this morning and left my room, I opened my door and accidentally hit this hooded figure that was out in the hallway. And, he was holding something in a brown sack."

At this, Verner quickly turned in my direction, "You said he was hooded? Did you see his face?"

"No," I told him, "He never looked at me and ran off."

"What was he dressed like?" Yrited quizzed me.

"He just had a black robe on," I said, trying to remember.

"That could be our man," Derik said slowly, "But why would he be running around the castle?"

"Well, if he didn't leave through the window, then he would have had to leave via the castle," Verner deduced, "And we just established that it's unlikely he could leave through the window here."

"Then he must have left through the door!" Yrited exclaimed, "Those guards must have been lying!"

"Hurry!" Derik said to Verner, "Let's go get them!"

"We've got this," Verner told Yrited and I, "You can go enjoy yourselves. Henry's financiers will be here shortly anyway."

I sort of wanted to see the guards get busted, but as I had said before, I felt like I was missing something. Hence, I thought getting a tour from Yrited would give me enough time to think the mystery through carefully.

"Well, you have already seen a lot," Yrited told me as we walked along the outside of the castle,

"But I bet you haven't seen the blacksmith shop!"

"There's a blacksmith shop here?!" I exclaimed.

"We just added it about a few years ago," Yrited explained, "Dwarves are the best blacksmith, but they are so separated among the kingdoms, that it was hard to get all our weapons repaired and new ones made, so Verner had the amazing idea to bring the best dwarves together so they can work pool their skills together."

"That's a good idea," I admitted.

"Yes! And we make sure to supply them with only the best materials," Yrited added, "Which is why we have all these financiers coming over here so often."

It wasn't too hard to tell where the blacksmith building was, because a massive column of smoke was rising from the North.

"Let me guess," I laughed, "It's over there?"

Yrited gasped in mock astonishment, "Really? You think so?!"

When we reached the blacksmith shop, I was astonished by how massive it was. It was largely constructed of rock and brick with just a little bit of wood. All the doors were fairly short, but I noticed that there was even a second floor to the shop.

"Come inside!" Yrited told me, opening the door for me.

As soon as I stepped inside I simultaneously choked on smoke fumes and wilted from the scorching heat.

"It's a bit intense here!" Yrited yelled to me over the din of metal being banged on anvils, "But it's also kinda cool!"

All around me, I saw dozens of anvils, furnaces, buckets of dirty water, and dwarves running around with clay molds. Only a few even bothered to look up as Yrited and I walked by.

"We pay them handsomely and try to make sure that we keep the place as clean as possible," Yrited informed me, "They're doing us all a massive favor! Plus, we want to keep their services away from the dark knights."

I continued down the main walkway, making sure to not bang my head on the overhead beams, and found some stairs to the second floor.

"Let's go up," Yrited insisted, "It's cooler up there!"

Sure enough, it was a lot less loud, hot, and smoky on the second floor. In fact, there was even a slight breeze coming from large square holes cut in the walls. The second floor appeared to be a storage area for all the newly mended and created weapons and armor. I noticed that George and a team of knights were standing around talking to some pompously dressed dwarves.

"George is here!" I said.

"Yeah, he comes over often to pick up gear," Yrited informed me, "We work together closely to be more efficient."

"That's cool!" I said, "And all this stuff is really epic looking!"

I picked up a nearby mace that weighed at least twenty pounds and attempted to swing it.

Yrited laughed, "Most of these weapons are incredibly sturdy but also very heavy!"

"Tell me about it!" I groaned, putting my mace back on the shelf.

"In fact," Yrited continued, very much enjoying the tour she was giving me, "Leo's current sword was repaired and enhanced here!"

"Ah," I said, "I was wondering why it looked so much bigger now!"

"Well, let's go back out," Yrited replied, gesturing to George and the dwarves, "We don't want to bother them."

We turned around and headed back for the stairs just when the head dwarf who was wearing a fancy purple cloak called out to Yrited, "Hey! Can I talk to you for a moment?"

Yrited was a bit surprised but walked over.

"Hey, do you know how many axes we need to keep on hand over here?" he asked her, pointing to several crates of axes.

While Yrited counted in her head, mentally trying to estimate how many guards would be on duty and need them, George, having been interrupted in his conversation, strode over to me.

"Hello there, Miss Lea," he addressed me, bowing deeply.

"And you as well," I curtsied, "It's been a while!"

"It sure has," George said, "Are you doing anything this afternoon?"

"Um, not that I know of?"

"Well, I was just asking because...uh...I was wondering if you wanted to just hang out and talk. I wanted to know what's going on with you and catch up a bit!" George said.

"I mean, sure," I told him, taken a bit of guard, "But uh, are you staying here all day?"

"Yeah," George said, "It'll be too late to leave tonight, and I have a lot of business to attend to here. In fact, I have to go talk to Verner in just a bit here too."

"Where should I meet you?" I asked him.

"Do you know where the main pavilion garden is?"

"Yeah."

"I'll meet you there."

"Okay!" I said.

"I'll catch you in a minute!" Yrited yelled over to me as she scribbled something down on a piece of paper.

George waved at me as I quickly descended down the staircase and exited the blacksmith shop. I was fairly sure that was his way of asking me out. Weirdly enough, even though I was almost thirty, I had never gone on a date before. Even during my high school's prom, no boy had asked me to dance with him, so I just danced with myself, which was fine because I was a pretty good dancer, and it was easier to dance solo.

As I sauntered outside and surveyed the landscape, I thought back to when I had distracted George last time I had come to this medieval world so that Verner could get to Yrited first.

Apparently, he must have actually liked me! I was excited, but also nervous, because I wasn't sure how long I would stay in this world and that could cause some... complications.

Behind the massive blacksmith shop, I noticed a large swath of sand, sort of like a small sand dune. It stood out among the grassy landscape, so I decided to walk across it while Yrited was busy. Carefully removing my leather shoes, I stepped into the soft sand, letting the warmth seep into my feet. It had been a bit of time since I had last gone to the beach, and I enjoyed the beach simulation. About halfway across the sand, I found a long wooden pole sticking out of the sand. I pulled at it, but it curiously remained stuck. After digging around it for a while and making no real progress, I was just about to give up when I found a piece of fabric.

Hmmm, I thought, I wonder what this is?!

Just at this moment, I heard Yrited scream from behind me.

"Lea!" she cried out, "Watch out!"

I whipped around and instinctively ducked but didn't see anything.

"What?" I yelled back.

"Lay on your back, *quick!*" she shouted back.

I couldn't figure out why she wanted me to lay on my back, and I didn't see any snakes or scorpions or rogue knights anywhere. Figuring she must be confused, I walked back to her from across the sand.

"What did you say?" I asked again.

Yrited stared at me like I had just walked on water.

"You...you just walked on the quicksand?!" she gasped.

"Quicksand?!" I yelped, jumping onto the grass nearby, "What in the world?!"

"That's quicksand," Yrited informed me, "How in the world did you walk on it?!"

"It was just hard like normal sand," I told her, "It wasn't squishy at all!"

Yrited leaned over and placed her hand into the sand, quickly realizing that it wasn't wet at all.

"That's funny," she said, "Maybe all the water evaporated with the heat?"

"I don't know," I said, "I've never heard of quicksand 'drying up'. By the way, do you know what that stick is for over there?"

"That? Oh that's the handle of a cart that an unfortunate merchant accidentally pushed into the sand," Yrited told me, "He barely escaped with his life."

"Oh," I said, "Because I was trying to dig it out, but no wonder I couldn't pull it out. I found some fabric sticking out of the sand too. Did he have anything in his cart?"

"Sure," Yrited said, "But I don't remember what."

"Well, now I'm just curious," I told Yrited, "I want to go see what it is."

"I'm not sure..." Yrited said slowly.

"I'll be *right* back," I told her, pulling up my dress a little so that I could walk quicker to the cart. Once at the cart, and being extra careful to look for real quicksand, I furiously dug up around the fabric and pulled on it.

"Floop!" the fabric quickly flung into the air – spilling me onto the hot sand below. It turned out to be a fabric bag, and it landed with a large thud next to me.

"Wait a minute!" I exclaimed, snatching up the bag and looking into it, "This is the same bag that that guy that slammed into my door earlier today had!"

Inside, I saw something large and shiny.

"LOOK!" I exclaimed to Yrited, running back over to her.

Yrited gingerly reached her hand into the bag and produced a beautiful tiara.

"It's gorgeous!" she exclaimed, holding it up in the sunlight.

"Well, what's going on over here!" a voice from nearby exclaimed.

I turned to see a very old wizard with a gnarled cane hobbling up to Yrited and I.

"Oh! Uio, look what Lea just found!" Yrited exclaimed.

"A tiara?" Uio guessed.

"Yes, but I think this is the same 'crown' that Verner bought for me!"

"Oh, you mean the one that those guards stole?" Uio understood.

"Yes!" Yrited said excitedly, "Oh, Verner is going to be so pleased!"

"Wait just a second," I interrupted, as pieces started to fall into place, "Something's wrong here."

"It is?" Uio said.

"Yes!" I said confidently, "And I think I just figured out what!"

"More wrong than finding my stolen crown in a quicksand pit?" Yrited asked.

"Look," I told her, "We just saw that both the ground and this entire quicksand has all dried up!"

"Okay," Yrited said slowly.

"Yet there were *muddy* footprints in that room where the tiara was stolen!" I continued.

"I'm not sure I'm following," Uio responded, confused.

"If there is no wet dirt anywhere, then there couldn't have been muddy footprints!" I told them, "Someone must have intentionally made their dirty shoes wet, and that explains why there was that wet ring of water on the ground."

"Wet ring of water?" Yrited said.

"Yeah, I noticed a ring of water on the floor by the footprints, and I just now realized that's the same ring of water when you get a bucket wet and some water drips down the sides and collects along the bucket's bottom," I explained, "The thief must have intentionally wet his shoes to make very visible footprints. I'll bet those footprints aren't his actual shoe prints and are someone else's prints."

"Ooooh!" Yrited finally understood, "The thief was *trying* to frame others."

"The guards I'll wager," I told Yrited.

"But then how did the thief get in and out unseen?" Uio argued.

"There has *got* to be some sort of secret passage in there," I insisted.

"I lived in that room for several dozen years," Uio told me, "And I never saw a secret passage."

"Wait, you lived in that room?" I said.

"Yeah, I was employed by Yrited parent's and the parents before them and the parents before *them!*" Uio told me.

"Hmmm," I thought out loud, "I'll need to go investigate that room again."

"I'll go with you!" Yrited offered.

"And I'll be on my way," Uio told us, "I need to pick up some pine leaves for my potion."

As Uio hobbled off into the forest, Yrited and I raced as fast as our dresses would allow to the castle. As soon as we entered through a side door, Yrited helped me find the room again that was now being guarded by only one new guard. He let us in, and I carefully searched the room.

"See where this ring of water is?" I said to Yrited, "It's where the thief put down his bucket of water. However, it's *not* near the window, it's closer to this wall!"

"I see," Yrited answered, "Because if you just entered the window, you would have to put it down near the window before jumping through."

"Exactly!" I exclaimed.

I immediately started searching through the various boxes and weapons that were lying around on a wide table that stood against the west wall.

"I'll look over..." Yrited began, but she was cut off as I cried out.

"OUCH! Ouch, ouch, ouch," I whined, pulling back my right hand and sucking my index finger, "I pricked it on this mace!"

"Oh goodness," Yrited exclaimed, rushing over, "I keep on telling our soldiers to place their maces heads down, but they never listen!"

As I nursed my poor hand, Yrited grabbed the handle of the mace that was hanging off the table and pulled up at it. Instead of her pulling it off the table, the handle moved a bit; then the entire west wall groaned and popped open by a foot or two – revealing a dark tunnel behind it.

"Aha!" I triumphed, "I *knew* there was a secret passage. All castles have secret passages!"

Yrited looked at the tunnel in astonishment, "How come I never knew about this?!"

"You must have never explored this room," I told her, squeezing myself into the small tunnel and making my way down it."

I didn't go far before I ran into another door that I yanked open. On the other side was a bunch of furs that glowed in the small amount of sunshine available in the tunnel. After pushing aside the furs, I reached another wooden door that I shoved open – revealing a large room filled with many wooden chairs, a few tables, and some pillows.

"Hey!" Yrited said, following me out of the closet that we had just emerged from, "This is the servant room!"

"Servant room?" I asked.

"Yeah, this is where our castles' servants hang out when they're not working," Yrited told me.

"Oh no," I suddenly said.

"What?" Yrited whispered, nervously looking around.

"Uio stole that crown."

"Him?" Yrited exclaimed, "He's been with my family for decades. It can't be him!"

"You think that you could live in a room for as long as he claims to have and *not* know about the secret passage?" I questioned.

"Well..." Yrited stammered.

"He said that there weren't any passages in there," I remembered, "And he *happened* to meet us over by the quicksand where I had found the crown. Perhaps he was really there to pick up the crown that he had buried there so we wouldn't find it in his room!"

"I guess that's possible," Yrited said slowly.

At that moment, a maid entered the room and jumped in surprise at seeing us.

"Oh!" she cried out quickly backing up, "I'm so sorry to bother you! I didn't know you were here!"

"It's totally okay," Yrited quickly assured her, "Have you seen Uio?"

"I saw him this morning," the maid told us, "But I haven't seen him since."

Yrited quickly rushed out with me following and wrapped back around to the guard outside the room where the crown had been stolen from.

Upon seeing us approaching from outside without ever having left, the guard jumped in surprise.

"You!" Yrited talked to the guard, "Can you go quickly get Uio?"

The guard looked at us and nodded his head, "Do you know where he is?"

"Outside in the forest by the quicksand pit," I told him, "He said he was looking for pine leaves."

The guard nodded his head, "Is there something I should be worried about?"

"Hopefully not," Yrited shook her head.

I could see that the guard looked doubtful but didn't ask any more questions and quickly headed for the nearest exit.

"Let's go show Verner the tiara now!" Yrited told me.

"You don't think Uio is going to make a run for it now that we found the tiara?" I asked Yrited.

"Nah," Yrited said, "He doesn't even know we're on to him – and that's assuming that he's guilty which I'm still not convinced of."

I nodded my head, "What should we do now?"

"I'm going to go show Verner what we found of course!" Yrited told me, heading back to the throne room where Verner was.

A minute later, Yrited burst through the large, double doors of the room and interrupted George and Verner who were talking over a large table filled with various delectables.

"Verner!" Yrited called out to him, "Look what Lea found!"

Verner gaped at the golden tiara that Yrited held in her hands.

"Wherever did you find that?!" he exclaimed.

"It was in some quicksand that wasn't quick," I told him.

Verner shook his head, "How-?"

"Hey!" George said, carefully inspecting the tiara that Yrited had put on the table, "That looks like the crown of the Legendary Wizard!"

"It is," Verner informed him, "It cost me a pretty penny to buy from a foreign merchant."

"I thought it was long gone," George laughed.

"Also," I told Verner, "I believe those guards didn't steal it."

"Who did, then?" Verner asked me, intrigued.

"My money's on Uio," I told him.

"Uio!" Verner exclaimed, "But he's been with Yrited's family for a very long time. He wouldn't steal anything!"

"That's what I thought," Yrited said, "Until Lea gave her proof. His case is starting to look a bit shaky."

Verner shook his head, "George? Could we continue this later, I need to go talk to Uio right away."

"Of course," George replied graciously, "I am a bit intrigued since I heard about this crown going missing!"

"I don't think he's in his room though," Yrited informed Verner as we left the throne room and headed down a nearby corridor – accompanied by a half a dozen guards.

"Well, if I just stole a valuable tiara," Verner said, "I wouldn't stay around either."

"I did send a guard to pick him up from the forest where we last saw him though," Yrited added.

Verner led the way to Uio's room on the East wing of the castle and opened his door using the master key. Inside, we saw that the room was very tidy. There were several vials of various liquids, a bed, a closet, and various tables covered with books and papers.

"He's not here," Verner sighed, "Although that's not all that uncommon."

"But look at this!" George called out to us from a table where he was looking down at a large sheet of paper, "There are red lines and dots all over this map!"

Yrited, Verner, and I crowded over what appeared to be a large map. On it were several large x's and lines that were all drawn to a central point.

"I recognize this city," George said, pointing to a square box on the bottom left of the map,

"That's a small village on the far North of my kingdom."

"Most of this is no-man's land," Verner noted, "It looks like Uio was tracking something."

"And whatever it is," Yrited added, "It's in the Forested Mountains of the North."

"I've never been up there myself," George commented, "It's pretty dangerous from what I've heard."

"I briefly explored the lower half of those mountains with an elite squad," one of George's guards said, "But there was nothing of interest there."

"This can't be related to the crown," Verner said, "I bought the tiara from a merchant from the deep South."

"But here's a question," I said, "If Uio left for good, either he's running away or following this map. Since this map is here, I'd assume he hasn't left to find whatever he's looking for."

"Well," Verner said quickly, "We still haven't established he's left for good. Uio is always in the nearby forests, collecting various leaves and roots."

At this, there was a pounding of feet in the hallway outside, and a boy in muddy clothes ran up to us. We all turned to look at him, but I wrinkled up my nose because he smelled strongly of horse manure.

"Hey, kid," one of the guards said, blocking his way, "You can't see the king."

"But Uio said Verner wanted to speak to me, post haste!" the boy informed the guard.

"I didn't call for you," Verner said slowly.

"Oh, Uio must have been mistaken then," the boy said slowly, "Maybe I heard wrong too. I had better leave then; no one's watching the stables now that I'm over here."

"Oh great," Yrited mumbled, "Lea's right again."

"What nonsense is *this*!?" Verner roared, rushing back out of Uio's room, "I want a squad to chase him down, and I want all available soldiers to search the premises for clues of where he went!"

As Verner's commanding voice disappeared down the hallway, Yrited, George, and I looked at each other.

"Um," I said.

"Okay then," Yrited said, "I'm going to go talk to our castle's cartographer. He may know something about the places on this map."

"You wanna go on a walk with me?" George addressed me, "Seems like I may not be able to finish my conversation with Verner for a bit."

"Sure," I accepted.

"Wait, you guys are going on a walk?" Yrited asked, surprised.

"Um, yeah," I said.

"Ooooooh," Yrited trailed off, "Well, we have a nice hedge maze on the back, right side of the castle."

George nodded his head, "I saw that when I came here last year. It looks like a good challenge!"

"It is!" Yrited answered, leading the way out of Uio's room and into the hallway, "Leo helped design it!"

"Oh no," I giggled, "We'll never be able to get out if Leo made it!"

George linked arms with me and announced, "We'll see about that!"

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"So," George said as we walked through the hedge maze, "Do you have a profession where you live?"

I glanced over my shoulder to see the entrance to the maze disappear as we rounded a corner.

Two of George's guards followed from a distance.

"Well, yes," I said, "But it's kind of hard to explain."

"Try me," George insisted as we strolled at a leisurely pace, "Are you some sort of royalty?"

"There really isn't royalty in our world," I laughed, "Or at least they don't have much power."

Actually, I'm a multimedia specialist. I work for a company that creates ads, video game characters and animations, as well as construct and maintain websites for other companies."

"Oh," George told me, "Yeah, I am a bit confused."

"Don't worry about it," I giggled, "My world is a ton different than here."

"Do you like your world better than this one?" George asked me.

"I'd have to say yes in almost every way," I answered truthfully, "We have better healthcare, less people trying to kill us, and lots of safe ways to have fun."

"Hmmm," George pondered, "I think I would like to visit your world. It sounds very intriguing!"

"I think you'd like it too," I told him, "But you'd probably be in shock for a few days!"

"From what?" George asked as we ran into a dead end and had to turn around. George's guards, noticing us double-back, hurriedly scrambled out of the way.

"Everything!" I laughed, "Literally almost everything is different."

"Even the people?" George pressed, dumbfounded.

"Yep. There are *only* humans in my world, and we spend a lot more time doing stuff that isn't physically taxing like here."

"Do you still marry?" George wanted to know next as we passed a stone statue.

"Of course," I laughed, "But no pre-arranged marriages."

"Could have called that," George told me, "That's really going out of fashion quickly."

I nodded my head, "But with that comes the fact that it's oftentimes hard to find a 'match.'" "Same here," George told me, "But I don't want to marry some *random* girl who just wants money and power."

"Can't relate there," I giggled, "I don't have money *or* power!"

George laughed a deep, contagious laugh about that, "Well that's how life is for you."

"Anyway," I said, bringing up a new conversation, "What's it like with Zadok in charge now?"

George scowled, "It's pretty bad. I mean, we don't fight amongst ourselves anymore. Dark knights and white knights rarely battle, but now Zadok keeps on sending off our best men in massive, collective armies against various creatures and humans from distant lands. In this way, he keeps us all weak."

"That's probably his plan," I realized.

"Yeah, I figured out that much," George grunted.

"Not another dead end!" I groaned as we reached at least our fourth dead end, but this one had a beautiful topiary duck

George started to say something, but my attention was suddenly elsewhere as black spots started to cloud my vision. It felt sort of like I was about to faint but just as I was thinking about lying down on the ground, I found myself standing in front of some imposing gates.

Surprised, I looked up at the watch towers nearby and saw two guards looking down at me.

"Who approaches the great Elven city of Reselva?" a guard yelled down to me.

"Wait, I'm in the Elven kingdom?" I yelled back up.

"Of course," the guard snapped.

As I thought about what had just happened, I heard a sudden commotion coming from the forest behind me and suddenly the large, dirt road leading to the gates was swarming with dark knights on horseback. In the air, several massive griffins flew overhead – carefully carrying minotaurs in their claws. Screaming, I dove out of the way, but snagged my dress on a nearby fur tree and collapsed on the ground just as some horses thundered overhead.

Then, just like that; I was back in the maze; lying on the ground with George and the two guards anxiously looking at me.

"Lea!" George was saying, "Can you hear me?"

"Oh, yes," I replied, "I think I just had a vision."

George jerked back in surprise, "You're okay!"

"I feel fine," I assured him, "But I can't say the same about the Elves!"

"The elves?" one of the guards replied, "Are you sure that you're okay?"

"I'm *fine*," I told them again, "But I'm more than a bit certain that the dark knights are attacking the Elves!"

"But you can't have visions," George insisted, "I thought Zadok took your powers!"

"He did," I replied, "But I'm *sure* that I had a vision, and I'm sure that we need to help the Elves. Let's *go*!"

Chapter 6: Leo:

By the time that our band of soldiers reached the main crossroads between the white knights', black knights', and elven territory, it was roughly dinnertime.

"Time to decide," I shouted out to everyone, "Where are we going?"

"I mean, we're supposed to go back to Yrited and Verner," the head white knight told me, "But that could potentially be a poor choice depending on where all those black knights are."

"Well, let's think about this," I thought out loud, "We didn't see any large force on our way to Val Helmar, so either they were taking a nonconventional route, or the main fighting force was heading to the white knights."

"But why would only a handful of warriors on horses and griffins take off as soon as we arrived in Val Helmar?" Zareline asked me.

I shook my head in confusion.

"Hey!" Zareline suddenly shouted, "I hear something coming from over there!"

She pointed down the road towards the white knights' territory.

"Oh no," a white knight mumbled.

"So, uh, are we going to run for it?" Alina spoke quickly.

"They wouldn't be coming *toward* us if they were attacking the white knights," I reasoned.

That's when an entire pack of cavalry raced out from around a bend in the forest trail and advanced on us. However, it was the white knights. Upon seeing us, a few of them came to a quick stop to talk, but the rest just kept on riding hard.

"What *is* going on?" I asked the new cavalry.

"The Elves are being attacked, sir!"

"What?!" I cried out in horror.

"Miss Lea apparently had a vision of it happening, and we were all ordered to try to help them out!" the young rider informed us.

"Let's go then!" I told them, turning Shadow around and urging him towards the Elven territory. Zareline quickly followed me, her face fraught with worry. I briefly looked behind me to see that all the white knights were following us – including Alina. Normally, I would have encouraged Alina to stay home, but now that she could summon her massive dragon (even though I wasn't sure she would remember how to do so), I thought it would be a good idea. I also wasn't sure if the entire dark knight army was attacking or just the cavalry and airborne divisions.

Unicorns were one of the fastest land animals in my world, and we swiftly caught up with the white knights' cavalry division that had passed us up at the crossroads.

"Guys!" I called out to them.

While still galloping at full speed, the group turned their heads towards me. Despite the fact that I technically had no authority over them, I was glad they were listening to me.

"I need most of you to go with my daughter to where my parents are staying while the rest of you follow me to protect the Elf elders!" I told them.

"Charlie, Derik," the head commander told his soldiers, "You go with Leo. We'll handle the deliverers' parents."

"C'mon!" I yelled to my two recruits, "We're going to need to take the back-country route!"

As we disappeared into the forest, I waved goodbye to Zareline and sincerely hoped that I'd see her again, but there really wasn't any time for emotions now. If Lea had foreseen the attack, that meant it was happening and *soon*.

By the time we had looped around the main Elven city of Reselva, I was convinced that the attack was in full swing and that, indeed, the entire dark knight army was there. They must have trekked across the forest, because we had to cut through a small detachment of them to reach the back of the city where the main Elf temple was.

"There's enemies *everywhere!*" Derik exclaimed, pointing out to me a half dozen warriors swarming the tall fence line of the city. Already, there was smoke pouring out of a dozen different parts of the city, and there were continual swooshes of air as griffins dove from the sky and dropped heavy boulders onto the city below. The temple itself was already in bad shape, but as we jumped through a destroyed portion of the fence, I saw that all the entrances were swarming with dark knights and their horrifying allies.

I swung off Shadow and plowed into a particularly imposing minotaur that was entering through a back entrance to the temple.

"Kaboom!" I instantly cleared the entryway with a pulse of my electric blue energy.

Charlie whooped with excitement and dismounted his horse as well, charging in after me.

"If I was an Elf elder that was suddenly attacked and trapped in here," I told my men, "Then I'd have retreated to the armory on the third floor."

Derik cut off a nearby minotaur at the waist while I blasted apart three werewolves that had attacked us from the left.

"The stairs are over there!" Charlie yelled to us, running for the once ornate stairs that rose from the ground majestically and led to the second floor. Only now, they were partly destroyed, and the banisters were mostly nonexistent.

"Pardon me for my ignorance," Derik said to me as we jogged up the stairs, annihilating enemies the entire way up, "But this temple was a lot better looking a few years ago, correct?"

"It's frankly amazing how much damage the dark knights have already caused," I shook my head.

On the second floor, the battle was much more heated as the dark knights were meeting stiff resistance from Elf guards.

Charlie pointed out a few Elf guards desperately trying to fend off multiple attacks, so I couldn't use a wide slash technique.

"Hit them while they're distracted!" I yelled over the din of shouts, yells, and colliding metal.

I blasted a few minotaurs apart; then somersaulted through the air and took out a group of wizards who had just fire-balled a poor Elf guard a second ago. Although not as skilled as I, Derik and Charlie were elite white knights and held their own against our enemies – making significant progress. However, the more enemies that we managed to defeat, the more ran up the stairs and attacked.

"Let's just head for the third floor!" I shouted to Derik and Charlie, "We don't have time to handle these guys!"

Charlie nodded his head and led the way to the third floor as I ensured that no one came too close to us from behind. The stairs to the third floor were on the other side of the second floor – rising off the balcony that wrapped around the entire temple. Breathing heavy, I swiftly ascended those stairs and emerged onto the third floor, right behind Derik. There, I caught sight

of a squad of heavily armored witches launching an entire barrage of lightning bolts at the last two elders. All around us were literal piles of clothing and armor of fallen enemies, interspersed with elven wardrobe.

Derik gasped, "Are these *all* the elders?!"

"I hope not," I grunted, aiming carefully at the witches from the left and letting loose a charge of energy. There was an explosion of color as my blast met its mark while Charlie and Derik moved in to finish off the others. As opposed to the second floor, the third floor – although very spacious, only had a few black knights on it as it was mostly composed of wizards and witches who were obviously surprised by us. Diving underneath a spark of lightning from a nearby wizard, I performed a precise slash against his legs and tossed him into his comrades, creating a satisfying domino effect. The fifth dark knight desperately attacked me, but was plugged in the head by an arrow before I could finish him off.

"You arrived just in time!" Ember yelled at me.

I whipped around to see her crouching in the corner, her bow and arrow moving so fast it was a blur. To my left, Derik and Charlie were having wonderful success against their slow-moving counterparts, and I was able to blast anyone that emerged from the stairs. While I whipped around to meet a minotaur's ax thrust, I promptly tripped over something and ran straight into the minotaur, shoving him to the ground. The minotaur grunted in surprise before I finished him off with a sword lock and fake head crush. Rolling over the armor of my previous opponent, I quickly discovered that I had tripped on the body of none other than the Elf Chancellor himself. Trewa was lying face down in the ground, blood oozing from his arm, but since he hadn't disappeared, I assumed that meant he was still alive.

"Ember!" I yelled to her, "Trewa is here, but severely injured!"

Ember gasped and raced over, cartwheeling over an injured wizard and blocking a stray arrow with her metal wristbands.

"Trewa!" she called to him, gently rolled him over, "Talk to me!"

Trewa grunted and opened his eyes slightly, "Whu?"

"Trewa, it's Ember and Leo," I told him, "We're going to help you!"

"Don't forget us!" Charlie called out from behind me as he stabbed a particularly aggressive wizard.

"I won't make it," Trewa whispered hoarsely, "But I...must say something."

"No," Ember softly replied, "We need you!"

"No!" Trewa replied sharply, moving his good arm to his chest, "The people need *you*."

He painfully removed the large medallion from around his neck and placed it in Ember's hands as I helped to lift his head and body up a little.

"Trewa," Ember gasped, "This is the Chancellor's medallion! What do you want me to do with it?!"

"Wear... wear it," Trewa grimaced, trying to talk despite the immense amount of pain he must have been feeling.

"But, I'm only an elder! And a new one at that!"

"There aren't any elders left," Trewa told her sadly, "You must lead the people now. "

"I don't know what to say," Ember said softly, ducking her head beneath another blast of energy from my sword as a few black knights attempted to reach the third floor.

“For so many years,” Trewa continued slowly, “We...we have fought your unconventional actions, but I know that when it comes down to it, you do what’s right for the people.”

Ember just stared at his dying body, tears slowly dripping down her face.

“Leo is the best husband that you could ever have, and Zareline is the most skilled youngling that I have ever seen. You will lead this people...well.”

Before finishing his sentence, Trewa’s eyes closed, and he disappeared into a pile of armor.

“CRRRRASSSSHHHHH!” a huge boulder flew through the roof of the temple and smashed directly into the stairs – immediately decimating it. As if on cue, the roof then proceeded to fall apart. Derik screamed and ran towards us, having finished off the last wizard. Before following Derik, Charlie turned to see the last of the stairs collapse onto the dark knights on the first floor.

“Ember!” I shouted at her, grabbing her by the hand, “We’re going to have to jump out the window!”

“Are you crazy!” Derik yelled at me, crouching down in the corner to avoid the falling debris,

“We’ll jump to our death! We’re like forty feet up here!”

“Well, staying here is suicide,” Charlie argued, raising his shield above his head as roof tiles rained down.

Quickly recovering from the emotional scene, Ember slung the medallion onto her neck and produced her bow and arrows. She then pulled a long rope off of her back and swiftly tied it to an arrow

“You keep a coil of rope on you?!” Derik gasped.

“Only during battle,” Ember told him, “Rope is incredibly handy.”

“I’m making a mental note of that,” Charlie stated.

Aiming out the nearest window, Ember shot her arrow into the side of a clay shop outside.

“Leo!” she commanded me, “Grab the nearest rock and toss it onto the other side of the rope!”

It wasn’t hard to find a chunk of debris, and I quickly heaved it onto the rope that Ember tossed to the floor. Without waiting another minute, Ember slung her bow over the rope and used it as a zip line, utilizing a special niche etched into her bow. I didn’t have a special bow, but I was wearing my iron reinforced, leather gloves, and I figured that they would be able to hold long enough to make the jump. Behind me, Charlie and Derik quickly undid the strong, leather latches on their shields and then strapped their shields to the rope, effectively using their shields as zip lines. Just as I jumped out the window, I saw the ornate dome and spire of the Elven temple crumble and plunge downwards into the midst of the once majestic structure – crushing a dozen black knights in the process. Outside, I caught glimpses of Elves still battling against their enemies, and I noticed Ember picking more enemies off from the roof of the clay building where she landed. At the last second, I leapt off the rope and somersaulted across the roof to cushion my fall. Derik and Charlie landed less elegantly, but managed to not hurt themselves at least.

“Hey, look!” Derik shouted to us, as we flattened ourselves on the building’s roof and came up with a plan, “There’s a massive dragon over there!”

Sure enough, Alina’s dragon was incinerating enemies on the complete opposite side of the town. As I watched, several archers shot at the dragon, but it was so big that all the arrows really did was make it more upset.

“Well,” Ember spoke up, “The main white knight army will hit the front side of the city first, so I guess we should start here in the back and work our way towards them.”

We all high-fived each other and jumped off the roof – just as a massive boulder screamed overhead and finished destroying the remnants of the palace.

Chapter 7: Alina:

When we had first started running towards the scene of the battle, I had been in such a rush that I hadn't fully comprehended exactly what I was running towards. However, as our small group of cavalry approached the back of the dark knights' army, I quickly figured out what we were up against. The army was massive - reminding me of the time when Zadok, Xee, and I had led it towards the largest white knights' castle a dozen years ago.

At first, we only ran into some supply carts, escorted by two or three dark knights that were easily overtaken by us. However, the farther along we rode, the more resistance we met until the cavalry leader decided we should just blaze a path through the forest.

Zarelina concurred and led the way while I gazed at the billows of smoke rising from the city of Reselva and tried to block out the din of warfare that permeated every part of the dense forest. My legs were already hurting pretty bad, what with having ridden for about twelve hours, and the afternoon sun was already starting to set, making me even more uncomfortable.

"Auntie!" Zarelina called out to me, awakening me from my thoughts, "Do you still remember how to summon your dragon? We're going to need some help!"

She pointed over to where an entire division of dark knights were actively demolishing the wall that surrounded the entire city, with a massive battering ram. It had obviously been a while since I had attempted to summon my dragon, but I remembered that it was easy to do so once I was sufficiently angry. Hence, I thought of all the annoying things I could: my previous job, thieves, murderers, mushrooms, drunk drivers, and, of course, Zadok. By the time we reached the intruders, I was so mad that it was only a matter of time before I pumped my fists into the air and a dragon of unearthly dimensions descended from out of nowhere.

"Whump – boom!" The battering ram finally punched a hole in the wall, revealing a war-torn section of the city. While Zarelina and the cavalry descended like angry hornets upon the intruders, I pointed behind me at the location of the dark knight army that was still flooding into the city. Not skipping a beat, the dragon flapped his powerful wings and roared through the air, intending to fulfill my wishes. That's when I heard a scream from Zarelina.

Whipping around on my horse, I saw a particularly large tree house that bordered the now nonexistent wall, start to lean dangerously.

"My house!" she cried out again, reigning in a very excited Zebra.

"Tell me Mom and Dad are not in there!" I yelled to Zarelina, while dodging arrows.

"They were the last I saw!" Zarelina yelled back, making a charge for the rope ladder.

Meanwhile, the cavalry were making good progress through the hordes of enemies and were currently holding back a surge of overzealous trolls.

"Gotcha now!" a voice roared from behind me. Before I could even turn around, something struck my horse, and we both tumbled to the ground. I flipped over to see an imposing warrior standing over me, his ax at the ready, but then something came to my rescue. In a blur of speed, a white unicorn charged my attacker from behind. Never before had I been so happy to see Eclipse. She rammed straight into my enemy and threw him backwards over me. The knight quickly attempted to scramble away, but Eclipse skidded past me and resumed the chase. Despite the dark knight's vicious ax chop, Eclipse managed to kick him hard with her

hoofs, sending him flying through the air again. However, he stuck the landing and crouched, ready to spring at her should she attack again. Unfortunately for him, something got to him first – a very large tree house. While I had been watching the unicorn vs. dark knight battle with rapt attention (which was honestly quite stupid seeing as any number of things could happen behind me if I wasn't looking), Zareline had reached the rope ladder to her house and was attempting to climb up it. But the constant barrage of boulders that kept flying through the air was too much, and the supporting tree collapsed under the weight. Zareline jumped free and landed on Zebra just as the rest of the house flopped on top of the dark knight, exploding into a cloud of dust and debris.

"Where's Ember?!" I spoke to Eclipse as she danced around – looking for another victim. Zareline, although noticing the riderless Eclipse, raced for the tree house shouting, "Grammy! Grampy!"

Despite the wreckage, some portions of the house were still intact which allowed Zareline to crawl inside. I quickly ran after her but found that I couldn't fit comfortably through the collapsed doorway so I waited anxiously outside.

"They're not here!" Zareline called out to me, "and I don't see any of their clothes around so I don't think they died either!"

"Where could they have gone!" I yelled back.

"Not sure," Zareline commented, crawling back out, "But if they're still alive, they probably ran off somewhere."

"How well do they know the city?" I asked her.

"I mean, they just arrived last night!" Zareline informed me, "So I doubt they know their way around."

"Where should we go then?" I asked, looking around at the battle still raging around us.

"I'd say let's head to the main palace because Mom might be there," Zareline said, running off into the city. Despite my inability to fight, I had confidence that Zareline, with the help of Eclipse and Zebra, could protect us both so I ran after her. The streets were lined with piles of armor and weapons – indicating that many lives had been lost, but as we kept on running down the wide streets, the casualties seemed to lessen considerably. Eventually, we reached a large grass field with several shacks dotting the landscape.

"Look!" Zareline pointed to me, "There's a bunch of ogres over there!"

Eclipse growled a very snorty sort of growl and led the charge on them – Zebra providing backup.

"But wait!" I called after Zareline, who did not want to miss out on the action, "There's a single white knight over there defending himself against those two werewolves!"

Whether Zareline had heard me or not, she kept on running, leaving me to decide what to do.

Despite my poor fighting skills, I was determined to prevent more bloodshed if possible, so I veered to my right and advanced on the troupe of werewolves. The white knight continued to fend off their attacks with his sword while I wielded mine and plunged it into the nearest wolf, the white knight using the distraction to turn on the other.

"Wait a minute!" I yelled, as I was attacked by a third werewolf and attempted to block the sharp claws with my shield, "Uncle?"

The white knight, after painfully kicking his opponent in the neck, turned around and whacked at my opponent's foaming mouth.

"Hey Alina!" he said to me cheerfully, "Fancy meeting you here!"

"EEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEKKK!" The most intense, high-pitched scream interrupted our conversation and caused both of us to wince in pain – our eardrums nearly getting shattered. The effect appeared to be ten times worse on the werewolves, who howled in protest and rolled on the ground, trying to cover their ears with their paws.

"That's just Carlina!" Uncle grimaced, "Her scream can bring even the mightiest warrior to his knees!"

"That *is* awful!" I admitted, cringing.

"When your Aunt and I saw the battle beginning, we ran like crazy to get out, but we didn't know how to get out!" Uncle informed me, plunging his sword into yet another beast, "And these guys followed us!"

"Where did you learn how to fight?!" I said, cowering behind my shield as Uncle Carl bravely took on the last of the hideous creatures.

"I took sword fighting lessons in college," Carl said, "There were a few, free courses, and I couldn't resist. Turns out that course just saved my life."

"Alina!" Aunt Carlina cried out, poking her head out from behind a rock once Carl had annihilated the last werewolf, "You're okay!"

"Yep!" I told her, "And Zareline is just right over there..."

I trailed off, noticing that neither her nor the unicorns nor the ogres were standing on the other side of the field.

"Where'd she go?" I said.

"Knowing her," Aunt told me, "She probably finished her enemies off and went back into town."

I gazed across the top of the city and saw a rain of fiery arrows and boulders still being launched across the sky – intermixed with the hiss of a Dragon blowtorch. In a few seconds, the pandemonium was joined by the zap of blue energy, signaling that Leo was near.

"Did you bring any reinforcements?" Uncle asked me, plopping down on the ground and resting his arm.

"Yes we did!" I told him, "The cavalry is already here, and the other white knight soldiers said the foot soldiers will arrive as soon as possible."

"Wonderful," Carlina said, "So are we just going to stand here or...?"

"Standing here sounds nice," I admitted, "I can't fight very well."

"And I'm too old for this," Carl laughed, "But it was *fun* for a little bit there."

"Well, at least there's no other dark knights over here," I noticed, "Even though the fenceline is destroyed..."

Once again, I was cut off as the ground started to tremble violently. In an instant, a surge of knights swept through, except these were all white knights. They were all on foot, but quickly reached us and ran by – their armor jingling and clanging in the dusky air. However, as the initial wave of soldiers ran by, more and more kept swarming through the break in the wall and fanning out across the town – disappearing among the wreckage of what used to be Reselva. Eventually, a few riders on horseback pounded up to us and asked if we needed anything.

"I could use some water," Aunt replied.

"And could you check on my dragon?" I added.

"Wait, you're Alina?!" one of the riders exclaimed, "What are you doing out here?!"

"Um, trying to help?" I said.

"It's dangerous out here!"

"That's sort of what I'm supposed to be here for I thought."

The other rider shook his head, "You need to stay put. Some supply wagons will be here shortly."

Aunt needed no urging and quickly raced off to where a collection of horses had been stopped and knights were unloading bags of supplies. As the carts started showing up, I noticed that one of them was particularly well guarded, and I figured out why when Lea stepped out. She totally stuck out like a sore thumb because she was wearing a beautiful, ornate dress.

"What are you doing here, Lea!" I yelled to her, "In a *dress*?!"

"It's beautiful, is it not?" Lea answered, noticing me amid the crowd of knights, "And I wanted to make sure that you guys were all right."

"I want a dress like that!" Aunt Carlina told Lea, "All I got was a dagger when the dark knights attacked. Oh, and Ember's Aunt gave me a beautiful dress that I was going to give to you Alina, but I don't think it's still there anymore..."

"Yrited has an entire room full of dresses," Lea mentioned as George came up from behind her.

"You guys know what's going on here?" George asked, his hand on the hilt of a golden sword.

"A little," I told him, "Leo and Joel overpowered Zadok and smashed his scepter which gave all our powers back. Then, we ran back here and joined some of your cavalry; then, Zareline disappeared with Zebra and Eclipse while I came over here and met my parents."

George shook his head, "I knew Zadok was going to try to decimate the Elves, but I didn't see this coming. Apparently, Joel didn't know about it either."

"Do you think that you'll be able to win?" Uncle asked George.

"Quite sure," George told us, "We have several thousand white knights arriving from all over the kingdom, and a few messengers have already alerted me that Leo is quickly destroying the dark knights on the North side of the city while your dragon is making quick work of those on the south – where the main part of the dark knight army is.

"I hope he'll be okay," I worried, hoping my dragon would survive the onslaught.

"I think he will," George laughed, "His head alone is the size of a small house!"

"You didn't happen to kill Zadok, did you?" a general asked me, overhearing the entire conversation.

"Leo said he didn't kill Zadok, but it's possible that he got killed during the confusion of the dense fog," I answered.

"Fog?"

"Never mind," I told him.

"I like your dress!" George complimented Lea.

Lea curtsied and grinned from ear to ear.

"It just worries me," the general continued, ignoring what George said, "That Zadok could very well still be out there."

"Sure, but I don't think he can summon his stone warriors again without his scepter," I stated.

"That is true," George added, "His scepter was made by the legendary wizard himself. Only that wizard can make another one of equal power."

"Well that is good news then, because the legendary wizard is thought to be dead. No one has seen him for thirty years!" the general told me.

"Look!" Someone cried out from nearby, "Joel is approaching!"

Very few white knights apparently knew that Joel was working with us, so several white knights converged on him as he galloped towards us from the city while waving a white flag.

“Stop! STOP!” George yelled out to his troops as Joel was roughly whisked off his horse and pinned to the ground, “He’s with *us* you idiots!”

The white knights looked up in surprise, confused on why a Dark Knight commander general would side with us. Joel didn’t even attempt to stand up, but just rolled over on his back to avoid any of the sword-happy knights from stabbing him.

“George!” he yelled, “Glad you’re here. Is Leo around?”

“No,” George replied, “Haven’t seen him.”

“He’s somewhere in that vicinity!” I yelled over to Joel, pointing to where blue energy pulses blasted through the sky periodically.

Joel shook his head as George helped him to his feet, “We don’t have much time. I just got contacted by Zadok.”

“Rats,” the general next to me groaned as we trotted over to where Joel was.

Joel, with fear in his eyes, succinctly told us what was wrong, “Zadok found out that the legendary wizard is still alive and is now going after him!”

Chapter 8: Lea:

"You *killers!*" Ember screamed at the dark knight commander, jumping at him from across the table. The commander ducked as Ember flew over his head, but she managed to grip the back of his chainmail and launch him into the air in the process. They both hit the ground hard, but Ember flipped over fast and kicked her adversary hard in the knee, sending him back to the ground in pain. At this, the nearby Elves cheered, and the dark knights roared with anger. Quickly grabbing the commander's neck in her two hands, Ember attempted to strangle him, but was promptly ripped off her opponent and pinned helplessly to the ground.

"Hey!" she yelled at Leo, "Get off me!"

"Ember," Leo said sternly, "We're trying to be *diplomatic* here."

Meanwhile, Joel helped the dark knight commander to his feet.

"Elves," he spat, "Dirty dogs."

At this a regular uproar erupted from the rest of the Elves, but was suppressed as Leo glared at them.

"Shut up," Joel ordered the commander, "We won't be able to have a civilized discussion unless you set aside your opinions!"

The commander grumbled something and sat back down at the massive setup of tables as Leo got off Ember.

"Alright then," George continued as if nothing had happened, "I understand there's some hard feelings about this, but it's really in the best interest of all of us if we sign this pact which outlines that we won't inflict any economic, military, or psychological warfare on each other."

"I wouldn't mind signing that," a nearby white knight king stated loudly. Then, pointing prominently at the Dark Knights, added, "But how can I trust that those guys will keep their end of the deal?"

"I'll make you eat those words" one of the nearby minotaurs growled, "Us minotaurs *a/ways* keep our promises!"

"Is that a threat?" the white knight king sneered, "Because we've already shown that we can cream you in a fight!"

This elicited an entire chorus of angry shouts and insults from the surrounding crowd of people.

"ALRIGHT!" Leo thundered, bashing his fist against the table so hard that he indented it, "I realize that a lot of you have lost loved ones, possessions, and property in the many, and I mean many, past conflicts. However, arguing will not and cannot help anything; nor will it resurrect our deceased brethren from the dead. The fact that we're here today and can even talk about peace is a momentous feat in itself, so let's direct our anger away from each other and towards the man who pitted us against each other in the first place - Zadok."

I couldn't remember Leo having such a commanding voice, but it did quiet everyone down.

"Now," Leo threatened, "I want *each and every one of you* to sign this pact or I will personally sign your name with your blood, and *you all* will continue to lose more than you gain from the continued bloodshed."

A few of the dark knights flinched a bit at this and quickly grabbed some ink pens to sign their names on the insanely long paper that was stretched all the way down three or four tables.

"But what about my home being destroyed!" an Elf shouted out from the surrounding crowd.

"It was my home too," Leo said quietly, "So we'll just have to rebuild."

"And you have my word that we'll help!" Joel announced loudly, "The Dark knights are the best builders of the land!"

There were scowls all around at Joel's remark, but no one voiced any of their thoughts thankfully.

"But what about Zadok?" a wizard elder whined, "When Zadok comes back and sees that I signed this, he'll have me beheaded!"

"That's unfounded," Joel informed the wizard, "Without his scepter, Zadok is only as powerful as a strong wizard, who, mind you, certainly won't have any support from *us* - especially since *I'm* the new Dark Knight king."

"But he brings up a good point," Verner added, "We need to find Zadok post-haste."

"Well, that may not be too hard," I said aloud, remembering what Joel had told me, "Joel said that Zadok is going after the legendary wizard."

At this, there was a murmur of whispers and gasps.

"Calm down," Joel said loudly, raising his arm in the air, "That's *still* just speculation as it is well-known that the legendary wizard is *dead*."

"But no one has seen him dead," George reminded Joel.

"And even if he is dead, the legendary wizard may still have some valuable possessions left," Leo pondered out loud, "Possibly stuff that Zadok wants."

"Where did you hear this anyway?" a white knight captain asked Joel, "Not saying that I don't trust you, although I don't."

"Several of my men confirmed this," Joel replied, "Apparently Zadok left with a sizable escort."

Verner shook his head in disgust, "Then we'll need an even bigger tracking party.."

Leo nodded, "We should put together a team of people to hunt him down."

"I want his head mounted on my wall!" someone yelled out from the crowd.

"Count me out," the head Dark Knight general said, "Following him is a death trap."

"Well, *I'm* in!" Ember announced. She was currently standing amid a group of several Elves who Leo had put in charge of keeping her from committing any murders. "I want to punish him, and not in a friendly sort of way!"

"I didn't think there *is* a friendly way to punish someone," I mumbled to myself.

A few other soldiers shouted that they too wanted to be part of this spontaneously created "pursuit" group.

"BEFORE we disperse!" George called out to everyone, "I was thinking of a radical new idea to keep the piece. Lea gave me an idea to create a bunch of embassies for each kingdom."

"Oh, oh, oh!" Dad called out from the crowd where he was showing Zareline how to spin a ball on your finger, "Can I be part of the Elf embassy?"

"You're not an elf," Ember reminded him.

"You can be a member of the embassy for the white knights in one of the Dark Knight cities," Joel offered him.

"Now wait a minute," Mom interrupted before Dad could accept, "We need to talk about this first!"

"Honey," Dad groaned, "Liven up a bit! This'll be so much FUN!"

Before Mom could reply, George interrupted, "We can talk about the specifics later, but in essence each kingdom would send a small group of men or women to stay in other kingdoms as representatives. This would allow all kingdoms some involvement in each others' affairs and could prevent unfortunate miscommunication or assumptions."

"What's the difference between that and just flat-out spying?" a Dark Knight king scoffed, "We have our rights to privacy you know!"

"Well," Verner said, "I actually think that..."

Before I could finish hearing Verner's thought, Leo tapped me on the shoulder, rushed me out of the large gathering of royalty, and led me to a small clump of people huddled together and talking in hushed voices.

"Now we just need to find how to get to the last known place where the legendary wizard was," a white knight was saying to the rest of the group.

"Ah c'mon, Leo," I said, "I'm *not* interested in joining this pursuit group. I've had enough interaction with Zadok to know to stay *far* away!"

"But you're the smart one, Lea!" Leo insisted.

"Ha!" I laughed, "That has never been the case."

"It honestly doesn't matter," one of the elf warriors interrupted, "If we can't even track down where Zadok is."

"See?!" I argued, "He could be *anywhere*!"

Leo groaned, "Well, maybe Shadow could-."

"Yeah no," Ember stated as she came up behind us, "Unicorns do have a good sense of smell, but not *that* good!"

"Saaaayyyy," one of the elves drawled, "Does Uio have an idea of where the legendary wizard was last seen? Didn't he know the legendary wizard a few hundred years ago or so?"

"Even if he did, he's gone too," I replied, "But that's a long story involving an intriguing mystery."

"Hmph," one of the white knight soldiers growled, "But if we don't find him first, he'll find us...on his own terms."

"That's why we have no choice but to find him! If only there was some note or manuscript detailing where the legendary wizard was," Leo pondered.

Something about what Leo just stated nagged at my brain while the others continued to discuss over the sound of aggressive arguing coming from where poor George and Verner were still trying to get everyone else to agree to peace.

"I mean, legends do say he frequently visited a monastery far to the East," Ember suggested,

"We could head East until we fall off the edge of the planet."

"Don't be silly," Leo smirked, "I've told you time and time again that the earth is round!"

"Hogwash!" a white knight chuckled, "Like you've been high enough in the sky to know that!"

"I have actually," Leo said, "In a *plane*."

"And let me guess that you also met the gods too, huh?" the white knight teased Leo.

"Oh great," I sighed as my brain finally kicked into gear, "Me and my brain; I think I know where Zadok is going."

"You do?!" Leo replied, astonished, "How?"

"It only makes sense," I admitted, "Uio just recently disappeared - so did Zadok. They are the only two people that actually knew the legendary wizard. I'd bet a stack of acorns that they're meeting up somewhere, and that somewhere is detailed in the map Uio left behind."

"Map? Meeting? I'm so confused!" Ember announced.

"Lemme go get it!" I declared, finally getting excited, "If I'm right, it'll lead you guys straight to where Uio is heading with Zadok!"

"And you didn't think to mention this before, because...?" Leo yelled after me as I rushed towards Yrited's castle.

"I didn't think it was all that important before!" I shouted back.

Of course, I wasn't exactly able to sprint, what with me still wearing a long dress, but I was so intent on getting that map that I slid around the corner of the main pavilion and pounded up the main stairs to the castle's left wing. Weirdly enough, there were still no guards stationed at Uio's old room, and, worse than that, the door was also unlocked, which allowed me to just waltz right into the room, snatch the large map off Uio's desk and dash back on out.

It was just as I was rushing back across the castle pavilion that I ran into Dad and Zareline, with Mom trailing behind.

"Can I come along?!" Dad asked excitedly.

"For what?" I faked ignorance as I tried to stop, but instead slid along the ground and ran into the brick wall.

"The chase party!" Dad informed me.

"I'm not even going," I replied, as I peeled my dress off the wall.

"But I want to go *too*!" Zareline added.

"Take it up with Leo," I told them, "I make no decisions here."

"You know, maybe you would be a great addition to an embassy," Mom replied, "Now that I think about it anyway."

"But I just thought that you didn't want me too..." Dad told Mom.

I smiled, knowing that Mom was much less of a fan of Dad chasing down a murderous villain than being part of an embassy.

"I'll see you guys shortly!" I told my parents, "I just need to drop this off with Leo."

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Thirty minutes later, I found myself riding a horse at a partial gallop.

"I cannot believe that you were able to convince me to follow along," I groaned to Leo, "I was looking forward to a few days with nothing much to do - just a few! Why is it so hard?!"

"Sorry," Leo laughed, "But we need you! You're part of the deliverer team!"

"That doesn't mean I *want* to," I groaned again, "At least make sure I don't die."

"Ember will see to that," Leo smirked.

"Will she also see to my poor legs after this long ride?" I continued, "Because I don't ride horses *that* often."

"I'm not seeing to you at all," Ember declared loudly from beside Leo, "It's serve-yourself style around here."

I groaned for the third time and attempted to shift the weight of my suit of armor from my aching shoulders. Leo had insisted that I wear a suit of armor, and, although it was bloody heavy and uncomfortable, it also allowed me to ride a horse normally as opposed to the cultural norm of ladies sitting sideways on a horse.

Ember and Leo were leading the band of about twenty of us; their unicorns sniffing the ground for any scent of Zadok.

After another three hours of incessant riding and staring down Uio's maps for nearby landmarks, Alina called out to me, "Look at that beautiful river down there!"

Far to my left was a deep valley, and as I got closer to the edge of that valley, I could see a fast flowing river that sparkled light blue in the bright sunlight.

"Sea monster river," Leo breathed from in front, "The fastest rapids this side of Giant Mountains!"

Ember laughed, "I had to boat down those for my senior project."

"Your senior project is intense boating?!" Alina gasped.

"Of course," Ember smirked.

Leo shook his head, but then was almost bucked right off Shadow as the unicorn reared high into the air. If it wasn't for Leo's insanely strong grip, he probably would have been launched into orbit.

Eclipse and Zebra also reared, but not as violently.

"Something spooked them!" Leo called out, "Everyone on guard!"

Of course, he didn't really have to say that, because as soon as a unicorn rears; your guard tends to go up!

"Shhh!" Ember cried out, cupping her hand over her left ear, "I hear something."

Everyone immediately fell silent, with the exception of two other elves who also started listening carefully.

"You can come out!" Ember yelled out across the valley, "I know it's you Zadok!"

As everyone gasped, Zadok burst through the thick underbrush, riding on his massive creature which was drooling enough saliva to fill a water trough.

"How nice of you to join me!" Zadok called back, "I had some trouble getting here because Uio forgot his map!"

"Nice excuse!" Ember called back, pulling out her arrows, "Otherwise, I'd say you're the slowest rider on the planet!"

From among the bushes emerged six other large, dark knights along with Uio; all of them were riding sleek stallions.

"Don't go anywhere!" Ember warned, "Or we'll shoot you where you stand!"

"Oh I don't think that'll be a problem!" Zadok laughed evilly. Before any of us realized what was happening, Zadok yanked Uio off his horse and tossed him into the churning river far below. I honestly didn't expect that old wizard to survive the long fall, but at the last second, he grabbed a root sticking out of the steep bank of the valley and managed to slow his descent so that he only hit the waves at a minimal speed. However, the rapids were so extreme that he was sucked out of sight, only surfacing once or twice in the span of a minute as he was rapidly shunted down the river.

Without any warning as well, Ember grimaced, jumped off Eclipse, and dove into the valley after Uio.

"Ember!" Leo screamed after her, but it was too late. Ember was already in rescue mode.

"She can't possibly make that dive!" I gasped, but I was wrong. With the agility of a superhero, Ember knifed into the water and resurfaced very quickly; swimming in perfect form after Uio who disappeared around a bend in the river.

“Ta tah!” Zadok called out cheerfully to us, lumbering back into the bushes. Immediately, some of the elves shot at him, but only one arrow actually hit a Dark Knight in the arm - the others fell short or bounced harmlessly off the thick foliage.

“Hurry!” Leo yelled, “I want three quarters of you to go with Zary and continue after Zadok. The rest of us will head to where the river empties into Poison Lily Lake to intercept Ember and Uio.” As if they had practiced this drill many times, fifteen soldiers and elves hurried after Zareline towards a natural, land bridge that led over the canyon. Meanwhile, Leo veered to the right and galloped through the nearby forest. I quickly urged my horse to follow Leo, but seeing as my riding skills weren’t all that exceptional, I quickly fell behind and ended up riding next to two other knights who had old horses and were pulling large carts.

“You know where Leo’s going?” the one knight addressed me.

“Psssh, no,” I said, “I’ve only been in this world for like a week in total.”

“I do,” the other knight replied, “But I’ve only been there once and my memory is kinda rusty. I feel like Poison Lily Lake is at least a few miles from here, but I’m not sure. We’ve already left the white knight kingdoms.”

After another few minutes of heavy riding in which we had to crest a large hill, we finally saw the large expanse of water on the Northern horizon.

“Why is it called Poison Lily Lake?” I asked the soldiers as we toiled back down the hill after our comrades far below.

“Because there’s poisonous water lilies there,” the soldier on my left informed me, “Touch it, and you’ll be out of commission for a week!”

“Ouch,” I mumbled.

“My horse can’t keep this up,” the other knight said, “I’ll need to slow to a trot.”

“Same here,” the first knight said.

“I thought we were already doing a trot,” I stated.

“Okay yeah, you’re right. Consider this a fast walk?” the second white knight said hopefully.

Luckily, it was a smooth ride over grassy fields for the rest of the ride, and we arrived at the pebbled beach of Poison Lily Lake in only about twenty minutes afterwards.

A crowd of knights, including Leo and Alina were all huddled around near where a small waterfall was pouring off the edge of a rock cliff and into the lake. After attempting to dismount my horse, I stumbled towards the group just in time to hear Leo yell at someone.

“Where is Zadok going?” he said fiercely.

When I finally got near enough to see what was happening, I noticed Ember lying on the wet grass by the waterfall – her chest heaving as she caught her breath. Next to her was Uio who was still coughing up water and wringing out his soggy beard.

“Legendary...wizard,” Uio gasped, leaning over to catch another breath, “He...has...no...map...though.”

“Let him rest for a minute,” Ember said, waving her hand in the air; then letting it fall to the ground, “Those rapids take the breath out of you.”

Leo stood impatiently nearby as some of the elves checked Ember’s pulse, and the knights checked Uio for any critical injuries.

“Looks like they’re okay,” Alina noted as Ember started to sit up. Eclipse ran over to lick her face.

"Give me another second," Ember breathed, pushing Eclipse away, "We can go after Zadok shortly."

Leo pulled the map out of his saddle bag and studied it carefully, "It looks like we'll need to head for the mountains now."

"Uh, you have it upside down," I told him, gently turning the map around in his hands.

"That was on purpose of course," Leo said, trying to save face, "We still need to head towards the mountains anyway."

An elf nearby suddenly burst into a fit of coughing and had to back up for a moment; although I suspect he was disguising his laughter.

"That's probably where the rest of the group is," one of the knights noted, "Assuming Zadok is heading in that direction."

"It's unlikely that they'll be able to win in a fight with that part of our group," Leo said, "But they had a large head start on the other side of the ravine which means that it's fifty fifty on whether Zadok's team will be overrun."

"We certainly won't," Alina said, "But I do think we should consider..."

As the others continued talking, I let my gaze wander to the murky water of the nearby lake where a small pod of water lilies were slowly drifting farther out in the lake. They were green with a disturbing purple tint. Even if I hadn't known that they were poisonous, it is doubtful that I would have touched them. Anyway, as I was watching them, I noticed a sudden increase of bubbles around them, followed by large rings of waves perforating outwards.

"Uh, guys," I said slowly, not taking my eyes off the water movement.

"Not now, Lea," Leo said, "We need to figure out the fastest way to get to the legendary wizard."

"Um, but," I continued, my eyes glued as a large spike emerged from the murky water.

"I think there's a shallow swamp over here somewhere," one of the older knights told Leo while pointing at a place on the map, "If we want to risk fording it, it should cut down our time considerably."

"Um...", I said again as a massive boulder rose from the water underneath the now several spikes.

"But it's unlikely that Zareline went over...", Ember began.

"GGGUUUUYYSSSS!" I screamed, running for my horse like my life depended on it, which, in retrospect, it probably did.

Everyone turned to see two massive eyes stare back. These eyes were connected to the largest sea monster that I had ever seen. Actually, the only one that I had ever seen.

"KAIJU!" Alina gasped, "THIS IS EPIC!"

Ember, who had just a minute before been sitting up and taking deep breaths, suddenly leapt onto Eclipse with the agility of an acrobat and rode off at top speed as nearby knights followed suit.

I fumbled with my horse's reins as I scrambled onto it, but as my horse started to gallop away, I noticed Alina turn to the giant sea monster and wave her hands around. Her summoned dragon immediately appeared on cue.

The massive sea monster was slightly taken aback at the sudden appearance of such a large creature but recovered in time to raise his four scaly arms into the air and launch a wave which rushed over the nearby land with intense fury. I urged my horse onward, but the few

seconds of indecision was my downfall. The tower of water surged all around my horse and I – sweeping us right into Poison Lily Lake.

Alina's dragon took the challenge and torched the sea monster back. Screaming in pain, the sea monster jabbed his spiky head into the dragon's side. That was the last I saw before I plunged into the cold water and somersaulted among the water currents. I was a strong swimmer, but the armor was so heavy that I quickly sank. I struggled to swim back up to the surface and evade the massive legs of the sea monster. Just as I felt like I would blackout, something gripped me tightly around my torso, pulled me to the surface of the lake, and heaved me out of the lake and onto dry ground. Panting and wheezing, I rolled around to see Alina's dragon deposit two more humans next to me, Leo and Alina.

Having had to rescue all of us put the dragon at a disadvantage, and the sea monster rammed the dragon again, causing him to splash painfully into the water.

"What are you still doing here?" I asked Leo.

"I stopped to help Alina," Leo grunted.

"Hey! My dragon has this under control!" Alina argued as the dragon and sea monster dug their claws into each other.

"Sure," Leo mumbled, whipping the sword off his back, "But check this out!"

Leo whipped his sword downward in a fast, chopping motion – releasing a slice of energy through the air. Instantaneously, it smacked into the sea monster's thick hide – throwing it back into the sea. With Leo's attack providing an opportune distraction, Alina's dragon swiftly disentangled itself and rose into the air – torching the lake below it and consequently sending billowing clouds of steam into the air.

"Look!" I cried out as I spotted Shadow pulling my horse out of the water, "Shadow's okay!"

Leo briefly glanced over at Shadow but his attention was diverted as the sea monster shot back out of the water and over to us – enraged by Leo's attack.

Leo followed up by rapidly bombarding the sea monster with more energy attacks – that, although extremely powerful, only served to just slow the monster down. Above us, Alina's dragon dive-bombed the monster – shoving him back into the lake.

"Let's move out!" Leo yelled over the roar of enraged monsters.

"Why don't we take my dragon?" Alina yelled back, as we raced towards the forest and away from the sea monster, "We'll be able to cover a ton of ground quickly!"

I looked behind me briefly as I grabbed for my horse's dripping saddle and swung on – just as Leo and Alina mounted Shadow. The sea monster threw Alina's dragon through the air, but he quickly righted himself and flew after us – leaving the sea monster far behind.

"Pick us up!" Alina shouted to her dragon as we galloped across the grassy plain with renewed vigor. Without missing a beat, Alina's dragon swooped down and grabbed all of us in its massive claws – causing my horse to whinny in surprise as we suddenly became airborne.

"Where should we go?" Alina yelled to Leo as the cold wind flashed against our skin, threatening to rip it off.

"Well, we need to eventually go that way!" Leo said, pointing behind us to the North as he simultaneously looked again at the now soggy map, "But we need to regroup with Ember and Zary first."

A minute later, Alina spotted Ember and the rest of the knights galloping towards the ravine to begin the long trek towards the legendary wizard's favorite (and likely only) monastery.

"You didn't even wait for us!" Leo yelled to Ember as Alina's dragon glided right over the small band of warriors.

"You have a dragon," Ember replied, "How much trouble could you get into?"

"We lost my horse!" Alina noted, "So that's a good deal of trouble!"

"That's why I stay away from sea monsters," Ember informed us.

"Say," one of the knights said, "How will we meet up with the others?"

"Zary's smart," Leo told him, "I'm sure they are waiting for us up ahead somewhere. The worst case is that we send Alina and her dragon around to find them."

"That's pretty worst case," Alina mumbled, "I get lost in grocery stores."

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It was dark by the time that our recently-captured Uio declared we had reached the red "x."

"I concur," one of the other soldiers agreed, "I've been in this area a few times, and a lot of the landmarks match up."

"Of course it's right," Uio snapped, "I made this map!"

"Well then do tell," Alina insisted, "How did you come upon where the legendary wizard is?"

"Also, I still haven't heard about why you started working for Zadok," I pressed.

Uio sighed, "Okay, okay, I'll tell. It's not like I exactly *liked* working for Zadok anyway."

"We should set up camp first," Ember insisted, "We need to get a fire going and dinner started."

"It *is* a little creepy around here," I admitted, looking warily over my shoulder.

"The only thing out here are goblins," one of the white knights stated, "And they aren't that tough."

"Goblins...??," I laughed nervously.

"I volunteer to go hunt for some firewood," Zareline said, "If Mom comes with me."

Ember smiled, "Sure, let's go."

Leo instantly recruited Alina to help set up camp, so, in order to get out of doing that and tending to the horses, I volunteered to tag along with Zareline and Ember. Despite it being dark, there was a full moon which allowed just enough light to illuminate the immediate land around me. In addition, I'd heard that Elves had incredibly strong eyesight, so I was confident that Ember and Zareline wouldn't lead me astray.

"There's a small grove of old oak trees near that mountain over there," Ember said, pointing across the grassy plain we were walking across, "I'll bet there's some nice limbs we can use."

"Even if there isn't," Zareline added, "I brought my ax to chop some."

When we arrived at the grove of trees, we found that the oaks, due to a recent storm, had dropped a good deal of small and large branches on the ground nearby. While Ember and Zareline grabbed armfuls of the brush, I hurried to my right where I saw a larger limb had fallen to the ground. However, when I picked it up, I noticed something odd about the ground underneath it - the ground was exceptionally flat. After looking around, I realized that I was standing at the base of a very long flight of stairs that weren't professionally cut into the side of the mountain. The stairs wrapped around the side of the mountain above me, quickly disappearing from my nighttime view.

"Hey guys!" I yelled to Ember and Zareline, "There's *stairs* here!"

"If this is a prank, then I'll have you know..." Ember began as she walked over to me, but it took even less time than it took me for Ember to notice the obviously man-made path up the mountain.

"Yeah yeah!" Zareline exclaimed excitedly while clapping her hands, "Let's go!"

"That'll have to wait for tomorrow," Ember said firmly, "That's a wonderful clue, but... we shouldn't investigate the stairs until tomorrow when we can actually see. I don't want to accidentally run into the most powerful wizard in the world and find out that he doesn't like me." Zareline frowned, "Okay, but can we at least interrogate Uio about this?"

I nodded my head in agreement as we quickly headed back to the camp where the white knights had already put together two crude tents.

"We got some stuff to burn!" Zareline announced, emptying her load on the ground, "And we also found some stairs cut into the mountain!"

"Splendid work, Zary!" Leo commended her.

"Actually, Auntie Lea found the stairs," Zareline corrected.

"Uio had better start talking," Ember said, as she bent down to the pile of brush and attempted to light it on fire using pieces of steel and flint.

"I want to tell you all, but what if Zadok finds out I told you guys!" Uio whined, "He'll have my head!"

"I'll have your head too if you don't start talking!" one of the white knights demanded, "We need to know what we're up against here!"

Uio whimpered at the threat.

"Okay, okay," he finally said, "I *don't* know if the legendary wizard is alive. Somehow Zadok thinks so, but I have not been able to confirm that in any capacity."

"So you don't know how Zadok gets all his information about this?" Leo quizzed Uio.

"No, but I do have my suspicion that Zadok once knew the legendary wizard," Uio continued, "Zadok *is* almost two hundred years old after all."

"Seriously?!" Ember explained as she finally managed to light our bonfire.

"Oh, we've known each other for a long time," Uio continued, "But we parted ways after I decided to work with the white knights, and Zadok was offered a job with the dark knights."

"That still doesn't explain why you betrayed Yrited and how you know where the legendary wizard is," I said.

"I'm getting to it," Uio replied, exasperated, "As you all know, I'm a meticulous record keeper, and I recently got a hold of a set of papers and maps that I recognized. They used to belong to the legendary wizard. As soon as I acquired them, I was able to piece together where he had been, and this is the last place that his journal referred to. However, the last date that I saw written on a scrap of parchment was dated almost a hundred years ago, so..."

"Well that's hopeful at least," one of the white knights said, "There's a good chance we won't run into that wizard."

Uio grunted, "It's doubtful he'd harm us."

"But I heard he could wipe out an entire army with just a swipe of his staff!" another white knight chimed in.

Uio shrugged his shoulders, "Yeah, maybe, but I don't know, he was always very secretive, and I never got to know him well since I only met him like twice."

"You know if there are any strange creatures or people out there?" Leo addressed Uio.

"Beats me," Uio said, "I wouldn't venture out here unless I had *good* reason to."

Leo snorted, "Okay then, we'll set up a rotation of guards through the night, and we'll explore the area the next morning."

Something told me that Uio was not saying everything he knew, but I kept quiet. I had bigger things to worry about - like my clothes that were still wet...

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

I woke up in the middle of the night freezing cold and with a sore back.

Next to me, Alina, Zareline, and Ember were all sound asleep in the small tent that had been allotted to us. I was about to wrap myself up tighter in my blanket when I heard some sticks snapping outside. Scared, I sat back up and peaked out of the tent's flap to see a lone figure's outline framed against the moonlit night.

"Just one of the guards," I said to myself, moments before I spotted the *real* white knights sleeping peacefully on the ground nearby.

Confused, I quickly stumbled out of the tent and shook the arms of the nearest knight, but he refused to awaken. The second and third knights were the same way. Scared, I hurried back to my tent, intending to wake up Ember, but standing right in front of it stood a tall man. He was wearing a long robe and had piercing eyes that seemed to look straight into my soul. He carried nothing in his hands but had an ornate medallion hung around his neck.

"Ummm," I whispered, "Who are you exactly?"

Without saying a word, the man kept staring at me, eventually disappearing in a cloud of mist.

"LEA, LEEEEAAA!" I awoke again to find myself staring at Zareline.

"Oh! You're awake!" Zareline said cheerfully, "It's time for breakfast!"

"Breakfast?!" I exclaimed, as my eyes adjusted to the bright sunlight filtering in through the tent's front door flap.

"Mommy says we need to get going soon," Zareline told me matter-of-factly.

I must've been having another vision, I told myself, *But what exactly was it trying to tell me?*

"Can you reach that pole?" Zareline asked as she carefully pulled the two supporting sticks on her side of the tent off the main support pole.

As I reached out for the sticks on my side of the tent, I was still distracted with thinking about the strange man from last night, and in the process, I accidentally forgot to hold up the main support pole on my side of the tent. This, in turn, caused the entire tent to collapse on Zareline and I.

"AAAAaaah!" I screamed, thrashing around in the heavy folds of the tent, "How do I get out of this thing!"

Outside, I heard some muffled yelling as everyone else attempted to pull it off Zareline and I.

"Stop moving around!" Zareline said to me, "It's harder for them to do anything with you punching the fabric and air like that."

"I can't breathe," I moaned.

"Then stop moving and conserve your air," Zareline suggested.

It felt weird being given instructions by my niece, but I stopped moving and shortly thereafter, the tent fabric was pulled off me.

"Are you okay?" Leo asked me.

"Yeah, I'll be fine," I insisted, "I was just...a little distracted."

"Hurry over and get your breakfast!" Alina shouted to me from the fire, "Ember's cooking smoked salmon!"

Sure enough, as I got closer to the group of white knights and elves enjoying their morning meal, I smelled the delicious aroma of frying fish. Ember served me up a large portion of the seafood on a wooden plate while Zareline bounced by and plopped down next to Leo.

"What're we doing after breakfast?" she wanted to know.

"We'll probably go investigate those stairs," Leo said.

"Nothing ever good came from following mysterious stairs," Uio stated grumpily.

"And nothing good will come from *not* investigating them," Leo argued.

"A few of us will have to stay here while the rest go," one of the white knights reminded Leo,

"We don't want to be exploring the mountains while burdened down by all of our supplies."

"I can survey from the sky!" Alina suggested as she sat down next to me on the grassy knoll I had claimed, "That way I can give ample warning if Zadok shows up."

"Good thinking," Leo said.

"But I'm not staying," I informed Leo, "I'm coming along too."

"Ah, but there might be ghosts!" Leo informed me, waving his arms in the air and howling eerily.

Leo's comment would have been funny if it hadn't been for my strange vision last night.

Because of that, I only replied with a nervous shrug of my shoulders.

Zareline laughed, "Daddy, don't tease Auntie so."

While the rest of us talked and finished our breakfast, the rest of our group finished packing up camp and loading everything onto the horses again. Once the fire had been put out, we all trekked back over to the oak grove where we got a better grasp of where the stairs were headed.

"I think there's some cliffside dwellings up there," Ember informed us, staring up into the mountain.

"I don't see anything," I mumbled.

"Alright then," Leo said, "I want half of you to stay here, and the other half will come with us.

Take only your weapons!"

Most of the white knights quickly agreed to stay at the bottom of the mountain with the horses while the majority of the elves quickly volunteered to go along on the adventure. As we started climbing the stairs, Shadow and his family followed along as well.

The stairs climbed gradually around many curves in the mountain; then got more narrow and broken as we approached a very large dwelling cut into the mountain.

"Guys, there's a little courtyard over there," Alina told us all as she swooped past on her dragon,

"You should check it out!"

Leo nodded his head, and Alina flew back up into the sky. I envied her a bit since she got to fly in the sky but on the other hand, I was scared of heights.

"Wow! This place is *old*," Leo noted once we finally topped the stairs and entered the cliff dwelling.

I agreed, "Looks like the ancient dwellings of the Mayans!"

"And this is where the legendary wizard is?" Zareline asked, looking at the abandoned infrastructure around us.

"Don't look at me," Uio shrugged, "I dunno why anyone would want to live here."

"Zadok might," Leo suggested, "Seeing as he won't be able to go back to the dark knights."

"Did we beat him here is the question," one of the other elves stated.

Uio looked nervously over his shoulder, but, seeing as there were no footprints on the worn ground, we continued onwards. With the unicorns bringing up the rear, we carefully stepped out of the courtyard and into a narrow passage. Periodically, Leo and the other soldiers checked the rooms bordering the hallway, but found nothing. It was both exhilarating and scary to gaze out the holes in the stone hallway and see a near-vertical drop.

"Who built this?" Alina asked.

"How should I know?!" Leo exclaimed, "This goes outside the territory of *all* of our kingdoms. Even the dark knights don't come out here."

"Why not?" I pressed.

"Not sure," Leo said, "I assume it's because of strange rumors about weird creatures out here."

"Which is *why* we shouldn't be here!" Uio insisted.

"Or is it because you are hiding something?" Ember asked aloud.

"No, I'm not," Uio said firmly.

"Why would someone have been out here and created this in the first place?" I asked.

"Like I said," Leo continued, "I don't have any solid facts, *but* I have been to the far West where we battled a bunch of Arab-like guys."

"Maybe it *is* that funky monastery," Zareline said, "In which case it would make sense that the legendary wizard would have lived here."

"That's what I've assumed," I replied out loud, "But we still don't know for *sure* if the legendary wizard is currently here - whether alive or dead."

Presently, we reached a large dome area that had a massive oak tree growing in the very center of it.

"This is actually kind of pretty," Leo admitted, "I bet Dad would love to be here."

"Maybe we can take him here after we find what happened to the legendary wizard," I said,

"Seeing as there's nothing out here."

"Cool statue though," Ember commented, pointing to a life-sized statue of an old man holding a scroll.

Shadow briefly sniffed the statue as he walked by but immediately squealed and back-tracked.

"What's wrong, Shadow?!" Leo exclaimed, whipping his sword out of its sheath. The other elves and Ember also drew their bows. For a tense minute, we all stood still, scarcely breathing as Shadow and then Eclipse and Zebra started snorting.

"I don't see what the problem is," Leo said slowly, "But unicorns have excellent senses of danger."

I looked behind me to see Shadow dancing on the back of his feet, swinging his head around like he was surrounded by enemies.

"You know," one of the elves noted, "There may be nothing wrong with this room. Maybe there's something behind the statue though?"

"Good point," I said, carefully looking the stone statue over, but he's already standing away from the wall almost entirely."

"What does his scroll say?" Zareline asked, standing on her tippy-toes and screwing her head around to see what may have been on it.

Carefully boosting myself up on the statue's knee, I managed to get a good look at the scroll.

There were some strange characters written on the part of the scroll that was not rolled up, but, of course, I couldn't read them.

"Hmmm," Leo said, looking over my shoulder, "It looks like...ancient Goblin!"

"Wait, so goblins were around here?!" I exclaimed nervously.

Ember snorted, "Fairy tales and old wives' rumors. No one has seen a live goblin for decades!"

"Lemme see if I can remember my goblin," Leo mumbled, "I've gotten real rusty from when I last learned it."

"You actually *learned* goblin?" I asked, "Seriously?"

"Well, I -," Leo replied.

I would have listened to his reply if it hadn't been that suddenly I had the distinct feeling that the statue was growing warm. Freaking out entirely, I jumped backwards and smashed into the wall behind me crushing Leo in the process.

"What's wrong?" Leo moaned as I quickly stepped away from the statue.

"The statue...it's warm!" Ember cried out as she, too, placed her hand on it.

As we watched, the statue started to turn colors; then started moving.

"YAAAAHHHH!" Leo yelped, backing up quickly himself as everyone else pointed their weapons at the seemingly-possessed statue.

In a matter of seconds, a tall man stood in front of us, shaking his head and looking at the scroll in his hand - completely *not* a statue anymore.

"The deliverers I presume?" he said, finally looking at all of us while also not scared of the bevy of weapons aimed in his direction.

"Um...", I said quietly.

"What are *you* guys doing here?" he asked again, tossing his scroll onto the ground.

"I could ask the same about you," Leo said quickly, pointing his sword at the man.

"I live here," the man laughed, shoving aside Leo's sword and walking around the room, "They call me Powell."

Leo stared, but Ember managed to get up enough courage to ask another question, "Why did you just turn into a human?"

Powell laughed, "I was always a human, but you guys made me wake up."

"Wake up?" I said, confused.

"I know a few spells to turn me into stone," Powell said, "I can transform back any time I want, but you guys all putting your hands on me woke me up from my nap."

"Sorry?" I replied, "We were looking for someone."

"Oh?" Powell said again, waving his hands at us to follow him, "Were you looking for the 'legendary wizard'?"

"Um, yeah," Leo admitted.

"I'm he," Powell laughed, turning around and walking backwards, his arms in the air, "Praise the almighty wizard who can turn to stone."

I could definitely tell he was being sarcastic, so I said nothing, but Leo started to follow him, so the rest of us did as well.

"What was on your scroll?" one of the elves asked, "The one you threw on the ground?"

"Oh, just some warnings written in ancient Goblin," Powell chuckled, "There's some Goblins in the area that keep on bothering me, so I turn myself to stone when I sleep to avoid being attacked whilst I'm asleep."

Leo looked back at me and gave me a "This guy is weird" look.

"Well, I suppose you can blame me for summoning you guys here," Powell continued, "I'm the one who chose to draw some people out of your world and into ours, although I had no idea who exactly would show up."

"Huh?" Leo grunted.

Powell shrugged as we rounded a corner and headed deeper into the mountain, "The magic of this realm chose you; I only chose to summon the deliverers. Zadok was getting too powerful again. I had to do something."

"Wait," Leo said, "You know Zadok?"

"Of course I do," Powell laughed again, "Who doesn't these days?"

"Good point," I admitted.

"Why don't you just crush him if you're so powerful?" Leo challenged Powell.

"I *try* to let the world run its course," Powell groaned, "But things have a habit of getting out of control."

"Tell me about it," Ember grunted.

"I'm sorry about all the destruction," Powell said sadly, "But I feel like if I keep interrupting, I'd make people dependent on me, and my inevitable death would then cause all sorts of confusion and chaos."

"Here," Powell continued, indicating some wooden chairs with red pillows on them, "Sit."

We now found ourselves in a pleasantly decorated room, with all the amenities of a normal castle. However, Shadow, Eclipse, and Zebra insisted on standing outside.

"Now please," Powell continued, "Do tell me who's who here!"

There was silence for a moment before Ember decided to answer, "Well, I'm Ember, Leo's wife. Leo is the fighter who was left behind in our world over the past dozen years. Then, that's Lea over there - she's the scepter; Zareline, my daughter; Uio, who led us to you; and a bunch of my Elven friends and warriors."

"Where's the traitor?" Powell pressed.

"She's outside on her dragon," I informed Powell, "Keeping an eye on things outside."

"Oh, yes, of course," Powell said, "And I firmly apologize to you Leo. It wasn't my original intent for you to stay."

Leo nodded his head.

"Anyway, nice unicorns," Powell continued, "I didn't think it was possible to train one without using spells, but I was wrong."

"Sure," Leo waved it off, "Now, you know that Zadok is coming for you. Right?"

"Yes," Powell said sadly, "I was afraid of that."

"Can you help us destroy him?" Zareline spoke up.

"I wouldn't normally help you out," Powell said, "But in this case, I need to make an exception."

"Why wouldn't you?" Leo exclaimed.

"You're *deliverers*," Powell chuckled, "That's your job!"

"Then why the exception?" I asked.

"Because Zadok was my pupil," Powell sighed, "I was younger then and didn't realize the problems with training an apprentice."

"Oh," Leo realized, "And he turned bad?"

"Something like that," Powell groaned, "I thought that he'd either grow out of it, or the people would rise up against him, but he just got too powerful."

"How are you still alive?" Uio interrupted Powell. Uio had been very quiet as we met Powell, but now he had to say something.

"I know a few spells to delay my aging," Powell said nonchalantly, "Seems like you know a few too."

Uio's face reddened, "Well, uh, not very powerful ones."

"I remember you from a few hundred years ago or so," Powell said thoughtfully, "You were just an up and coming wizard at the time."

"Let's get back on track," Leo said firmly, "What's your plan to deal with Zadok?"

"Here," Powell said, pulling out two medallions from under his cloak, "These are for you."

He handed one to me and one to Leo, who immediately let Zareline hold it.

"These will allow you to switch between our worlds simply by thinking of the place and time you want to appear at. Of course, you can only appear sometime in the future from when you last left your world, and only deliverers can activate it," Powell explained.

"But wait, can our parents use it?" I asked.

"As long as they are touching you when you teleport," Powell informed me, "And give them my regards when you see them again. I wasn't expecting them to show up either!"

"So why are you giving us these now?" Leo said.

"Because I won't be around much longer," Powell said, "I'm old, and Zadok wants me dead."

"So I do," Zadok said, appearing out of nowhere from the corner of the room, "This is your last day, *teacher*."

Powell jumped in alarm, "Wait, what?!"

Instantly, everyone else drew their weapons, ready to attack.

"How did *you* get here?!" Leo wanted to know.

"I remembered the spell of ultimate speed," Zadok grinned evilly, "And then I got here and found your spell book, Powell. The spell of invisibility is quite handy."

"Zadok, put my staff down!" Powell commanded Zadok, indicating an ornate, golden staff in Zadok's hands.

"I don't think so," Zadok laughed, "Check this out!"

With that, he waved his staff and mumbled some incantation. Instantly, four figures appeared in front of him – direct copies of Ember, Leo, Zareline, and I.

"These are copies of a few of you!" Zadok chuckled, "Have fun fighting yourself!"

"They're fakes though," Leo argued.

"No, *you're* fakes," the other Leo said, pointing at us with his sword.

"Oh great," I mumbled.

Powell waved his hands and blasted Zadok across the room, while the copies of us quickly ran at us – forcing us out of the room and into the hallway outside. Shadow and Eclipse looked surprised at the two Leos and Embers while Zebra looked too stunned to do anything.

Meanwhile, the rest of our group raced outside just in time to see part of Zadok's escort team racing down the hall towards us.

"Okay, we have to be very careful here," Leo said to Ember, Zareline, and I slowly.

At the exact same time, the other Leo turned to the other copies and said the exact same thing.

"Wait, you copy *everything* I do?!" Leo exclaimed.

"Not everything," the other Leo insisted, "Because I'm the true Leo."

Honestly, it genuinely looked like the other Leo believed he was the real Leo.

"Temporary truce!" Zareline yelled at her counterpart.

The other Zareline nodded her head, "That's what I was thinking! Give us two minutes!"

We quickly huddled up to discuss what to do – which was kind of funny, considering that we still hadn't fought ourselves yet. Apparently, we were both nervous of fighting ourselves. From inside Powell's room, there were all sorts of angry shouts, yells, and mini explosions while further down the hall, the elves battled the dark knights epicly.

"Look," Leo said to us, "If they truly are copies of us, then my clone is saying exactly what I'm saying now, but over there."

"Agreed," I noted, stealing a glance at my clone who just so happened to be doing the same to me.

"That means, they're thinking exactly what we're thinking," Ember added.

"We may be able to take them," Leo pondered, "Since we got our unicorns."

"But Shadow doesn't know who's truly Leo, and Eclipse won't know which me is me!" Ember stated.

"If they're thinking just what we're thinking," I said, "Then they don't want to fight any more than we do!"

"True," Leo noted.

"Which means, we can convince them to work *with* us instead of *against* us!" I finished.

"Good point," Ember said, breaking the huddle.

"Let's work together!" my clone called out to me from across the room, "That sounds like a much better idea."

"You're serious?!" Leo exclaimed.

"Sure," clone Leo said, extending his hand, "I don't want to fight you – even if you're a fake."

Leo laughed and shook his clone's hand, "I've always wanted to shake my own hand!"

"Wait," Ember said, "Don't get too close to him. Otherwise, I'll get confused who's the real Leo."

"Yeah, don't you dare kiss that fake Ember," the fake Ember told the other Leo.

"Concentrate!" I yelled at everyone, "We need to help Powell!"

"BABOOOM!" a large explosion blew out the walls of Powell's room – sending us flying. When the dust cleared, I saw Zadok and Powell battling it out with a large assortment of spells and incantations.

"Take out Zadok!" fake Leo cried out, launching a slice of energy at Zadok.

Everyone else followed up by attacking. Immediately, Zadok pointed his staff at us and produced a heat wave that repelled us. He then started waving his staff around, producing a large red, energy ball.

Powell's eyes grew very wide, and he yelled, "Zadok! What are you *thinking*?!"

"I'm going to kill you all!" Zadok crowed, as the "ball" grew larger in the air.

"You'll kill yourself too!"

"I know how to use this power," Zadok said confidently.

"RUN!" Powell screamed at us, forming his own green ball of energy between his fingertips.

Although I'm sure we all wanted to help, the orb of energy was starting to look more than a little menacing, so we all turned and ran towards where the Elves were just finishing decapitating the rest of Zadok's group.

"Hey!" one of the elves called to Leo as we all met up, "Where's your clone?!"

“He disappeared when Zadok started creating that orb,” Leo said, “But we all need to get out of here NOW!”

The others needed no coaxing. Unfortunately, we were completely lost amid the multitude of hallways and rooms in this mountain monastery, but Leo randomly chose a staircase nearby and disappeared down it. That’s when the entire mountain blew apart.

In less time than it takes to react to a bee stinging you, I found myself in the very middle of crumbling rock and dirt. I couldn’t breathe, I couldn’t move, and I was being squashed and slammed with all sorts of material. Then, something very hard hit me right in the head and I blacked out.

Chapter 9: Leo:

The ancient, mountainside dwelling blew apart just as I had entered the stairwell. Fortunately for me, the stairwell had been sculpted out of the mountain's rock, so, as everything outside the stairwell was instantly churned up, I was given a few quick seconds to react. The only other person that had managed to make it to the stairwell was Zareline. As Zareline screamed in horror, I jumped on her, enveloping her body in mine just as the stairwell, and consequent mountainside, imploded. In a moment, I was being crushed.

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"Ungh," I moaned, rolling off Zareline and onto molding floorboards nearby.

"Daddy!" Zareline immediately cried out, "Where are we?!"

I moaned and opened my eyes to see the inside of a dilapidated shed, "Welcome to modern society."

Zareline immediately got up and dusted off her dirty clothing.

"Why are we here?" Zareline wanted to know.

"I thought us to appear here," I grunted, sitting up and feeling a surge of pain through my back.

"But how did we get here?" she asked again.

"Powell's medallion," I told her while testing out my ligaments to see if anything was broken, strained, or profusely bleeding, "I grabbed it as I jumped on you."

"But I thought that only deliverers could-," Zareline began.

She was cut off by a voice coming from outside the terribly decrepit shack that we were in,

"Hey! Are you guys okay in there?"

I stood up painfully and was glad to find out that I had not retained any serious injury.

"Yeah, I'm fine," I shouted back, reaching for the crumbling door.

"I'll get it Dad," Zareline told me, throwing open the door.

Unfortunately, Zareline didn't realize how old the door was, which meant that she succeeded in completely throwing the door off of its hinges. Outside, two construction workers were staring at us like we had just risen from the dead, which, in a weird sort of way, was true.

"Who are *you*?!" the taller one demanded of me.

"Um, I'm Leo," I said, "And this is my daughter Zareline."

Zareline bowed to both men upon her introduction.

"Where's the family!" the second construction worker exclaimed, running for the door and peering into the now empty shack.

"Oh no!" the first moaned, "Now we're in for it!"

"In for what?" I asked, confused.

"More people have disappeared into this shack and now more people are even coming out!" the second groaned.

"Ooooh," I said, realizing why they were distraught, "Well I'm the guy that disappeared in here a dozen years ago!"

"You?" the first construction worker gasped, "But what's up with your clothes and why are you so much older?!"

"Obviously he's grown," the first construction worker said, "But where is everyone else though?!"

"In there!" I said, pointing to the shack.

"Don't be funny with me," the second construction worker growled, "This is serious business!"

"Well, they're in my world," I told him, "And it's not like they can all just waltz back here."

"You mean...there's another dimension?!" the first construction worker gasped, "Seriously?!"

"I mean, I guess? I don't know if that's the right word though!" I replied.

"Lord help us all," the first construction worker groaned, "Now what're we going to do."

"Daddy," Zareline addressed me, "Can't we just go back to our world and get your family?"

"Precisely," I told her, "Let's just do that now."

"Wait!" the second one said, "You're *not* going back in-."

His words fell on deaf ears as I held Zareline's hand and gripped the medallion; immediately causing me to be whisked back to the world I had come to know so well.

Just as I had planned, we appeared not more than a couple thousand yards from me where the mountain monastery had been. I said "been" because there was nothing there anymore. The entire right half of that mountain had just oozed outwards and created a massive landslide that demolished everything in its path. Luckily by the time that Zareline and I had arrived, the landslide had largely finished.

"Look Daddy!" Zareline said to me, "There's Auntie Alina!"

It wasn't hard to spot the massive dragon towering above the collection of knights that had not followed us into the mountain, and I hurried off to meet up with them.

"Who were those guys?" Zareline asked me as we ran along.

"Construction workers," I said, "My family told me the place was going to be razed, so I imagine that's what they were there for."

"Oh," Zareline said, "I would like to go back to your world. It seemed nice."

"Maybe later," I replied as I ran up to the small group.

"LEO!" Alina cried out, rushing over to me, "How?! Why? When?!"

I waved off the questions, "No time to explain, where's Lea and Ember?"

"Over there!" Alina told me, pointing to where several of the white knights were huddled together, "But."

I didn't wait for her to finish. On the ground laid the inert forms of only Ember and Lea. Lea was unconscious, but as some of the soldiers removed her helmet and armor, I saw that she didn't have any serious wounds except for a dozen or so shallow cuts and bruises. Ember, on the other hand, had several nasty gashes in her head and torso. Her legs were warped in an unnatural way, and her right arm was completely red with blood. Although she wasn't moving, I could hear her whimpering softly.

I shook my head, "This is *not* good!"

"I tried to rescue them all with my dragon!" Alina cried, "But it was almost impossible to spot anyone amid the flying debris!"

"That's okay," I comforted Alina, "We may still be able to save both, and even if we can't, I'll try."

"Um, I'm sorry to be that person," one of the knights addressed me, "But there's no way we'll be able to save Ember."

"We still have another option," I told the knight, "The solution being as to how I stayed alive."

"Alina!" I said to her, while taking off my medallion, "I need you to fly your dragon to my parents at Yrited's and Verner's castle. As soon as you are there, you need to use this medallion to transport yourself to your world, at only a few minutes after you guys all entered that shack in the forest, which isn't a forest anymore, in the first place."

"Um, Leo, are you okay?" Alina said, "Medallions don't transport people."

"It's a specially enchanted one!" Zareline told Alina excitedly, "That only deliverers can use!"

Alina looked from me to Zareline and then back, "How do you use it again?"

I sighed, "Zareline, show Alina how to use it, okay? I'm going to use Lea's medallion and take these two to the emergency room at the hospital," I said.

"But you don't know where it is," Alina informed me, "They demolished the old one and built a new one since you left."

"Fine," I said exasperated, "Then meet up with me at my parents' house, and I can call the ambulance."

"The what?" one of the soldiers said.

"Never mind," I told him, "You guys should just get back to the nearest castle."

With that said, I reached down to Lea's neck and gripped the medallion while placing my left hand on Ember's bloodied body.

Instantly, all three of us were in the exact same positions, just now on the driveway of my parents' house.

"Wow!" I exclaimed, "They've remodeled the place!"

However, I was so frantic with worry that I missed the army of garden gnomes that now dwelt in the front lawn. The front door turned out to be locked, but the back door wasn't, and I hurriedly searched through the house for a phone. Everything had changed since I had last been in modern times, and I was completely unaccustomed to where everything was, but I finally found the landline on a charging base on a kitchen counter. Taking a deep breath and plugging in 9-1-1, I desperately tried to remember what the address of the house was.

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"Mr. Carl, Mrs. Carlina, and Mr. Leonard?" the nurse called out to the waiting room, "The doctor will see you now."

After waiting anxiously for more than an hour, Dad, Mom, and I hurried after the nurse; leaving Alina and Zareline out in the lobby.

"You can come in here," the nurse directed us, opening a door to a small, side room.

Inside were a few chairs as well as a desk and computer that the doctor was currently working on. Once we had all come inside, the nurse followed us in and closed the door.

"Are you the family of Miss Lea and Miss Ember?" the doctor asked.

"Yes, yes," Dad replied quickly, "Are they alright?"

"They'll be fine," the doctor replied, nodding his head.

All three of us audibly sighed.

"BUT, I do have a few things to say," the doctor continued, "The foremost one being what exactly happened to them?"

"We got caught in a landslide," I told the doctor, "And Lea and Ember got the worst of it."

"Where was this?" the doctor asked, surprised, "Surely not at the new development site near your house!"

"It's...kind of a long story," I told him, "You probably wouldn't understand."

"Which leads me to my next question," the doctor replied, "The pointy ears on Ember? Is this a genetic thing."

"Yes," I told him, "And that's also part of the long story that I would rather not go into."

"Very well then," the doctor said, "So let's talk about Lea first. Aside from a broken leg and lots of minor wounds, the main concern is her head."

"Did her concussion damage her brain?" Mom asked anxiously.

"We did extensive x-rays," the doctor replied, "But it appears her brain has no lasting effects except for a slight abrasion on her frontal lobe. I believe it should heal nicely, but she'll need to remain fairly inactive for a few days to allow for a thorough heal."

Dad nodded his head, "And anything else?"

"We put her leg in a cast, but I expect it to heal completely within a month," the doctor continued, "It was a fairly common fracture."

Mom breathed again and leaned back more comfortably in her chair, "Will she be able to come home tonight?"

"Well, we actually need to monitor her for another day, just so we make sure the concussion isn't worse than we think it is," the doctor replied, "But if she's doing fine by noon tomorrow, I don't see why she couldn't."

"What about Ember?" I said, "How's she doing?"

"Well, Ember is a bit of a different story," the doctor said, "Ember didn't get a concussion, but instead ended up with several nasty gashes in her skull. In addition, she broke both of her arms and legs."

I sighed, "But will she be able to heal?"

"Of course," the doctor said, "And luckily her blood type is O-positive so we were able to give her the needed blood transfusion, but it was close - much too close if you ask me."

"Will she be able to get discharged from the hospital as well, soon?" Dad wanted to know.

"Unfortunately no," the doctor told him, "Unless she has extensive preparations at her house, it'll be hard for you to care for her - due to the fact that she can't move at all."

I shook my head, "Ugh, so how long do you think she'll be here for?"

"At least two weeks," the doctor replied, "She passed out and still hasn't awoken from her coma which will only extend her stay here. However, I'm more worried about Ember's memory."

"What about it?" I asked, worried.

"Well, when we asked her about what date it is, or who's President, or even what date her birthday is, she seemed completely at a loss," the doctor informed me.

At this, I started laughing while the doctor looked confused.

"What's funny?" the doctor wanted to know.

"Ember shouldn't be able to tell you that stuff," Mom smiled, "Could she remember stuff like who her parents were and what her name was?"

"She was able to tell us that, though I don't have any way to check if she got her parents' names right," the doctor replied.

"Yeah," I kept on laughing, "Don't worry about that. That is also part of the *long* story."

At this point, the poor doctor must've been terribly confused, but all he did was nod his head and continue typing on his computer.

"Very well then," he finished, "That's all I had to say."

"Great!" I said, standing up, "Can I go see Ember and Lea now?"

"You can go ask the nurse at the front desk in the lobby for key cards to visit their room. We put them in the same room, as we're pretty full at the hospital anyway. As I said before, Ember's still out cold," the doctor told me, "But Lea is awake."

"We'll go check on them both," Mom told the doctor, "We just told the receptionist we want to visit Ember and Lea?"

"That should be fine," the doctor said, "And I'll send Susan here with you in case you have any issues, but Carl, you should stay here."

"Me?!" Dad said, "Why me?"

"You're due for your next cancer scan," the doctor informed him.

Dad groaned, "But I just got checked out like a week ago!"

"You said you're going on vacation though, so we should check now to see how fast it's spreading," the doctor replied.

Dad groaned, "Fine, but make it quick. I wanna see my daughter!"

Mom and I hurried out of the consultation room and outside in the lobby where Alina was trying to read a magazine while Zareline pestered her with questions.

"DADDY!" Zareline cried out with delight upon seeing me again, "How's Mommy?!"

"We're just going to check on her," I told Zareline, "But the doctor said she's sleeping, so we need to be careful to not bother her."

"Of course," Zareline said in a whisper, "She won't know we're there!"

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After picking up a key card from the front desk lady, nurse Susan led the way to the elevator which then got us to the second floor. Zareline loved the elevator ride too much and insisted we do it a few more times on the way back. After another brief jaunt across a massive, glass skybridge, Susan showed us to room 164.

"Ssshhh," I said again as I slowly opened the room's door.

In the bed closest to the door was Ember. At least I *thought* it was Ember, but it was kind of hard to tell since she was fully bandaged up and covered with a large blanket. However, Zareline recognized her instantly.

"Mommy!" she whispered, gently placing her hand on the bed, "Why is she all bandaged up?"

"So she can heal," I told Zareline.

"But that's not what our doctors do!"

"Our doctors aren't as good as these," I reminded her.

"Mom! Leo! Alina!" Lea whispered loudly from the bed at the back of the room, "You came to visit!"

"Of course we did," Alina laughed, "We've been here ever since you got picked up by the ambulance!"

Lea's eyes grew wide, "But I've been here for several hours!"

"We just wanted to make sure you were alright, sweetie," Mom told Lea, "How are you feeling?"

"As good as can be expected," Lea admitted, "My leg hurts, but at least it'll heal. The rest of my body is also pretty sore but nothing else is broken, the doctor said."

"Good," I announced, inspecting the cast on Lea's right leg.

"You know when I can get out of here?" Lea wanted to know next.

"Doctor said maybe tomorrow!" Mom said excitedly.

"That's great news!" Lea said, beaming, "I don't like being here."

"But Ember needs company," I stated.

Lea turned to look at the inert form of Ember, still unconscious, "She hasn't awakened at all, as far as I have seen anyway."

"I know," I said sadly, "But the doctor seems quite hopeful about her recovery!"

Lea groaned and laid back in her bed, "What are you guys gonna do?"

Shrugging my shoulders, I turned around and looked at Alina and Mom.

"I think these two," Mom said, pointing at Zareline and I, "Need to go to the dentist!"

"Actually," I admitted, "I do need to! It was hard to create my own toothbrushes!"

"But my teeth are much better than any of my friends!" Zareline announced.

"Thanks to Leo," Mom told her, "But compared to normal hygiene standards, you need some work."

"The dentist is *fun*," I reminded Zareline, "Remember what I told you about him working magic with teeth?!"

"Yeah," Zareline said, "But I want to see other things!"

"You will," I told her, "You will."

As we turned to go, Lea remembered something to tell me.

"Leo! Take Ember and I's medallions with you," Lea told me, "They're in a box by the door!"

"Ohhh," I said, "Good idea."

By the door I found a large, plastic box that had Lea and Ember's possessions in it. Their clothes were missing though.

"Where did they put your clothes?" I asked Lea.

"I dunno," Lea said, "They're totally replaceable though and were virtually destroyed anyway."

After another goodbye wave to Lea and a wistful look at my wife, I hurried after Zareline, Alina, and Mom.

By the time that we made it back down to the ground floor, Dad had already completed his quick scan and was waiting for us in the front lobby. He was also doing some sort of jig.

"Dad?!" Alina gasped, "What *are* you doing?!"

"I do *not* know!" Dad laughed, "But I don't care!!!!"

"Um?" I said.

"The doctor says that my cancer has *decreased*!" Dad announced.

"WHAT?!" Mom exclaimed, "Are you serious?"

"Absolutely!" Dad said, "In only a week, my cancer has decreased - only a small amount, but still - miraculous!"

"How?" Alina wanted to know.

"Not sure," Dad shrugged, "But the doctor said to keep on doing what I've been doing, and what I've been doing is going on adventures, so I shouldn't stop!"

"That's great grandpa!" Zareline said excitedly, "I don't know what cancer is, but I'm glad it's going away!"

Dad laughed, "Me too!"

"Well," Mom said after the excitement had worn down, and we were walking out to the parking lot, "Alina, why don't you and Carl go back home and relax while I take Leo and Zareline to our dentist?"

"Sounds good to me!" Alina replied, "I could use some more chilling, and some less fighting."

"Are you kidding?!" Dad exclaimed as he hurried after Alina, "Fighting is where all the fun is at!"

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“Did you guys start going to a new dentist?” I asked Mom as we pulled up in a brand new parking lot in front of an even newer business complex.

“Nope,” Mom said, “But they totally remodeled the place.”

“Wow,” I breathed, “I forgot how fantastic modern architecture is.”

“Not very classy,” Mom replied, “But I guess it’s nice?”

“Look at how tall this building is!” Zareline exclaimed, running over to the double doors, “It’s so - oof!”

Zareline, not realizing that the doors and windows were extremely large pieces of glass, smacked right into a window.

I cringed.

“Oh honey!” Mom cried out in alarm, “Are you okay?”

“I’ll be fine,” Zareline groaned, “Is this glass or something?”

“A whole lot of it,” I told her while carefully inspecting her head.

“It’s *fine* dad,” Zareline insisted, “But you should open the doors!”

“I don’t need to,” I said, “They automatically open!”

While Zareline stared at the automatic, sliding doors, Mom led the way to the dentist’s office.

“Hey Megan!” Mom called to her favorite secretary as we walked into the office.

“Good afternoon!” Megan said to Mom, “You have an appointment?”

“No,” Mom said, “But I need to get a walk-in appointment for Leo and Zareline here.”

“Of course!” Megan said, beaming at us, “Nice costumes by the way!”

“This *isn’t* a costume,” Zareline told Megan, “This is my normal clothes!”

“Wait...seriously?” Megan asked Mom, confused.

“Long story,” Mom replied quickly, “How soon can you get them in?”

“Actually, I just had someone cancel on me,” Megan informed us, “So it’ll only be a few minutes. You can wait over there in the chairs if you like.”

“Thanks!” I said, plopping down in an overly-cushioned chair.

“Ah, such good chairs,” I stated, sinking down into it.

“Look at this!” Zareline said, bouncing up and down in her chair, “It’s something called a magazine!”

“I know,” Mom replied, “I read them all the time.”

“But look at all these words!” Zareline continued, “It says ‘Get rid of back pain in only thirty days’!”

“Mhm,” Mom replied.

“They’re going to make me take x-rays,” I moaned, suddenly realizing what was about to happen to me.

“What are x-rays?” Zareline wanted to know.

“They’re...they’re just invisible scans,” I caught myself.

“Zareline?” a hygienist called out while coming up to us.

“That’s meeee!” Zareline said with excitement, “What do I need to do?”

“Right this way,” the hygienist said, gesturing to the back room where all the dentist chairs were.

“I’ll stay here,” I told Mom, “Come get me if you have questions.”

Mom nodded and followed after Zareline who was already racing away. It had been a good while since I had last gone to the dentist, and I was glad about it. I had never liked going to the

dentist - which was why I had brainwashed Zareline into thinking dentists were great. Hence, if Mom was willing to keep an eye on Zareline, I was all for it. Also, I had something I needed to do...

I carefully removed Ember and Lea's medallions from my pocket and thought about where in my world I wanted to go. I had to be careful about what time I chose, because Powell had said that I can't ever go back in time there.

"Eh, I'll arrive back at Yrited's castle when the other white knights do," I thought aloud, holding Lea's medallion carefully in my right hand, "I need to talk with some people..."

"Whoosh!"

I promptly warped through time and space to the large field in front of Yrited's castle - just as a team of white knights on horseback galloped up from behind me.

"Leo?!" one of them cried, "How in the *world* did you beat us here?"

"I'll explain that later," I told them.

"Where's the others?" one of the other white knights asked.

"Lea and Ember are recovering, while everyone else is just doing...stuff," I replied.

"SNORT!" Shadow suddenly burst out of the pack of knights and ran straight into me - bowling me to the ground.

"Shadow!" I laughed, "Good to see you boy!"

"Where *is* everyone?" one of the knights asked, looking around the empty field, "There were so many people here before we left."

"It *has* been a few days now," I said, "I'm going to head inside and find Verner."

However, we didn't get far before being accosted by the castle's guards, who, quickly recognizing us, immediately escorted us into the castle and to the throne room.

"Leo!" Verner called out to me from across the room, "Good to see you back! How did the pursuit mission go?"

"Uh, not quite as planned," I admitted.

"We lost part of our crew," one of the other white knights told Verner reluctantly, "Most of them were Elves, but we did lose two knights."

"Wait!" Verner gasped, "Where's the other deliverers?"

"They're fine, they're fine," I calmed Verner, "They're at home recovering, but several of the other elves and a few white knights were caught in a landslide and buried."

Verner shook his head, "That's terrible. Did you even find Zadok or the legendary wizard?"

"Both!" a white knight said excitedly.

"Although they both died too," I added.

"Way to bring the mood down again," Verner groaned, "So you got your siblings back to your world? I know Alina stopped by to pick up your parents yesterday."

"Yeah," I told him, "Only Lea and Ember really sustained anything serious, but they'll both live."

"Well, I guess we do have some good news," Verner replied, "And I have some news of my own. I was going to tell Alina, but she was in a very big rush."

"What is it?"

"Xee's back!"

"What?" I gasped, along with all of the other knights from our group.

"Apparently he had just been sucked into Zadok's staff, and when Zadok's staff was broken...", Verner began, "We ended up with a ton of people reappearing."

"Well, that's actually awesome!" I said, "Xee was a huge help!"

"Yeah, except he wants to rule the Dark Knight kingdom now," Verner said, "So he and Joel are at each other's throats."

"Figures," I laughed, "Where are they now?"

"In one of the meeting halls here," Verner replied.

"I'll go check on them," I winked.

While the rest of the white knights dispersed to go outside and eventually return to their homes, one of Verner's guards escorted me to where Xee and Joel were. It turned out that it wasn't too hard to tell where they were located because of the volume of shouting emanating from the room. Outside the room, I ran into a dozen dark knights all standing around.

"What are you guys doing out here?" I asked.

"I'm...staying out of this one," the first dark knight replied, "I'd rather not get involved."

"Yeah," a minotaur added, "Either of those guys could easily wipe the floor with us. I'm not getting in their crosshairs."

Amid nervous laughter from the rest of the dark knights, I slowly opened the door and crept into the room. Against the opposite wall, Joel and Xee were yelling at each other while simultaneously pounding the massive, oak table with their hands. The only other person in the room was a white knight who was cowering in the corner. I assumed he was supposed to be meditating the conversation, but instead, he was practicing self-preservation.

"Guys, guys!" I called out to them, "What's the issue here?"

"Leo!" Joel called out to me, "Will you *please* tell this guy here that I am the rightful leader of the dark knights!"

"Pssst," Xee snorted, "Everyone knows that I was a dark knight general, legions of time before you were."

"And yet you were conveniently missing for a dozen years," Joel added, "While I was a general."

"Wasn't my fault!" Xee roared back.

"Let's chill," I interrupted, "And talk about this kindly."

"Joel's waaaay past 'kind'," Xee insisted.

"So are you though," Joel added.

"Well, let's think about this," I interrupted again, "Can we both agree that the most adept and experienced leader of the dark knights should lead the dark knights?"

"Sure," Joel said.

"So, who has led the dark knights longer?" I asked.

"Me," Xee said immediately, "I was a general for twenty years!"

"But," I quickly added as Joel grumbled, "Joel has been around for the last twelve years and is much better acquainted with current happenings."

"Of course," Joel said proudly, "Plus, I've been a dark knight for all my life whereas Xee here is half elf!"

"Don't bring my heritage into this!" Xee growled.

I sighed, "Fine, then there's only one way to settle this!"

"How?" Joel and Xee asked.

"A duel," I smirked, "First one to dearm the other *without* killing them."

"I've got this in the bag," Joel laughed.

"And I have your body in *my* bag," Xee smirked.

Chapter 10: Lea:

I woke up the next morning still feeling a bit out of it. Sure, only my right leg had been broken, but the way that it had been broken had more than likely affected other parts of my bruised body. After a sufficiently loud groan, I rolled over and tried to get my brain woken up. Across from me, Ember was still completely knocked out on her bed, having not moved at all from last night.

This was slightly disturbing, as the longer someone was in a coma the worse conditions became for them.

"Amber!" I said to her as I attempted to sit up in bed without disturbing my leg too much, "Are you awake yet?"

No answer.

An hour later of staring at the ceiling brought me to breakfast time, and my favorite nurse arrived shortly with a large platter of hospital breakfast, which wasn't very delicious although not too bad at the same time.

"Will Amber be waking soon?" I asked the nurse.

The nurse shrugged her shoulders, "I'm not sure. Hopefully! She took a pretty hard hit to the head."

I sighed, "Is it true I'll be leaving today?"

The nurse smiled at me as she left the room, "The doctor said he'll check you out around noon, and if you pass, you *can* go!"

"YES!" I grinned, pumping my fist slightly.

The nurse was just about to shut the door behind her when she ran into some people out in the hallway. After a whispered exchange of voices, my family quickly entered the room.

"Lea!" Alina whispered to me, as she quietly stepped by Ember's bed, "How're you feeling?"

"A bit banged up and a bit off," I replied honestly, "But much better than yesterday. That's for sure!"

"Leo brought someone here to see you!" Mom informed me as she grabbed my hand.

"Who?" I asked, intrigued.

Barely had the words left my mouth then George stepped into the hospital room.

"Mom!" I howled, "I'm barely presentable!"

"You have clothes on," Mom argued.

"Barely better than a surgery smock!" I said, hurriedly trying to smooth my hair.

"It's fine, you look great!" George smiled at me.

I groaned, "You're just saying that."

"No, I...-", George replied, cut off by another groan from across the room.

"EMBER!" Leo yelled too loud, "You're awake!"

"Whaaa?" Ember groaned again, rolling over in her bed, "Wait...Where am I?"

"Don't move!" Leo said quickly, placing his hand on her to keep her from sitting up, "You're at a hospital."

Ember seemed to forget about being transported to the hospital via the ambulance for a moment before remembering what had happened early yesterday. Then, she sank back into her pillow, "How long have I been here for?"

"Just about a day," Leo said calmly.

"MOMMY!" Zareline said next, "You're awake!"

Ember smiled weakly, "Yeah, I guess I am."

Zareline grabbed Ember's right hand and squeezed it tight, "You scared me mommy!"

"Shh, let's let her sleep some more," Mom reminded Zareline, "Ember needs to recover."

A gentle snore from Ember shortly thereafter confirmed the statement.

This whole time, I had been so distracted with Ember finally waking that I had forgotten about George standing right next to me. Now, I realized he was fidgeting with something that he was carrying in his hands.

"What's that?" I asked, pointing to the small box he was carrying.

"This? Oh, sorry, I was just distracted; everything is so new to me here," George admitted, "But anyway, this is for you!"

As I watched George got down on one knee and pulled a small ring from his box, "Lea."

At this, my eyes nearly popped out of my head, and, more than a little embarrassed, I glanced at the rest of my family looking back at me. Alina was staring at me like I had four arms, but my parents were smiling grandly.

"Will you marry me?" George finished.

Epilog:

Lea did end up accepting George's proposal, and they were happily married a year later. Lea and George went on to expand their White Knight kingdom to more than twice its original size and improve the quality of life of their subjects drastically. They eventually had two girls and a boy.

Carl and Carlina, the deliverers' parents, lived for another twenty years as Carl's cancer was miraculously cured (Carl always said it was because of God that he was cured). Carl decided to not be part of the ambassador program amongst the medieval world, because he wanted to spend all of his available time exploring, and although Carlina continued to visit modern earth, she joined her husband on many of his adventures and became a much-loved grandma to her grandkids.

Ember, with the help of Leo, led the Elves in a massive restoration effort that has since been known as a period of prosperity and population boom. Ember also promoted Xee to an Elven general, who made the most of his second chance to protect the kingdom and expand its borders against the neighboring desert creatures in a series of excellently planned and executed war-time maneuvers. When Leo and Ember got too old to rule effectively, they restored the Elven government to its original, elder-led structure with Zareline as head chancellor. Thus, she became the first wildly-popular, Elven elder to not be one hundred percent elf.

Alina married a nice man in modern society, and although she was instrumental in helping Joel to renovate the Dark Knight government and society to be a much more peaceful and humane culture, she decided to limit her time spent in the medieval world.