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Chapter 4

Make Haste Slowly

The sound of birds chirping wasn't something John was accustomed to waking up to in the morning. In fact, he was so use to rising at the crack of dawn to run military exercises that he felt out of place, out of sync. The disciplined legionnaire's life had been ingrained into him for so long that *not* doing it was making him restless.

Listening to the forest wake up around him, he forced his body into staying motionless in his bed of moss. As restless as he'd been about the new routine in his life, he wasn't a fool. His new drill sergeant was a harsh task mistress and she only gave him reprieve when he absolutely had to sleep. So instead of getting up, he reflected on the past several days they'd traveled Kalian's empty roads.

As his new mentor had predicted, his body 'Awakened', as she called it--which basically meant he went through his second puberty as his body became "enhanced" over the course of two days. The first change that he'd noticed right away was the weight in things. Almost over night everything had become lighter, including his own step, as his strength, speed, reaction time, and stamina dramatically increased. Shortly after that, his vision and hearing radically improved. It improved so much so that he could make out an individual leaf on a tree nearly a mile away and hear the heartbeat of a rabbit at the base of the tree.

But as miraculous as these enhancements were, he quickly discovered that he had to relearn how to function in his own body again. Everything from holding onto things without breaking them to trying to keep his eyes from focusing on the finest details. Celia, of course, had developed a number of exercises that he had to practice every waking minute of the day. Like trying to hold onto a leaf without breaking it, or jumping only a foot high off the ground. The last one he wasn't particularly fond of as she'd intentionally waited for nightfall before he could do his jumps. By then, they'd make it to the next Waypoint and John was punished by the low ceiling if he jumped too high.

That was Celia's teaching style in a nutshell. She came from the tough love school of thought. All business with no mittens.

Not only did she push his body, but she also pushed his mind. Every waking moment she dumped on him everything he needed to know to function as a newly minted Slayer from Kalian. And what he had to know was a *lot*. Northern politics, local gossip, places, people, history, traditions, customs, and a hundred other little details of Kalian that only someone who'd lived there for years would know. She would then quiz him randomly on something she told him hours

or even days ago. His reward for getting a question right was being asked another question. But get a question wrong? There was always some form of pain inducing punishment waiting for him.

Thankfully, he didn't get her knowledge quizzes wrong very often. Not only had his body changed but also his mind.

Whatever the mage had done to him had turned his brain into a sponge. Anything she told him, he could recall instantly and in the most minute detail. It was truly a life saving gift as he was pretty sure Celia would have killed him by now if he'd been without it.

Against his will, John recalled their very first lecture. The lesson had been on her five golden rules that she lived by. Specifically the first one, "Don't get caught". Celia had told him that they had be cautious to the point of being paranoid. Getting caught wasn't an option since that ended in a gruesome death. And if he was ever found out, she wouldn't try to save him. In fact, she told him to his face that she'd kill him herself if she thought it would maintain her cover. At first, he'd passed it off as a scare tactic but there were other similar comments. After a while, he came to realize that, deep down, she was a hardened survivalist who kept everyone at arms length. That and she really *would* do all the things she said she would if he screwed up.

Thinking back now, it wasn't too difficult to believe considering her other rules:

Rule 2: Don't tell anyone who you really are.

Rule 3: Don't get emotionally close to anyone.

Rule 4: Don't trust anyone.

Rule 5: Don't take unnecessary risks

"Do you see the theme here?" she'd asked him with a challenging look. *"Be fucking paranoid."*

He also learned she had the mouth of a sailor.

She's an enigma wrapped in a riddle surrounded by a mystery, he mused.

Thankfully, it wasn't just his memory that he had going for him but also his mental endurance and stamina. His mind was razor sharp regardless of how hard she pushed him. And she pushed him hard. For three straight days at a time, to be exact. When she had told him before that he could go longer without sleep, he hadn't realized that had meant he'd be training non-stop for days.

But as much as all of his new abilities were helpful, there were some things he just couldn't learn. Specifically, all the little different social protocols, phrases and mannerisms that only people north of the Empire's border used. He'd had over 26 years to develop habits that went against everything a Kalian would do.

Eye contact was the most difficult one for John to master. He'd thought it was comical in how people flaunted their status in the first few seconds of meeting someone new--only so the other person would know where to look. Titles and uniforms played a big part of the show and they did that for a reason. Status played an enormous part in the day-to-day interaction.

He was surprised to learn that only the bluebloods--or Royals, as Celia violently insisted he called them as no Northerner would use the word blueblood--had last names. Which gave him another puzzling piece to the puzzle that which was Celia Tecard.

What took first place in most surprising discovery he'd made about the North, though, was the fact that slavery was legalized. That it wasn't uncommon for a coin strapped farmer to sell

his daughter off into slavery because women were valued far less than men. Coming from an Empire that it was illegal to own someone, and who only allowed a woman to rule over them, it was an unthinkable concept.

The runner up in most shocking discoveries was that it was expected for men to have multiple wives. The first wife, called the Headmistress, was the matriarch of the family while the other wives, the Maidens, bore the many children that was expected. John suspected this expectation stemmed from the fact that the North had been nearly wiped completely out when the Hellhounds were unleashed into the world. Celia, however, didn't delve too deeply into the history or dynamics that went on inside of a typical household, but he got the impression it was messy and complicated. Which wasn't a surprise. He knew men who'd had enough of a challenge with one wife, he couldn't imagine having many.

John mentally sighed in irritation. Even though he was sure he hadn't slept more than a handful of hours, he just couldn't go back to sleep. His body was already fully rested and while his eyes were closed, the sounds of forest outside of the Waypoint hammered against his conscious as if he weren't buried under ten paces of solid stone and earth.

But even with the incessant sounds of the forest, the last thing he wanted was his mentor to rouse him up and yell at him for looking her in the eye or not bowing low enough--or any of the other hundred little things he did unconsciously that would cause people to look into his background story a little more closely.

He'd come to the realization that being a spy was much harder than being a soldier.

"You know I can hear the change in your breathing and heart rate when you wake up," Celia said from somewhere behind him.

Son of a...

"Just resting my eyes," John quickly replied, but he knew better than to stay there.

Swinging his feet over, he crawled out of his hole and stretched his back.

His eyes took in the cavern as if it were high noon on a cloudless day. It felt like it had been months ago when he'd thought the Waypoint was poorly lit. He was starting to get use to being able to see in the dark and he idly wondered if he'd ever stop remembering what it was like to be blind in the dark.

"What's the plan for today?" he asked, rubbing the last of the sleep out of his eyes.

"I know of a hot spring nearby," she said, also swinging herself out of her bed. "We're overdue for a bath, novice."

John inwardly groaned.

Yet another thing that he hadn't gotten use to was the North's love of public baths and their lack of modesty.

He kept his eyes on her throat before he bowed his head by exactly one head length. Since he was a novice Slayer of humble origins, he held a rank three notches below her.

"Ladies first, Slayer Celia," he said, sliding into their familiar role playing game she'd started day one.

Because they were acquaintances, he didn't have to use her last name. However, she held a rank three times as high as he so he had to use her title. If she held only one rank above him, or if she'd given him permission, he could have forgone the title.

All the different rules made his head swim.

“Not this time,” she said, shaking her head.

He faltered, and then looked her in the eyes.

She looked... hesitant.

Alarm bells immediately started going off in his head.

“When you get to Tekal, you’ll be given a slave,” she said slowly.

You’ve got to be kidding me.

“Rule four applies to slaves I take it?” he said, feeling like an idiot. He’d intentionally forgotten about the slave he’d be acquiring. It had made his stomach churn the first time she’d told him about it. When a novice joined the ranks of the Slayers, they couldn’t bring anything from their old lives. It was part of the process in becoming a full fledged Slayer. Once someone became a Slayer, they lost their previous status in life and gained a new one. For most people, it was a huge promotion. It was considered a high honor becoming a Slayer. After he passed his tests and became a full fledge Slayer, he’d be the equivalent of a Duke or Lord, depending on the nation. At which point, he’d only have to look lower to a ruler, the ruler’s family, or other higher ranked Slayers

Celia’s eyes hardened. “We trust *no one*.”

“Right. So, another role play?” John said, feeling uneasy.

She had pretended to be various people during her lessons, so he’d become well versed in how to interact with the different people he’d end up meeting. Sometimes she’d just name off what she was wearing as the only clue. It had certainly kept him on his toes the day before when she had switch roles every hour.

She didn’t look happy when she nodded.

“What do slaves wear?” she quizzed him as she started unbuckling her corset. Today’s corset was a black one with grey studs, which marked the eighth corset he’d seen on her. He’d begun to wonder if she’d owned anything other than corsets. That, and where the hell she found the room in her pack to store them all.

He looked at her forehead as she stared at his feet. “White robes.”

Her corset hit the floor and she said, “What else can be used to distinguish a slave?”

“They also have a tattoo of an S on their left cheek.”

Celia nodded just as her skirt dropped to her ankles. “And what if the tattoo has a family crest on it as well?”

“Then the slave has offered their name and the owner has accepted it... what ever that means,” he added a touch of annoyance to the last bit. She’d kept the explanation very vague on what accepting a slave’s name meant but, from what he’d been able to piece together, it was a slave’s way of binding themselves permanently to their owner’s House... that’s capital H, House, so the option was only available to Royalty.

Stepping out of her riding boots and the ring of clothes around her, she dropped to her knees in an act of submission.

Naked as the day she was born.

He forced his eyes away from her exposed flesh and focused on her hair as he started doing his multiplication tables. As much of a royal pain in the ass she was, he could not deny her beauty. She was a goddess in her own right and John privately cursed the gods for his predicament.

“Stop looking at me,” she snapped.

John blinked.

Idiot. I'm suppose to ignore her. She's a slave.

He opened his mouth to say sorry, but stopped himself. “Come along, Celia.”

“Slave” was also another acceptable name to call someone wearing white robes, but he just couldn't bring himself to call her that, even if it was a game.

Turning, he made for the door that led out to the forest.

When he reached it, he almost made a move for the door but stayed his hand at the last possible second before the motion became obvious. Not only had she not taught him how to open the gate yet, but protocol stated he wasn't suppose to open a door when someone lower in rank was present.

Celia rushed forward and opened it for him.

Consciously, he held his ground after she opened the door and allowed her to go first--even though the sneaky woman hesitated long enough to allow him to go through. As the highest ranking person to leave, he was suppose to be the last to exit. Protocol also stated that he ignore her unless he needed something from her... but against his better judgement his eyes strayed to her bare ass as she sashayed out of the Waypoint.

“That's two,” she hissed.

He snapped his eyes forward. How she'd known he had looked at her, he had no idea. Her eyes were aimed at the ground and she wasn't facing him but he suspected she'd stripped ahead of the bath for this very reason. He knew better than to deny it. Letting his eyes glaze over her, he walked outside.

“Take me to this hot spring you told me about,” he commanded.

Gods this is weird.

Wordlessly, Celia ghosted forward on quiet feet. He followed after her and made damn sure he didn't look anywhere near the naked woman.

Just going for a stroll, John. A boring stroll. Nothing to see but trees and breasts.

Bushes!

I mean trees and bushes!

The hot spring ended up being a short walk away, and he immediately felt his body relax upon seeing the steam covered pool. It was the second hot spring he'd ever seen in his life but, if it was anything like their first one, he was ready for it.

John was proud of himself when he didn't make a move for his clothes. He turned to her expectantly and she started undressing him.

11 times 12 equals 132. 12 times 13 equals 156....

As much as he tried, though, Little John couldn't concentrate on the numbers. All he could concentrate on was the feel of her warm breath against his skin, smell her rosemary scent, and take in her pale perfectly sized breasts.

Celia didn't comment on his growing erection and wordlessly finished undressing him.

Feeling both arousal and embarrassment at the same time, he turned his back to her and marched himself right into the water. Closing his eyes, he let the warmth consume him until half his body was submersed into the blissfully hot water.

The surface of the pool shifted as his mentor join him, and then her hands found his back.

As she started to rub his shoulders, he couldn't help the smile that formed on his lips.

Greatest. Role play. Ever.

Then she smacked him across the back of the head. Hard.

His forehead slapped the hot water and stars exploded into his vision.

"Blood and sand woman!" he roared when he pulled his head back up from the scalding hot water.

She smacked him even harder.

Heat swarmed over his head as the force of her blow sent his head underwater. Caught unprepared, he came up for air coughing the water out from his lungs before he roared, "I mean bloody hell woman!"

I can't even curse like a Ce'lian!

Turning, he saw a ghost of a smile on her but it was gone before the red and black spots in his vision had a chance to fully clear. Only hard eyes looked into his now.

"You're still blushing," she criticized. "And you still oggle."

She motioned to her naked body. "Is this really the first naked female body you've ever seen?"

Involuntarily his eyes ravished her nakedness before he had the decency to raise them back to her throat.

"No," John said behind gritted teeth.

Just the most gorgeous one. I'm physically attracted to you, dammit. Gods help me, but I am, not that I'll ever admit it to you.

She motioned to his shrinking manhood. "And *that* isn't acceptable in the public baths."

Giving an exasperated sigh she looked to the heavens.

"He'll just have to avoid the public baths," she finally muttered to herself, something he probably wouldn't have caught if not for his enhanced hearing. Louder she said, "Stick with the bath in your apartment and don't invite anyone over. Worst case, your slave will get the wrong impression... Just don't accept her name if she offers it and you should be fine."

"What wrong with accepting her name?" he asked, hoping this time she'd fess up.

"Nothing you need to concern yourself with," she said with a dismissive hand. "Now hurry up and scrub yourself clean. It's time you started learning how to handle a slider."

To Celia's annoyance, he intentionally took his time bathing. By the time he got himself out, dried off and dressed, Celia had already returned from the Waypoint with her enormous oversized bag in tow and blessedly fully clothed. Without a word he followed her as she passed him. Leisurely they walked through the forest and, for the umpteenth time, he took in the giant redwood trees that towered over them.

Amazing.

Out of the corner of his eye, he caught her looking at him. There was a hint of amusement before it morphed into something less humorous.

"Don't worry," he said, still taking in the trees. "I'm getting all the gawking out of my system now."

She sniffed--as she always did when he said the right thing but she didn't want to

acknowledge it--and then she threw her pack onto the ground with a heavy thunk.

Stopping, he eyed the small clearing she had led him to.

Celia fished around in her pack before producing a tangle of leather straps.

Throwing it at him, she said, "Here."

As he picked apart the straps, he discovered it was a sheathed dagger.

"A slider is your primary weapon as a Slayer," Celia said, pulling an identical dagger free from the sheath strapped to her thigh. It slowly grew into a sword. "Created by the mages, it cannot be broken. Its sharp enough to shave with and it will never dull. Since it uses your own energy to grow, it will only respond to a Slayer's touch. Just like portals and Waypoints. Today, you're going to work on extending yourself into the weapon. This is the first step in learning how to wield your own energy."

"My own energy..." John said, playing with the foreign words.

"Every human on the planet has a small amount of energy," she explained patiently. "It's what makes us move and keeps us alive. Mages found a way to uncap the amount of energy we can hold. Using a water analogy, they essentially created a well. We unconsciously draw upon the energy around us to fill up that well. Energy is everywhere you look. It's what moves the air, and keeps us grounded to the ground. It's movement. It's life."

Pulling free his new slider, he spied Tekal's emblem etched into the guard. Three triangles positioned to look like a Hellhound's eyes and nose.

"So how do I make it grow?" he asked, looking back at her.

"Only when you can imagine the slider as an extension of yourself will you will be able to extend it like another one of your appendages," she said.

Her tone implied the words were from a textbook.

John eyed the dagger again before turning a flat look on her.

"That doesn't help."

Celia flashed him a dazzling bright smile that only magnified her striking beauty.

Immediately he became suspicious of her.

Her—dislike—of him, to put mildly, hadn't diminished much since their first encounter, even after his little heart-to-heart with her. Which he supposed he understood her reasons, not that it made it any less painful. There was only one person in the world she cared about and that was herself. His sudden arrival, and orders to get him up to speed--a nearly impossible task now that John knew the drastic differences between their nations--definitely posed a serious threat to her precarious life as a spy to the Empire.

Sure enough, his instincts were right and she lunged at him.

Having expected it, he dodged her attack easily.

John knew fighting a swordsman with a dagger required keeping close to the attacker but the swordsman was an experienced Slayer and keeping close in his still new body wasn't a simple task. He'd gotten a lot better at using his new abilities, but this was swordplay. It was a whole other level of control that was required.

Moving faster than any normal human being should have been able to move, she struck again and this time she clipped his arm.

Hissing, John pulled back his injured arm.

"Are you crazy!?" he yelled.

"I was told you were a Sergeant in the Vanguard," she said, ignoring his comment. "Aren't Vanguard's suppose to be the second most dangerous men in the Empire?"

John's eyes narrowed at the popular joke the Blood said to the Vanguards.

"Now you're just pissing me off," he said darkly.

Her sword shrunk to a short sword as she expertly made a playful flourish.

She flashed him her beautiful smile again.

"If you want to come out of this unscathed, I'd suggest you become one with your slider."

Annoyed, he mouthed her own words back at her mockingly, drawing out an angry strike from her.

He dodged three of her attacks before he had the chance to step under her guard, but she danced away from him before he could do any damage.

"Nice footwork," she commented before lunging at him again.

This time it was a faint, and he just barely dodged a nasty slice from a second dagger she'd produced from behind her back. Catching him off balanced, her foot blurred and slammed into his stomach.

It was a well timed and executed maneuver.

Where the hell did that come from? he thought, as he was lifted off of the ground and sailed into one of the great red tree's behind him. He grunted upon impact, and half the tree's leaves started to float down around him.

She was good.

Maybe even better than good.

Keeping his eyes locked onto her, he pushed himself away from the tree trunk and approached his opponent with a lot more seriousness than he had before. He wasn't one to boast but, back in the Vanguard, there were few that could match him, and that said something. Getting his ass handed to by a 90 pound spiteful woman wasn't an option for him. His pride wouldn't allow it. The Vanguard had a saying: "Never back down. Never surrender. And for gods' sake, die young."

Her slider shrunk back to the size of a dagger and she circled him.

Knowing at any moment it could grow to a full length sword, he watched his distance.

"Remember to think of it as an extension of you," she said with a smug smile.

Seeing an opening, he took it. She tried to pull up her guard, but he was just as quick as her--no thanks to her exercises. Using his free forearm, he blocked her guard. Thrusting forward, John's dagger hit it's mark and brushed her cheek.

He backed away before she could turn the tide.

"Your form could use a little work," John noted critically, before giving her his own smug smile. It was a small victory, but he'd take it.

She wiped the thin line of blood with the back of her hand. Looking down at the red smear, she made a sound deep in her throat.

That was the only warning he got.

One moment she was ten paces away, the next she had her dagger sheathed into his shoulder. The force of her strike pushed him backwards and he landed on his back, hard. The wind was knocked out of him and he opened his eyes to find Celia arching her slider--now a full sword--down on him in a killing blow. Panicked, fight or flight instincts took over him and in a

frantic move he thrust his slider forward.

Celia's eyes flew wide open, mirroring John's.

They both looked down to see his dagger had grown to a full length sword and a good portion of it was behind her.

He'd impaled her.

Celia's slider shrunk before falling from her fingertips. Dropping to her knees, John withdrew himself from the slider, pulling the sword out of her as it shrank back to the size of a dagger.

Just as she had predicted, he was able to retract it as if it were an extension of his own hand. There was no way he could explain it, other than he could do it now without thinking.

"You bastard!" Celia screamed.

"I thought you were going to kill me!" John said, torn between being afraid for her well-being and defending his actions. He knew he'd cut into her stomach and spine. An injury like that wasn't a minor thing.

He gingerly grabbed her shoulders.

"Why don't you lie down? I'll... I'll find a mage."

She looked down at the blood staining her corset.

"That was my favorite corset!"

He blinked. "Wha--?"

Celia rolled her eyes. "Idiot. Where are you going to find a mage out here in the middle of nowhere? I told you already, it takes a lot to kill a Slayer."

To prove her point, she grabbed the dagger in his shoulder and ripped it free.

Gritting his teeth from the sudden shot of pain, he looked down to see his gaping wound clotting before his eyes. Blood *should* have been flowing out freely and his broken shoulder *should* have hurt like hell—but it didn't. In fact, he wasn't even sure if his shoulder had been broken in the first place.

"Our bones can't break easily," she said, reading his mind. To prove her point, she motioned to the tree she'd knocked him into. He hadn't noticed it before, but a third of the giant tree had been dented inward right where he'd slammed into it. He was pretty sure a strong breeze could tip it over.

"Help me up, I think it's healed enough," she said, pulling his attention away from the swaying monolithic tree.

Dumbfounded, he helped her up with gentle hands, still untrusting of her condition. To his amazement, he watched the skin that had been exposed by his blade slowly mend itself. It was as if someone had fast forward time.

And then it dawned on him.

The kill-John-act had been for his benefit, to get him to activate the slider.

Leave it to her to use that tactic.

He looked down at his shoulder again to watch the healing process and saw the muscles stitching themselves back together. There was an uncomfortable warm tugging sensation as the wound slowly closed itself up. It was the strangest feeling but before he knew it, only smooth bloodied skin was left.

That explains why all my wounds healed shortly after the mage knocked me out, he

thought with wonder. *Even my old scars are gone.*

The sound of her rummaging through her pack drew his attention back to her.

She produced a vambrace and threw it at him.

“Try this on,” she said.

He pulled it over his left forearm and, like the slider, he sensed it was more than just a regular vambrace. Extending himself into it, the outside of the vambrace slowly grew into a small shield. Eyes wide, John coaxed more of it out until it was a full sized tower shield.

“You’re a quick learner,” she said with an approving nod.

If he didn’t know any better, he’d have thought there was pride in her voice.

“I’ve yet to see anything that could put a dent into one of those,” she said, the short lived pride dying before he could really enjoy it. “But it isn’t the most fashionable accessory we ha--”

Her head snapped to the right, and then John heard it too.

Footsteps.

Chapter 5

Every Dog has its Day

John didn’t wait for Celia. He shrunk the vambrace and launched himself into the air. Like an arrow, he shot straight for the tree branches above. Thankfully, his training at jumping had paid off and he was able to control his jump enough to land on one of the sturdier branches a good fifty paces up.

Listening for the footsteps again, he found them. From his vantage point, he saw most of the forest’s floor. His eyes zoomed in on the area he’d heard the light feet and felt the world spin as his eyes got away from him. Gripping his branch tightly--but not too tightly--he wrestled his vision back under control and shifted his focus to get the right depth. And then his eyes settled on the source of the sound: a Kalian woman with bright blond hair in a dark green traveling cloak.

As the woman approached the clearing, Celia met her at the edge and said in surprise, “Honored Slayer Priscilla Tekal?! What are you doing way out here?”

Inwardly John kicked himself.

Of course she’s a Slayer. Who else would be out here?

He should have known that. Which meant it was useless trying to hide from her. She’d have been able to hear his heartbeat and maybe even his earlier jump. Him hiding in a tree was suspicious, to say the least.

Thinking quickly, he dropped to the ground, making a heavy muffled thump.

"Three," he grumbled.

Celia glared at him, but she immediately caught on to what he was doing.

He made to jump again but paused when she called over to him.

"John, please stop with your jumps and come on over here. We have a guest."

"Yes, Slayer Celia," he said in a measured tone.

Did she just say 'please'?

"I could say the same to you," Priscilla said with an amused expression.

Of all things, Celia averted her eyes in embarrassment. "Sorry, I take it Kael told you?"

"The only thing he told me was that you had to go to Kalian for an errand," Priscilla said, her curiosity clearly visible. She shifted her gaze to John and he made sure his eyes were on her cleavage.

Celia had used the word "Honored", which meant Priscilla Tekal was on the Council. Ergo, he was four notches down from her. Since her last name was Tekal, it also meant that she wasn't born into Royalty prior to becoming a Slayer. All non-Royal Slayers took on the name Tekal as a way to show their status to others.

Tekal had a Council of five people that helped the Headmistress--the leader of the Slayers--run the city and its citizens. It was no secret that the mages had intentionally placed a woman at the head of Tekal and named her Headmistress. The ploy had been intentional, to send a message to all the Slayers. It was safe to say there was very little love between the mages and the Slayers. A deep seated resentment had formed between the two groups over the centuries. The resentment was enough that, to the mage's surprise, the Slayers followed the Headmistress like any other rule, just to spite them. It didn't help the mages that they'd unknowingly appointed a very strong willed woman that wouldn't take to being their puppet. It all confused the hell out of John, but he figured he shouldn't be surprised anymore by what went on in a Northerner's head. They were all crazy.

"A contact I'd made over in Kalian mentioned of an orphan in the Red Guard that had Awakened. He didn't... trust... the Slayers in our outpost in Kalian," Celia said apologetically, and let the words stand as if to imply more.

Priscilla's eyes alighted in both understanding and in surprise.

John supposed the latter was her discovery of John. Finding a new Slayer was rare. Like *maybe* once every ten years kind of rare. Slayer women were barren at birth, which left only the men to pass on the ability. But, even when the men did produce offspring, it was very common for the ability to skip many generations before it surfaced again. And since Slayers didn't age--yet another shocking discovery for John--most Slayer men avoided having a family. There was something horrific about attending the funeral of your grandkids.

But for the Slayer men that did procreate--regardless if intentional or not--they had to report the pregnancy to the mages. It was law. The mages kept a close eye on all the bloodlines. It was because of this that finding an orphan was even more rare.

That's not to say the threat of outliving all of their children stopped the men from wanting to tumble in the sheets. In a city near Tekal, called Boca Bay, there were "pleasure houses"--or what a Southerner would call whore houses--that cater to Slayers. Rumour had it that mage's paid big money to any of the women that became pregnant and gave up their child to be cared for by the mages.

It was a sad life for the children born into that life.

“And...” Celia continued, looking even more embarrassed. “I thought it would be good to give him a jump-start on his training. Before the Alpha’s start giving him bad habits.”

The last part she flashed Priscilla a rueful smile.

John was shocked by her sudden change in behavior. It was as if the hardened survivalist had been replaced by a genuine decent human being.

She was an amazing actress.

He schooled his features as Priscilla glanced at him again.

Alpha’s were the strongest Slayers of Tekal. They were the ones that went out and did the actual killing of Hellhounds and they were the ones that mentored any new blood that joined the Slayer ranks. They were always on the lookout for new blood. Celia was a Tracker, and her responsibility was finding the Hellhounds in her territory for the Alpha’s to kill. The amount of land the Slayers covered was *vast* and not all Slayers were born equal in strength so they had to create the Alpha and Tracker system. Over the years, though, the Alpha’s had become a group of elitist that believed they were better than everyone else, or so Celia claimed. She wasn’t a fan of them.

“Some day you’re going to have to tell me how you make these contacts,” Priscilla said, her amused expression returning. “So another novice?”

This time she gave John her full attention, surprise coloring her face once again.

“Another?” Celia asked questioningly.

“He will make the seventh one in the last two months.”

Celia’s eyes snapped to the Slayer’s nose. “Seventh?”

Uh oh.

They’d assumed he’d be the only one, maybe the second one. Him being the seventh would raise some red flags.

“You haven’t been to Tekal in a while,” Priscilla chided.

Celia bowed her head, chastised. “It’s been a busy three months.”

“Indeed, which is the reason why I came to find you,” Priscilla said, her eyes going to the vambrace on John’s arm, then to the tree that was dented inward, and finally to the ground that had been disturbed from their earlier sparring. “The Headmistress wants everyone in Tekal. You both are to report to the Main Hall, tomorrow morning by the second bell.”

Celia blinked in surprise, “Everyone? What is she announcing?”

“No idea. But if I were to guess, it would have something to do with the increase in Hellhound activity,” she replied dryly. “And--if one were religious--the sudden influx of Slayer novices could be conceived as a sign from the gods.”

Then she sighed. “I still have to get a few more stragglers in Kalian so I’ve got to get going if I’m to get there before nightfall. Please come find me after the all hands meeting, we really need to catch up. It’s been far too long.”

Celia smiled warmly and promised.

As Priscilla turned to go, both Celia and John bowed their heads. John lower than Celia.

But the Councilwoman paused and her eyes returned to John. She looked him over from top to bottom.

The hairs on the back of his neck stood on end and he unconsciously tensed.

"Tallen will be jealous," she finally said with a mischievous smile. Then she took off like a bat out of hell.

Celia blinked a few times before growing beat red.

She's either an incredible actress or...

"Who's Tallen?" he asked behind a hidden smile.

"None of your damn business, novice!" Celia snapped, her face instantly returning to its cold demeanor.

Priscilla howled with laughter off in the distance.

She glared at him.

Right, Slayer hearing.

But instead of looking guilty for not thinking about Priscilla overhearing them, he flashed her a knowing smile.

In quick order, they had everything packed up. As John strapped on his new sheath to his thigh, mimicking Celia, his task mistress handed him a rice cake. She had stored up a lot of the dry food in her bag. He'd never had a rice cake before entering Kalian, but Celia had explained to him that they were specifically designed for Slayers. They helped replenish his cravings, which was the downside of being able to do all the things they did. He got hungry, damn near starving, quickly and frequently.

He scarfed his down quickly, and then she handed him another one.

"You're going to burn a lot," she said curtly.

She was still angry at the Tallen comment.

John didn't complain and ate that one too... as well as the three other rice cakes she gave him after that.

Feeling stuffed, Celia threw her bag at him.

It knocked him back a step.

Throwing the heavy bag over his shoulder, he kept his eyes on her throat as she tied her long hair back into a tight ponytail.

Sniffing, she said, "Don't fall behind."

And then she was off.

As John tore after her, he realized they were going away from the road they'd been following the past two days.

Even though he'd sprinted after her before, as part of his training, they hadn't ever gone nearly this fast. This time he was sure she was going as fast as she could go, but he didn't dare test that theory lest she slammed him into a tree for not letting her lead. Watching the massive trees rush by with a "whomp", his eyes widened in wonderment. They were going *fast*. What was the most amazing thing, though, was how his mind was unconsciously adjusting his foot around roots, and shifted his body's trajectory around branches. He was moving purely on instinct.

It was exhilarating and intoxicating at the same time.

I feel like a God!

He howled like a madman as he leapt over a ravine, thirty paces across, and landed right

next to the black haired beauty.

His dopey smile immediately fell when he saw the look in her eyes.

She wasn't just angry. She was *pissed*.

Dirt flew up as she launched herself up and over a large rock formation.

Glaring at her retreating form, he silently followed.

What the hell? he thought, feeling more than a little annoyed.

For the hundredth time, he felt like he couldn't do anything right.

Wordlessly he followed after her, chewing through many miles of rough terrain (as no one in the North used 'leagues' anymore). The more time that passed, and the longer she kept her simmering glare, the angrier he got.

She finally halted at a river when the sun was at its zenith.

Even with Slayer powers, they had their limits. His body had started to protest over an hour ago but he didn't dare show sign of weakness in front of Ms. Grumpy.

Snapping her fingers at him, John threw her bag at her a little harder than necessary.

He hid his smirk when she had to take a step back from the force of the bag.

They were both breathing hard when she ripped it open and tossed two rice cakes at him. Wordlessly he caught them and started scarfing them down. He was famished.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw her hand blur and he looked up just in time to see a cup hurling at his head. Thankfully his reflexes kicked in and he plucked it out of the air before it could give him a black eye.

"Hells bells, what is wrong with you?" he snapped.

She ignored him and dramatically took a mean bite out of her rice cake.

He silently glared at her until she'd killed the whole rice cake and started working on a second one.

"Have it your way," he growled.

Taking his cup, he scooped out a cup of water from the river and gulped it down. He didn't worry whether or not the water was clean, his new healing powers made it impossible for him to get sick. Even if the water had been poisoned, it wouldn't so much as make him cough.

An angry yell pulled his attention back to his mentor as she slammed a fist into one of the redwood trees, punching a hole forearm deep into it. If her hand had been any wider, the whole thing might have tipped over.

"Damn Priscilla!" she hissed before punching into the tree again. This time the tree groaned as she drilled another hole into it.

Against his better judgement, John smiled at her tantrum. Taking another cup full of water, he sipped it and enjoyed the show.

"Un-fucking-believable," she screamed, throwing her balled fists out to each side of her.

He was immediately reminded of the story of the Princess that threw a similar hissyfit for not getting what she wanted. The childrens picture book had depicted a little girl in the exact pose.

Her hot eyes found his and her mood darkened further when she saw his shit eating grin. In a flash, her foot connected with the defenseless tree in a round house kick and the whole thing snapped with a loud pop. With a loud moan, the redwood tree tipped over and hit the ground with a thunderous boom.

His grin faltered.

"You!" she growled darkly. "This is your fault."

She took a step towards him and out of reflex he took a step backwards.

"Easy now," he said slowly, as if afraid to spook her. "This is just a minor setback."

"Minor. Setback?" she said each word with clenched teeth.

John took another step backwards when he saw a new look on his mentor.

Murderous glare, that's a new one.

Consciously, he kept his hand away from his slider. It had been drilled into him since he was old enough to carry a weapon to never draw it unless he was willing to use it or his life was in danger.

Although the latter was becoming difficult to argue.

"I've spent *decades* infiltrating Tekal to get where I am. You've been here a fucking *week* and now you're going to screw that up."

"Decades? How old are..." John cut himself off with an audible click of his teeth. His mouth did the thinking sometimes.

Her blade came free as she roared at him, and it was only because of his training that he was able to get his own free in time to block her attack.

Bloody hell, she's serious! he thought as she sent her blade at his neck in a killing blow. His hand vibrated painfully when the flat of his short sword sized slider connected with her sword. Briefly locked in combat, he saw rage in her eyes. Rage with just a pinch of deranged-madwoman-"I'll kill you" in it.

She took a step back and then attacked him again. While her strike was frenzied by her anger, her level of focus was nothing like before. She was intent on killing him.

That bit of knowledge put him in a different mindset as he parried two more strikes.

She was a skilled swordswoman, and he was at a slight disadvantage with him still learning his body. He caught himself twice over reaching after misjudging the distance between them.

But the Vanguard in him laughed at the challenge.

Like a dance, they struck, dodged and parried in a deadly rhythm.

She roared in anger when it became apparent she couldn't kill him as easily as she'd hoped for.

It wasn't until he had sweat dripping down his brow before he saw the opening he'd been looking for. Side stepping at the last possible second, he used his new enhanced reflexes and grabbed her guard with his off hand.

Pulling on it, he used her own momentum against her and tipped her off balance. Timing it perfectly, his knee came up just as she teetered forward and slammed it into her gut. Making a gamble, he dropped his own slider as the wind blew out of her. Before she could recover, he brought his freed fist down as hard as he could across her exposed cheek. Her head whipped around dangerously as the sound of bone on bone crunched loudly.

Fighting against the massive blow, her blood lusted eyes lifted back up to meet his but he wasn't done. He stripped her slider, having gotten a good grip on her guard, just as he brought the back of his fist up in a back-handed uppercut. He caught the side of her nose and immediately blood spewed forward as cartilage crumbled.

And just as he'd hoped for, shocked eyes flew skyward as she was thrown backwards. It

didn't matter how strong she was, he weighed a lot more than she which meant the amount of force to his blow overcame her ability to stay grounded. Once she was airborne, she was at the mercy of gravity, allowing him to press his advantage.

By the time her back hit the ground, he had her own slider at her throat.

Wide eyes took in the slider, before traveling up the sword to his hand, and then finally her eyes found his.

What she saw in them made her visibly gulp, nicking herself in the process.

The sliders *were* razor sharp.

"I'm a quick study, remember?" he said darkly, before pushing the blade closer to her skin and drew another drop of blood.

She froze.

"In the Vanguard, they have a saying. Never leave an enemy breathing, least he stabs you in the back later."

Her eyes widened a hair further as she took in the implications.

"Are you my enemy?" he asked.

There wasn't any malice behind his words, it was just a question. He was fully prepared to kill her right then and there--and not lose any sleep over it--or let her live. It was completely up to her.

She took a steadying--albeit shallow--breath before whispering in defeat, "No."

He took in her bloodied features, measuring her sincerity, before finally nodding.

"Alright, but if you raise a sword at me again, I won't hesitate next time," he warned, pulling the weapon away from her neck.

"I'll keep that in mind," Celia said slowly, rubbing the blood away from her neck.

The last thing he honestly wanted to do was kill her. He was in a strange land with no way of getting back home. Which, to his annoyance, made her his lifeline. If their relationship was going to work, he had to get through her thick skull that they were on the same team and that she could trust him.

Which was why he handed her weapon back.

She eyed the blade in her hands and then at his slider that laid in the grass behind him, well out of reach.

He forcefully relaxed his stance.

I trust her, he told himself firmly.

Was he crazy? Probably. Everything he knew about the woman told him that she'd take this opportunity to run him through and leave him to the Hellhounds. Sure her superiors wouldn't be happy that he'd "ran away", but they'd get over it and the hovering threat of discovery would diminish back to normal levels.

But his gut told him that no one had ever given her the chance for trust, and he'd never had a reason to doubt his gut.

"Never trust a beautiful woman," Randy's voice warned him from another time.

He squashed the thought as Celia looked him in the eyes, hers searching his for something.

"You're a strange man," she finally muttered before sheathing her slider.

He slowly let out the breath he'd unknowingly held in.

John wasn't sure if it meant he wouldn't have to watch his back in Tekal but he thought it was progress.

At least I don't have to worry about her poisoning me, he mused.

"This doesn't change the fact that the scheduled moved up by a whole week," Celia said before she reached up with both of her hands and jerked her nose back into place with an audible pop. Closing her eyes, she exhaled as her healing kicked in.

"You're a soldier, not a spy," she continued. "You still have a long ways to go before you can pass off as a Kalian."

He couldn't argue that. He knew he still did things unconsciously that could give him away.

Walking over to her bag, he pulled out one of his shirts and dunked it into the river.

"In my experience," he said, wringing the shirt and handing it to her. "People will believe what they want to believe, and are blinded by the unlikely. No matter how much the unlikely is right in their face. Beside, you should give me some credit. I've made a lot of progress in a short amount of time. I'm a quick study. I *know* I can adapt."

Celia leveled a flat look at him but took his peace offering anyways.

The bruise that had begun surfacing under her eye slowly morphed in color to match her own pale skin and, by the time she'd cleaned away the blood from her nose and neck, it was as if nothing had ever happened.

Handing him back his shirt, she sighed.

And then her eyes alighted as another thought came to her.

"You sure you want to go through with this?" she asked hopefully. "You could still make a run for it."

"Is this the only way I can return to the Empire?" he asked.

When she begrudgingly said yes, he motioned towards the general direction they'd been traveling since the morning. "Then after you, Slayer Celia."

She set her jaw, and then nodded. "Fine. But if you fuck this up, you won't see me coming next time."

"I think that's fair," he said with a cheerful smile. It earned him a roll of her eyes, but then--hand to the gods--she shot him a genuine dimple-showing-smile.

Bloody hell she's got dimples...

It wasn't the least bit alarming.

Not one bit.

I'm not getting out of this one alive, am I?

Chapter 6: http://www.writing.com/main/view_item/item_id/2007150-The-Hellhound-War-Ch6

Or

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1JGUBAtghTMM4ey1uqz0DZoP7y8X2y_-xeZmVSHBBbp/edit?usp=sharing