

Prologue

It hurts. It isn't a physical pain, no I can't feel that anymore, but the emotional pain, and the separation, it burns deep inside me. His laugh still echoes in my mind, the shedding of the skin that I knew. I had to watch him kill my friend, thinking that what he was doing was for the good of our world, thinking it was what it took to save our world from the demons, but that wasn't the case. It was me, this was my fault, I collected those skulls and brought them together. I failed to save my friend so he is likely also stuck in the same state as me. I could have... I should have saved him sooner, I should have done more, and I never got the chance to apologize to Tallak, for failing him. I was a cleric, it was my job to keep my friends alive, like it was theirs to keep me safe, but I failed. I pray that Saitama found peace. I pray to Torm that his sacrifice let his soul be released to go beyond and that Torm's blessing falls upon him, that he is not trapped like I am, tied to a creature of the dark that I cannot control. If I could cry, I would, I would cry for all who I have failed. I would cry for Terry, who we never returned to like we promised, who tried so hard just to keep his bar open and running and was always there for us despite everything we brought his way. Apparently I wasn't the first dead body that was brought to his inn and brought back to life. Saitama was there before me in the same situation. I was impressed, by the end not even bringing in my pet dragon had sent him running.

Oh Tseng, I wonder what happened after death. I wanted to bring him back, I had the daimons ready for the ritual, all I needed was time, but death found me too quickly after. Did he reincarnated back at the proving grounds? The place that I had first rescued him from after defeating the adult version of him? Did his soul get released and he found peace? I am just glad that I didn't ask Arcturus to take care of him and leave him at his house like I first planned. To have that thing... to leave Tseng with that. Under the incorrect guidance it would bring terrible destruction, though that seems inevitable now. What was released upon the earth, I don't think it is even in the same plain of existence from what I grew up with. If I could have I would have sent him to Allen, another man who had gone through so much and helped us despite everything that he had to go through with us. Three months. We had disappeared for three months together after our ship was wrecked by pirates and our gold taken. We had found our way into the Feywilds, where we had to save it from a creature corrupting it, taking life from the tree that sustained that world. What was no more than three days in the Feywild plus travel time. Over all from when we had left the north it should have taken only a week, but there we were three months later returning to Tulip Bay, it took a day before we realized how long we were gone. When Allen came running into the tavern we were staying at, talking about how his wife was freaking out. I gave him a necklace to help him make it up to his wife. I was going to have the refugees sent up to him, but the poor man has been through so much, I don't know if he would have been able to handle all that, all those people showing up at his door, sent by two people he barely knew, just the only man who had agreed to take us through the passage to the north, all to find another skull, the same skull that I happen to be trapped in now. We lost a dear friend on that trip too.

So much loss on this journey to save the world, only to bring destruction to it. Everything we did, all the sacrifices made, they were all in vain, they were all to do the very thing that we were trying to prevent, and now I am left stranded, trying to hold on to who I used to be by looping through my mind who I used to be, where this all began. Trying to remember the Arcturus I looked up to, admired above anyone else in my temple. Trying to remember the man who saved my life. I think... I think his soul was still trapped there. I think that he still lived, even with that demon, the moments we had, the hugs, when he brought me back. I refuse to believe that was fake, I refuse to believe that was all just part of his plan to get me here. He didn't need me here and he didn't need to threaten those around me to keep me safe. Perhaps if I was needed for the sacrifice, but no, Saitama took that upon himself. All this, why would he have done all this, keep me around? Why would he have come whenever I called and helped all ways that he could if he wasn't there somewhere. I missed my Arcturus, my mentor, my teacher. I missed the temple I spent most of my life, the warm touch of Torm, I just want to go back. I want to be taken back to those days, I want to see my mother smile as I set off into the temple doors where an old man in grey robes awaited me.

Chapter 1

"I am so proud of you Liliana for making this step. I am proud that you want to study so you can help people. But remember no one is forcing you to go. If it is ever too hard you can always come home. I will be waiting for you with open arms." Rosaline knelt in front of her young daughter, a six year old girl with big brown eyes who stared at her with a sort of unexplainable sadness to it. Her chestnut brown hair still falling in her face a bit despite being tied back in two neat pigtails.

"It's okay momma, you don't have to lie. Last time dad was home I heard him and you talking after I was in bed. I heard him say that, at this rate next time I get sick and you bring me to them, they might not let me leave. He said you had to remember the promise you made, and you said you didn't want to force it on me. So you aren't, it is my choice. Besides you always told me what they do here helps make sure dad comes home safely all the time and I want to help with that." My words so calm and sincere, can my mom see how scared I am taking this step? I meant every word I said but it still terrified me to give up the life I had completely to Torm to take up a life in his servitude instead. Are they going to send me to war too when I am older? I want to help with the war against the orcs, but I don't want to be fighting in the front lines with dad, I would never be strong like him, I wouldn't survive. What I could do though is learn how to serve in the temple and heal like the priests have healed me times before. It might not have ever been anything serious, but according to my mom, I get sick more often than most children should. When that happened she would take me to the temple of Torm, my fathers temple where they would help me get better. Moving there, serving there wouldn't be a big change in my life I don't think, but it still makes me nervous.

"I... I just was so scared of losing you, I said whatever I had to in order to make sure that you were going to live through that fever, you were still so young and it seemed bad. When you healed up, and came home, when I saw your bright smile, I couldn't give you up. I wouldn't force you to be away from your family. It wasn't my life to give. I had hoped that you would choose this for yourself, but if you didn't I would fight tooth and nail for yo-" Rosaline was cut off as there was a force against her nearly knocking her backwards as two small arms wrapped around her neck.

"Don't cry momma. It will be okay. I am choosing to go myself. They will take good care of me. I know they will, they have before. Besides you will come and visit right?"

"Of course sweetie, of course I will visit you. My little flower, you are so brave and I am so proud of you. If you ever need me just shout and I will come running up here as fast as I can. I will never be far." Reaching up she moved a stray strand of hair from my face before hugging me once more and kissing the top of my head, lingering until I started to squirm. It wasn't that I didn't cherish the time I had with my mother, but as the old man in grey robes looked down at us from the top of the temple steps, I knew it was time to go.

As my mother let go of me, I tried to hide my tears, only to turn and see that she herself was crying. Taking one step away, the despair I could see in her eyes, watching me leave, broke my heart more than it already was. Was this the right choice? Was this what I was meant to be doing with my life? Should I have not gone? Did I even have much of a choice? All these questions and more circled in my head as I tears fell from my eyes as well. A trail of tears marked my path to the steps of the temple and up to the entrance where I finally looked up to see the face of the man who was in charge of my care from this point forward. A kind older gentleman, High Priest Simiel.

"Come my child. There is nothing to fear here." The elderly man ushered me inside. I glance back at my mother one more time before disappearing through the doors. There is a deep sadness in her eyes as she weeps, and regret. All I can think is that this is my fault. I caused her this pain, it was my choice. If I had chosen not to go through with this, she would have found another way out for me, and I could live with her instead of here, but the choice is made and I fear, if I retract it now, Torm will not protect my father from the war that he faces nearly every day. If serving here is what it took to make sure my father always came home, then that is what I would do. I would do anything just to make sure I get to be in my father's arms again, and to see him hold and laugh and kiss mom. Perhaps offering me to the church was a mistake, but it is a life that I have to live with now, and one I will embrace, if it means protecting my family.

Chapter 2

The halls are familiar. I feel like I walked them a thousand times already. As we walked I instinctively went to turn down the left hall, towards a room that was practically dubbed my own. I tend to get sick a lot and because of that my mom always took me to visit. Many times I had to stay here over the course of a few nights until I got better. Since I was born I would always stay in the same room, despite there being plenty of rooms meant to take in the sick and wounded that were brought here. It was like a second home to me. As I turned I felt a gentle hand on my back, slowly pushing me another direction.

“Not this time my child. You are no longer a guest of the temple of Torm, you are a servant of it. You will be given a more permanent room in the more residential wing. Follow me, and we will put your things away. You are to be baptized into the church after dinner tonight, be prepared. Training will start tomorrow.” High Priest Simiel informed me. It wasn’t that he was trying to rush me, but in his eyes the best way to get settled into the new life, was to start living it. Sitting around thinking about what was to come wouldn’t help me at all, it was better to see what I had agreed to and come to peace with it as soon as possible.

Leading me up a set of stairs to a secondary living area that I had never known existed before now, Simiel brought me down a hallway towards a room at the very end. Walking, I was vigilant to what was around me. Several young girls and boys were in various rooms along the way, all of them cleaning the rooms, taking care of waste and replacing sheets. Simple chores that it seemed was part of their everyday life. Was this what it meant to serve in the temple of Torm? Were these the people that I was to be training with from here on out? The answer was likely yes, and I hadn’t expected much different. I had seen many of the young acolytes in my times staying at the temple, though I never spoke to them. Usually they made themselves scarce, and didn’t talk with those who were staying in the temple. It was always the older acolytes and the priests that dealt with the guests, only on occasion did they call the younger acolytes, usually to just fetch something. I do wonder though, will there be more to my days than basic chores? Looking up at Simiel I decided that I shouldn’t ask and just wait and see. It wasn’t like I would have to wait long, dinner was only an hour away after all.

Arriving at my room, we put my stuff on the bed. There was not much that I took with me, after all, my mom would just send what I need later. She lived in the town after all and it was only a short distance. The Temple of Torm lay on the outskirts of a small town called Badger’s Sett. Despite it being a small town, we have a decent military presence, many of the men who live here are heading out to help against the fights against the Orcs. We are decently close to the border between the Orc territory and our territory, but we aren’t close enough for it to be a threat in our everyday life. Torm is the god of Duty and Loyalty, it is part of the reason he is so well worshiped among those who fight, including my father. I already know that until my birth my mother was much of a worshiper, she only started in order to make sure I was healthy and safe. I followed in my parents footsteps soon after. It isn’t that I have something wrong with me, but I do tend to get sick more than most kids. It is usually not anything major, just enough to scare my mother. Apparently I had an aunt, but she died before I was born. From what I know my aunt had died from something that should have been curable. The herbalists that claimed to know how to cure her, failed and instead she only grew more sick and ended with her death. Now my

mom doesn't trust them and when I started getting sick turned to my fathers religion, desperate for help. In the end they were able to help me, so ever since then she had trusted them more and she started to encourage me to worship Torm as well. In the end that is how I ended up here, starting my life here.

Moving on to a tour of the temple. It seemed that there was a lot of area's to the temple that I had not been aware of before now. I had thought, having been here so many times before that I had a decent grasp on my way around the temple, though it seems I was only shown what was available to the public. While I knew there was a kitchen, I hadn't been shown it until now. The entire upper floor was new to me, with it's classrooms and living quarters. There was also a library that I had known about before now but had not had the chance to visit until this tour. While the library contained information that was open for all to know, it was more of a precautionary thing that you had to go through steps to gain permission to use the library, and sometimes the priests would just bring out the book that you needed and there was no setting foot in there at all. I had not realized how vast the array of books and the trove of knowledge that this library, tucked in the back of the temple contained. Besides that there was also a small room behind the main temple area that serves as a place to get ready and prepare to serve during services. The room was small and contained mostly vestments, oils, incense and other small items used for services.

As we walked around, High Priest Simiel still leading me around the temple, it was hard not to notice the curious glances of various acolytes, that peered up from their work, eyes on me. Some were young like me, but even the teenagers seemed at least slightly interested in the new child who was being brought around by the most important person of the temple. Whether Simiel didn't notice them, or chose not to care it was unclear. All that I could tell was that he didn't pay mind to them at all instead explaining each area and the use of it. Simiel tried to tell me about some of my chores, as well as the classes that I would be expected to attend, however my mind wandered. As we walked I looked at the paintings on the walls and the artifacts that were brought back to the temple and put on display. So many different things from all around the worlds. Things that I would never see in our small town of Badger's Sett. Perhaps one day I would get to travel. As far as I was aware I was only tied to service in the temple for so long before it was encouraged to go out and help others in the world, that is why there was so few teachers here compared to students. If those who were raised in the light of Torm were not fighting the righteous battles on the front lines, they were travelling helping other people instead. It takes a special kind of person to give that all up to sit in a temple and teach and help those who make the journey here. It isn't a life for many, but people such as Simiel have the heart for it and that is okay, it isn't the heart I have though. I want to see the world and dream of one day having the chance to do so.

The first meal arrived soon after. I was allowed to sit with the guests for this meal, but after today, I am to eat in the kitchen after all the guests are served. Now I can see the younger acolytes coming around serving our food and disappearing, a job that I would soon have as well. For now though I sat with the adults and enjoyed my food as they asked about why I was

here and what I hoped to learn from this step. Some told me how brave I was, taking this step, but I don't know if I would call it bravery. I am just doing what I have to. I am still terrified about this entire thing, still terrified about trying to make new friends, still terrified of the idea I might not like it here and it will be too late to change my mind. It isn't that I thought that High Priest Simiel was cruel enough to force me to stay if I really didn't want to, but I didn't want to lose the favour of Torm that was granted to my family. If I changed my mind I don't want to lose my father because of it. I fear that without me upholding the deal that my mother made to the temple, Torm will be angry and stop providing his protection to my father. If that happens and rumours are to be believed, he might not stand much of a chance on the front lines. The Orcs are vicious terrible creatures that live for violence, and while my father is strong, he always tells me his strength is thanks to Torm. That is why I have to do this. I would hardly call that brave.

Still I keep quiet and I am polite. I don't tell anyone about my worries and just go about eating my food, answering questions only in short answers, and rarely looking people in the eye. I always have found it hard to gauge what is okay with what crowds, so I came to find that keeping my eyes averted and only speaking what is necessary when spoken to, is the best way to handle things. I am sure I will be doing a lot more of that now, judging by the other young acolytes that I am noticing around. It is a role easy enough to slip into. It isn't that I ever needed to do it at home, there were no social regulations that I needed to fit into except when my father had friends or commanding officers over, which wasn't often. That being said my family while doing well compared to some, certainly are not considered high class citizens, so when those of higher class than us are around, I had been taught how to act as to not offend anyone. My parents were always gracious hosts, welcoming anyone and everyone that was willing to come over. On occasion those of a higher class would come, or the inn keeper would send them our way when his rooms were full and there was still travelers looking for rooms.

I was almost relieved when dinner had finished up and the plates were cleared. Being done with my social obligations were nice, but that left something much more frightening to come. It was after dinner that my baptism into the church was. I am sent off with an older acolyte named Tilly to go get ready for it. The girl carried a pile of robes as she lead me back to my room and placed the robes on the bed.

"Get changed. I will do your hair after you are in the proper attire." Tilly stood in front of me waiting for me to get changed, but I couldn't help but blush and stand there awkwardly. "What are you waiting for me to leave the room? Just hurry up. There is nothing that you have that I haven't already seen. Just do it." The girl seemed impatient with me. Still a little red in the face I strip and change into the robes provided. However as I got to the belt I struggled to get it tied tight enough and right. I tried twice, both times it came loose and fell the moment I tried to walk. "You are useless, let me do it." The girl walked up and tied my belt before motioning to the chair at a small desk in my room. "Sit." She ordered me.

Obedient I sit on the chair, nervously holding my hands in my lap, trying to not fidget as she pulled my hair back and up, starting to braid it into a tight french braid.

"Ow! That hurts!"

“Well it wouldn’t hurt so much if you stopped moving. Keep your head still, leaning back only makes it harder.” Perhaps I wouldn’t lean my head back if she didn’t pull so hard. It would be a losing battle though if I tried to argue that with her. Soon enough a ribbon was in her hand and she started to tie off the bottom of my hair before standing me up and looking me over.

“Well kid, you look the part now at least. Lets not keep father Simiel waiting. I am sure he will blame me if it takes too long.” With a hand on my back, she ushered me out of the room and down the stairs towards the main sanctuary area where High Priest Simiel was waiting patiently for her. I could see a couple acolytes waiting in the background and a couple more priests flanking Simiel.

“Come here my child.” Simiel called out to me as Tilly stopped walking and just lingered at the side entrance as I continued forward, slowly, anxiously, towards the man who held a hand out to me, a warm smile on his face as he let me take my time on the approach.

Standing at the bottom of the steps up to the altar, I just looked up at the High Priest. I wasn’t quite sure what I was to be doing now. Was I to approach? Would that be disrespectful? I was afraid of doing something wrong so I thought it best to not do anything at all.

“No need to be afraid, come here. Stand right in front of me child.” Simiel beckoned me once more and I started ascending the three steps up until I was standing on the same platform as he was. The silence before he started to speak seemed to last minutes though it had only been seconds of me standing there. Nervousness lead me to never look Father Simiel in the eyes, instead looking everywhere but there. One of the young Acolytes stepped up with a vessel containing what I could only assume to be holy oil.

“Repeat after me. I Liliana Fahey hereby choose to commit my life to the service and works of Torm.”

“I Liliana Fahey here... here by choose to commit my... my life to the service... to the service and works of Torm.”

“To surrender my mind, soul and body to his good deeds and follow the path that Torm has set out for me.”

“To surrender my mind. My soul. And my body to his good deeds. I will follow the path that Torm has set out for me.”

“Though trials and tribulations may come my way, I will lean turn to Torm first, before any others to meet my needs.”

“Though Trials and tribulations may come my way. I will lean turn to Torm first before any others to meet my... um needs.”

“My life is in your hands.”

“My life is in your hands.” The oil on my forehead was warmer than expected, and Father Simiel’s thumb softer as he spread it.

“I am proud to call you a child of Torm and an acolyte of this temple, a part of this family. Welcome daughter Liliana.” Reaching over to another acolyte, he picked up a necklace with a small pendent on it. The pendent depicted the back of a gauntlet, facing up, the sigil of Torm. That nervousness that I had been feeling melted away as Father Simiel wrapped me in his embrace and just held me there for a long moment before sending me to my room to bed. Training would be starting the next morning.

Chapter 3

It has been a month now since I first took my vows. I have learned my chores well enough and am able to complete them alongside the other acolytes. I have not been able to make many friends here however. I have not really tried to make friends, but nor has anyone tried to make friends with me. Perhaps it is on me to try more, but I don't know how to try. It seems that everyone here has already formed their own groups of friends and there is not room for another. There are people who are nicer than the others, ones that will talk to me as we share a chore we have to do, or make sure I was awake and wouldn't be late for class... again. I am not very good at the early morning thing. I never had to wake up this early at home and still struggle getting up and ready in time.

Just to add to my struggles of getting along with other students, and getting up in time to actually get to class on time, I have also fallen ill again. Apparently it is nothing too bad, a little more than a cold but nothing so bad that anyone worries I will not come back from it. They have forced me to stay in bed, where meals and homework are brought to me. Since being ill my mother has stopped by once. I miss her singing. She has the most lovely voice and would often stay by my side singing when I would have nightmares, or was sick and bored in bed. Now she wasn't around nearly as much. I have heard that she started working in the town, that is why she hasn't been around as much since I have been sick. It has been lonely here, though there are people around, most are too busy with their own work to spend time with keeping me company. Some of my teachers would stop by to check on how I was doing with my homework.

Today however as I sat reading a book instead of doing my homework like I was supposed to be doing, Father Simiel came into my room, pulling up a chair beside me.

"How are you feeling today my child?" He asked as he checked for my temperature.

"I am doing okay, better than yesterday." I could feel how scratchy my voice was from coughing. My chest burned as I breathed and I was still feeling exhausted, even after just waking up from a nap.

"You know, I have heard that you have been having troubles fitting in with the other children. Why do you think that is?"

I consider it for a moment, it is hard to really explain. "I don't know I think they all have friends already and don't need any more. I don't want to push too much either. They will only dislike me more." Whether or not that actually made sense, I do not know, but at least I did my best to explain my thinking.

"No I don't think that is the case. You know why I think that you are having so much trouble?"

There was no judgment in his voice, but it seemed as though he already had his answer carefully thought out. He knew exactly what he was going to tell me. "You are special my child." He placed a hand on my forehead. "Torm has certainly touched you. You have his blessing, and though you might not see it yourself, it radiates from you like a light. You might feel lonely now, but you have a very special gift and you will go on to save many."

“What does that mean?” I tried to ask him but he moved his hand down to my chest and just held it there for a moment, a warmth filled my body as I started feeling a little bit better.

“The blessing of Torm, you don’t have a warrior heart like some, but you have a heart for people, so he will give you the ability to help them, just like I have. You just can’t let yourself become a crutch for people. If I just took away your illness every time you got sick, your immune system would never learn to fight for itself. I can make it more comfortable for you, take away some of the symptoms, but I have to let your body grow on its own. It will take a while to learn, how to use these gifts and when to use them, but I assure you that you will learn, and when you do, this loneliness you feel now will mean nothing, it won’t matter. I promise you.”

I did not quite understand all that he meant by his words, but it made me feel a little better even still. At the very least it was something that I could hold onto, something to help get through these times. I had not realized that not everyone received the gifts that I had seen Paladins and Clerics of Torm use, and it was exciting to know I was fortunate enough to be blessed with them. If only that blessing didn’t come with such loneliness. It isn’t that I wasn’t used to not having friends around. I never was all that social growing up, but my mother was always around for me, and until last year, so was my grandmother. Father wasn’t home often, but when he was he would spend as much time with me as he could. I had never really felt true loneliness until I came here, and now it seemed like it was a price I had to pay for being deemed special. It is almost not worth it, but I don’t dare spit on a very special gift from Torm, so I have no choice but to embrace it.

Chapter 4

Two years later and the cycles still remain. I am still sick more often than the other kids. I still haven’t made many friends, but I have started to get extra attention with my training. With that extra attention however comes less of a reason for other people to even try and like her. Father Simiel always tells me that they are jealous, but that doesn’t help the pain most days. Like anyone would be I am terribly lonely and hate it. The teachers and Father Simiel do their best to keep me company, or at least keep me busy enough to not notice, but I still am missing that connection, a close connection with another human. I can’t count the amount of times I have cried in my mother’s arms in the last couple years since being here. Every time she comes to visit I feel the weight of missing her press on my chest and I want to ask her to take me home, but when I open my mouth to ask, I can’t convince myself to betray my calling like that, so I remain for another month forcing myself through the pain and the loneliness, holding on to the hope that once my training was over I would be able to help more people, and maybe then would I have friends. If not that at least I could travel, see the world, and at least have some excitement in my life.

Once again I am sick and this time it has been lingering for a while. Two weeks, and while I am starting to feel better now, there are still some of my chores I am not allowed to do, and if I am not doing my chores because I am sick, then I am supposed to be in bed. It is lonely sitting in

my room while everyone is eating dinner. Rumour is that we have a new guest staying with us, a paladin from another temple of Torm from overseas. It is hard to imagine anyone wanting to come here, I am sure wherever he is from must be so much better than here, especially a town such as Badger's Sett. Maybe if he was on his way to Valorbloom. I have never been there myself but it is supposed to be the capital of our nation. Rumours say that if there is anything you need to find, it is all there and in abundance, as well as springs of knowledge. I heard that the library there is at least four times the size of the one we have in the temple, and the one we have in the temple is the biggest in this town. Even though, with the constant war against the orcs, this is hardly a vacation destination. I don't understand, and that is why I want to meet him. I begged to be able to serve today. I wanted to at least see him, but Father Simiel was worried that I would make our guests sick and insisted that I stayed in my room. Just a few more days he assured me before I can get back to my regular routines. But in a few more days he could be gone for all I know, I don't want to wait that long.

That night after the chores were done and everyone was winding down for the night. The other acolytes were dismissed from their duties to have free time before bed, and everyone just did their own thing. It was this time I chose to sneak out of my room. While the halls and common areas were still busy at this time, making sneaking around difficult, but at least I would have a chance to meet him while he was still up and about. I want to meet this strange man, ask him what brought him here, perhaps hear stories about other continents, but I am not so desperate to wake him up or sneak to his room. I have some respect... even if I am breaking the rules.

Bundling myself in an extra sweater I step out of my room. It is usually warm in the temple, but I am still cold regardless of the temperature inside. A side effect from being sick, it is enough to tell me that I am not as better as I believe I should be. Still I try and push past that as I peer out into the empty hallway beyond my room. Most of the other kids wouldn't be returning for another hour or so. Since curfew and the time we must be in bed are two different times, we try to enjoy the free time as much as possible, either playing games in the common areas, or going for walks, it is rare there is anyone in this hall at this time. It will only get harder from here. Plus I don't exactly know where I will find this so called guest who is staying here. Perhaps he has already retired to his room, or perhaps he is having a conversation with Father Simiel, or maybe he is in the library reading. The last one would be my preferred outcome, it would be the easiest place to sneak into and talk to him. If he is with other people it would be hard, but at least I could see the man who is staying here, and then just hope that tomorrow I am allowed out of my room and that he would still be here.

Surprisingly enough, as I walked through the halls I heard the sound of metal on metal. Not quite sure who it was or what was going on, and since I wasn't supposed to be out of my room, I hid, though not well. In an open hallway there aren't many places to hide, pushing myself against the wall behind the door to the next hall was the best I got, and even then if he went to open the door more than I would be squished behind the door. Holding my breath I tried to wait until the person passed. It took longer than anticipated, for anyone to come by. Shifting uncomfortably in my hiding place I caught the first glimpse of the person that was approaching.

The first thing that I noticed was his shining armour that he was wearing. Compared to me he seemed massive and I was a bit scared. However as I lift my gaze I notice his face, while strong it was also kind. He had long golden colour hair and he was every bit the knight that I imagined a knight should look.

A few more steps then he stops, looking towards the door. I hold my breath again but it didn't help as he walked over to the door and instead of pushing it open to get passed, he slipped through the opening and closed the door behind him, looking down at me with almost a curious look.

"It isn't often I walk through halls of a temple and find a child in her pajamas hiding behind a door. Just what are you doing here?" The man knelt down to look me in the eye. His words held almost an amusement to them. For a man who travel so far he wasn't as old as I thought he would be when he knelt down to look at me. He had to be at least a few years younger than my father, definitely younger than any of my teachers here. My voice was dry as I looked at him wanting to say something but was too nervous to actually say anything.

"I- I..." I am not good at lying and I am nervous. Every time I try and lie I am called out right away. "I heard there was a guest from another land here. I just wanted to see who it was and I kind of wanted to see if maybe.... Well you see... um I haven't been outside Badger's Sett and I want to and I want to know what it is like beyond our lands. You know where there isn't a constant war with the orcs. But I have been a little sick and wasn't allowed out of my room and it is boring in my room so I just thought I could at least see who it was so maybe when I was better I could ask." There was a hearty laugh as the man put a hand on her head. He smiled at me, ruffling at my hair as I tried to bat his hands away.

"You are honest, I like that. So what exactly do you want to know, what do you want to ask me?" He offered almost looking ready to sit down on the ground with me. I was so taken aback by how kind and ready he was to talk to me that I didn't hear anyone else coming down the hall until Father Simiel was standing right beside us.

"Aren't you supposed to be resting in your room not disturbing our guests?" He asked me in a stern voice, causing me to duck my head and nod silently, averting my gaze from the two men. "It is okay, she is not bothering me at all. I am happy to answer her questions." The man tried to assure him, but Father Simiel just shook his head and she walked up and put a hand to my forehead.

"You are not going to get better if you don't relax and rest more. I know you are getting impatient, but maybe this is just another form of training. Patience is a key if you are ever going to master Torm's gifts and grow into a great Cleric one day." He always spoke to me softly, even when he was upset with me. Nodding I turned away from the man I wanted to learn more about to retreat to my room, ashamed of myself for breaking the rules.

"Hey, what's your name?" The blonde haired paladin called out to me as I started to walk away. "Liliana. But most people just call my Lily." It seemed strange this random guest actually caring who I was.

"Well Lily, I am Arcturus. I will be around for a little while, so I will probably see you again soon." The smile on his face as I looked up, the warm smile, it made me feel slightly less alone. I found

myself smiling back at him. The smile might have been small but it was genuine, the first genuine smile from me in a long time.

Chapter 5

It was around mid afternoon the following day. I had been left alone with a stack of homework that I was working on, mostly languages today. It was apparently important for me to be fluent in many languages if I wanted to help people. When they are in pain or hurt, their first reaction might not be to speak common if that isn't what they speak around home. If I could communicate with them in any language that they were likely to speak, it would further the use I could be to them. I am also learning a language that few know, Celestial. This one I started learning so I could read out incantations for various blessings of Torm. Not all of the abilities he granted could be done with a wave of a hand. Sometimes I would have to recite words, often in celestial in order for them to work. Besides that it was seen to get more favour from Torm if you speak to him in his own language even if it was not required. I know more in Celestial than I do in Dwarven, or Elven right now, but that is only due to the fact that the spell I am learning to cast now, relies on it.

Struggling through reading a children's book in dwarven, I can hear the squeak of my door opening. I assumed that it was just a teacher coming to make sure I was behaving myself, but as I glance up from the book I found the blond haired man from the night before standing in my doorway, this time not in his armour. He smiled as he looked over at the book I was reading and then back to me.

"I don't suppose that you want a break do you?" The book was closed and on my bedside table in an instant as I heard him laugh. He stepped further into my room pulling up the chair from my desk to beside my bed. "You know we never did finish our conversation from yesterday. I am not taking you away from resting now am I?" I shook my head, unsure why he was bothering with me though. I was just a no one acolyte with no friends who wanted to know about the world beyond where I know. Why bother with me? Of course I couldn't ask that, it would be rude, but it seemed like the question was written on my face by the answer that Arcturus had.

"Why am I taking my time talking to you? Well for one, you think for yourself. Some might say you were breaking the rules yesterday, but I don't think a little curiosity hurt anyone, getting out every once and a while and talking to new people doesn't hurt, it is how you learn. Plus I sensed something special about you, Father Simiel confirmed it when he was sending you off to bed last night. And finally, just one look into your eyes and it is clear to see how lonely you are. I can't ignore that can I? It wouldn't be right. So what are you reading?" Was I really that easy to read? From one look at my face he was able to dispel some of the questions I have and help bring comfort to the situation. It almost seemed too easy and he seemed too nice, but there really was no reason for me not to trust him.

“Um, it is called into the diamond mine.” I translate the name to English not knowing if he would know Dwarven. And if he did know Dwarven then I would rather not embarrass myself by messing up the pronunciation of the words.

“Ah so they have you reading children books in other languages. Boring way to learn for sure, but it really does help, trust me on that.” He chuckles lightly as he picks up the book and starts reading it out to me in Dwarven. I can only understand bits and pieces here and there, not good enough at my Dwarven yet to process everything being said as it was said, but he made it sound so easy to speak the language that I was fumbling over every other word.

When he finished he put down the book and looked at me. “Now I expect you to be able to read that to me sometime soon.” Where this came from I did not know, but without even thinking about it I made the deal, nodding my head, my mouth a little agape.

“So Torm’s gifts. I suppose that means Torm has smiled on you and you have been granted access to some of his powers? What can you do?” Again an attempt at starting a conversation, but I am so taken aback that he is even trying that it is hard to talk. Why would this man want anything to do with me?

“Oh... um... well I don’t know much yet, I am just learning one incantation right now and it is a skill I need to know but hopefully won’t ever need use for. I know I am doing it right though because I can feel warmth in my hands.” I tried to inform him before closing my eyes, letting the words flow out of me. Unlike Dwarven, when it comes to celestial incantations, it seemed that once I started speaking them they just sort of came to me as I could feel the blessings of Torm flow through my veins. “Ut fleem sal pe cel co!” The ancient celestial language flowed off my tongue as a faint power flowed from my fingertips.

Clapping, he was clapping and smiling like he could feel it too, the power I used even though it didn’t have much effect. “Very good. I too hope you don’t have to use that, but it could be the difference in saving someone’s life or not. But how would you like to learn something that shows a little more results that you can see. Unfortunately I have not been blessed by Torm in the same means that you have, I have my own giftings, but I know something you might have the skills to do. You would just have to give me time to research it more. So I will make you a deal. When you can read that entire book to me without stumbling over words, then I will try and teach you this new skill.”

“You promise?” I asked eager to learn more.

“I promise.” A smile spread across my face as I picked up the Dwarven book and studied it again.

“There is that smile. I was wondering when I would get to see it. It is never any fun when everyone is serious all the time. That seems to be all I get when I visit other temples. Everyone putting on serious faces and no one smiling, and let me tell you it is easier to get you kids smiling than those old stiff priests. You should have seen the people at the temple in Maple Bay. Not even the youngest would talk to me openly. They were all trying to be so professional. You never get anywhere like that.” In that moment the man seemed... young. I suppose it sort of cleared up why he was spending time with me, perhaps I seemed the easiest to get talking

because I was lonely? I enjoyed the company though, I wanted to keep him here at my bed a little longer, so I couldn't help myself but continue talking.

"What is Maple Bay like? Was that the first place in Lordric that you saw? Where are you from originally?" So many questions, but similar to what Father Simiel had done to me last night he put a hand to my forehead, checking my temperature and frowned slightly.

"I will tell you all about it later. You should rest. I have no real plans on where I was going to go once, here, besides possibly make a name for myself, so I might stick around a while. That means there will be plenty of time to talk about such things, when you are feeling a bit better and I am not keeping you from your rest."

Chapter 6

The next time that I really had any time with Arcturus was several days later when I was finally well enough to get back to my chores and regular studying. After a single day I had given up hoping he would come back and visit again, assuming that he had continued on to his own life and whatever he had come here to accomplish. It was nice for the day, to feel like someone wanted me around and cared, a person who wasn't obligated to look after me and teach me. It was nice pretending I had a friend and the promise he made me gave me something to look forward to, I had tried really hard to learn to read the book and had improved greatly in just the single night. However when he didn't return when I thought he should, my mind instantly turned to the other side of things, believing that he wouldn't come back around and I was just deluding myself.

Standing in the kitchen, I was cleaning up after dinner, doing the dishes and stacking them on the side to clean and put away later. Since I had been away from chores for so long, I ended up cleaning the kitchen myself, giving some of the other students a break who had been pulling double shift while I was out sick. Suddenly there was someone with a towel in hand, starting to dry the dishes that I was watching. Glancing over Arcturus had taken up a spot at the sink next to me, drying the dishes that I was watching. Shocked I didn't even know what to say to him. "Um... you know you don't have to do that. Guests are not required to help around the temple." I tried to inform him though I was sure he already knew such things. It was common practice most places from my understanding that guests were not expected to help with the chores. It wasn't that I had been many places to know, and perhaps in his lands it was different, but as far as I could tell, it wasn't.

"I know I don't, but I did say I would come visit again and since you are busy, I figured this was the easiest time. Though I suppose it isn't the most ideal time for you to read me that book. You did make me a deal though." Arcturus reminded me and I couldn't help but giggle a little bit. It was strange really. The man spoke to me, like I am a normal person, not just a lowly acolyte. Now I am more than a little glad that I practiced reading that book for him. I wanted to learn the spell that he promised to teach me. I hope that he actually remembers to teach me it, he remembered that I had to read the book, so I am sure he would remember the other part of the deal.

“Well... After I am done in here I have some free time before bed. I could read to you then.” I suggested a little nervously but he was the one that brought it up, so it seemed fair. If he had not mentioned anything I wouldn't have said it. So really I should be in the right with what I said and shouldn't worry about it, but I sort of do. I guess I just don't know how to talk to people outside those I have to. I am still learning, and I will learn as I go.

“That sounds like a great idea Liliana. I would love to hear what you have been working on.” His tone was warm and encouraging, enough so that it made me smile as I nodded to him. An hour later we found our way back to my room where I found my book. My dwarven was still a little broken, but it improved greatly since the last time that I tried. I had thought I was reading it perfectly in my head, but speaking it out loud, and more than that, to someone made me stumble a bit. Even still it seemed that my reading skills were sufficient enough that Arcturus still agreed to teach me the spell that he promised.

Showing me a small incantation, the writing was celestial, but under it, what I could only assume was the instructions on how to cast it, were written in dwarven runes. Looking up from the notes to him, Arcturus gave me a bit of a wry smile.

“I thought this might have been a better reason to learn dwarven than to just read kids books.” He told me as he shifted to see the paper better. “First can you read the celestial?” Studying it, it was a word that I did recognize.

“Hwul al.” The words slipped off my tongue with ease. The language that would be difficult for some, coming seemingly naturally to me.

“Very good. Now what I wrote below here, it tells you what motions you must do with your hand. As soon as you can read them out to me, I will show you what it means by that.”

It took the better part of an hour before I managed to fully translate properly. After about twenty minutes I began writing notes as I figured it out. Finally though I managed to get the entire thing in common so that Arcturus could show me exactly how to perform the spell. As it turned out, it was not too difficult to cast. The explanation that I translated was written in such a way that it sounded more complicated than it really was. A couple signs with my fingers, then the incantation, then whatever I touched after that came alight. My holy symbol was glowing after the second try, and I smiled at him.

“Oh thank you! This is amazing! Thank you so much Mr. Arcturus!” I couldn't help but be grateful, it felt like the most useful thing I had learned in a long time. This was a spell in which I could actually see results and know, that I was indeed special, just like everyone had told me I was. It was hard to believe such tails at times when you didn't see any evidence of them. This however made me happy.

“You are welcome, now I think it is time you get some sleep. Perhaps we will have another lesson another day.” Little did I know another day wouldn't come for another couple months. As the next morning when I woke up, he had left on an adventure of his own.

Chapter 7

As it turned out, that first time he left was not going to be the last. Like promised Arcturus would come and teach me, but never for long. Sometimes he stayed for a week, sometimes he stayed for months, but he always ended up disappearing again. Sometimes he would tell me where he was going or what he was doing, others he wouldn't say a word before he left. When he was at the temple though, he always taught me a lot of things, and when he wasn't teaching me or helping me with my homework, he would tell me stories of where he went and what he had been doing. In return I told him all the temple gossip, not like it was nearly as interesting, but he seemed to take interest in it anyways. Arcturus was the only friend I really had in the temple, which many thought strange since he was so much older than me, but I did not see the problem in it, after all, who was I to turn away any sort of companionship when I had so little. As a result of these times I realized, I stopped being sick so often. The more I laughed and had fun with Arcturus the better the rest of my life was going. Even my studies when he wasn't around were improving, though that might have been because I always wanted to show off how much I learned while he was gone. After all my asking, he still wouldn't take me with him when he left, so I had to learn and become stronger, maybe then I could prove myself worth being able to go along.

"Please. I am stronger now. I can help!"

"Absolutely not Lily. I won't risk your life I won't be gone long."

"You said that last time and you didn't come back for four months!"

"Three weeks, I promise. Maybe when you are older."

"Stop saying that! I am plenty old enough now!"

"The fact that you are fighting this says otherwise. I will see you again soon Lily. In the meantime keep up your studies." The hug he gave me after that would not make up for him leaving me behind again. I watched as Arcturus turned and walked out the door, back to me. The moment the temple doors shut I ran over to the pews where I had hid a backpack and a dull practice sword that I had swiped from the training room the day before. I knew that he wouldn't take me along, so I would just follow him. When we were far enough away from the temple, what would he do? He couldn't send me back alone and it would be a waste of time to take me back himself. He would have to let me come along. I am twelve now. I am plenty old enough to go out and help him. I am not a child anymore, I had been training to fight for two years now, so I could do it, I was sure.

Surprisingly enough I was better at sneaking than I had originally thought. While my plan was to follow him until we were far enough he couldn't send me back, when the sun set that night and Arcturus started making camp, I realized how unprepared I really was for this. Bringing a small amount of food with me, and an even smaller amount of money, I had not thought of packing anything to make camp with. While his fire and blankets looked so warm, I knew if I went up now he would send me back, or bring me back himself. We weren't far enough away from the temple

for it to actually be a waste of time to take me back. I would be stuck sleeping on the ground tonight.

The sleep was restless and uncomfortable. Rocks and sticks dug into my back all night and every small noise made me jump. More than once, I found myself creeping close to Arcturus's campsite, but just as I started to get close, I realized that if I went a laid down with him, or sat by his fire, he was sure to notice me. So every time I got close I ended up turning around and finding another place to rest, it was never more comfortable than the last.

The next morning, Arcturus got moving early. In some ways it was a relief that they were able to keep going and I didn't have to keep trying to sleep and I could move away from my paranoia. On the other hand I had barely slept at all and exhaustion weighted heavy on my shoulders as I tried to force myself to keep moving, keep following. I knew I had to keep a decent pace in order to still follow Arcturus and stay hidden, but it was difficult to keep pace when all I wanted to do was curl up in my own bed and sleep. I hadn't even had time to eat that morning, since when I awoke from my dozing, Arcturus was already packing his camp site. I couldn't risk being left behind.

As I walked I was tempted to reach into my pack and get food, but each time I started, I felt everything seemed too loud. The smallest noise I made, had me thinking he would hear me. It was near sunset that I finally gave up on trying to be quiet and pulled out some dried meat that I had in my bag and started to chew on it as quietly as I could as I followed from between the trees. Maybe tonight... tonight I would let him see me. I would take advantage of what he had brought, make him share his sleeping mat with me. Just sitting by the fire even sounded lovely. I had not thought about how cold it would be outside when night came, or at least how cold it would be when you tried to sleep in it.

A snap of a twig brought me out of my thoughts as I looked to my own feet. I couldn't see the stick I might have broken. I looked ahead and realized that I was falling behind Arcturus, too zoned out in my own thoughts to pay attention to where he was going. Perhaps that noise was him. Looking around I picked the direction that I thought that it had come from and started to walk in that direction. My mind was terrified that I was lost and I won't find him again, but I couldn't give up yet. I had to at least try and find him again. Forcing the terror to the back of my mind, I picked up my pace, dropping my dried meat on the ground as I picked up a light jog.

Another noise, this time it came from my left. While I was certain that was not the direction that I heard the first noise, I followed it anyways. Perhaps I was just mistaken about where I heard the noise, after all I wasn't paying attention until after the fact. It was easy that she was mistaken about where she heard noises. Assuming that she was wrong, the change of directions seemed to make sense as she headed toward the next noise, oblivious about what awaited her in the forest beyond.

I didn't know what I was looking at until it tried to bite at me with its beak. I backed away, fumbling for my sword. The creature before me, what was it? With the body of a bear, but the face of an owl, it was the strangest creature that I had ever seen. This wonder didn't distract me from the hostility though as it took a swipe with its claws at my legs, catching my right one. Falling to the ground I cried out, frantically swinging the dull shortsword at the creature. It stalked closer to me, almost like it wanted to play with me before he ate me. Tears streamed down my face as suddenly another one of these strange creatures decided to emerge from the forest. By this point I backed myself against a tree. My leg may as well have been useless as the blood poured from it. There was no chance of standing up and running, I wouldn't make it five feet with the gash across my leg.

With two now surrounding me, the first stopped its hesitating as it slashed at me with its giant claws once again. Desperate I tried to use my sword to defend myself, but the claw caught on my arm, tearing it to shreds as my sword went flying from my hand. This was it, this was the end for me. Pain and terror wracked my senses as I closed my eyes tight and hoped that it would be quick. This was not how I wished to go. Arcturus was right, I was not ready to go with him. Now I was to die on a stupid mistake trying to follow him.

I could smell the breath of the Owlbears as one of their faces got close to mine. With my good hand I gripped onto my holy symbol, praying to Torm to save me, or at least grant me mercy after death. Another slash to my side, this time from the other one, the one with its beak close to my face backed up a moment, probably preparing to strike, but before it did I heard a shriek, then a voice, it sounded like the voice was saying my name.

Slowly opening my eyes pain burst through my being, especially after seeing the blood that covered me, My vision danced with black dots and spots of red, but through it I could see silver armour, and golden hair.

"Lily! Lily... hold on!" The voice echoed through my mind, I knew that voice. I knew that person. He had come back. A warmth filled my body, but it wasn't enough. I knew that he had healed me, but whatever he managed to do was minimal, not even enough to close my wounds completely. It eased the pain though and slowly I found myself fading, feeling safer with him there, even as I heard the sound of a fight around me. The sound of claws on a metal shield and the shrieks of injured creatures. Finally the thundering steps, fading into the distance.

"Liliana. By Torm, look at you. Damn it! I should have saved some of my energy." Strong arms hooked under my legs and my back as I felt myself lifted from the ground. "Hold on. I am here now. Let's get you back to my campsite. It is the best I can do tonight. Too dark to travel further, but I will get you to safety tomorrow, I promise." I didn't know how to respond to that, I rested my head against him, savouring his warmth, thankful that he had not started to yell at me.

I don't know how much time had passed before he was setting me down. I could hear the tearing of fabric and the slosh of water in a water skin, shortly after a burning sensation.

Whimpering I did my best to not move too much even though as he dabbed at my arm I wanted nothing more than to pull away from the pain.

"I know it hurts, but you have to let me clean these Lily. I have to rest before I can do anymore healing. I need to clean and wrap your wounds so they don't get infected. What were you doing out here. By Torm Lily, you could have died! You are lucky I heard something running around the forest that sounded too speratic to be a normal animal. I thought I was securing my campsite, I didn't expect to find you out there." The pain subsided as he finished wrapping my last injury and put a hand on my head. "I am just glad that you are safe, please, rest now." It didn't take much convincing for me to doze off to the sound of a crackling campfire, wrapped in Arcturus's blankets.

As the sun rose over the horizon, I was awoken by the feeling of being lifted once more. Opening my eyes, Arcturus, my hero and knight, teacher and friend, he looked horrible, like he hadn't slept all night. There was still traces of my blood on him, and I could still feel the faint aching where the wounds were. Noticing my shifting, Arcturus looked down on me. His normally stormy blue eyes seemed almost dull, as purple circles sat beneath his eyes. Did he even sleep at all last night? Did he sacrifice his own sleep for me? To keep me safe?

"I am sorry I can't close those wounds. I still don't have the energy. Hopefully we can find help soon, maybe a horse. I will get you back to the temple, I swear, you will just have to hold on a little longer."

I can tell, he was trying to hide it but he was tired and having to carry me all the way back. How long could he travel like this? How long could I hold out. I would have liked to say that I would walk, but I knew, with the damage done to my leg, it would be near impossible, I just hoped that when we finally got me help, I would still be able to walk in general. I knew from being around the temple and witnessing many healings. Sometimes when the damage was too bad, or when they waited too long, serious damage could be done and they wouldn't be able to heal it. If I couldn't walk again I would never be able to come out and actually be helpful to Arcturus.

We took a lot more breaks that day then he had when he was heading into the forest, often putting me down, looking at my wounds, but I could see in his eyes, and the uneven breathing, that he just needed a break to breath. Every time he checked my leg though, I could see the look of concern on his face. I wanted to ask what was wrong, but at the same time I didn't want to know, fear of the worst kept my mouth shut through the entire travels. Neither of us really spoke to each other and it wasn't until late afternoon that we ran into our first person.

"Please, I will pay you, but I need to get her back to the temple."

"And what am I supposed to do, pull the cart by myself? Absolutely not!"

"Her leg has not clotted, and I can't fix it unless I properly sleep, but I can't properly sleep while she is still in danger. Camp here the night, you could walk back to town and buy another horse tomorrow."

"That would be a day extra travel and my business partner needs this now."

"Please sir. Before it is too late." He bowed and begged, now I knew how bad it was. Now I could tell why he kept making that face. Arcturus wouldn't say it to her, but thinking I was

asleep, he spoke more clearly. While he was still being vague about what exactly was happening, I had studied long enough to know. My leg was infected, it could turn bad soon. There was a long sigh then I could hear a bag of money jingling. "Fine, only because you look so pathetic."

"Thank you sir." Turning around I heard the clapping of hooves. "Alright Lily, we will ride through the night."

Chapter 8

The next time I woke up, we were on the road, approaching Badger's Sett. I could hear Arcturus muttering under his breath as his arms wrapped around me, holding me in his lap and a cloak around me. Where I got the cloak I wasn't sure, but even with it, I was still cold. Pain burned through my leg, and I whimpered, alerting Arcturus to my consciousness.

"We are almost home. You will be okay, hold on a little longer. Just hold on." His voice was worn and tired as he kissed the top of my head. I could feel his breathing, heavy and slow, I was sure he wasn't going to hold on much longer either. "Just hold on, please. Stay awake until we get there. It is my only request."

"You need to hold on too." I thought to myself as we rode on. It was a challenge to keep myself awake, but I had to at least try. I knew where we were finally, so I knew that we weren't far.

The next few minutes were a blur of movement and noises followed by hurried shouting. I was picked up again and I could hear another familiar voice, Father Simiel. We were moving faster now, heading towards an area I was too familiar with. The voice of Arcturus while still tried sounded more urgent now that he was explaining the situation to Father Simiel. A soft bed was beneath me and warm healing warmth filled me, the pain started to lift, but the cloudy mind remained.

"There will be scarring and I can't heal this perfectly, the wounds were too deep. Thank you for trying, we can handle it from here."

"I am going to stay thank you." I could hear Arcturus say as a chair was pulled up and it creaked as he sat down, holding my good hand.

"Alright, well the fever will stay but I was able to get rid of the infection and close up the wounds." Father Simiel told Arcturus as he got up from where he was sitting at the end of my bed. "People will be here checking up on her regularly, is there anything we can get you Arcturus?" Father Simiel offered before he left.

"I am okay." Arcturus said, but I could hear in his voice he wasn't. It wasn't long before I could hear the sound of light snoring.

Arcturus stayed with me that night and then the few nights after that. He remained at the temple as I healed and for six months after that. Instead of going back traveling, he remained teaching me, after a scolding me for my stupidity. Thankfully, aside from some scarring there was no other effects from the damage caused. I was able to walk fine soon afterwards, and I had a sword back in my hand practicing a couple weeks after I got over my fever.

It was in those first days that my father returned from war with the orcs. He had gotten just a week off, but it was a week that he came home to see me and my mother.

"Where is she? Where is my daughter?" Fear, fear and anger rang through the all too familiar voice in the halls of the temple.

"Just through that door, I believe that she is still awake. You may visit if you wish." Father Simiel, his voice always soft in spite of the yelling of my father.

"I don't need permission to see my own daughter." The door opened and my father looked from me then to Arcturus who sat by my side, going over some of the work I had been missing in the past few days while confined to bed.

"I suppose that you are the one filling my daughters mind with fantasies of the world, making her go out and do stupid things."

"Please Daren, Arcturus was the one who saved her life and stayed up two nights to get her here to safety. She has always been interested in the world, it is not his fault." Father Simiel tried to stand up for Arcturus, but Arcturus was ready to stand up for himself. He stood up and faced my father.

"If you would please listen sir, I didn't tell her anything that she didn't ask about, and I encouraged her to stay here and learn more." Arcturus defended himself.

"Get out." My father was having none of it.

"Dad, don't be mad at Arcturus, it was my own stupidity. I didn't tell anyone that I was going to do that." I was trying to defend Arcturus, I didn't want any reason for him to feel the need to leave, but Arcturus held up his hand.

"I should go, leave you and your father to talk. I will see you tomorrow Lilianna." It had been a long time since he casually called me that. I was so used to him calling me Lily that it almost made me uncomfortable. I could only watch as he walked out of the room, and Father Simiel followed. There was murmuring after the door shut, but I couldn't tell what was being said. Meanwhile my father sat down where Arcturus was sitting before and grabbed my hand, kissing it lightly.

"I am glad that you are safe. Don't ever scare me or your mother like that again." There was no more anger in his voice, just sadness and fear.

"I won't, I am sorry dad. I thought I was strong enough to help others, but I can't, not yet." Tears pricked my eyes as I lay in bed, my fever still running high. He moved the bangs out of my face and kissed my head.

"You are safe now. You can help people from here in the temple, there is no need to go into that sort of danger again."

My father visited for the next few days, and after the first two, he got over his hatred of Arcturus and finally spoke to him like a normal person. Their conversations were never exciting, but at least they got along and he wasn't forced to leave anymore. But when the week was up, my father had to head back to the front lines and Arcturus remained by my side teaching and training me more.

After six months of learning and training, having Arcturus sticking close by my side, he once again decided it was time for him to leave, claiming that he had more to offer my world, and that he would be back soon, but he couldn't only stay in the temple, he had to help everyone and keep everyone safe. He never did return after that. I waited for five years for him to return, even as I graduated from acolyte to a full cleric, but he never did return. I found mild contentment in helping those in the temple, but I began to itch for something more. I needed to travel and see the world, and I needed to see him again, even for a day. I was not content with our last goodbye. I had expected Arcturus to be back in a few weeks, so I only said a quick goodbye and gave him a hug, nothing that was final, because it wasn't supposed to be final. Every time a visitor came into the temple, I always hoped, even after five years I still held hope but it was never him, though occasionally there was news of him, the great things Arcturus had done, but never recent enough for me to know where he was.

The first hope that I had after five years was news rumour that Arcturus had been knighted in Valorbloom. My first bit of hope since the news seemed recent. Maybe I would get to see him again, and congratulate him. I would take what money I had and get him a good gift. Though it took some convincing, Father Simiel agreed to let me go. After all I was eighteen and a full Cleric now, he couldn't stop me from going. When I went to leave however the response was overwhelming. The entire temple had come together providing some gold for me to buy the gift and get me to Valorbloom.

"Be safe my child, and come back and visit. Tell Arcturus that we miss him. Be a light into the world and never forget your roots." Placing a new holy symbol around my neck to replace the old beaten up one from when I became an acolyte, he sent me off with the same horse used to save me the one time I tried to follow Arcturus. The horse was not the best for riding long distances, but there was little else to offer and it was better than walking. It was all I needed for the start of my real journey. Little did I know, just how far that journey would take me.

Chapter 9

The journey to Valorbloom took longer than I expected. Not long after I took to the road, I had met up with a caravan that informed me that it was not safe to take the most direct route to Valorbloom do to the fact that Ashvale, a smaller city on the road there had been quiet for some time. Not knowing the possible dangers that awaited there, it was advised to go around it, skirting to the north of the town, passing by the edge of the Smoky Mountains. In the end I traded, healing services as well as skills with preparing and cleaning up meals to be able to travel with them for the journey. Thankfully they happened to be passing through Valorbloom as well, on their way for trade with Port Memphire. I was almost thankful that Arcturus had chosen to settle down in a big city instead of another small out in the middle of nowhere town like Badger's Sett. If he had done that there was little chance of me finding him, and even less of a chance of me finding others who would travel with me. Companions that I was more than grateful to have when our camp was attacked two days into the journey by some bandits. For

the most part there was not too much damage done and the guards of the caravan managed to chase them away, but not before a crossbow bolt found its way into the breast of my horse. Not being trained to deal with healing animals, and having a few guards that needed my attention first. The horse was put down that night out of mercy and I found myself riding in the back of one of the wagons for the remainder of the trip to Valorbloom.

Upon reaching the gates I departed from my travelling companions, ready to head on and find where Arcturus was now living. That being said, the moment I stepped through the gate, I was distracted from my goal, as I came into full view of the city. It was huge, I didn't know how I would ever find anything here, but I was mesmerised by the entire place. The buildings were higher than most in my town, some seeming higher than my temple even though they weren't nearly as important as my temple was. The streets were bustling with life and activity as people moved place to place. Guards were posted in most areas, which again was strange to me given there were few guards in our town. Moving through the streets at first I wanted to ask where I could find Arcturus, but then I remembered the money I was given at my temple. I was going to buy him a gift and even if Arcturus wasn't here, a city like this was going to be the best for finding something for him.

Arcturus had a favourite sword, that I knew. I didn't think in the time that he had been away that had changed. Perhaps a new sheath for the sword would be something he would enjoy. It wasn't that he didn't have one of his own, but the last one she had seen him with was plain, old and starting to get tattered. If she could get him a really nice one, it was something that she figured he would use and keep on him. The biggest fear of getting gifts for people were that they wouldn't use it and it would just go to waste in a corner somewhere. At least he would use a sheath, or at least I hope so.

With a few questions, and a lot of searching, I found my way to a market like district with some artisan's that were working there. I figured a leather worker would be my best shot, so taking the money I had I went and found one, thankfully easier than I found the market place.

"What can I do for you young lady?" The man inside was hard at work, but he took time to stop and look up at me.

"Well... I am looking for a gift for my mentor, I want to get him a new sheath, something nice and fancy."

"Do you know what sort of sword he has, the dimensions of it?" I had not thought about that, I had not even seen his sword in so long. I held out my hands a decent distance apart, trying to guess how big the sword was.

"I don't know, like this big? I haven't seen him for a while, but it is for Arcturus... or Sir Arcturus I think it is now." I don't know why I added the last part, perhaps because I heard word of him being knighted, I thought everyone should.

"Oh Sir Arcturus! I know that sword. Yes yes I can do that. What do you want on it? How much do you have to spend?" The man seemed rather excited all of the sudden. I weighed the gold that I had gotten from the church in my hand, debating how much I could spend.

“I just want something nice. Something special and ornate but functional. I have four hundred gold pieces.” I could see the light shine in his eyes. I knew the moment I said it, he would take all the money, but that was why I still saved a little for myself.

“It would be my honour to make something for him. When do you need it ready by?” The man asked already putting the last thing he was working on to the side in order to lay out a new scrap of leather, examining it for blemish I suspected.

“As soon as possible.” I didn’t really have a time limit, but I did want to see Arcturus as soon as possible, but I wouldn’t go without a gift in hand.

“Tomorrow morning it is then. Pay upfront and we will be good.” He assured me and I handed over the gold, all four hundred that I had promised him. It kind of hurt to give over that much gold at once considering I never held this much before, but the church gave me money to give him a gift so I wouldn’t save it for myself, it would be unfair.

The inn I stayed at was nothing special. I had not stayed in many... or any inns before. They are loud and bustling, there were far too many drunks for my liking. Having grown up in the church, I had seen far too many drunks come in too sick to stand and had to clean up after them. I swore off drinking very early in my years and have not regretted it since. After a quick dinner of who knows what kind of meat, I found my way to my room and locked myself in it, refusing to come out until the next morning. I did plenty of praying that I would be able to find Arcturus tomorrow and wouldn’t have to stay in another one of the inns again, or at least not alone. With a couple guys eyeing me while I ate my meal, I knew it was best to not visit these sorts of places often alone. I would just be asking for trouble.

The next morning, while still a drag to get out of bed and ready, I managed to be ready by mid morning, ready to head back into the city. Thankfully the inn was far less busy in the morning when I came down for my meal of what seemed to be lumpy oatmeal and dried fruit, or at least I hoped it was fruit. It was hot at least though, so that was a start and while bland, it tasted edible so I ate it, after all I did pay for it in the price of my room. After that I set out to town.

It took a little bit of time to make my way around town. In the morning light, I was equally in awe of the city as I had been the evening before upon arriving. It didn’t take long before the scent of fresh baking bread and pastries found me and I started regretting the oatmeal I had for breakfast. Though my coin purse was a little thin after paying for the gift for Arcturus, I still would have considered splurging on a fresh croissant given how good they smelled.

As I rounded another corner I spotted the quaint little bakery that I had been smelling, in the middle of a quaint little neighbourhood that I didn’t recognize from the night before. Knowing that I must have taken a wrong turn somewhere, I still enjoyed the stroll through the area before finding my way back to the main road, wondering what it would have been like growing up in such a cultured area like this, in comparison to my small town, centered around defending against the war with the orcs. I couldn’t help but be a little jealous of the people who lived in those cute houses down the street from the bakery, whose windows were lined with so many baked goods I didn’t think I could even name all of the ones that were there. I would have to

make a note to come back later. Later, after I found Arcturus, after I got a chance to catch up with him and ask him just why he had left.

When I found my way back to the main road, it didn't take too long to find the market place from there. It turned out the neighbourhood that I had wandered into was not all that far from where I needed to go. The market was much busier now than it had been when I came by the day before. That being said, the day before I had come by just as everything was closing down. It was so busy that I nearly walked right by the leather worker that I had paid to make the sheath the previous day. The business at this shop had certainly picked up today, but as I entered the small area in which he worked, the man looked up from the customer that he was helping. "You are here to pick up the order for Sir Arcturus, yes?" The man seemed to recognize me nearly immediately and I nodded as he already set to work rummaging through his stuff, pulling out a beautifully ornate sheath setting it on the table with pride glowing on his face. There were jewels on it as well as intricate designs scrolling down the leather. "There you go young lady, and be sure to tell Sir Arcturus where you got it from."

I was so amazed by the sheath that I almost forgot to respond as he wrapped it back up in cloth and handed it over to me. "Thank you. I will I promise. It looks amazing." With the sheath wrapped in cloth and gripped to my chest, I had one more task ahead of me, that was tracking down where Arcturus might be, if he was still in the city at all.

With several questions, and a small pouch of candy later, I managed to at the very least find out where Arcturus was living. Apparently the rumours were true and he had been doing very well for himself as word was that he had a manor up in the nobles district of town. Suddenly I felt a little intimidated to go visit him. I wasn't going to back down now though. I didn't travel all the way here and spend all that money on a gift just to back down now, even if not a single thing about me looked like I belonged in the noble district. At the very least I could keep my head high as I walked around, pretending I knew what I was doing until I found the house that was described to me as being the house of Sir Arcturus, the Silver Knight. It was still weird to think about, Sir Arcturus the Knight. When I knew him he was an adventurer, a paladin, a teacher, a friend, not a knight, not a noble man who lived in fancy houses. How much had changed with him since he left? Did he even remember me anymore? He would have to. He saved my life, that wasn't something anyone would be forgetting any time soon.

Chapter 10

The thumping sound of flesh against the hard oak wood door, echoed through the manor and outside it, as I waited, shifted my weight wondering if I made the wrong decision. Anxiety boiled in my veins as I waited, hearing the footsteps approach the door. I looked down at my simple outfit, my simple armour that I wore, the gift wrapped in burlap cloth in my arms. Nothing about me looked like I was going to see a knight, or even an old mentor and it was embarrassing, but I

couldn't turn away now as the door opened and there was... There was a man I had never seen before. I nearly turned around and bolted the other direction.

"May I help you miss?" He asked as he stood in the doorway, clearly not ready to let me inside, but wanting to know why I was there. The man was rather well dressed and just watched me patiently.

"I-I was trying." I was stumbling over my words, this was all a mess and a big mistake. "I was trying to find Sir Arcturus's house. I guess I got the wrong place. I am sorry I should go." I was shrinking back with every word I spoke but the man just smiled at me, light dancing in his eyes. "You are not at the wrong place miss. The master is inside. May I ask what brings you to see him?" Well that was a sigh of relief, at least I didn't completely mess up.

"I ugh... He used to teach me, a few years back. I was just coming to visit and congratulate him, and I brought him a gift."

"Well the master is entertaining guests right now, but if you come wait in the drawing room I will let him know that you are here, what is your name?"

"Liliana... his student from Badger's Sett." I informed him as he walked me inside.

The inside of the house was even more grand than the outside. He had statues in his foyer and marble flooring. Everything shined brightly and it was a home for a king it seemed. The butler lead me into the drawing room, which was half the size of our sanctuary I was sure. I was scared to even sit on the furniture in fear that I could get it dirty or ruin it at any moment. Instead I wandered the room before stopping and staring out the large bay window that looked out front of the house.

"L-Lily? What are you doing here? It has been so long?" A voice from behind me, surprised, but still warm and familiar. Arcturus, my Arcturus, not some distant Silver Knight, but my teacher and friend. I turned around to see his face, and while he was indeed clad in bright shining armour, he still looked every bit the man that he used to.

I couldn't help myself, I couldn't stop as I ran to his arms as he embraced me with a hug. There was so many questions, so many I wanted to ask him, but now was not the time, I just wanted to be near him. After weeks of being surrounded only by strangers, it was a relief to have a friendly familiar face in front of me, especially one I hadn't seen in so long.

"I came to see you... Congratulate you, and give you this. It is from me... well the entire temple pitched in money so I could get you something but you know.." I trailed off as I held out the burlap wrapped sheath to him, my hands near trembling as I did so.

Taking it from me, he unwrapped the cloth, and I could see the happiness shine in his eyes, the gratitude. "Thank you Lily, it is perfect." I watched as he undid the belt on his current sheath and switched it out for the one that I had bought him, before strapping it back on, looking at me a long moment before pulling me into another hug. "There is so much that we need to catch up on, but you caught me at a bad time. I have to return to the front lines soon, and I have some guests over to do another task for me. If you would like you could join us for lunch, I don't mind you listening in on the conversation."

While I wasn't interested in whatever conversation that they were having, I wasn't about to sit here and wait while Arcturus was so close. I figured that I may as well be in the meeting, at least then the anxiety of thinking what I would tell him and say next would be lessened thanks to the distraction the meal would be. Unable to find the words to say to him, I nodded and followed him to the dining area, where indeed two men, a human and an elven male sat at the table, both turning their attention to me.

"Liliana, these are my... new friends, Othwal and Gal'el. Othwal, Gal'el, this is my friend and former student Lily. I told her that she could listen in on the meal." With that he guided me to a seat before returning to his own. I shifted uncomfortably all the sudden but accepted the food I was given and tried to just listen and not be a distraction so they could get back to their meeting.

"As I was saying before, the man you met before, Valec, he was on a task for me. You see there is an demonic entity that could come back any day. This creature has caused towns to go silent, and while I managed to banish him for the time being, I have no doubts that the spell won't keep him away and he will return. I believe that Zod is out looking for four artifacts, four skulls with four stones. Once brought together he could use them to bring hell to earth." Arcturus started to explain before another, Gal'el if I remembered correctly, spoke up.

"So why can't you deal with it?" A valid question in my mind, but I was sure Arcturus had his reasons.

"I have to return to the front lines in the morning. I am supposed to be leading the troops on the front line, keep them orcs at bay. They have been gaining ground recently and it is my job to prevent it, I have already taken time off to be here, I cannot take more time off."

"So why not just ask the king to provide some people to look after this for you?" This time it was the human man who spoke up, Othwal.

"For now I want to keep this mission quiet, most won't believe me if I told them, and I don't want to cause unnecessary panic. If we can get the skulls and stones before Zod returns then we can destroy them and there would be no need of panic." His explanation seemed calm and reasonable, but I still wondered a little bit about it. This was Arcturus however and I was a guest in his meeting, there was no reason for me to speak up, it would be rude.

"So you want us to find these skulls for you?" Othwal asked and Arcturus gave them a grim nod.

"It won't be safe, I have lost others to this mission already, none of the original party remain. If you are not willing to do it, just say so, but you will be saving the world." They seemed to consider it but then I spoke up, I didn't know where it came from.

"Let me go. I can help!"

"Lily no. Did you not just hear what I said. It is dangerous I won't let you put yourself in that kind of danger."

"But I can help. You said people died on this right? I have spent most of my life learning how to protect people and heal them. You know this, you taught me, and in the five years since you... since you left, I have learned so much more. I am stronger now."

"I am sure you have and are, but I will not risk you. I-I don't want to lose you."

"Then maybe you shouldn't have left. I am stronger now Arcturus I can help! I will prove to you that I can help" What I didn't say was that maybe if I showed him how strong I was now, he

wouldn't just disappear and leave me again, maybe he would let me go with him in the future, have my own adventure.

"I-I don't know Lily. I don't want to lose you." He was unsure and shaky but I still looked at him, ignoring the others at the table for the time being.

"Perhaps if you didn't leave for five years. Just let me do this. I finally found you and you are telling me that you have to go back to fighting the war and meanwhile the world is in danger. You want me to just sit around and wait when I have been training my whole life to have the ability to help people? Let me help. Please." My voice was softer than I wanted it to be, barely a whisper as I looked him in the eye, pleading for him to let me go with them.

"I will consider it. Will you please step outside so I can talk to Gal'el and Othwal about this." And so I did, though I didn't want to, I waited outside, but I was still listening through the door, the best I could without pressing my ear to the door.

Chapter 11

"She will be your healer... If anything happens.... Your job to.... With your life... kill you if..." The words were cut off and muffled. I never heard more than murmurs from Othwal and Gal'el but I could hear the desperation in Arcturus's voice as he spoke. I could tell he was threatening them if they didn't ensure my safety. He would do anything to make sure that I wouldn't get hurt on this adventure, anything but come with us. He had his own job to deal with and it was something I couldn't help with. Once more I would be forced to watch Arcturus walk away not knowing when he would come back, and this time if he would. I have seen plenty of soldiers brought to the temple and were not able to make it through the night. I cleaned up after grieving widows had left from offering prayer for the souls of their husbands that never made it back. I knew how deadly the war with the orcs could get, and while I never doubted Arcturus's strength, especially now when he had been knighted, it was not my own life that I worried for. I just wanted to see him come back and sitting around knowing what he was walking into, I don't think I could just sit there. I had to do something, and if helping Arcturus with this quest gave me something to do and helped people in the process I was more than willing to do it.

Several more minutes passed before the door to the dining room eventually opened, all three men stepping out of the dining hall. I went to enter to help clean up but Arcturus put a hand on my shoulder to stop me.

"I am just going to help clean up a little. I mean it is unfair to come into your house, eat your food and not help clean up." I tried arguing with him. At this point it was near ingrained in every fibre of my being to help with the chores no matter where I was, it was the polite thing to do.

"Don't worry Lily, I have people to clean up, let's sit down and catch up. I have to leave tomorrow back to the front lines." Tomorrow, so soon it was that he was to leave again and I would start on my own quest, I would see the world with my own two eyes and help stop this evil.

Nodding my head I followed him into the seating area where we spent the next few hours between that time and dinner catching up on all that was missed. Of course Arcturus had many more stories than I had, and even so, he treated each of my stories with equal attention and importance. I had forgotten how much I missed having him around, it just made the pain of knowing that he was to leave the following morning, all that much harder to bare.

“I want to come with you. It took a moment of silence and a lot of thinking before I managed to get that out. I was nervous on how he would react to it at first and didn’t really know what I wanted to say. However eventually it came out, the honest truth. “I don’t want you to leave again.”

Arcturus sighed, putting an arm around me he just held me close for a minute. “I know you do, but I have an entire army to help lead against these orcs. I would only be putting you in danger and wouldn’t have the power to look out for you myself. Besides, those battle fields, they are nothing I want you to ever see.”

“And what about this then? Why can I do this but not follow you to the war that both you and my father are fighting.” I could feel the difficulty that he was having justifying that question but he planted a kiss on my head and just held me a moment longer.

“Because I know Othwal and Gal’el will protect you, and I need someone I trust there with them. I need you and your abilities to heal to help get them through so we lose no one else and then perhaps we can make headway on the fight with the orcs when towns stop going quiet. When the orcs are dealt with then we will really have time to catch up.” I felt like that was an excuse as much as anything but I nodded my acceptance to the whole thing and just went with it, though it was hurting me so much knowing I had just found Arcturus, and we would be going our separate ways again.

“I think it is time to get some rest, we both have to be up early tomorrow and need our strength.” He offered me a hand up and I took it. Beside him I still felt like a child even as I matured over the years of not seeing him. I had filled out more and though I was still perhaps a little smaller than I should have been, I had very much grown into a woman’s body, though with my hand in his, I may as well been the same 13 year old he had left five years before with vague promises of returning, promises that he never kept.

Chapter 12

I had asked Joseph, the butler, to wake me up the next morning, when Arcturus was leaving. I knew that he was planning to let me sleep in a little longer, likely knowing how much I liked my sleep, but I would not miss a chance for a final goodbye. Dressed in a silk nightgown and a fine silk robe, I descended the stairs to see Arcturus already in his armour ready to head out the door. Hearing my footsteps he turned around to face me, a little bit shocked as he beheld my barely awake form. My hair was a mess and I was rubbing the sleep from my eyes with one hand while I held my robe closed with the other, the ties for it still dangling to the side as if I just stumbled out of bed.

“What are you doing awake?” There was almost a sound of concern in Arcutus’s voice as he started up a couple steps to meet me.

“You didn’t think I would let you slip out without saying goodbye, did you?” I could have sworn hurt flashed in his eyes for a moment as he wrapped me in another one of his warm hugs.

“We said goodbye last night.”

“But I wanted to see you off, and make you promise that you would come back.”

There was a light chuckle that I could feel through my bones as he still hugged me. “I promise I will come back. Be safe on your own journey Lily. You should go back to bed, get a few more hours of sleep before you set out, you are going to need the energy.” Letting go of me he turned and descended the stairs once more, turning around once more as he opened the door, before disappearing outside. I watched until I couldn’t see him through the window anymore. Only then did I turn and return to my room, falling back asleep nearly instantly, knowing I needed it if I was going to be ready for what awaited me the following day.

Joseph arrived to wake me up once more far earlier than I was ready for him. The knock at my door that dragged me from my sleep, seemed to come moments after I fell asleep. Rolling over I could see the sun had now risen in the sky, compared the the only slight orange colour on the horizon when I was saying my goodbyes to Arcturus. It had to be at least a few hours since I had gone back to bed, but I could use a few hours more of sleep. The smell of cooking food however dragged me from my bed, stomach growling as I got dressed into more appropriate clothes than those I had been wearing to see Arcturus off. He had seen me at my worst so I was not embarrassed with him, but Othwal and Gal’el on the other hand were another story. I barely knew the two men that I was supposed to travel with, it was best to go about meeting up with them in proper clothing.

The breakfast was a little bit awkward, we made small talk and basic introductions a little bit past what we had the night before. Given the night before I was so preoccupied with talking to Arcturus, wanting to catch up with him as much as I could in the short amount of time we had, I didn’t even try to get to know the two men that I was to be helping with, but now as I sat across the table from them, it was hard not to at least try and get along with them. They did both seem like nice enough people, and while I might not have really understood why they chose to be here, I accepted the help since I knew myself that I wouldn’t have been able to do this on my own, nor would I want to. The short travel to get from Badger’s Sett to here had me glad to have been traveling with a caravan, I couldn’t imagine what traveling this entire journey on my own would be like, especially since I didn’t know what awaited along the journey. Since these skulls were so important and hidden away for so long, I couldn’t imagine that they would be all that easy to get to, which would certainly make the journey interesting. It made me nervous to go, but if Arcturus trusted these people then I should too.

“So, do we need to pick anything up on our way out of the town. I mean I don’t know how long it will take to get to where we need to go, so we should be prepared right? I am sorry I am still learning this.” Perhaps I was being too timid, and perhaps it would put off the other two, not make them want to take me with them, but I couldn’t not say anything. I only had minimum

supplies and I would rather ask about getting things in town rather than dragging them down during the traveling by running out of supplies.

“Actually I want to pick something up.” Othwal, the human man said. I nodded I could at least follow them.

“Supplies wouldn’t be a bad idea, more rations would always be good, if the skull is indeed somewhere in the sea, it might take a while to find.” Gal’el piped in. So apparently my suggestion wasn’t as stupid as I thought it was.

“You two do that, I will meet up with you after.” While I didn’t understand why we needed to speak up, I supposed that it wasn’t a bad idea, it would get the chores done more quickly and then we could be on our way.

“Alright well I suppose that will be okay. Meet back in half an hour?” It was a rather loose basic suggestion but at least it was some headway. I by far didn’t want to be in any sort of leader position, but I figured that maybe laying down some of the basics first would be a good thing and we could figure out dynamics

Following Gal’el we stopped in a local tavern where we were able to ask them for a few rations, and by we, I mean it was mostly Gal’el speaking. I never had been a fan of taverns and they made me a little uncomfortable, but it wasn’t like I could just walk away from this now. I had to at least come and get the rations with Gal’el, pitch in a meager amount of money that I had left after buying the gift for Arcturus. Once we picked those up it was off to meet Othwal.

It turned out that we were faster than he was and we met up with him shortly after he left a store on the edge of the noble district. It was an interesting store to be coming out of for someone who was about to go on a dangerous hunt for an artifact. However as the cute furry head popped out from Othwal’s jacket, I couldn’t question his choice, my heart instantly melting at the sight of a puppy.

“Really?” Gal’el didn’t seem so sold on the idea of getting a puppy, but Othwal assured him that he would take care of it, and I found myself even offering to help. How could I say no to the cute mastiff face that was still so small. Rummaging through my stuff, I pulled out any bit of food that I had in my bag and held it up for the puppy, instantly earning it’s affection. I had a feeling that this whole trip just got a little bit better.

“Well if that is everything, then we should probably go to pick up the horses and start heading out.” So it seemed that Gal’el might be the better one to look to for leadership. Perhaps I was reading into this wrong, but it seemed like the more logical choice for the time being.

“You know I still need to name her. Any suggestions.” Thinking closely on what he asked, I turned to what I knew best.

“What about Varia?” I suggested thinking it was a rather nice name, and the smile on Othwal’s face seemed to suggest that he agreed with that idea.

“What does it mean Lily?” It was Gal’el asked, he seemed to know that I took it from somewhere and I was more than happy to share with him.

“Well you see Varia is one of the great angels of Torm, and..” I could hear simultaneous sighs from both the men that I was traveling with. I took that as my queue to stop talking about that and just let the name be done and settled with. Thankfully we were nearing the stables where the horses that Arcturus had promised us the night before at dinner were kept.

Thumbing through my bag for the letter Arcturus wrote we approached the stable boy. He was a rather short scrawny young lad who seemed to doubt me when I asked for the horses Arcturus had promised. After showing him the papers though he started moving faster, getting the horses ready and brought out for us. It seemed that, even though Arcturus was just knighted, he was a big deal in this town and no one wanted to get on his bad side. So different to what I knew of him, but at the same time it wasn't different at all. Even without being a knight, Arcturus was well respected and looked up to by many, even in such a small town like Badger's Sett. Perhaps not quite to this extent, but Badger's Sett was a smaller community as well. Even the mayor could be treated as a friend not someone of authority half the time.

Returning, the young lad brought three horses with him. One being a beautiful bey horse. It's dark brown coat and long black mane groomed so well that it was shining in the early morning sun. Beside it stood a chestnut mare, her light brown mane and coat equally as well groomed, but it was the look in her eyes that caught me. She was smaller than the other two and the horse looked almost... sad. The last horse was another bey who seemed to have a little bit more of a temperament than the other two. Going straight for the chestnut horse I put my hand up to it. I had already made my decision on which horse I wanted. At first it backed away a little startled, and it took several minutes and the help of the stable hand, but eventually I was mounted and ready to go. It seemed that the first bey that Gal'el approached, liked the elven man. From what I could see the two of them got along fine, better than me with my horse and he was mounted in no time. My troubles however were nothing compared to Othwal. The horse nearly ran off on him and the poor stable boy was struggling to keep the horse still enough for Othwal to mount. I can't say it wasn't at least a little entertaining though. When Othwal approached the horse he seemed so confident, so now watching him struggle with this horse, I couldn't help but let out a small laugh as he finally managed to mount, Varia in his lap opposed to walking along side.

Finally ready to head off on our adventure, we started making our way towards our first stop. According to Arcturus there was a skull someone in the ocean. Our best bet at getting to it would be going to Port Memphshire and chartering a boat from there. Hopefully one of the sailors would know something about a temple or a place that the skull might be hidden in. At the very least, at least this was closer than our next best option, which was up into the northern part of the world where more nomadic tribes of people were found, some even say more savage like people. I didn't know if I believed the last part but that was something that I was yet to see. The other two skulls lay in the proving grounds, an area for knights to go and train, and below the wall, in the orc territory. I knew that we weren't ready for either of those yet. Perhaps if I learned a thing or two about what I was doing along the way, then I would be fine, but right now, I did not have the confidence to face things that knights barely were able to.

Our journey the first day was long. It was mid afternoon before we hit the first town, a small town named Fizton We only stopped there long enough to grab some food before we continued on. If we kept going at the pace that we had been, we could reach Clayton by sun down, where we would stay the night before continuing the rest of the way to the port town the following day. We did not have much time for talking to the locals in Fizton when we were there, but upon arriving at Clayton, I was starving and looking forward to food and a bed. It had been a long ride, but one that gave me a chance to get to know the two men accompanying me a little more. Both seemed like nice people, and more than willing to help save the world from this threat that loomed over it.

Sitting down in the only tavern in Fizton, we sat down for a meal. I would be lying if I said I didn't share some of my meal with Varia as I snuck food under the table from time to time for her to eat. When I was finished my meal however I looked around. Today had been an easy day in many ways and I had not really done anything too stressful, meaning I still had lots of energy left. Looking around I could see a man who seemed to have a hurt wrist and walked over to him. "Do you mind if I take a look at your wrist? Perhaps I could help with that." The older gentleman looked up at me and smiled enough that I could see his crooked teeth and smell the alcohol on his breath.

"If a sweet thing like you thinks you can help me, I wouldn't say no." I could see that the wrist seemed to have been broken previously and not set properly. The best healing would have been to re break the bone and set it once more, but I didn't have the courage to do that to him, so instead I grabbed his wrist and started muttering a prayer under my breath. The wrist straightened itself a bit and not perfectly.

"Here let me try again." Just as I went to pray again I felt a hand on my shoulder.

"Perhaps you shouldn't do stuff like this so openly it might draw the wrong kind of attention." A warning from Gal'el, a man who seemed to know the world, and yet I still didn't listen.

"It is no big deal I heal people all the time. I just want to be of help to someone if I can." I tried to argue as I began muttering another prayer. This one giving him better movement of his fingers and wrist. It still wasn't perfect but much better than before.

"Oh thank you, thank you so much. Hey look at this!" The man stood up and showed off how much better his wrist was. I smiled before I heard another voice behind me.

"Hey beautiful. Wonderful work you did on his wrist, perhaps later you can come up to my room and help me with a problem I have been having." That was when Othwal stepped in, putting himself between me and the man who was asking for my help.

"No. She will not be joining you in your room, back off."

"That is the wrong kind of attention I was speaking of." Gal'el whispered to me as he guided me back to our table.

"I just want to help people. I know the abilities I have are kind of rare and I thought that maybe if I had energy left at the end of the day I could help people. All it takes is a good night's sleep to get my energy back, so I wouldn't be wasting anything." I tried to defend myself and Gal'el kind of sighed but it seemed that he could at least in some ways understand where I was coming from.

“If you want to help people perhaps we could do it in a more structured manner. Come let's talk to the bar keep and see if he has any suggestions.”

I walked with Gal'el to the barkeep where he began asking if there was anyone injured or sick that could really use my help. The bar keeper couldn't seem to think of anyone in particular but he did mention a bigger issue they were having.

“There is a spit of land between here and Fizton. We aren't quite sure what is going on down there but everyone we have sent to investigate either hasn't come back or returned to tell stories of a field of people turned to stone. I don't suppose you have anything that could help with that, do you?” I didn't. I wasn't strong enough yet.

“I am so sorry, I wish I could help but I am not that strong. There are few people who are and I know it can be helped, but I am not capable of helping. I promise though, when I am stronger I will return and then I can save all those people. And if not me, I will send someone stronger than myself down to do it. Rest assured it can be done, it just might take a little more time.” I felt powerless, unable to do anything to help them. If Arcturus were here instead of me, I was sure that he would have the power to help these people, to end the cursed state those people were in, but I, I wasn't good enough to do anything.

“We should just go to bed then.” I told Gal'el quietly as I turned towards the stairs that lead to our bedrooms, clearly a little bit disappointed in myself. As I claimed one of the two rooms for myself, leaving the two males to bunk together.

Chapter 13

Come morning we were back on the road to close the rest of the distance between Fizton and Port Memphshire. For this bit of the journey, Othwal had let Varia on the ground to follow along with us, learning to behave on her own. It was a slow process to get her to learn, and many times that day she was back in Othwal's lap, but at least it was a start to training the young puppy that we had with us. She could use the training. It wasn't that Varia was ever misbehaving too heavily, but I knew that we couldn't always be looking after her, she had to be able to follow instructions and stay close without us constantly keeping an eye on her.

Overall the journey the rest of the way was uneventful with very few hiccups along the way, nothing that slowed us down too terribly. It was mid afternoon when we arrived in town, far too late to bother chartering a boat for that night, and we were in no rush to find one to take us the next day, so instead we decided to check out some of the shops, make sure that we were actually prepared for whatever lay ahead. Sure we did some shopping in Valorbloom, but we were trying to get on the road as soon as possible. However now that we had some extra time, a night before we set off on our journey, we could see if there was anything that we may have missed along the way. Checking my own backpack, I felt confident that I was prepared, but Othwal seemed to want to see if he could find any sort of different shop. Just a place to get what you wouldn't get at a common general market. This search brought us to what seemed like a ruin of a building just off the market place. The place creeped me out a little bit, but still I

dragged behind entering the building slowly. Varia remained behind with me as Othwal took the lead.

Inside there was a lot of rather interesting things. It looked like a house of a hoarder, not a proper shop. There was items, bobbles and viles everywhere but I could not find the shop keeper, at least not at first, not until I heard a voice from the back of the shop.

“Customers? Yes yes, come in, look around. Tell me, what can I help you with? Items infused with magic? Lucky charms, potions?” When I looked around I finally spotted an old woman hunched behind a... Counter? Or at least I thought that was what that was considering there was so much crap on the counter that I couldn’t actually see the surface, it could just be a butchers block for all I knew.

“Is there anything special that you have to offer?” Gal’el pushed. It was hard enough to look through everything that was there, easier to just ask for the best.

“Enchantments. I can do enchantments if you want.” That seemed to catch the ear of both of the men.

“What kind of enchantments can you do?” Othwal asked as he pulled out his long sword and placed it on a small clear area of the counter.

“Ah yes yes, I can do frost or fire, lightning or light. I can enchant them all.”

“For how much.” Gal’el asked a little skeptical on the whole thing.”

“Five hundred gold marks for one enchantment.”

“Three hundred” Othwal countered.

“Four hundred and fifty” She countered.

“Seven hundred for two.”

“Seven hundred for two and you do me a favour.”

“What is the favour?” Gal’el piped back into the bartering.

“Oh nothing big, I just haven’t seen my dear sister in a long time. I just want you to take a letter to her.”

“Aren’t there services for that?” Othwal pointed out.

“Yes but I don’t trust any of them. They are always looking through your mail and it never gets delivered.”

“I don’t know if we should... I mean we need to catch a boat tomorrow. By the way do you know where we can find someone who would let us charter their boat.”

“Oh one of the many inns by the water, but if you want your enchanting done it is going to take a few days anyways. May as well make yourself useful in the meantime.” I still was not convinced but I took a step back, if this was what Othwal and Gal’el wanted, then who was I to question it.

“You just want us to deliver a letter, that is it? Nothing else?” Gal’el clarified

“Nothing, what do you think I am? A hag? No I just run a business. If you want a discount you have to work for it.”

“Fine, we will do it.” Othwal agreed, I still wasn’t sure about it, but I kept my mouth shut and stepped back with Varia as they continued to speak on what kind of enchantments they wanted, and exactly where they could find this woman’s sister. She even offered some Fairy Wing tea

that we politely declined. With the state of this place I didn't actually trust whatever this tea actually was. Besides I wasn't so inclined to stay in such a place longer than necessary.

When all discussions were said and done, we made our way to a tavern for food and a bed. In the end we agreed to set out to a small town, about two days travel to the south called Kilead. We would deliver the letter to the old ladies sister and then return. When we got back Othwal's and Gal'el's weapons should have been enchanted and we could proceed to charter a boat to take us, wherever this place was supposed to be.

Chapter 14

Some tasks are easier said than done. Once again I couldn't complain too much about the traveling or the company, all of that was good, more than once did I try and steal the attention of Varia for a little bit. However when we arrived in Kilead, things turned out to be a little more complicated than I first thought. The simple task to deliver a letter, that was still easy enough I assumed, however not all seemed to be right in the town as we entered it. Seeing as we got into town later in the day, we thought it would be rude to go bug the old woman at such an hour, so instead we found the local inn. Asking around about where she might be, it seemed that the townsfolk were not so fond of the woman who we were looking for. A witch they called her. Blaming the woman for the disappearance of the children. They offered us money to kill her and bring her head back to the inn. The only problem was they seemed to have no real proof that she was a witch or that she took the children, and given this was the lady we were supposed to be delivering the letter to, I had my doubts.

Agreeing to at least look into it. We stayed at the inn that night, Othwal even offered to let Varia sleep in my room for the night. I couldn't help but find myself smiling as the small puppy curled up in bed with me. Inside the temple we were never allowed pets, and while Varia was not my own pet I still loved the small puppy and treated her like she was my own. I didn't necessarily want to steal Varia away from Othwal, she just provided a companionship that I felt like I was lacking. It wasn't that Othwal and Gal'el weren't great companions, it was more just that they were hired by the man who I look up to and were told they had to look after my well being. They did it without being too pushy, but in the back of my mind I knew that they were here because they were told to, not necessarily that I was their first choice of travelling companion. A dog on the other hand would hold no loyalties to Arcturus, she could choose if she liked me or not, I could earn her favour on my own. This was a step in the right direction though as Varia curled up with me. It was probably the best sleep I had in a long time.

The next morning I dragged myself out of bed just in time for the breakfast of lumpy oatmeal and dried fruit. Not the most satisfying meal, but it seemed like I would be eating a lot of it during my time traveling. Most of the places that we have been during our short trip so far had served oatmeal and raisins... or at least I really hoped they were raisins. Even the thought made me

cringe, enough that Varia ate half of my oatmeal for me. It was soon after that in which we set off to deliver the letter, or deal with the witch, whichever situation turned out to be true.

The woman's cottage was on the outskirts of the town, beyond the woods slightly. Approaching the door however was a bit difficult, confusing in some ways. What should have been a straight path wasn't, and the fields in the nearby area had nearly a scary amount of scarecrows in them. Eventually however we managed to make it to the woman's door, I however was a bit on guard. Given that this woman seemed to have put some sort of spell on the path from what I could tell, it was not out of the possibility that she was a witch like the town claimed. I would at least talk to the old lady first however.

Knocking on the door we waited patiently for an old woman to answer. Just by looking at her it was quite clear that it was the sister of the one enchanting my friends weapons. While not identical in appearance, they certainly resembled each other.

"Guests? I never get guests. What do you want."

"We are here to deliver a letter, from your sister." Gal'el spoke up and you could see the light shine in the woman's eyes.

"My sister? I haven't heard from her in years! Come in, come in. Can I offer you some fairy wing tea?" The same tea that her sister seemed to favour, I still was not sure if I trusted it.

"Um, no thanks, but yes she is enchanting our weapons, and in the meantime with our extra time she asked us to take the letter to you." I tried to clarify for her, though I probably didn't need to.

"Although we do have another question for you. The towns folk called you a witch, blamed you for the disappearance of the local children. What do you know about that?" Perhaps a little upfront, but at least Othwal was getting it on the table and I didn't have to bring it up myself later.

"Ah phoo, those people just don't trust what they don't know. I am a little different so they think it is easier to blame me. I might not like the children all the time, but I have them over sometimes. They are good company, I mean no one else visits me. I just don't like children coming by at night. Sometimes they think it is fun to throw things at the cottage, that is why I enchanted the path up here. But during the day I love having them around." I studied the woman as she spoke, from what I could tell she was being honest with me. And really she had been nothing but hospitable to us since we arrived.

To be nice we remained and chatted with the lady for a little while longer. We weren't in a huge rush to get back, especially since we had been hired to kill her. When we finally left the cottage after a polite conversation and we had finished our tea, we had to figure out what to do about the children situation. While it was important to help the children, we didn't have time to deal with that yet, not when the entire world was in danger. We were wasting time as it was being here. Taking the time to fully investigate this would be of no use to us. It was a quick decision, and probably a stupid one, but on our way back to the tavern we had grabbed a pumpkin from the fields, as well as some strands of grass that we attached to it like hair. As we got closer to

the Tavern Othwal cast an illusion on the pumpkin to make it appear as the head of the old lady we had just visited. Entering into the tavern, Othwal threw the head on the table.

“The job is done.”

“Is it really? Where are our children? Are they back?” The Tavern keeper seemed overjoyed and I felt guilty, almost opening my mouth to speak, but stopping myself before I could.

“We don’t know. We have a theory about the scarecrows but we can’t do anything about them.”

“Well not yet at least, when I am a bit stronger though I can come back and try to help.” I corrected Gal’el and offered to help with something I didn’t have time to help with. That was twice now, but if we managed to save the world, I did fully intend on returning to help them.

“Thank you, thank you so much. Here is some gold. It isn’t much but it is all I have.” I was glad for Othwal to pick up the gold, I did not have the nerve to, not when I lied so heavily, we all had lied. We still didn’t know what happened to the children, and the woman was not dead.

Hopefully she would take our warnings about the people blaming her and leave before they came by and caused more trouble. We couldn’t be of any help though, not when we had to leave. We practically ran out of the tavern at the end of the conversation, not looking back as we took our horses and headed back to Port Memphshire to pick up our weapons and charter a boat.

Chapter 15

The trip was long but I was grateful to be back, ready to head on our actual mission. It has been bothering me that it took so long to get started on what Arcturus asked us to do, but at the same time I could understand the value of the enchantments that we had gotten on the weapons. For me being given so much grace and gifts from Torm, I didn’t feel like I needed anything enchanted, nor could I afford it. My bow would work plenty fine for me anyways and if it didn’t, I still knew a spell that could help with that for a short amount of time.

We kept the visit with the lady that enchanted the weapons brief, reporting on how her sister was doing and all that, but not wasting too much time talking to her. We needed to charter a boat after all to get us started on this next leg of our journey. We returned to the inn that we stayed in on our first pass through Port Memphshire, but soon discovered that we wouldn’t find what we needed there. We at the very least could rent a room, but if we wanted to find someone to take us out to sea, then we would have to visit the tavern at the docks. Thanks to our travels arriving us into town mid day, it was near evening when we were ready to set out anyways, a good time to search for people in the tavern.

To say I wasn’t nervous as we made our way down to the docks would be a lie. I have never been terrible at interacting with people, but at the same time I have never been great at it either. At the temple I knew what I was supposed to say to who, but most of the time I wasn’t supposed to say much at all. To be asking around at tavern to find someone to take us to a place that we barely even know about, it seemed a little odd, like it was impolite or something, I wasn’t even sure, it just caused my stomach to knot.

Standing in front of the Giddy Mermaid, I looked to my two traveling companions, then back to the door. I supposed it was now or never then. Taking a deep breath we pushed open the door and walked into the room, already half full of sailors well on their way to being drunk after a day of work. Being around drunk people didn't bother me too much, but it did worry me slightly. The reason I worried for them was the same reason that I didn't drink myself. I have seen far too many people come into the temple injured after a night of drinking gone wrong. Scanning the room I had no idea where to even start asking about chartering a ship. Thankfully Othwal took the lead on that though.

"Do you know who might be willing to take us somewhere for pay. We are looking for a ship to take us out to find an island or something." Othwal approached the tavern keep, asking the question straight up.

"You're lookin' to find something are ya? Well your best bet would be to ask Captain Kuzon, right over there. He might be willing to take you and he knows the waters around here as well as any." The Tavern keep pointed towards a table of gentlemen, with one man sitting at it finer than the rest.

"Thanks, we'll ask." I stared at the table for a moment while Othwal spoke, wondering if he would actually agree or not. Captain Kuzon didn't look particularly mean, not with the way that he was laughing with his friends, but nice or not that didn't mean he would necessarily be inclined to agree to help us.

Trailing slightly behind Othwal and Gal'el I followed the two men to the table as they cleared their throats ready to talk, I was content hanging in the background.

"Excuse us, Captain Kuzon?" Gal'el tried to approach the man. He turned around and looked none too impressed with the interruption.

"What do you want?" He demanded as his eyes soon drifted to me. "What can I do for you?" He eyed me directly.

"We are looking to charter a sh-"

"Not you. Her. What is your name?" Kuzon interrupted Othwal before he could finish his request, he then turned to some people at the table. "Move over, make room for the lady." A chair was cleared next to him and he motioned for me to sit. I stepped forward, but did not sit, too nervous to sit down with these men. I wasn't fond of all the attention being on me but we needed to get them to help us and it seemed I was the only one that he was willing to talk to.

"Come sit down, let me buy you a drink." Kuzon kept encouraging, flagging a bar maid to bring another drink for me. I hesitantly sat down but didn't accept the drink.

"I don't drink, but thanks anyways. Um... I am Lily... Liliiana... but Lily for short." My voice was perhaps quieter than I originally intended it to be, and I found myself staring at my hands folded on the table. I was not the right person for this, and yet here I was forced to do the talking anyways.

"Why not? There is no harm in it."

"I have seen far too many people come into the temple injured after a night of drinking. I swore not to partake myself." I tried to inform him.

“Oh a church girl. I like that. So tell me what brings you to my company this fine night.” He moved a little closer to me, looking straight at me with a bit of a sly smirk on his face. I shifted uncomfortably under his gaze but forced myself to speak anyways.

“Well you see... we are looking to charter a ship to help us find a temple or something like that. We are in search of an artifact for my mentor.” I could swear I saw Gal’el cringe out of the corner of my eye, but I tried to ignore it.

“A temple. There is nothing like that around these parts, but there is an island with a lighthouse place on it. Nearly abandoned, but some folks say there is a witch living on it. Perhaps that would have what you are looking for. What exactly is this artifact.” Kuzon pressed and I knew I shouldn’t have brought it up in the first place.

“Um nothing... I don’t think I am supposed to tell people. It is just something that Sir Acturus wants.” Kuzon seemed a bit surprised by the words but didn’t mention anything.

“So how much do you want for taking us to the island.” Othwal stepped in to get to the point.

“What I want you can’t afford.”

“How much is it worth.” Gal’el corrected and there was a light smile on Kuzon’s face seeing him catch the error of his friends wording so quickly.

“Now that is a good question. 500 gold pieces for the lot of you, provided the lady comes with.” He gave me a wink, and this time I could see Gal’el scowl a little bit.

“Yes she will be coming.” Gal’el confirmed, none to happy about it.

“Great, we will leave first thing in the morning. Meet down at the dock. Do you have a place to stay the night? You can always stay here. I would be happy to share my room with the Lily, cut down the costs for you.”

“We have a room and we should be heading back right away. Thank you and we will see you tomorrow.” It was a clear sign that it was time to leave, especially given the aggravation in Gal’el’s voice.

“Yes thank you.” I stood up and gave a quick slight bow before leaving at a rather brisk pace with Othwal and Gal’el.

It was not me setting the pace but Gal’el, he seemed set on getting out of there as soon as possible. I had not seen the issue with sticking around and talking a bit more, but I wasn’t going to push the subject at all. He was less comfortable than me with the situation, which was hard since all the attention on me.

Not bothering to stop in the bar to sit and eat, we went straight to our rooms. I didn’t want to bother either Othwal or Gal’el with thoughts of food or doing anything really. It wasn’t too late, but it was late enough that they insisted that since we had to be up early tomorrow, that we should go to bed. At the very least it was an excuse to get more sleep. Waking up in the mornings was ever difficult, I only hoped that it would be easier with more sleep. Knowing me however it would not be.

As suspected the morning found me too soon as Othwal pounded on my door in attempts to wake me up. Ever so slowly I rolled out of bed, mumbling something about being right there before stumbling to where my clothes and armour laid in a pile on the floor in the corner of the

room. I always hated having to put my armour on. I understood that it was for safety and that I should wear it while traveling, that was why I spent the time donning it every morning, but that didn't mean I found it comfortable. It could be worse. The chain shirt wasn't nearly as bad as what I imagined it would be like to wear Arcturus's plate armour. I didn't even know if I was strong enough to fight with that stuff on. I definitely was no warrior like him, but I supposed I was never meant to be. No I was to be the person that kept those warriors alive and fighting. As long as I was just trained enough to keep myself alive then I would be fine.

Once dressed I spent a short amount of time offering my morning prayer to Torm before getting up and heading downstairs for a bowl of the ever so common, lumpy oatmeal and dried fruit, before we set off to meet Kuzon. Once more Gal'el and Othwal didn't seem too thrilled to go meet Kuzon, but we went anyways, it was the best we had for getting ourselves to the first skull and stone that we were supposed to find. This was after all the real first step in our journey after all. Previously we were travelling and getting side tracked, but now our mission was clear and we had every intent on completing it. For them if it meant putting up with a captain they were not so fond of, than so be it, it was what needed done.

As the sun casts its first light on the ocean beyond, we found our way down to the dock. It wasn't hard to pick out the ship that Kuzon had described to us the day before. Everyone seemed busy getting the ship ready to sail, but the moment Kuzon laid eyes on me, he stopped what he was doing.

"Ah you made it. I am pleased. And I see your friends are still tagging along." The dislike between the parties seemed mutual, but I still wasn't sure why.

"Well of course we were all tasked with the same mission." I tried to sound awake and put together despite the ungodly hour of which we awoke.

"Very well, come aboard, we will be sailing shortly." He held out a hand to help me on, and while I didn't need it, I took it anyways to be polite. Kuzon held my hand tight, like he didn't quite want to let go as he lead me aboard the ship, leaving my two companions on their own. "Welcome to my ship. You may wander the deck during the sailing, or you are more than welcome to sleep in the cots below deck." He then turned to me. "Unless you want to stay in my cabin for a bit. It is much nicer than below deck with all the sweaty guys."

I was a bit baffled. I didn't know how to respond, but a proper room did sound rather nice, to at least stay in during our sailing.

"Um, that would be nice, thank you."

"Of course. We will be setting sail shortly. I have to get back to work but feel free to wonder the deck." Kuzon kissed my hand and left, I could feel the daggers being glared at him from behind me, as I turned to find Othwal and Gal'el standing there.

"Be careful of him." Othwal warned, but I didn't understand why.

"He is just being nice." I tried to defend Kuzon, not seeing the underlying implications myself.

"I don't trust him, but I trust you, so just try and be a little cautious with him." Othwal was trying to be nice at least, it was better than blatantly calling Captain Kuzon out. I took that as a win as I went about walking the deck, just as we set sail.

Chapter 16

The first part of the journey out was pleasant. I have never sailed on the ocean before, barely been this close to water if I was to be perfectly honest. I found the vastness of the open sea mesmerising as I spent the first few hours on deck just watching the land quickly grow smaller in the distance. It was amazing how this could put the world into perspective, how small the land mass seemed compared to the vastness of the sea beyond it. Even as dark rain clouds started to cover the area, I still watched until the first drops of rain started to fall on the deck of the ship.

“Are you hungry?” A voice approached from behind me, soft and kind. I turned to face Kuzon as he smiled at me. “Let’s have lunch while the rain passes.” He offered, holding his hand out to me again. Taking it I followed his lead into his cabin.

It was bigger than I expected. There was a large bed on one side, and a good sized table in the middle, in which Kuzon was busy clearing off papers and maps from, in preparation for the cooks to bring up our meal.

“It is amazing isn’t it.” He finally spoke, pausing at his porthole, staring out at the water’s beyond.

“It is beautiful, I have never seen anything like it.” I admitted and he smiled.

“More of a city girl then?” An honest question, but I had to shake my head, I really wasn’t.

“No I just never got the chance to get out of the temple until recently, and the temple wasn’t particularly close to any bodies of water.”

“That is almost sad, I live for the ocean and open seas, to not be around it would be to go without a heartbeat.” There was a level of purity in that statement, like the ocean meant as much to him, as Torm did to me. It gave me another view on Kuzon.

Over lunch by a warm fire, we had pleasant small talk, but it started to turn into a bit more flirting than I was used to.

“So you have never been in a relationship?” He asked sounding almost surprised by the fact.

“Well no... I mean there aren’t that many people to date in my temple, and I haven’t been out much.”

“So you have never had an intimate relationship with a man?” My face turned red, very red. There was no hiding the awkwardness as I shifted in my seat.

“Well... no I mean in the temple they teach us to wait until we marry.” I tried to explain.

“Where is the fun in that?” He asked with a jovial laugh.

“It is just the right thing to do, so when you get married it is a gift to your partner.”

“Outdated rules from old stiff priests that don’t know how to have a little fun. Shouldn’t rules change with the times?” He pressed.

“I guess, but I mean. I don’t know, it is just what I have always been taught.” A sudden shift in the boat was my saving grace as Kuzon glanced out at the storm that had picked up over lunch and listened to his men yelling instructions.

“Well I suppose that is my cue to go help my men with the ship. Feel free to stay here, where it is warm. I will be back in a bit.” With that Kuzon got up and left the table, leaving me to sit awkwardly in his chambers, my face still red from the conversation that we just had.

Finding a blanket and sitting down in front of the fire, I wondered how Gal’el and Othwal were fairing. I hadn’t seen them much since we started sailing, but Othwal didn’t seem like he was feeling well at first. While I could go check on them, the warmth of the fire and blanket were far too welcoming to convince me to get up and move, even if remaining in this room was a bit awkward. Since it wasn’t my room I didn’t really want to touch anything, in fear of breaking something or seeing something I wasn’t supposed to. It was safest to simply sit by the fire and enjoy it while waiting for the storm to pass.

As the time passed, I was more than happy that I had not gotten up. The storm picked up for a while and I could feel my stomach churning with the wave. Thankfully I was able to keep myself composed through it, but I didn’t want to know what would have happened if I had attempted to get up and leave, or if I was on the lower levels of the ship, which I was certain would feel much more claustrophobic than the spacious cabin that I resided in now.

The sun was just setting as the storm had calmed down and Kuzon came back into the cabin, beaming, like navigating the storm was the most fun he had in awhile.

“How are you holding up?” He asked as he grabbed a seat beside me by the fire, which had now nearly completely died out.

“I am fine. How was sailing through the storm?” I didn’t really know what to ask, so the question came out in a soft awkward voice.

“It was so much fun, hard work, but I like the challenge.” He admitted before standing up. “If you are not too tired I would like to show you something.” I had to admit I was curious about what this something could possibly be. Taking his outstretched hand I let him haul me to my feet and lead me outside, his blanket still wrapped around me.

“You don’t see anything like this on the land, trust me. I have been to plenty of cities and towns and valleys, but nothing matches this view.” Leading me out to the deck he found a dry spot to sit and sat down, patting a hand beside him for me to join. Upon joining he pointed up at the sky and I saw what he meant. The stars shined brighter than I had ever seen them, and the heavens were full of them. Rivers of stars flowed and mingled with each other, all mixed together with a half moon that shone bright amongst them, like a beacon for all to see.

“W-Wow... This is amazing.” I was so mesmerized that I barely noticed as Kuzon wrapped an arm around my shoulder.

“Out here you can see the constellations that guide us perfectly. If you look over there. The bright star is the bow of the boat. If you follow it, the stars make a curved shape down, with a straight line up. It is the ship that guides us.” Kuzon pointed out a constellation that looked roughly like a boat, before pointing to another set of stars. “And there is the lighthouse that guides us safely to home. The brightest star being the light that guides the way. And there. That is the goddess of the sea. I am not religious like you are, but I respect her, and she gives us smooth sailing.” It seemed weird to believe in a god but not.

“How does that work? Not being religious but seeming to believe?” I asked, my mind grasping easier to the religion, than the pattern in the stars, though those were pretty as well.

“It is just respect, simply I respect the goddess and her creation. We don’t overfish, we don’t dump our trash in the ocean and hurt the animals beyond what is needed, and in return she grants us smooth sailing.” He explained to me and I nodded.

“I suppose that makes sense.” I agreed as he pulled me in closer.

“Do you have any special constellations from where you are from?” I had to think for a long moment.

“Well I never really studied things like that, but I do know one.” I searched the sky before finally finding what I was looking for. “The white stag. He holds the east star between his antlers. See there are the antlers, and they lead down to a head, and the body is there.” I traced the constellation with my finger as he followed my gaze and smiled.

“I can’t say I can see it, but I will take your word for it.”

Someone cleared their throat behind us, and I turned to notice Gal’el standing behind.

“Do you mind if I join?” He asked.

“We were about to retire to bed, but if you want to join us, you are more than welcome.” Kuzon winked at Gal’el as he stood up and offered me a hand up as well. The look on Gal’el’s face was priceless as he stepped back.

“Uh no, no thank you.” He quickly spat out.

“Fine it is up to you, come on Lily.” He started guiding me back to his cabin when Othwal showed up at the top of the stairs, watching us.

“She isn’t going anywhere with you.”

“And who are you to make that decision for her?” Things were getting tense and I froze up not sure what to say.

“Come on Lily, let’s get out of here. I will let Varia sleep with you tonight, lets just go to the cots.” Othwal seemed to be trying to bribe me.

“You can’t force her to do anything.” Kuzon defended, but I knew that it wouldn’t go anywhere.

“I won’t let you take advantage of her.”

“I am not, she is coming of her own free will. Isn’t that right Lily?”

“I um...” I had no idea what to do or say. “Stop fighting. Please. I did say I would stay with him.” I tried to defend Kuzon.

“Stop misleading her.” I could see something spark and even Gal’el tensed.

“I wouldn’t threaten a captain on his own ship.” Kuzon warned, clearly pissed off, and so were the deck hands as they closed in. Finally I pulled free from Kuzon’s hand and stood between them.

“Stop it! No fighting. Othwal, he isn’t forcing me to do anything, I am choosing to go with him.” Othwal was none too impressed with that answer, if it wasn’t for Gal’el he might have attacked Kuzon right then and there. Instead however Gal’el stepped in and Kuzon was sweeping me off my feet, carrying me the rest of the way back to the cabin.

“Does the offer still stand?” Gal’el asked just before we reached the door, after he had dealt with Othwal.

“No.” A straight flat answer before the door was between me, and my two traveling companions, leaving me alone with Kuzon for the rest of the night.

Chapter 17

The night was an interesting one to say the least. What I had in mind and what he had in mind were too very different things. While I wanted to just sleep, it seems that he was implying something a little less restful. Nevertheless, I wasn't allowed a full nights sleep either way.

The moon was still high, in the sky, the sun not even cresting the horizon when I was dragged out of bed and told to get ready. Apparently the island that Kuzon suggested that we check out was just ahead, and we were to take boats in. Why couldn't we finish sleeping then go ashore? Why did we have to go now? Perhaps it was because of Othwal, he did threaten the captain on his own ship after all, so in some ways it was understandable, but I really just wanted to sleep.

“Have a good trip. We will wait two days for you to signal us to pick you up. If we don't get a sign by then then we assume that you are dead or have your own way back, but I am sure I will be seeing you again soon.” With a wink and a slap in the butt I was sent on my way, my face burning red and I faced Othwal and Gal'el.

“Did you have a good night last night?” Gal'el's stare bothered me to no end as I shrank back more and more embarrassed.

“It was fine.” I could feel Kuzon's smile behind me as someone else called from the deck.

“Come on, we don't got all night I want to go back to bed.” And they didn't? Either way I finally stepped forward and followed Gal'el and Othwal to the boat awaiting to take us to shore, yawning as I climbed in.

“It is far too early for this.” I mumbled complaining even more about the time.

“Then maybe you shouldn't have stayed up all night.” I could see Gal'el's eyes flick over to Kuzon and back.

“It isn't what you think.” I tried to half heartedly protest but it didn't get the point across as I would have liked it, not when I was this embarrassed. Thankfully Gal'el stopped talking and Othwal didn't dare comment, but it made the boat ride across to the small island awkward to say the least.

The men bringing us across seemed more than happy to get rid of us. The moment we were out of the boat and on the island, the men had already turned tail and started to head back to the bigger boat that was to wait for them.

“So what now? Do we go back to bed or...”

“Let's at least scout ahead.” Othwal interrupted me before walking the perimeter of the beach. Looking towards the lighthouse it was tempting to go and see if they could get shelter there, but what if something else was on this island? If there was this skull here it probably would be guarded, and the guardian would need somewhere to stay.

Once we decided that everything was clear, we set up camp on the beach, Othwal and Gal'el taking turns watching letting me catch some extra sleep. I felt bad that I got to sleep and they didn't, but we all knew that it was for the best. On a good day I couldn't stay awake for a watch, after staying up with Kuzon, I knew that there was not much hope for me. It was better that we faced it up front than put ourselves in danger by pretending that I would be able to take a full watch, and falling asleep during it.

Thankfully however over the night nothing happened and we were able to finish sleeping before we started to explore the small island that we had found ourselves on, heading towards the most logical place to find answers about this temple, the lighthouse. A slight scan of the rest of the island left us thinking that there wasn't going to be easy finding this temple without a starting place. The island wasn't huge, but it was big enough that it would take a couple of days to give a thorough search of the entire island, looking for any signs of a way to the sea temple, and there was no use spending that time when there was an obvious starting point near by. Some might have thought it too obvious, and it did cross my mind that it might be so, but we didn't have time to waste.

As we approached the lighthouse, Othwal on a hunch started to check it for traps, and sure enough, he found some. The path leading up to the house seemed to have runes carved into them and while we didn't know exactly what they did, we made quick work of dispelling the magic so that we could get closer to the old lighthouse. The closer we got however, the more we noticed about it. While the paint was worn and chipped, the building weathered by time, outside of it, at its base was a garden perfectly tended to. It was more than just a fenced off area now left to its own devices, but instead the roses were pruned back to leave room for the carrots and lettuce that were growing in the bed. This lighthouse wasn't abandoned on an island that no one remembered, no there was someone that still lived here, tending to it. Could he have the skull and stone that they were looking for? No not possible, it was to be in a temple, not a lighthouse... unless he found it... or he knew about the temple. It was worth at least asking about it, or at least I hoped.

Looking to the others it seemed that they had drawn up the same conclusion as I did, there was someone in there that we needed to speak with. Cautiously approaching the door, I took the step forward to knock on the door. I was probably the least threatening of the three of us so it made sense that I was the one doing the speaking for us. After waiting a few seconds after knocking, there was finally the sound of footsteps on a stairway then several locks unlocking. One after another there was clicks as latch after latch on the door was opened and the door itself slowly creaked open just enough for me to see a set of eyes peering out at me.

"Yes? Who are you? What do you want? Why are you on my island?" The voice of an older gentleman demanded from behind the door frame where he was hiding.

"Lily... my name is Lily. This is Gal'el, and Othwal." I introduced, using a kind soft voice, similar to that used when talking to sick or dying people that we just didn't have the power to save.

"What do you want?" He demanded again.

"We are looking for an artifact... a skull and a stone. My mentor. The Silver Knight Arcturus, sent us to receive this."

"Silver Knight Arcturus you say? Never heard of him. And I don't know of no skull either. I suggest you leave!" He nearly shut the door on us, but I spoke up once again, not forcing the door to stay open or anything, just trying to catch his attention.

"It is a matter of the safety of our world. Please. He said it would be in some kind of temple in this part of the sea. Do you know anything about it? Anything at all would help." He paused for a moment looking back to us before sighing.

"Alright, alright. There is a mermaid temple in this area under water, I wouldn't go anywhere near it if I were you." He warned, but his warning fell on deaf ears it seemed.

"How do we get to this temple?" Othwal asked from behind me, and the door opened a little bit more, just enough to see the older human man's face, with his scruffy white beard and short curly hair.

"You can't get there yourself, but..." Another sigh escaped his lips. "I managed to build a boat that goes underwater. I can take you there, but I will not get too close to it. Once you are in you are on your own, I ain't sticking around." Fair enough I supposed. If this place really was dangerous I didn't want to make him stay in harm's way.

"Thank you. Is there anything we can do to thank you? I have a little bit of money." I searched my pockets for what money I carried with me but wasn't able to dig it out before he spoke again.

"Bah, I don't need your money here. Just leave me alone and I will be happy." Reclusive it seemed, though one would have to be to live in a place like this.

"I never did catch your name?" I added on trying to be polite by having something to call him by. "Sacramouch."

"Well Sacramouch, I thank you for your generosity."

"Bah. Follow me. The quicker we get you there, the sooner you will be out of my hair."

Certainly a... friendly individual. Regardless at the very least he was helping us get to where we needed to, or at least I hoped that we needed to go, so I had to be grateful for that, even if it was a little nerve wracking having to follow a guy into a boat that supposedly was able to go underwater as the only way to get there. I was scared to even ask how such feats were possible, I didn't want to know what I was putting my faith in, I figured it was better to not know the details. That didn't stop Othwal from being curious however as we approached the boat.

"So how did you make this exactly?" He asked as I watched him marvel at the design of it. Open air for now, but I could see where it would be enclosed and how.

"Mechanisms and enchantments that you will never understand." Well at least I didn't have to listen to the explanation that it seemed that Sacramouch was not so willing to give. Whether it was truly too complicated, or if he just didn't want to talk more than he had to, I am not sure, but I wouldn't push it. Quietly I took my seat back as Sacramouch started to pilot the boat off the island, away from where Kuzon was parked, back in the general direction of the main continent.

After about fifteen minutes of travel Sacramouch began to pull up lining, almost like a bubble around us before tapping something else. There was a faint magical aura around the ship that I was able to detect before he began to go under.

“There are mermaids in this area. I won’t get any closer. It is right there, but you are going to have to swim the rest of the way there. I will be back the same time tomorrow and the day after. If you aren’t back by then I assume you are dead.” It shouldn’t take us that long though. It was just a temple after all, it couldn’t be that large, at least from my experience.

“Thank you Sacramoush. We will see you tomorrow then.” I bowed, looking to the others, a little nervous about having to swim the rest of the way in the waters that Sacramoush was so scared of. I took a deep breath before the magic aura the ship was holding released enough for us to swim freely, heading in the direction of hopefully what would be the first skull, and really the start of this journey, that was promised to only get more difficult from that point forward.

Chapter 18

The swim in, while not far, was harrowing. In the thirty seconds that I was underwater, no air available to me, I struggled to keep calm. Growing up in a temple really didn’t give much time for swimming, not to mention Badger Set was not on any body of water. I knew some of my basic’s, it was enough for me to get to the underwater temple, but I did not know enough for my mind not to be racing with each stroke I took. Surely Othwal and Gal’el wouldn’t let me drown though, they both seemed like competent swimmers and they made their way towards the door and into the temple.

Much to my surprise, the doors were unlocked and led into an antichamber where the water drained out of, enough for us to breath. For a mermaid temple I expected a lot more to be underwater, but since I couldn’t just breath underwater, it came as a relief to find the temple filled with air, not water. We could do this then, we could manage our way through this place. It wouldn’t be that hard, right?

Of course it took all of a couple steps before reaching an intersection with three ways to go. Straight ahead of us was a rather ornate door, that I assumed would be locked. Then to our left and our right there was hallways. The one to our right we could already see a gate blocking the way through, but to the left, the hall seemed to continue to a turn. Just to be sure that I wasn’t making false assumptions, I took the lead stepping forward to the door straight ahead. Trying the door, it would not give way.

“Anyone know how to get through this?” It might have been hopeful thinking to think that one of my companions was skilled at breaking and entering. Arcturus would never choose such unsavoury people for such a task, but I still had to ask. And as I thought, they both shook their heads no.

“Well I am sure there is a key somewhere in here, let’s look.” I shrugged as I turned back. Since one was was clearly a dead end, we decided to take the passage that was originally to our left. It was a matter of a few feet before we noticed another door to our left. This time Othwal checked it, and once again it was locked, leaving us no way to get in. So it seemed that this was to be a maze of locked doors that we had to get through. There was only one way left to go really and that was to the end of the hall where it bent right.

Rounding the corner I found myself at the back of the team, following behind casting my light ahead so that the men could see where they were going. My spot cost me. As Gal'el rounded the corner seemed to be what was needed to trigger something, because the next thing that I knew, I was engulfed in a glob of black slime. What was worse was that this slime didn't just drop, it moved. It was a living breathing thing, and I was inside of it, suffocating, unable to breathe or fight for my own life.

Frantically I looked to my friends for help. I didn't know what to do, I felt like a panicked child again from those days I chased after my mentor, only to nearly get myself killed in the process. Each swing of the blade that narrowly missed me, each spell cast at the creature came in slow motion. All I could think of was how I was going to die there. With a prayer to Torm in my mind, the world around me went dark and silent. After everything, after all my training and searching, I guess I never managed to grow and be better. I guess I could never keep up with my hero after all. Perhaps I should have listened to him and not gone on this adventure, if I couldn't make it passed the first obstacle what good was I? Maybe Torm would have something good waiting for me in the after life.

Chapter 19

A coughing, choking sound. A gasp of breath? Do I need to breath in the after life? Someone exhaled a breath of relief as my eyes fluttered open. Everything was blurry for a moment but surprisingly not bright like I thought the after world would be.

"Lily, are you alright?" The voice, it was familiar, too familiar really. Squeezing my eyes shut I opened them again, letting my vision focus this time. My vision cleared and it was Gal'el who stood over me. Slowly I started realizing what happened, as the tart aftertaste of whatever was poured into my mouth moments earlier registered in my mind. A healing potion... they manage to heal me, but not enough, everything hurt, I couldn't go on like that.

"T-thanks." I mumbled sitting up trying to get myself focused fully on what had just happened. Slowly I cast a couple more healing spells on myself so that I could get back up and rejoin them. I had no desire to hold everyone back. I was weak, but I wouldn't be helpless, especially since we couldn't turn around now.

"Are you going to be alright?" A hand up, that was what Gal'el was offering, and kind words. "I am fine. Don't worry about me." I was embarrassed was what I really was. It must have been visible on my face as Othwal walked up behind me and put a hand on my shoulder. "Don't worry about it, none of us noticed it. We are as much to blame as anyone else, but we are all fine now, right?" A sad attempt at encouraging me, but one I needed nonetheless. I still felt bad for passing out on them, but she could deal with it and move forward, it would only be worse if I allowed myself to fall behind now.

The hall stretched before us and it was easy to see our two options that lay ahead. There was something on our left just up the hall, and then at the end of the hall it seemed like there was a room attached there. From where we stood we couldn't see what was in that room but it was open, that was a positive sign, in fact it had no door at all. For once there was nothing standing in our way. Easy, it would be so easy to see what was down that way, likely not what we were looking for, but maybe there would be a hint about how to get through some of the locked doors to where they needed to go.