

## **Chapter IV**

Due to the lack of clouds attempting to blot out the Lady's light, there was no need for the torches within the monastery. Because of it, Gunther and Mannfred had no issue navigating through the hallways as they made their way to the courtyard.

The sound of their bare feet slapping against the stone flooring was the only sound that permeated the night, and while it might not have been audible to anyone beyond a few dozen yards, Mannfred found the noise deafening.

Walking around Lumestele at night was not an unfamiliar occurrence to Mannfred. He had woken up early many nights with the need to relieve himself or with the desire to pray at the chapel after a nightmare. Few nuns or priests had issues with either action, and they encouraged the latter. Sneaking outside of the monastery was an entirely different situation.

*The Lady will understand. She will forgive me so long as I ask forgiveness. I am breaking the rules so as to better serve Her;* Mannfred told himself every time he felt himself getting cold feet to Gunther's plan.

Despite his personal justification for the act, the sensation of eyes drilling into the back of his head remained no matter where he went. The feeling persisted even after the two of them made it to the courtyard undetected.

"See, told you he left them here," Gunther exclaimed in a hushed tone.

Rushing over to the pile of wooden swords left in the exact place Peter instructed the boys to drop them, he threw one to Mannfred while picking up one for himself.

"Do make an effort to not scream should you get hit," the boy warned. "The last thing we need is you waking up the nuns or priests from their sleep."

Nodding with a grimace, Mannfred took his stance with his sword out in front of them. Reflecting the same action as he did, Gunther took a deep breath.

In complete silence, the two threw themselves at one another and their swords clashed. Instead of following up the attack as they would have normally, the thunderous sound of wood clashing on wood echoed through the night causing each of them to flinch and pull away. Each of the boys strained their ears, waiting to see if anyone heard and if anyone was on their way to investigate the source.

“What do we do if someone comes out?” Mannfred whispered.

“We’ll just hide. They shouldn’t have any reason to come out much further than the courtyard. Once they see that there is nothing out here, they’ll just assume it was an animal or something,” Gunther answered.

“And our swords?”

“We’ll just take them with us until they leave. No one will notice two swords missing from a pile as messy as what Peter had us make,” Gunther exclaimed.

Mannfred frowned, but realized there was no alternative to the problem beyond getting in trouble or returning to the dorm. After waiting a few seconds longer to hear nothing but silence echoing throughout Lumestele, the boy exhaled a long breath he did not realize he had taken in.

“The coast is clear, I think,” he noted as he resumed the same stance as before.

Gunther waited for a few seconds longer before nodding and mimicking the action. “Okay. Are you ready?”

Without waiting for an answer, the two boys threw themselves at one another, their swords clashing just as they had seconds prior. The two faced only a split second of hesitation as the sound of wood on wood thundered through

the dead silent night, but they both pushed past their fears and swung at each other again.

The shock of the impact echoed throughout Mannfred's body as struggled to maintain his hold on his sword. Wounds and soreness from earlier in the day returned to him and he could not hold back a groan. He found some solace in Gunther doing the same, and through the corner of his eye he could see his muscles recoil in pain. It was a small reaction, but one Mannfred caught onto nonetheless.

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"I don't think this is working," Mannfred admitted as he fell to the ground.

"Why? Annoyed you haven't beaten me once?" Gunther huffed as he joined him on the opposite side.

"We've been at this for hours, and the same thing keeps happening over and over again. I always hold my own for a little while before you start putting in more

strength and overpowering me. Sure, how this happens has changed, but the underlying path it follows is a constant,” Mannfred clarified.

“So?” Gunther asked.

“We haven’t changed anything from earlier. You’re still relying too much on your strength, and I cannot overcome someone stronger than I am,” Mannfred continued.

Gunther’s brow furrowed as he realized the truth in the other boy’s words.

“How do you suggest we change that?” Gunther asked while stroking his chin.

Mannfred let out a sigh and shook his head. “If I knew the answer to that, I would have done so.”

“Okay, why are we making these mistakes in the first place?” Gunther pondered. “If we can figure out why we’re behaving the way we do, certainly finding the answer shouldn’t be too difficult.”

“Well, why do you always resort to brute strength?”

Mannfred posed.

“Usually it’s because you use those freakishly long arms of yours to keep me away. The only way around them is through them, and the only way through them is brute force. Why do you fall back onto your long reach?”

Gunther answered after a minute of pause.

“I suppose it’s because I don’t want to get hit again,” Mannfred replied while rubbing his jaw.

“Which is one of the problems that Peter brought up with everybody else,” Gunther realized. “I don’t see any answer to that problem beyond what the man already told us. Have you ever considered pressing the attack?”

“Isn’t that what I am already doing?”

“Not in the way I mean it. Sure you keep swinging, but you don’t do anything while I’m on the defensive. It’s like attacking me to keep me from attacking you,” Gunther

elaborated. "It could be what Peter was trying to get you to do when he told you to swing at me."

"What do you think of him? Peter, I mean,"

Mannfred asked.

"He is a crude man who doesn't know how to keep quiet. I suppose he gives proper respect to the Lady. He did remain in the chapel praying for longer than anyone,"

Gunther answered. "Where is this coming from?"

"I think similarly, I just wasn't sure what the others made of him. No one said anything about him, so I wondered if I was the only one thinking as such,"

Mannfred explained.

"It feels like he knows something that we do not.

By the sound of it, the monastery knows what it is to. Did you not notice how many times Father Tobias or Sister Mary tried to cut him off. Whatever he knows, the monastery doesn't want us to know," Gunther said.



“But what would the monastery want to keep from us? They have always answered our questions in class to the best of their abilities. Besides, wouldn’t it be a sin to lie to us as men and women of the Lady? *Never tell a lie that can be exposed by my light*, remember? It is one of the first things they taught us.” Mannfred noted.

“I do not know, Mannfred. I do not know,” Gunther lamented. “Perhaps it is something that we would never think to ask. Omission is not a lie after all, as the Lady cannot reveal something that was never hidden.”

Silence filled Mannfred as he considered his words. When he could find nothing further to add, he turned his attention back to the courtyard to continue catching his breath. He froze when his eyes settled on two golden orbs floating above the monastery's roof. It took him a few seconds longer to realize they were eyes belonging to an individual.

“Gunther, how long has that person been watching us?” Mannfred asked, gesturing to the figure.

The individual looked human enough, but their two golden eyes that glowed in the moonlight destroyed any notion that they were one. Dark blue cloth covered most of their body with a veil covering the lower half face and a cloth covering everything above their eyes. Were it not for the Lady’s light shining down on them, they would have blended in with the night sky.

Such clothing hugged the individual tightly, revealing a slender frame that almost distracted Mannfred from noticing the short sword attached to the back of the individual’s hip.

“What is that?” Gunther asked, picking himself up and brandishing his sword at the creature.

“I-I don’t know. A vampire maybe?” Mannfred guessed, scrambling to his feet to join the other boy.

“Vampires have red eyes, you dunce!” Gunther countered.

“What else could it be?” Mannfred shot back.

Gunther did not have an answer and grimaced as he turned his attention back to the individual. “What are we going to do about them?”

“Do we go wake up the priests?” Mannfred suggested.

“What are they going to do against someone with a blade? Do you think Tobias will hit them hard enough with his cane that he will fall unconscious?”

“What about Sir Peter? He had a sword, certainly he could do something about this creature,” Mannfred offered.

Gunther considered the thought for a few seconds, but shook his head. “If that thing wants to hurt us, then they would not let us call for help. Even if we could wake someone with a single scream, I doubt they would let us-”

“I don’t believe children such as yourself should be up and about at this time of night. Shouldn’t you be in bed, sound asleep with your dreams?” a feminine voice interrupted.

The sweetness and softness of the individual’s words combined with the suddenness of her remark made both boys lower their weapons. Mannfred was the first to recover between the two of them and he brandished his sword at her again. Despite his renewed vigor and skepticism of the woman, he struggled to keep it pointed at her as he lost desire to resist.

“Who are you? What are you? What are you doing up here?” he demanded.

“Who am I? What am I? What am I doing?” the woman repeated. With exaggerated movements, she stood up from her crouching position only to sit back down with her skinny legs dangling from the edge of the roof. “Those are good questions, child. But didn’t your parents ever

teach you it is rude to answer someone else's question with a question of your own?"

"We don't have parents. We're orphans. Every aspirant here in the monastery is an orphan," Mannfred replied.

The woman's eyes narrowed. "Is that so? Then I must apologize for saying something so insensitive."

"What are you doing here?" Mannfred repeated.

"I suppose you're not going to answer my question?" she sighed. "Well, I suppose it is not my responsibility to teach you manners."

"What are you?" Gunther inquired, taking a step toward her.

The woman sighed, shook her head, and clicked her tongue.

"I suppose...I am what you call a fae," she answered after a long pause.

"A fae?" Gunther repeated.

“What in the light is a fae?” Mannfred whispered.

“How am I supposed to know? None of the books in the monastery mention fae!” Gunther hissed back.

The two boys exchanged glances with one another, and each jumped back when the woman pushed herself off the roof to join them on the ground. The grass did not let out a sound once she landed, nor did it complain as she glided over to Mannfred and Gunther. She filled every step she took with grace, her body moving in perfect synchronism with itself to create one fluid motion. As Mannfred watched, he pondered whether she was a solid or liquid.

At the last possible minute when she was within arms grasp of the lady, he snapped himself to attention and pointed his sword at her. His action proved enough to make Gunther follow suit, and the woman paused as the two boys backed up to create distance.

“Who are you?” Mannfred asked.

“Me? Child, you must not understand fae very well, do you?” she cooed. “A fae does not give up their name so easily. No, not without exchanging something of equal value.”

“Then what are you doing here?” he inquired.

“I...am simply enjoying a nightly stroll through the mountains. Is that a crime?” the fae responded.

*I do not trust that pause*, Mannfred thought.

“It is when you are trespassing,” Gunther answered.

“Trespassing? Trespassing? I am afraid I do not-” the woman cut herself off as her eyes widened. “Oh, that must be one of your human silly made-up words. It is like the word *money* or *justice*, is it not? Something you gave meaning that truly has none.”

“Justice does exist. It is punishing those who reject the Lady’s light,” Mannfred rebuked, spitting more than he intended.

The fae's eyes widened further upon hearing his rebuttal, but she stayed quiet and kept her opinions to herself despite how badly Mannfred could tell she wanted to voice them.

Silence befell the three of them as no further questions came to mind. At the same time, Mannfred could not bring himself to move. While the woman did not have either of her hands anywhere near her blade, the fluidity in which she moved gave the boy no illusion that she could change the fact in an instant.

*Would she really use it though?* he pondered. *She might not have been as honest as she could be, but she hasn't done anything hostile.*

"It is a beautiful night to night, is it not?" she inquired. "Not a cloud in sight. With this weather, I suppose I could see why children would want to wander out of their beds and put themselves under the night skies."



“The Lady’s light is shining bright, that is for sure,”  
Mannfred agreed.

The fae sighed. “Lady this, Lady that. Is that all you humans are capable of thinking about?”

“Do not disparage the Lady’s name!” Gunther seethed, swiping at the woman only to back up when she placed her hand on her own blade. He did not reapproach when she loosened her grip.

“I assure you, I meant no offense, young boy,” the woman apologized. “I was merely making note of the fact that your kind are quick to put your faith in Her and even quicker to sing Her praise to the heavens above.”

“As well we should! Her light protects us from the dark and the monstrosities that lurk within. Humankind would not exist without Her,” Gunther preached.

“And yet you live behind walls and in mountains. If Her light was so protective, such things would not be necessary, no?” the woman countered.

To respond, Gunther exchanged glances with Mannfred.

“The light is a different kind of protection. It is not physical like a wall. It shows us the way and guides us,” Mannfred reasoned.

The woman nodded, but the veil on her face made it difficult to tell whether she did so to appease the boys, or to agree with them.

“Have you ever considered that there is more to the world?” she inquired.

“Of course there is more to the world. Just gaze down the mountain path and you can see it with your own two eyes,” Mannfred replied, astonished she could make such a claim.

“No, no. Not the world traversable by our own two feet, but the world above,” the woman clarified. “Do you ever wonder what is beyond the Ring? Have you ever wished to walk among the stars?”

“Why would I? We are stuck down here and there is no way up?” Mannfred answered. “Besides, why would I ever want to leave the Lady’s light?”

The fae frowned. “But the thought has most certainly crossed your mind, no? Surely you must believe that there are worlds beyond our own out there; just waiting for someone to discover and explore them. Surely you do not believe that this world we live in is all there is to life.”

“I suppose I never considered it,” Mannfred realized. “Why worry about tomorrow’s problem when today is staring me in the face?”

“Ah, so it is a lack of foresight. I suppose something like that is common among the young. It occurs all the time in the fae youth as well,” the woman exclaimed. “Look to the stars above when you sleep tonight and consider what potential lies the stars try to hide.”

Without waiting for either boy to give her a response, the fae leapt up from the ground back to the roof,

her legs springing her higher than she had any right to.

Turning back to the two, the woman waved before fleeing in the opposite direction. It took Mannfred a few seconds to realize not once did she make a sound as she fled, and his skin crawled upon the realization.