**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, whaattt?” 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.

“MWAHAHAHAAaaaa,” 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 tower,” 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 Zarline 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.

“Seeeee?” 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.”