

[Young Alazondra]

The story of Alazondra is one of trust and betrayal, bravery, and sheer willpower. It's about the people in her life as well as her past. It all begins in a small village in the powerful country of Liam.

It was the fifteenth century, and the lands of Liam were changing. Recent rulers were as corrupt as they came, and the untamed wilderness was abundant. This was the time of Cervantes' rule, the rise and fall of the Swordslinger, and the next divine ruler of the Lycans.

In the early spring of 1451, a man and his hunting party returned to their quaint village of Piliad. In his arms was a child, a young girl. She was only four years old. The man, Matthias Graystone IV, had found her lying on the edge of Hell's Forest. To the hunters, it was called Hell's Forest, but in legends, it was called the Harthyung Forest. The Harthyung was forbidden to most for Lycans thickly inhabited it. To those in Piliad, Lycans were horrid beasts. They were semi-human by day and large wolfish beasts at night. Most Lycans stood at around eight feet. Their coarse hair and burning canine eyes were enough to give the most fearless guards nightmares.

Matthias and his hunting group entered the village. He held the young child in his arms. The silken, white blanket hid most of the girl's young, cherubic face. The girl made no noise of cry or giggle; she merely remained quiet, seemingly viewing her surroundings. Matthias had entered his home and was welcomed by his wife.

"Oh Matthias, how did the hunt go?" she asked.

He brought forth the child and replied, "Well, we have a new addition to our family, Kiley." His wife looked at the girl with the utmost glee in her eyes. The young girl shone with new life and silently peered up at her new, adopted mother.

Kiley embraced the child in her arms and spoke softly, "Oh, she's gorgeous. Wherever did you find her? What happened to her? And what will we name her?" Matthias laughed and placed his spear upon the silver rungs above the door, where it was always kept.

"Well," said he, "I found the poor lass out at the edge of the forest, the Hell's Forest." Kiley let out a small gasp. He continued, "She was completely alone. I believe her parents were, well, killed by those nasty Lycans. I think a perfect name for the lass would be Alazondra, don't you?"

His young wife squealed lightly in joy, "Why, that is perfect. Alazondra, she's the patron saint of the forest. Oh, this will be like having our very own child, Matthias!" Her husband nodded, smiling brightly.

The young child grew up never to know her past with Lycans. She always feared them, for the tales that her mother told her always described them as ferocious and bloodthirsty. Alazondra grew quite interested in Lycans. She almost wanted to meet one in person, but she still feared them. It was a quaking fear that seemed to grow and manifest as time went on. Soon, however, her past came to meet her.

Alazondra was standing outside the local armory awaiting her father to emerge from the shop. She peered up at the sign in boredom. Its iron holdings were over-rusted and hanging loosely to the wood paneling of the armory. The sign read "Jeremy Brigadine's Fine Class Armor." Alazondra sat there studying the small sign when a shadow passed over her. She let a slight gasp and quickly turned.

Nothing but the regular crowds of the market passed by. *It*, she thought to herself, *must have been a hawk flying overhead*. She tried to convince herself of this, but she knew that the shadow was too big than that produced from a hawk flying above. Alazondra merely sat down upon a crate, watching those in the immediate area.

A voice from behind her whispered, "Excuse me, miss. You'll have to come with us. Right now."

She almost let a scream pass through her gaping mouth, but it would not move to do so. Alazondra turned quickly to find herself facing four Mages. The one that had spoken held out his hand, his long, slender fingers reaching towards her wrist.

"Come," said he, "we will take you to where you belong."

Alazondra slowly took a few paces back. She looked at the four Mages, her green oculars viciously scanning them. All of them were in robes. The one that spoke was somewhat taller and had jet black hair with a small goatee on his chin, but the one next to him with the dusty blonde hair had much leaner build. The other two mages looked seemingly alike, with the same eyes and same chestnut hair swept back into small ponytails. Alazondra merely looked at them, slowly starting to back away.

"You, you must have the wrong person, sir. I am Alazondra. I live here in Piliad, and that is all," she whispered.

It was more in assurance of herself that they had the wrong girl, for she knew not what four Mages would want a sixteen-year-old girl. The lean one with dirty blonde hair, cut short, merely shook his head. His blue eyes shone brightly with an intellectual type of sheen.

The door of the armory slammed open. Alazondra saw her father walk out. Matthias, with a new longsword in a plain leather scabbard under his arm, approached his daughter.

"Ah. There's my little girl. How are you?" he asked gently.

Alazondra stood motionless, looking past her father's shoulder frantically. He looked at her confused.

"Alazondra, what is the matter?" Matthias asked. He threw a small glance over his shoulder. There was nothing. Alazondra just sighed and started for home. Matthias shrugged and did so too.

Late at night, Matthias was in his bedroom with his wife. He was lightly pacing the rug in front of the bed. Sleep, on this night, did not come to him. Matthias glanced at his sleeping wife, her figure gently laid out in the bed sheets. He decided to go for a walk. Matthias silently slipped outside and walked to the back of the house. Before he turned the corner of his house to go to the back, he heard voices. Whatever the voices were, they were close, and there were more than one.

Matthias placed his back on the stone wall and peered over the corner's edge. Right outside Alazondra's window stood four Mages. Matthias let out a quick, sharp gasp. Matthias knew they were people associated with her real past, and he didn't like it. He wasn't going to let them take her away or back to where she had come from. *She's my daughter. I found her*, Matthias thought. He quickly dashed back inside and grabbed the spear from its post. Then, back to the corner he went, silently watching the four Mages.

"So, Sekei, you're sure this young woman is her?" one with a ponytail asked.

The tall one, who must have been the one Sekei, answered, "Yes. She looks exactly like her father."

Matthias sighed. He knew they meant her real father, for his daughter looked nothing like either him or his wife. Alazondra had flaxen hair so pale it gleamed like silver at times, and her eyes were a bright shade of green, nothing at all like his own. Matthias continued to listen with a heavy heart and an apprehensive mind.

“She *does* look like her father...” the leanest one said, his voice faltering. Sekei glanced at him and placed a robed arm at his shoulder.

“Why, Fritchel, all will be okay. I know you knew the man, I know. We’ll get her. Now, let’s think up a plan of action,” Sekei said comfortingly.

Fritchel nodded in response, and the other two huddled up with them. They whispered lowly and in a foreign language. Matthias, having heard this, was angered. There was no way he was to give up his daughter. Matthias wondered if her real parents were out there missing their daughter. He dismissed the thought immediately. *She’s my daughter*, he thought to himself, *I raised her since she was a young lass. She’s not going anywhere and ever knowing that awful truth.* Finally, he summoned himself to go around the corner and approach the Mages.

“Halt!” he yelled. “This is my home. What are you doing?” The four peered up at him more in annoyance than fear.

“Well, who might you be, good sir?” Sekei said with a slight bow.

“I, sir,” Matthias began, “am Matthias Graystone IV, and you four had best leave.” Matthias gripped his spear harder, his knuckles glowing white in the dark light. The one called Fritchel glanced at the spear.

“Well, yes sir, we shall be off at once. Pardon us,” Fritchel replied. He beckoned the other three, and they walked off into the darkness.

Matthias looked for them, his eyes unable to focus in the void black of the night. He sighed and went inside as a gold band swept across the sky from the morning sun. Matthias placed his spear atop its holder and shuffled into bed. He hoped he’d never see the four Mages again.

What he hoped and what was were two different things. The next evening, Matthias, Alazondra, and Kiley were eating at the table when a knock was heard upon the door. Kiley jumped up from the table and made her way to the door. Matthias peered up from his stew briefly. Kiley opened the door, and waiting on the other side was the Mage named Sekei. Matthias jumped up from the table, slightly disrupting the stew. Alazondra looked up at her father.

“You!” Matthias exclaimed. “What are you doing here?”

“Matt, now, let’s be hospitable to our guest,” Kiley said, eyeing her husband suspiciously. Sekei merely looked at the two silently.

He cleared his throat and said, “Well, I am Sekei Othediis. I’d like to have a word, if I may, please.”

His figure swept low into a bow. His black robe flared out, flowing gracefully. Kiley nodded and welcomed the strange guest. Alazondra sat up straight in her chair, gripping the hardwood edges tightly. She gazed at the Mage’s face. He had a stern dark face. His black hair hung in his eyes and a goatee graced his firm chin. This Mage looked a man of importance.

Seating himself opposite Alazondra, he cleared his throat and began, “I, as I have introduced, am Sekei. I am a Mage, and I travel freely. I have been sent by Lord Julius to seek out and return the missing child to her home.” Kiley looked to Alazondra, and then

averted her soft brown eyes towards Sekei.

“Well,” said she, “we know not of anyone foreign or missing.” Sekei merely sat back, with a perked brow. He gazed over at Alazondra. Under his gaze, she shifted nervously.

He said almost with strain, “This young woman I am looking for was last seen just outside of the Harthyung forest as a mere child at the age of four years old. It’s now been nigh on twelve years since. My sources have tracked her to this very locale, Piliad. The consequences for taking a child and refusing to return her would be most severe, may I mention.” His gaze tightened on Alazondra, as she looked up at her mother and father.

Finally she spoke up, “Sir, uh, I am Alazondra. I’ve lived here my whole life. I can assure you I am not, well, whom you are looking for.” He merely shook his head.

Rising angrily out of his chair, Sekei yelled, “You lie to the child after taking her from where she belongs? Have you people *any* thought what this may do to the poor child? She has no clue *who* she is!” Sekei cleared his throat and seated himself down again.

Matthias pounded his large fists on the table yelling, “She *knows* exactly who she is, sir! She is Alazondra Graystone and none other! *You*, sir, need to get out, now!” Sekei lowered his glance to the table legs. *Hmm*, he thought, *these people, they are stubborn, like asses*. Sekei stood, rising to his full height, which at once became alarming.

“I shall go now, but you, you two shall pay. This young woman does not belong here. This is *not* her home, and you will receive nasty visits, I am sure, until you decide to do the right thing for her.” Sekei said softly but sternly.

He threw his violet cape around his shoulders and made his way to the door. Alazondra silently stared at him as he made his leave. She could hear each footstep solidly step upon the wooden floor of the house. She watched as the door creaked open and the last fold of the violet cape slunk around the edge of the closing door. With a muffled thud, it closed and her father sighed loudly. Alazondra looked up at her father. Her eyes couldn’t meet his.

“Father, I’m sorry. It’s all my fault. They are after *me*...I’m...sorry. Maybe I should go pack up some things in my trunk?” she said. She averted her jade eyes towards her mother. Kiley looked at Matthias, taking his hand lightly.

“No, dear,” said Matthias, “it is not your fault. You’ve nothing to be sorry for, and you’re not going anywhere.” He lightly shook his head. Then, Alazondra sighed and made her way to her room.

In her room, she looked out at the window. She wondered silently, *Who am I? Why are these people after me? Am I actually who they are looking for anyway?* Question after question rambled through her mind. For all the inquiries her mind sent out, no answer could she fathom for any of them. Alazondra’s jade eyes gazed out her window.

The sun was setting, embellishing all things in its range with a golden, orange hue. The sky was lit up like fire, and brilliant colors streaked across as if in a prideful last stand against the forthcoming moon. In the very distance, there was a dark figure against all the light. It moved across the terra smoothly. Soon another figure, with long hair, came across the view to meet the other figure.

This piqued Alazondra’s curiosity. Silently, she stole outside through her window. She made her way towards the two figures, not to be found. Alazondra slunk behind a

rock and peered silently. In the flaming light she could scarcely make out the two figures, but, to her surprise, she found it was Sekei and a woman.

“I do recall, Sekei Othedius,” she said.

“It is certainly a pleasure to see you again, my dear lady. Your reputation, I’ve heard, has grown darker since our last meeting,” Sekei said.

In the unfocused light, Alazondra peered at the woman intensely. The woman wore a long blue robe, trimmed in a gold sort of thread. Her boots were fashioned of rare dark leather. Then she saw her infamous name embroidered on the left side of her chest in gold thread. This woman was no ordinary woman. She was known far and wide. In the rumors, she was a vicious killer, but to those who really knew, she was a skilled fighter who was brilliant in any melee combat.

This woman was Neva the Swordslinger. Alazondra, after making this realization, felt in awe in Neva’s presence. Neva was still in her teens, yet she had such a reputation. She was a woman as well. Alazondra and her friends had idolized this woman, all swearing they’d do the same as she somehow. Then, Alazondra pondered to herself as to what a fighter such as Neva would be doing with a Mage. Alazondra listened even more closely.

“Yes, I’ve killed quite a good number. I suppose this scares the public. The city boys are constantly on the watch for me. I hear I have a bounty almost equivalent to Lord James’ vaults.”

Sekei nodded and laughed. Alazondra continued watching silently. Sekei stepped closer to Neva, and then placed a hand at her hip, sliding her robe back. A dark leather belt that the robe concealed became exposed. Alazondra viewed the blades which were kept in the belt. She was in awe that a woman had a blade at all. Neva had not just one but three.

“Hmm, sounds enthralling,” Sekei said softly.

Then, it hit Alazondra; Sekei was in love with Neva. Alazondra found it an interesting romance, a mage and a fighter. She merely pondered about this. She couldn’t tell if Neva felt the same exactly though.

As the sun plummeted behind the western hills, the stars began to illuminate brightly overhead as if the gods had shaken them from the darkness of sleep, and Alazondra quietly stole away back to her room. She looked out the window watching the two figures. She saw Neva’s form slide back from Sekei’s, and a large hawk swept from the skies like a phantom, gracefully seating itself on Neva’s shoulder. Then, Neva walked off towards the western hills, leaving Sekei standing alone.

The next day Alazondra was in the town courtyard, sitting upon the wall of fountain. She watched young children chase a palomino horse throughout the courtyard. Behind her, she heard the sound of a person seating himself on the wall, too. Alazondra turned her head, her jade eyes seeking behind her. She found sitting behind her was one of the Mages. He was in a dark red robe that exposed his dusty leather boots down at the bottom. He looked rather young. Alazondra guessed he must have been around nineteen or twenty years of age.

The Mage nodded his head, gazing at Alazondra with his crystal blue eyes, and said to her, “Hello Alazondra.” His voice was smooth and quiet, and his eyes shining brightly. She smiled at him lightly.

“Good day, sir,” she replied. The man took her hand, kissing it in a gentlemanly

manner.

“Allow me to introduce myself,” he said. “I am Fritchel Gamion. I am merely an enchanter. I am pleased to meet you in person, lady.” Alazondra smiled even more broadly, now lightly blushing.

“And a pleasure it is to meet you,” she replied politely.

Alazondra felt his eyes seemingly peer into her very soul. Fritchel reached into his robe. Alazondra slid back nervously, not knowing what was concealed in the folds of the crimson fabric. He pulled his hand out of his robe, brandishing a thornless, white rose. Fritchel placed it in Alazondra’s hair and smiled at her, saying nothing.

“Why, thank you, Sir Gamion. It’s beautiful,” Alazondra whispered.

Smiling, Fritchel rose to his feet. He bowed briefly before disappearing into the crowd of people. It was the last she would see of him for quite some time.

The Mages, though, never lost track of Matthias. They kept close tags on him at all time, constantly pestering him. Soon the mere pestering turned into threats. The threats were carried out in no time. Alazondra’s father paid for his stubbornness. On hunts, the Mages would take his pelts, trophies, and other hunting prizes. Occasionally he got in fights with them, coming home a mess. Alazondra wished he would just let her go. She no longer wished to be in Piliad. She grew restless and wanted to escape.

One night, the four Mages stormed into the Graystone house uninvited. Sekei forced the door to their home open and approached Alazondra. The other three Mages’ boots clamored on the wooden floor. They gathered by the door, awaiting their leader’s next moves. She was sitting by the hearth, embroidering flowers into a small piece of cloth. Sekei placed a hand on her shoulder and her fingers became unsteady with the needle. Her hands shook so much that she dropped the cloth and merely looked at the dusty floorboards, hoping she’d find any clues as to what to do.

“Alazondra,” Sekei said softly, “it is time.”

She averted her green eyes to the hallway as footsteps boomed closely. She saw her father’s looming shadow roll onto the floor. Alazondra couldn’t bring herself to look at her father, and she merely looked at the glowing hearth listlessly. Matthias entered and glared at all four of the Mages.

“You! Don’t you dare touch my daughter!” Matthias roared, his voice reverberating though out the small stone room.

Sekei, with a fixed sneer upon his lean face, placed a hand atop Alazondra’s flaxen hair, stroking it softly.

“Well, then you won’t mind this, seeing as she *isn’t* your daughter!” Sekei yelled.

Matthias turned and made for his spear, but Sekei speedily raised his staff. A blue spark ejected from its tapered end, sending the spear clattering onto the floor and across the room. Kiley, from the hall, silently watched. Matthias looked up at Sekei, his hazel eyes widened. He backed up against the wall, his steel boots hitting the stone wall with a deafening smack.

“Now, Matthias. Are we going to cooperate, or does this have to be violent?” Sekei asked, still sneering.

Matthias looked at Alazondra with a desperate glance. He sighed. Fritchel, from the shadows, made his way across the room and placed an arm about Alazondra.

“Alazondra, if there’s nothing you need from your quarters then let us leave now,” he said quietly.

Alazondra looked down at her small stitching and sighed. *Am I really leaving? Is this a dream?* She thought to herself. Alazondra merely glanced up at Fritchel, just shaking her head. Matthias turned a bright hue of maroon.

“You’re not taking my daughter anywhere. She’s my little girl,” he said sternly.

“Well,” said Sekei, “you’re a stubborn ass, aren’t you? Give it up, Matthias. She can’t stay here. You’re being a fool. For this...you shall pay. None interfere with Sekei Othedius.” Sekei forcefully extended his arm, his staff lightly grazing Matthias’ chest. He kept it placed at the man’s sternum menacingly.

Kiley shouted, “No! I shan’t have violence. Think of Alazondra!”

Sekei, his eyes straight on Matthias, replied, “Sorry, ma’am, but this violence is for Alazondra.”

Having said that, he jerked the staff upwards in a smooth motion. Sekei deftly twisted it in his hands and then brought the end down upon Matthias’ cranium. Matthias was knocked off his feet and skidded into a nearby table. A small trickle of crimson slowly slid down his forehead. Matthias looked down at the floorboards; he knew there was no stopping this Mage.

“Father!” Alazondra cried out.

“No,” he said heavily, “I am...not your father...” Kiley let out a sigh and then ran down the hall sobbing quietly. Alazondra merely looked at her father, her jade eyes boring into him. Not a word was spoken, but the silence said it all.

“Go,” he said before limping down the hall after his wife.

“Now, I apologize you had to see that, miss, but what must be done must be done,” Sekei said softly, his sneer now replaced with a soft smile. His eyes shone with the light of sympathy and compassion.

Alazondra, with her head held low, shed only a single tear.

“Yes sir, let us take our leave, now. I have no need of any belongings,” she said, sniffing lightly. “They aren’t truly mine anyhow,” Alazondra added bitterly.

She felt all four pairs of eyes on her. She felt Fritchel’s blue ones the most. His soul-seeking eyes peered into her soul. Sekei nodded to the three Mages and all five of them left the Graystone homestead, never to see it again.

As they walked off into the darkness, Alazondra pondered to herself. *Why had they never before thought of even telling me that I wasn’t their real daughter? I feel so empty. I am no one. I am not Alazondra after all, or am I?* The more she thought to herself, the angrier she grew. Alazondra merely kept it all inside; she walked on, bottling her fury. She knew not where she was going but didn’t care to ask.

They reached an abandoned mine, where once vast amounts of silver were unearthed. Alazondra looked over back at the small village. There were small streams of smoke hovering over houses; their own forces pushing themselves upwards, slightly curling in the air before dissipating into blackness. Small orange flames twinkled like stars, and the grass rustled under her feet. She could not call this place home, and she began to wonder why she even did in the first place. She turned her back upon Piliad, silently saying goodbye to it forever. Sekei finally broke the silence that had followed them since they marched from the Graystone home.

“Alazondra, stay here. We will be back shortly. We just need to get something, and then we shall be on our way,” he said. “Fritchel will stay here with you.”

Alazondra nodded, and he turned. She watched him until the very tail of his robe

was emerged in darkness. Alazondra wondered how they were able to see through the cave's darkness, but they were Mages after all. Fritchel cleared his throat, catching Alazondra's attention.

"So ma'am, are you...alright? I sense you're perhaps...angry?" Fritchel said silently, in a near whisper. Alazondra merely nodded.

"Would you like to know where we are headed?" he asked.

"Not that it really matters. I have no home," Alazondra replied bitterly. Fritchel frowned slightly.

"Well, nevertheless, we are headed to the North, to Mount Kuthpast, Fort Witherfroth. Hmm, now, though, I'd hardly call it a fort. It's become more of a market city, an outpost for the Northern hunters and fur trappers," he said, his voice still very soft.

Alazondra merely looked up at him, listening quietly. She watched him look down at the village. His eyes slowly scanned the quaint place. Fritchel's breath came out in a fine, white vapor, slowly wreathing about his nose before vanishing. He pulled up the collar on his robe some and began to fidget with the straps on his belt.

Alazondra looked at the mining cavern's entrance. The stalactites hung grimly in the dark. She heard footsteps, though more than what two people could make. Two thick white mists erupted from the darkness. Alazondra took a step back.

"Here they are. The little buggers walked all the way down the mine, looking for food probably, the gluttons!" she heard one of the Mages yell.

Alazondra relaxed a bit as she saw the three Mages pile out of the cave mouth leading four horses. She looked at the gargantuan beasts, standing and breathing slowly. Alazondra watched as Sekei and the other mages placed hard leather saddles upon the horses. A cold state of fact hit Alazondra like a kick in the guts; she had never ridden a horse. Alazondra peered at Sekei uncertainly.

"Let's mount up. We've nigh on the whole country to cross. Fritchel, you ride with Alazondra." Sekei stated.

Alazondra glimpsed over at Fritchel, and he nodded. Fritchel strode up to a tall, bay horse and agilely raised himself into the saddle, gently seating himself. Fritchel's robes were pulled back and revealed long, leather greaves over fine cotton pants. He scooted forward and extended his palm to Alazondra. She took his hand and he lifted her in a single thrust into the saddle just behind him. Alazondra felt awkward riding in sidesaddle fashion, but forced herself to accustom to it.

"Now, we'll get you thick pants when we reach Viland. For now, ride as such and don't fall off; that's all the advice I have," Fritchel said with a grin.

His grin gave her a small sense of confidence. Fritchel grasped her hands and placed them at his belt to hold onto. Fritchel and the other Mages took up their reins and each clucked to their horses. At once, they were off, and the journey had begun.

Their horses thundered over the dry farmland. Alazondra tightly clutched Fritchel's thick belt. Tall trees swiftly flew past her in a green blur. She could feel the wind whipping her hair behind her wildly. She decided that she just might like the new life ahead of her.

Soon, the night had ended. The horses were now at a slow, steady walking pace. The sky was silver and a small belt of gold arched across the horizon beautifully. It was dawn, and Alazondra could feel the heavy weight of exhaustion. Fritchel tossed a glance

over his shoulder briefly.

“Tired, Alazondra?” he asked.

Alazondra peered up at him and nodded, her eyelids lightly drooping over her green eyes. Fritchel let out a whistle and all four horses turned off the path and into some cover. It was nothing but a few trees, but it would do. Fritchel dismounted his horse. He held out a hand to help Alazondra down, and she took it. She slid off the horse, feeling how sore her legs were. Fritchel, then, unbuttoned his robe and handed it to Alazondra.

“Here, take it. Don’t want you to be cold,” he said softly.

Alazondra graciously took the robe from him. In her hands, she felt its warmth from his body heat. She wrapped the overly large robe around her and glanced at Fritchel. Without his robe, he no longer looked like a venturesome Mage. His fine woven clothes gave him the look of a noble. Alazondra watched as he walked out of the small, tree covered area. She pulled the robe over her tightly and lay under a large oak, falling asleep instantly.

The sun rose sometime later, but Alazondra did not. She slept through the day until the night. Her eyes opened to dark scenery. The sky was a deep blue, near black. Alazondra groggily rubbed her eyes and looked around. She saw the four Mages conversing around a small, glowing fire. Alazondra stood and silently walked towards the Mages.

The four all looked up and greeted, “Hello Alazondra.”

She gave a small wave and sat down between Sekei and Fritchel. She peered at them all. Alazondra came to realize she didn’t know the two other Mages.

“Sirs, may I know your names? I haven’t yet learned them,” she said.

The Mage in the grey robe stood and bowed.

“I,” he said, “am Razule Falks, Mage and Alchemist,” Alazondra nodded.

The other one, dressed in an emerald robe, did likewise and said, “I am Johnez Meredin. I, too, am a Mage and Alchemist.” Alazondra nodded and peered at both of them. They looked alike. They both had brown eyes and dark chestnut hair pulled into small ponytails.

Sekei asked, “Did you rest well, Alazondra?”

“Yes, sir,” Alazondra replied.

Sekei nodded and said, “Good.”

The Mages conversed again. Alazondra noticed how silent Fritchel was. His eyes would merely scan his three companions, yet scarcely say a word. Alazondra had been one of few words herself. As she sat there listening to the men, she thought to herself.

I am here, she thought. I’m with these complete strangers, only known by a name and a face to me. I don’t even know exactly where we are going. All I know is that it’s Witherfroth, a city in the North. I don’t know what’s going to happen there, or even why we are going there. Maybe my real family is there, if they are still alive. I’m stuck here, and I can’t leave. I feel like a prisoner.

Alazondra sighed lightly and walked a little ways from the group. She looked up at the stars twinkling overhead. They gave her a sense of comfort and strengthening within herself. *Even if I am a prisoner, I am never going to quit trying to find who I am. Never.*

With these thoughts, she returned to the others as they were putting out the fire. They saddled the horses and prepared themselves to leave. Alazondra lightly stroked the

horse's head as Fritchel mounted. He held his hand out to Alazondra, and she took it. Once again, she was seated atop the horse behind Fritchel, tightly holding his belt.

The day passed uneventfully. The company passed several villages. One they stopped in, Viland, was a large market town, and there they bought new pants for Alazondra. They became further from Piliad with each step. Alazondra knew that now she could never go back nor could she escape. The possibilities of her survival if she somehow escaped the four were very slim. She was not yet accustomed to this rough life, but she knew that soon she would; it was hard. They rode through the night and to the middle of the day. Their exhaustion was great, but they traveled far.

They chose a small, remote grouping of trees. The company was now in the more rural and rugged territory of the Plainlands region. Alazondra slid off of the horse herself and leaned against a tree silently. Her eyes averted about quickly before drifting off to sleep.

Alazondra opened her eyes to an unknown time. She could see the sky was grey, and she assumed it was sometime in the early hours before sunrise. Alazondra's sleep was disturbed by a sound. She sat up straight, listening to all around her. There was a large shadowy figure hanging under a large elm a few feet where Johnez was lying. Alazondra took a second look, and, to her horror, found that he was lying in a grotesque manner, with his legs sprawled and mouth hanging in a gnarly fashion.

Alazondra was in such a shock that paralyzed her. In the pale light, she could make out the thin streaming of blood from his lower abdomen. Her emerald eyes focused intently on the dark figure hovering by the elm.

A small hissing sound emanated presumably from the figure, vaguely wording, "Human..."

Alazondra stood silently and looked around. She knew not to whom he was speaking. The figure took a step forward out of the shadows. Alazondra backed up a few steps realizing that this was a real Lycan standing before her. The Lycan must have measured to about nine feet when standing on two feet. Scars were slashed randomly over his coarse black hair, and his eyes were a dark red color.

Alazondra's back was roughly edged against the tree behind her. Looking into the Lycan's dark eyes, something within her, something primordial, awoke. She could almost physically feel it. Alazondra calmly slid from her nervous pose and stood facing the Lycan. Her face held a look that clearly said, *Come get me.*

The Lycan lowered himself to all fours and slowly stepped towards Alazondra, sensing her aggressiveness. Then, he jumped at her, arcing his back and aiming his canine jaws for her neck. A hideous snarl erupted from his mouth as he charged. Alazondra could almost foresee his movement. She could sense it somehow. As his form jettisoned towards hers, Alazondra took a dive under his forelegs. She tucked herself up, rolling and narrowly missing his gargantuan hind legs. Alazondra agilely caught her feet and jumped to a crouch as she smirked at the Lycan.

The Lycan whirled about, facing her. He thrust his claws into the crouched form of Alazondra. She merely slid her foot to the left an inch, and the Lycan's claws became embedded into the soil at Alazondra's feet. His face was lowered to hers. The Lycan snarled viciously and bared his teeth fiercely. His eyes locked onto Alazondra's, and he froze. He ejected his claws from the earthly terra and bowed lowly on all fours.

"Rolath. It is you, the Incarnate. I should have known from the physique in your

movements,” the Lycan said, his voice sounding like that of a noble.

Alazondra peered at him and replied, “I know not of what you speak.” Her eyes drifted to the body of Johnez. She felt a pang of hot anger.

“Young one, you do not understand, but soon you will. Come now, and join your brethren. We have long awaited your return,” he said.

“You,” she replied coldly, “are nothing but a cold, killing beast.”

A look of shock passed through both the Lycan and Alazondra for she having said such. Alazondra never knew how cold the human heart could get, even her own.

From behind her, a voice yelled, “Lycan! Get away from her!”

Alazondra turned to find Sekei with his staff held high. The Lycan raised himself to two legs and snarled loudly at him. Sekei aimed his staff towards the Lycan.

“I’m warning you,” Sekei said sternly.

The Lycan turned and bounded into the woods. As he turned, Alazondra looked at his back. Upon the back of his right shoulder, there was a ‘D’ looking as if it had been branded. Alazondra felt numb as she saw his tail flick over a bush before completely disappearing. All the trees in the small grouping silently whispered in the wind, but no other things dared make a noise. It was a silence Alazondra favored above all others. She needed a minute to regain herself. The encountering and the awkward primordial feeling she had disoriented her mind a bit.

Finally breaking the silence, Sekei called out, “Alazondra, are you alright?” Sekei was standing over Johnez’s body, mutilated past any familiar recognition.

Alazondra peered at Johnez, and then to Sekei.

“Yes, sir. What about Johnez? Is there no way to revive him somehow with magic?” Alazondra asked.

“Well,” Sekei replied, “I am afraid there is no such magic. Only in fairy tales people are ‘resurrected’ or ‘revived from the dead’. It’s an unstoppable force, death.”

Alazondra nodded, sniffing lightly. The thought of Johnez dying was hard. He was an honest man who worked hard. His death was undeserving.

“Let us make haste with this work, for we must be on our way. And do not cry for Johnez. I am sure he would rather you not. His death was unjust, but we will hold our heads high carrying his memory,” Sekei said. “Hmm, where are Razule and Fritchel?”

Alazondra found comfort in his words, yet was stilled saddened. She peered over by the ashes of the fire where the Mages had slept. She saw no trace of either Fritchel or Razule and began wondering herself.

Alazondra and Sekei dug a shallow grave and placed Johnez marred remains into it. *He was quite young*, Alazondra thought to herself. *The harshest of consequences tend to fall upon the best of people, the most innocent. Why is that?* Alazondra sighed lightly.

Sekei saddled the horses while the two waited patiently for the rest of their company to return. Alazondra gently stroked the muzzle of Fritchel’s horse. His name was Ferdinand, and he was a beautiful bay stallion. His big, brown eyes flicked left and right viewing his surroundings. His large nostrils slowly inhaled and exhaled as he silently peered. Suddenly, Ferdinand’s ears perked straight up. He nickered lowly and turned. Alazondra peered in the same direction finding Razule and Fritchel approaching.

“Hmm,” Sekei grumbled, “finally.”

“Hallo! Sorry we’ve been out, had some tracking to do. There have been Lycan sightings, North of here and...had to...” Razule’s voice trailed off, spotting the stone

atop the mound of freshly turned earth. “Where’s...”

Sekei cleared his throat and replied grimly, “He’s dead.”

A look of sadness passed between all four there. A silence grew until Sekei took Fritchel and Razule aside, telling them what happened. Alazondra continued stroking Ferdinand’s soft nose. The Mages finished conversing and mounted their horses. Johnez’s horse stood with a bare back. Fritchel took Johnez’s saddle packs and distributed them among the three left. Then, he slapped the horse’s hindquarters, releasing him into the wild. Fritchel helped Alazondra onto the saddle behind him.

“We must get to Fort Dover. We must warn them of the Lycans’ movement!” Sekei yelled as all three horses thundered off into the distance.

Alazondra rode a lot easier now that she was getting used to it, and the chaps helped too. They traveled fast over the plains to reach the Fort. Their horses became exhausted, but they had an emergency. The company needed to warn those at Fort Dover. They needed to get there in time.

Soon they saw the faint shape of the Dover fort and encouraged their tired horses to continue just a bit farther. They came to a screeching halt as they clattered over the Dover River Bridge. All four of them looked up at the fort. They found it in ruin. Smoke billowed from various, scattered bits of buildings. The flags were torn to shreds, and claw marks were apparent on the burning trees. For a moment, Alazondra thought Sekei just might cry. His horror was so great. There was a deadly silence in the air, and it sent chills down Alazondra’s spine.

“They...they’ve already been here. We’re...too late,” Sekei said silently. Fritchel and Razule silently hung their heads.

“You think we should look for survivors?” Alazondra asked.

Sekei peered at her blankly, and then silently nodded. He nudged his horse forward and entered the debris littered leftovers of what was a brilliant fort.

“We should watch just in case there are any still here,” Razule shouted.

“I’d be able to smell them if they were. I don’t smell anything, but I do feel the aura they left. These weren’t Alpha Lycans I can tell you that,” Fritchel replied.

“Fritchel,” Alazondra whispered, “what are Alpha Lycans?”

“Well, they are—” Fritchel began.

Sekei loudly cleared his throat, interrupting him mid-sentence. Fritchel merely sighed and averted his eyes towards the ground. Alazondra could tell he wanted to tell her, but he couldn’t. She began to wonder why she wasn’t allowed to know some things. She focused her eyes upon the ground they were passing, looking for anyone alive.

Her eyes soon grew weary, but she wanted to find someone, anyone. *Lycans*, she thought to herself, *are horrid. I thought they lived up North. Why are they here?* Alazondra turned and looked at Razule.

“Let me see that map,” she demanded.

Razule leaned over his pommel and handed it to her. Sekei turned in his saddle, watching curiously. Alazondra studied the map. The Harthyung Forest was way up to the north. They were currently located at Fort Dover, which she found on the Dover River. There was a few large lines just before the Harthyung forest labeled *Qudante*, *Mivon*, and, *Gomeck*.

“What are these lines, Razule? What do they mean?” She asked.

“Well,” said he, “those three are Valleys. Qudante is the biggest valley in Liam.”

Alazondra nodded.

“Then, how did they manage to get past it? I thought they always stayed within the Harthyung Forest,” she said.

“Well, that’s what Razule and I were trying to figure out this morning. They’re not trying to take over, I can say that much. I am thinking they are after something. They’ve gutted Dover, and, by the way everything is slashed, opened, and broken, it sure seems like they are looking for something or someone mayhap,” Fritchel replied, his voice quiet.

Sekei sputtered, “Miss, that’s enough questions. We have to get going.”

Alazondra looked at him and nodded silently, her eyes fixed coldly upon his. She really wanted to know more, but yet again, she was being held back. Alazondra wondered when the time would come when she should know what she wanted to know.

They continued riding through the sad remains of Dover. Alazondra had never been to Fort Dover before, but could tell from the debris that it was once a beautiful fort. Shards from stain glass windows were all about, and small broken stones from the large engraved boulders that made up the walls were scattered randomly. It was sad to think that something as nice as this was torn up just because they were looking for something. In the hidden legends about Lycans, Alazondra never heard anything like this. She read that they lived in an underground city in the Harthyung, with a civilization imperial to the humans’ societies.

After the sun had started to go down, they lost hope. They had passed most of the debris and turned over board after board only to find carnage, no human lives waiting to be saved.

“We must head on, even though we are all tired. We can’t rest here tonight. Let us get to some shelter a ways away from here. It’s too dark to search anymore,” Sekei said.

Alazondra was so tired, and she didn’t know how long she would go on. She just knew she had to. As she rode on, she laid her head upon Fritchel’s back lightly. He turned and looked down at Alazondra. He gave her a soft smile.

“Sleep now, Alazondra. It’s alright,” Fritchel whispered quietly.

Alazondra closed her eyes, burying her head within the soft folds of his robe. Her head was lightly cradled between Fritchel’s shoulder blades as she slept silently.

Alazondra’s jade eyes opened, finding plain darkness. There was seemingly no light. The only way to make out figures was to view the shadows. In the dark, her eyes focused slowly to the dimness. She could just make out the form of a single being. Alazondra examined it for a while, attempting to decipher what the being was in the poor light. She slowly crept towards the figure.

“Hello miss,” the familiar voice of Fritchel said. It was comforting to hear his voice and not anything else’s.

The wind struck up a bit and a smoky cloud uncovered the moon, which was pitched low in the sky. Its luminescent face cast a glow upon the area.

“Hi Fritchel,” she greeted in return.

Alazondra quietly seated herself on a large rock next to him. He was sitting on a log with his back against a tree. Alazondra peered at him wordlessly. Fritchel was wearing a white, buttoned shirt with pants of some brown material instead of his crimson robe. *I guess, she thought to herself, that’s why I didn’t recognize him.* His shirt gently ruffled in the breeze.

“So why aren’t you asleep?” Alazondra asked.

“Well,” he replied, “why aren’t *you*?” Alazondra shrugged lightly. She really didn’t know why she had awoken. She still was tired, but she didn’t want to sleep.

Fritchel merely nodded in response.

“Fritchel...?” Alazondra said.

“Yes?”

“Well, I’ve been wanting to know. Why are we going to Witherfroth?” she asked plainly. Fritchel narrowed his brow in thought.

“We are going there because we have to, well...” his voice trailed off.

“Is my real family there?” she inquired. He fell into silence.

“Yes, I...suppose you could say that,” Fritchel finally said.

Alazondra looked away. She knew he was lying. Sekei had told him not to give any information out, and Alazondra knew Fritchel wanted to tell, though. She sighed and looked at the earthen terra.

She finally asked, “Why can’t I know anything? I know you’re lying Fritchel. Why doesn’t Sekei want me knowing anything? Why couldn’t I have just stayed in Piliad?” Alazondra was close to tears.

“And live a lie your whole life?” Fritchel said.

“It’s better than being way out here,” she replied hotly, “where I don’t know anyone. Nothing is familiar, and what if I really am not the person you look for? What if I *am* Alazondra?” A small tear streaked down her cheek. Fritchel turned and placed an arm around her, gently patting her back.

“Shh, I understand that this is all new and frightening, but everything will work out. Also, we are more than sure that you are whom we seek,” Fritchel said comfortingly.

“I am whom you seek so you say, but *I* have no clue *who I am!*” Alazondra felt a deep anger rise within herself. Her voice grew steadily louder with each syllable that passed her lips, and it resonated through the quiet of the locale.

“Hey now, we are only trying to help you and get you home...” he said quietly. Alazondra shook her head.

“I have no home. I belong nowhere. You took me from the only home I had, and for what, this? It’s all nothing...no where...” Her voice trailed off. Even in the dark light, Alazondra could see sadness pass over his beautiful blue eyes.

He said, his voice almost choked, “You don’t even remember your real home? You...don’t remember your father? Or mother? Or...me?”

Alazondra heard him sniff lightly. She placed her head in her hands and averted her eyes to the ground once more.

“No...I don’t know where home is. I have no clue who my mother and father are or were, and I only know you by a name and a face...” she replied softly. Those last words seemingly hung in the air. Fritchel embraced Alazondra tightly, merely sighing as he let go. He clasped her hand in both of his, gently stroking it.

“We will find exactly who you are, together. Okay? We’ll put it all back together, piece by piece until everything that’s gone wrong is fixed for you,” Fritchel said.

His eyes were gleaming in the darkness like crystals. Alazondra gently wrapped her arms around his neck and laid her head on his shoulder, sniffing some. Fritchel held her as she cried and said not a word.

That night Alazondra fell asleep crying within his arms. Fritchel gently awoke her

in the morning early before any of the other Mages had risen. Alazondra rubbed her eyes and peered up at him inquiringly.

“Quietly now, follow me,” he whispered urgently.

Alazondra did so without question. Fritchel led her up a hill a good distance from the camp. He nodded towards a large stump and seated himself on a large rock next to it. Alazondra sat on the stump and looked up at him.

“What are we doing here?” She asked.

“We are watching the sunrise,” Fritchel replied. “Also, I wanted to tell you some things about myself, so you’d at least know about me. All I ask is that this remains in secrecy. Sekei would have my head if he knew.”

“Of course. Please, do tell,” Alazondra leaned back, making herself comfortable on the stump. She was more than willing to hear about Fritchel; for she knew somewhere in there she came into the story, which would be one step closer to finding who she was.

“Well,” he began, “my name is not really Fritchel Gamion. I am an enchanter, but it’s just a small hobby, I suppose. I...” His eyes fell to the ground and he inhaled deeply. “I am a Lycan.” It took a minute for it to fully hit Alazondra.

“You...what?” she stammered. Fritchel merely remained quiet, his head hung low. “Oh, it doesn’t bother me, Fritchel. Honest, I just am a little surprised. I have never seen you turn into one, and they turn nightly, don’t they? I saw you just last night...” Her voice trailed off. His blue eyes seemed clouded.

“That’s what my ring is for. It keeps me from turning into a beast every night, and you’re sure it really doesn’t bother you?” he inquired.

“No,” Alazondra answered truthfully, “it does not.”

His lips parted into a bright smile. He leaned forward on his rock and took her hand in his, which was sweaty.

“Thank you. I was worried that it’d scare you. It makes me feel better knowing you trust me and not fear me,” Fritchel whispered. Alazondra nodded. She really didn’t fear Fritchel, just his other side.

“My parents,” said he, “were the leaders in the forest. It’s a long line of descendents. I was supposed to lead, but I got scared. I ran from it all. I was near death out in the cold. I hadn’t eaten in days, and Sekei found me. He brought me to Witherfroth and let me stay in his house. Sekei nursed me back to health, and then he taught me enchanting. Soon, I crafted a ring that would stop me from becoming a Lycan every night. I named ‘The Savior’s Ring.’ Fitting, eh?”

He grinned lightly and glanced at the silver ring on his right middle finger. It was engraved with beautiful designs, and it shone with a faint, blue aura.

“Yes, and soon after Sekei and I began adventuring; the rest is history.”

Alazondra nodded silently as he finished his story. She sat back and thought to herself. *The rest is history? Something tells me it’s more than history, especially considering Sekei was mentioned in the same sentence.* Alazondra felt a slight disappointment in the story, though. Nothing at all was mentioned about her background. She did feel happier in knowing Fritchel’s background. *He’s led an interesting life,* she thought.

“Thank you, Fritchel,” Alazondra said. Fritchel smiled and nodded.

“Of course,” he replied. “Now, just pretend you don’t know, all right? Sekei says you’re not supposed to, er, yet at least. Your time will come when you may know it all,

but, for now, just don't worry about it. And remember, we're in this together."

Alazondra smiled in acknowledgement, but it was a half-hearted smile. She felt empty inside, for she still knew not whom she was. Alazondra came to the bitter realization that she didn't even know her real name. Fritchel placed a hand on her back, and then he stood up.

"Well, we should get back to the others. They may be up now," he said.

His blue eyes were shining again, which gave Alazondra a small sense of hope. As they walked down the grassy hill, Fritchel placed his arm around Alazondra's shoulders. They came back to the others to find they were both up. Razule was saddling the horses, and Sekei was leaning against a tree, peering about.

"There you two are!" he exclaimed. "Where've you been?"

"Well..." Fritchel began.

Alazondra supplied, "We went for a walk. Did you see the sunrise? It was brilliant on the hill up there." Fritchel merely nodded in support.

"Oh, why yes. It was lovely, wasn't it?" Sekei said. He turned and helped Razule with the saddling. Fritchel grinned and peered at Alazondra.

"Little sneak, you're a quick one," he whispered. Alazondra smiled back and laughed lightly.

Once everyone was ready, the four set off towards the North once more, keeping a wary eye out for Lycans. The land before them was a series of smooth rolling plains. There were small groupings of trees dotting the grassland. The wind whipped Alazondra's flaxen hair and coolly curled around her appendages, chilling her. She could feel the cold winds of the North against her face, and she liked it.

Then, in the silence came the screech of a bird. Overhead it swiftly glided over us and hovered in the air. It flapped its chestnut wing and circled over head once more before flying back in the direction it came.

"Hmm," Sekei mused quietly to himself, "hawks don't dwell here, and if I am not mistaken Neva's hawk is brown."

"What? Neva?" Razule inquired. "I thought they executed her."

"Neva, no. She is above death," Sekei said with a slight grin.

Alazondra wondered what he meant by being 'above death.' She presumed that he was referring to her combative skills. Alazondra wanted to meet Neva. From all she heard about her, Neva sounded heroic.

Then, a loud whistle was heard. It pierced through the area, and the air seemed to vibrate with that noise. Without warning, Sekei pushed his horse into a gallop and fled in the direction of the hawk. The others followed, not questioning anything. *She has to be here, Alazondra thought. Sekei knows it.* The hawk took a dive in a thick nestle of trees and disappeared from sight.

As Sekei reached the edge of the trees, he jumped off his horse and ran into the small wooded area. The other three jumped off their horses, but stayed just outside the trees. Sekei ran in further, his eyes searching continuously.

"Neva!" he called out.

There was no reply. Sekei sighed and hung his head lowly. Then, something grabbed him from behind. There was an arm around his neck, squeezing tightly. He yelled aloud before a hand clamped over his mouth. He tried turning around to see the attacker.

A voice said in his ear, "Caught you."

He continued to struggle to escape the grasp. Just outside, they heard the yell and stormed into the forest together. Alazondra heard some heavy rustling. Silently, she crept up behind a tree and peered around it. There she saw a humorous scene.

Neva had grabbed Sekei from behind. Sekei was struggling, not knowing it was her. Neva had a slight grin on her face, seemingly holding back laughter. Alazondra tried hard to keep her laughter in. Fritchel and Razule walked up behind Alazondra.

"What's going on?" Razule asked frantically.

Alazondra giggled silently and pointed to Neva. Razule eyes darted towards the scene. A small smile spread across his face, then it quickly vanished.

"That's Neva!" he exclaimed.

"What?" Fritchel yelled. The two of them came rushing up to Sekei and Neva. Neva looked a little startled at first. She grinned, dropped Sekei onto a pile of dead fern leaves, and began laughing. Sekei sat there, breathing deeply. Then, he looked up at Neva, and he too began laughing.

"Ah, Neva! I should have known it was you. Hah, no wonder I couldn't pull out of that grasp," Sekei exclaimed. Fritchel and Razule peered at her wordlessly.

"It's good to see you. I didn't expect you to be out here. What's the cause?" she asked. She looked like everything from the legends. Alazondra peered at her in admiration. Neva was in her infamous blue robe with the pale gold trim, exposing her custom leather armor. Her chestnut hair cascaded about her shoulders, and her eyes were steely grey.

"Bringing her home," Sekei replied, pointing to Alazondra. Neva nodded.

She bent forward in a deep, graceful bow and said with a warm smile, "Hallo there. I'm Neva the Swordslinger." Sekei laughed a bit.

Alazondra replied, "I'm Alazondra. It's a pleasure." Alazondra gave a small bow in return. Neva's hawk screeched loudly from a tree branch above.

"What?" she exclaimed. The bird seemed to nod its head to her. "Alright, alright." The hawk leapt from the branch and soared off into the blue sky. Alazondra gazed up at her inquisitively.

"Well, I'm off. I apologize for leaving in such a rush. Something has come up. Maybe I'll see you another time soon. Farewell and good luck to you!" she shouted over her shoulder as she bounded out of the timbered area. Sekei's smile slowly dissipated, and then he, followed by the others, walked out of the forest.

"She's alive?" Razule asked him as they walked.

"Yes. She's been working quite secretly now. That's why a rumor was started that she died. It's a long story," Sekei replied, keeping his eyes straightforward.

"So, how does she know you?" Fritchel inquired. Sekei said nothing. All three of them looked at him expectantly, but he didn't reply. Alazondra wondered herself how they met. They exited the grouping of trees, and then they mounted their horses. Soon they were headed back to the trail and onto the north.

For the next few days, Sekei was somewhat contained. His green eyes were distant and glazed over. He spoke very little. Alazondra had the feeling he missed Neva. She couldn't imagine what it was like to not seeing the person you loved everyday. The daily patterns were the same; they rode, found shelter, slept, and got up to do it all again. The rolling plains seemed to continue on forever, and the horizon seemed to hold no

promises.

Finally, one chilly morning, Alazondra arose and decided to go for a small walk. She walked straight north, following the path they were taking. It slightly sloped upwards for sometime. She continued to follow it, losing track of time and distance. Alazondra reached the point it dropped and receded into flatness. There was nothing. She raised her emerald oculars to the horizon. There was the faint outline of large mountainous landscape.

She stopped dead in her steps and stood there, gazing in awe. She wondered what these landforms were. Alazondra's mind attempted to recollect what she had seen on the map. *Let's see*, she thought to herself. *There were the plains, then what next? The forest? No, the valley.* Alazondra gave the mountainous figures a last glance, knowing she'd soon be crossing them somehow. Then, she made her way back to where the others were.

Only Fritchel was up, as to be expected. He was a light sleeper. Alazondra wondered about when he really did sleep.

"Where were you off to, miss?" he asked.

"Just walking. I saw the valley," Alazondra replied.

"Oh?" said he. "We're that far along?" He snatched the map that was crumpled in Razule's hand. "Hmm, yes. Well, indeed we are. Then, there's the forest. Mhm, then...well once we pass the forest we are basically there." Fritchel smiled a bit.

Alazondra grinned back in return, but the thought of going through the forest scared her. The fear somewhat dwelled within her, unmoving and unnerving. Alazondra tried to set her mind off it and think of other things.

Lycans, she thought, *they vary greatly. I mean, Fritchel, was he a snarling vicious beast? He's so well tempered. Maybe he isn't a bad Lycan, maybe he is.* Alazondra hoped he wasn't anything like the type she had encountered. Of course, knowing he had to use magic to control his other side didn't comfort her much either.

Fritchel tossed a glance in Sekei's direction. Sekei was lying there awake. His eyes had that far away look.

"Boy, he's sure down. I wish I could help the man, but I haven't the faintest what his problem is. I'm thinking it has something to do with Neva," Fritchel said quietly. Alazondra looked up at him and merely nodded. Fritchel peered at Alazondra suspiciously.

"And you don't know anything, right?" he said.

"Not a thing," Alazondra replied. A small grin flickered across both of their faces.

"And you expect me to believe that?" Fritchel said. He began laughing lightly.

Alazondra replied, "Hmm, maybe." Alazondra laughed too. Fritchel shook his head and laughed even more. He grabbed Alazondra and began tickling her profusely.

"Aha, what are you going to do now, though?" he laughed.

"Oh, no!" she said through laughter. "Please...stop!"

As Fritchel released her, their eyes met and locked. Both seemed frozen in an awkward stare. His blue eyes curiously stared into her eyes.

Finally, Razule interrupted, "Ahem, let's get going you two."

Fritchel nodded, and then they mounted their horses. Then, they were off once again. Alazondra began to wonder about Fritchel. *He's such a nice person. Although, what did that stare mean exactly?*

She also began to wonder how he fit in her old life, before Matthias abducted her.

Alazondra recalled Fritchel saying, “Or...me?” It made her curious as to what he was supposed to mean to her. She wished more than anything that she really could remember. *What would a Lycan have to do with me? Maybe I come in somewhere when he was living in the Harthyung, since that’s where I was taken from.* Once again, Alazondra was upset that she didn’t know her true identity.

Soon they reached the large valley. It was larger than what Alazondra first thought. They all gathered at the edge of the deep valley. Alazondra peered down it, seeing a rushing river. She looked up at Sekei inquiringly. She hadn’t the faintest of how they were going to cross the huge valley.

“This is the Qudante Valley. It’s the largest of the three. We don’t have to cross them. They are further to the south,” Fritchel whispered over his shoulder. Alazondra nodded.

Then, Razule jumped off of his horse and kneeled at the edge. Alazondra watched curiously as he placed both hands upon the ground, digging each digit into the soil. Quietly, he mumbled something. To Alazondra, it was another language. *Must be a spell,* she thought as she watched apprehensively. A strong wind began to rise up. The grass rippled wildly, and the ground under his palms shook violently.

From the dark soil came a sprouting of four blue tendrils that shot straight from the side of the valley. The tendrils intercrossed and laced with each other as they jettisoned towards the other side. They sparked across the valley, sending a shimmering rain of sparks down at the river below. The tendrils reached the other side of the valley with a loud report. Razule ejected his digits from the terra with a forceful tug and stood there breathing hardly.

“It’s a lot harder to do without Johnez,” said he with a small sigh. He leaned against his horse, his muscles quivering with exhaustion.

Alazondra did not know much about magic and its effects on people, but she could tell that spell he just did was hard. Razule, without another word, jumped atop his steed. Alazondra wondered what the spell would do.

She immediately found that it was a bridge. Sekei led his horse atop the shimmering blue, purely magic structure. The horse did not seem afraid. *The horses all must be special,* Alazondra thought. *I didn’t even see them flinch when Razule first began the spell.* Her grip on Fritchel’s belt became tighter as the horse stepped its front hoof upon the summoned ground. As it stepped another hoof upon the self-suspended bridge, Alazondra loosened her grip and relaxed some. She figured that these men were good Mages, and they knew what they were doing.

Alazondra looked down over the horses flank. She saw the rapid river flowing fiercely below her. The immense boulders, slightly worn by the water, protruded from the blazing water sharply. Step by step, they made their way across the bridge. Once the last horse hoof stepped off, Razule dispelled the bridge with a wave of his hand. It faded into nothing, and they had made their way across the Qudante Valley.

Fritchel let out a sigh and said, “Well, we’ve gotten past the valley.” Sekei nodded silently and kicked his horse onwards.

“We will rest soon. Let’s go a ways,” he said.

His voice sounded drained and empty. Fritchel peered at the map, mumbling quietly to himself. Alazondra peered over his shoulder. Her eyes quickly scanned the map, and she almost fell off the horse when she found what was next on their journey to

Wetherfroth. She inhaled sharply as the earlier fears that dwelled within in her stirred. Fritchel's blue eyes took a glance at her.

"Something the matter, Alazondra?" he asked.

"Next, it's..." Alazondra voice trailed off. Fritchel looked at her with a quizzical face, not sure of what she meant.

"Well," she said, regaining her words, "the forest. It's ahead, and we'll have to cross through it then, won't we?"

"Ah," Fritchel nodded. "You'll be alright, miss. You're safe now, and I'll be keeping close watch on you. Nothing will harm you, my promise." Alazondra smiled at his reassurance.

"Thank you, Fritchel. I'm sure I'll feel better about it now," she said to make him feel better more than herself.

She knew she was in good hands, but her encounter with the Lycan and seeing Fort Dover proved to her that they were ruthless when they wanted to be. The thought of having to go into the forest scared her, and there was already a strong quaking fear within her. Alazondra's grip on Fritchel's belt tightened some as her thoughts continued to disturb her.

The sun once again had sunken down the west horizon. The earth glowed with a dark blue hue, and the quiet of the night entrapped them all. The night was cold with bone chilling winds. They were getting ever closer to the North, and to the season of winter.

They reached a small cave. Sekei sent a single bolt of lightening from his staff into the dark cave. The brightness flashed vividly, illuminating all the rock formations of the cave. Nothing came out, which was what he wanted to find out. Alazondra jumped off Ferdinand's back. She helped Fritchel unsaddle him and take his other tack off. The three Mages went inside to sleep. Alazondra sat at the edge of the cave, leaning against a stone stalagmite. Her thoughts had finally drifted from the thought of the Harthyung Forest to other unpleasant thoughts.

Behind her she heard a set of footsteps approaching her from behind. She recognized the sound of leather and the steps' timing as Fritchel.

"Hello Fritchel," she said without averting her eyes. Fritchel smiled warmly, which when unnoticed by her, and then seated himself next to her.

"Hey. Can't sleep?" he asked. Alazondra merely nodded. "Never been a heavy sleeper myself," he said.

Alazondra was tired. She wanted to sleep, but her fears kept her awake.

"Why can't you sleep tonight?" Fritchel asked. Alazondra sighed lightly, averting her eyes to the ground.

"I don't know. I just can't sleep," she replied. Fritchel looked at Alazondra.

"Hmm. Correct me if I am wrong, but I think the forest is what is troubling you."

"Yes," Alazondra answered, "it does scare me." Fritchel nodded understandingly and hugged her.

"Well, you don't need to be afraid. We're all here for you; we'll look out for you." His voice filled Alazondra with some security, but her quaking fears did not seem to disperse. Through the night, Fritchel stayed by Alazondra's side. She finally drifted off to sleep as the sun's first rays of light pierced the night's darkness.

When Alazondra arose in morning, she could feel the bitter cold of the North. The

sun brightly set the sky a magnificent hue of light azure, but no warmth from the light was felt. Alazondra numbly stood flexing her limbs to produce some warmth. She shivered once lightly, but just shook off the feeling of cold. Alazondra felt void of inner feelings. The journey ahead gave her a bleak outlook on the world.

“Mornin’ Alazondra,” Razule greeted cheerfully.

Alazondra gave him a small nod in response but said not a word. She looked over her shoulder briefly seeing only the Mages doing the usual things. Alazondra headed for a small stream to be alone.

She looked into the rippling water silently and saw her shattered image. Her face had become tan. The sheen in her bright flaxen hair was lost, but the almost-silver hair still possessed its natural beauty. Alazondra looked her image in the eyes, and she found they were the same as ever, a rich emerald color. Alazondra wondered if these green eyes were her real mother’s or father’s eyes. She picked up a small stone and cast it into the reflected image upon the shimmering water. She watched it shatter and hoped to never have to look at it until she could place a name with it.

Her thoughts once again turned to the forest, and she shuddered lightly. *This is insane*, her inner voice told her. *I’m heading into this forbidden place, and who knows if I may ever come out of it...alive.* These strained thoughts struck Alazondra with almost more fear than she could handle. Finally, Fritchel placed a hand on her shoulder and told her that it was time to go. Every fiber in Alazondra’s being wanted to run home, even if she didn’t have one. She wanted to escape and never look back, but she knew she couldn’t.

Alazondra mounted Ferdinand just behind Fritchel as she always did. Reluctantly, she placed her hands at Fritchel’s belt as a sign that she was ready. Fritchel clucked to the bay horse lightly, and Ferdinand eased into steady trot.

“Hey,” Fritchel whispered over his back, “are you alright? You look pale.”

His blue eyes scanned her pale face. Alazondra gave a half-hearted nod in reply. Alazondra averted her eyes to the ground passing beneath her. Soon the company had all stopped. Alazondra lifted her head dizzily to see what was happening.

As her eyes veered upward, she saw a breathtaking sight. They were at the very peak of a large hill overlooking the entirety of the very forest they were headed to. Alazondra inhaled sharply, and she felt her hands gripping Fritchel’s rough leather belt even harder. The vast woodland was flood of pure green, and in the very far distance, white snow could be seen draped across the Harthyung canopy. A strong wind struck up, sending chills down Alazondra’s spine, but more even more chilling was that they had arrived at the forest that was once so forbidden to her.

["A Lycan unlike any other..."]

Alazondra’s heart dropped as she watched Sekei cluck to his horse and move onwards. He took the lead into the forest, followed by Ferdinand and his riders, then Razule followed, bringing up the hind end of the small company. Everything in her mind screamed to turn back. Something told her going here would be a mistake, but she had no choice now. Alazondra wanted to finish what was begun already, and even more, she wanted to find a place she could call home.

She decided to keep a brave state of mind though her insides were screaming with fear. Before she knew it, the immense canopy of the Harthyung loomed over them. Alazondra was in the forest, and there was no going back. Fritchel shifted in the saddle slightly. Alazondra looked up at him and then averted her eyes to her surroundings. Her green eyes flicked from side to side quickly. Alazondra was more determined than anything to get through the place alive. Quietly she cleared her throat.

“Excuse me, I was wondering how long it may take to get through here,” she said, her voice cutting the dead silence like a knife.

Sekei replied quietly, “I am not for sure. At a guess, it may take...six days. We are taking the safest route.”

“Yes sir,” Alazondra answered.

She looked to the ground and saw merely dirt, dead leaves, and rock. The gnarled roots of the trees curled up through the dirt. Large, jagged rocks were embedded within the soil in various spots. The forest air was filled with a chilling silence, and a small, frigid wind whisked around the tree trunks, like the breath of an ice demon from the legends.

Step by step, they made their way into the dark forest. Soon, the air grew still, and the light was gradually consumed by bleak darkness. All the trees looked the same, tall and powerful. They were all evergreens of some type, mostly towering pines. Their dark green canopies were like high ceilings that kept them from the light. The three horses crept on silently. In the darkness of the Harthyung, it was impossible to decipher night from day without counting hours. The group had to ride until they felt it was the time of day to sleep. Alazondra found this quite odd.

They lay down that night, or what they felt was night, and Fritchel sat aside Alazondra as she slept. He kept a steady watch over her, though it pained him to look at her. Fritchel felt sorry for Alazondra. She was a young woman without a home, and what she had once thought of as home was all a lie.

Fritchel wanted more than anything to tell her the truth of her hidden and mysterious past, but Sekei had told him she was not to be told until they reached Witherfroth, for he knew not how she would take it. Alazondra’s past was a dangerous one, and she herself didn’t even know it. On the other hand, Fritchel was glad she didn’t know yet. It kept her safe but not for long. Alazondra began stirring within her blanket. She rubbed her eyes and glanced over at Fritchel.

“Morning Fritchel...or I suppose it is,” she said quietly.

Fritchel, still deep in thought, did not hear her greeting. His crystal blue eyes seemed clouded. Alazondra sat upright and looked up at him.

“Are you alright, Fritchel?” Alazondra asked. The question seemed to startle him out of his semi-conscious state. Fritchel nodded his head lightly.

“Wha...what? Oh, yes. Yes, I’m fine. Thank you...” His voice seemed to trail off. Alazondra started to get up but sat back down. Instead of leaving, she wrapped her arms around Fritchel’s shoulders and gave him a big hug.

She whispered, “Everything will be alright.” At once, Fritchel’s sapphire eyes shone again. He smiled and returned the hug. *Maybe, just maybe*, Fritchel thought, *she will be okay after all. A strong soul. She has a strong soul.* Alazondra’s arms receded from around his shoulders.

His blue eyes followed her as she sat down against a tree and watched a slowly

moving creek. A scent drifted into his sensitive nostrils. Fritchel slowly got to his feet and peered around in the dim forestry. Soon, the scent was gone. He couldn't have mistaken it. The others arose not long afterwards, and they traveled on once more. A manifesting fear of insecurity struck up within Fritchel's mind.

"Alazondra, would you ride in front today?" he asked.

He feared in the back of his mind that if she was behind him they could so much more easily take her. Fritchel had made up his mind awhile back that he was going to do all he could to ensure her safety. He wanted more than anything for her to remember her parents and him, too. Fritchel wanted Alazondra to know exactly what she meant to him, but it all would have to wait. The waiting gnawed on Fritchel's insides like vermin. He had to hold it all in though, for he promised he would.

Alazondra gave him a curious look and replied, "Yes. May I know the reason?" Her green eyes searched him inquisitively.

He answered as his blue eyes found her eyes, "It's the safest."

Without another word, Alazondra nodded and mounted Ferdinand. She scooted forward and awkwardly took the reins in her hands. She knew very well how to use them, but it just felt different being the one in front. Fritchel placed his strong arms around her waist, and she couldn't help but blush slightly. Alazondra kept her face forward but looked down momentarily at the hands placed at her stomach.

She took quick notice that Ferdinand was very responsive. The beautiful bay knew what to do from even the slightest jerk of the reins. Ferdinand was indeed a creature of beauty. His shoulders were sculpted and chiseled in the finest. His silky, black tail was perfectly arched. Ferdinand's steps were always even and smooth. He was a very well-trained horse. Alazondra wondered where he had come from.

The company decided to bed down early, for all were quite weary. Fritchel and Alazondra untacked Ferdinand, and then Fritchel seated himself near a large rock. He saw Alazondra sitting under a tree spreading her blanket about her. Fritchel motioned for her to come over. She rose, came to him, and seated herself next to him.

"Yes, Fritchel?" she asked.

Fritchel replied, "Sleep here, would you?" Alazondra knew this was a safety measure. She found comfort in it. Fritchel placed an arm around her shoulder, and Alazondra gently laid her head on him. Her eyes soon closed and the world faded from existence. Fritchel pulled her a bit closer to him as he peered around at the opaque scenery. Gently, he laid his head atop hers and closed his eyes. For the first time in awhile, he fell into a deep sleep.

Alazondra didn't know how long she had slept until she opened her eyes, but she found she was in a different place. Alazondra stood and looked around. She found no one around. All she knew that she was in the forest with no one else. Alazondra remained as calm as she would, though her mind was racing. *Did they leave me somewhere?* She thought. *I'm lost in this forest...I will surely die.*

Then, as she had feared such in her mind, a large, chestnut Lycan approached her. She wanted to just run, though for some reason she felt as if her feet were rooted to the very ground on which she stood. Sick, cold fear flowed through her like a parasitic disease. Her blood almost seemed to run cold from it. Then, the Lycan spoke to her.

"My lady, please, if you would come now. It is ready..." he said in a voice so soft and human-like it was almost eerie. He turned and walked onwards.

Alazondra was flooded with curiosity. Fogged with intrigue, she followed the brown Lycan. Alazondra could see a small, luminescent fire softly glowing. She entered the clearing and found that there before her were, in all, twenty-seven Lycans. Two of them were standing upon a mound of earth that was built up, and the other twenty-five were lined up in several lines and bowed low in front of the two.

“Rolath, come. It is good you’re here now. You two can now be united,” a large dark grey Lycan spoke, one of the ones upon the earthen mound.

Alazondra looked around to see who he was talking to. All eyes were focused on her. The largest one, who was the light silver one also standing upon the mound of earth. Alazondra took special notice of the silver one. He had yellow eyes that gleamed like gold. This place did not seem hostile and wild, as she would have expected out of Lycans. It looked civilized. She still wondered where Fritchel and the others were.

Alazondra took a step forwards towards them. Then, something inside her seemed to spark alive with life. The image of a silver pup flashed in her mind. It was just a quick sensation before it was gone. She shook her head and looked at the silver Lycan.

“Do I...know you...from somewhere?” she stuttered. A large grin passed between both the dark grey Lycan and the silver one.

Then, there was an abrupt disturbance, and all of the scene and Lycans disappeared from her view. Her eyes opened to the real world, but it was an awkward one. She was no longer on the ground. Alazondra looked and saw that she was in the arms of a strange man. He was running with endurance unseen before by Alazondra.

His large arms grasped her firmly as he flew over small creeks and pounded on even further. His eyes were focused straight ahead. *Where am I?* Her head was screaming with thoughts. Alazondra didn’t know this man and she didn’t know where she was going, but she wasn’t going to let him continue without her knowing. She wanted to know; she *had* to know. With a strong fist, she sent a punch straight for the man’s jaw.

“SIR! I demand you put me down this *instant!*” Alazondra screamed. She had never before screamed with a fury as she had now. Everything seemed so new and strange to her, and it had all built up into a bottled fury. She decided now was the time to pop the cork off. The man gasped loudly and stopped.

He replied hastily, “Why madam! My sincerest apologies! I am merely taking you where you belong...with us. Now, come we must hurry!”

She retorted, “Put me down. *Right now!*” The man did as was ordered. “Now, I am not going another step further until you tell me who you are.”

The large man looked at her, his posture changing into an intimidating one.

“Ma’am. You’re not in the position to make the calls,” he stated firmly.

Alazondra glanced at the man. At his side was a blade with a large handle. He wore a light chain armor and she took fast notice of his eyes. They looked brown, but they almost looked maroon at the same time. Alazondra had to admit to herself that there would be no way to outrun or defeat him with strength. Her quick mind pieced together a plan that, with luck, could get her out of this.

“Okay, sir,” she said in defeat. She took a step towards him but then fell to the forest floor dramatically. “My leg! Oh, hell! It’s in unbearable pain...please sir, would you look at it?”

Alazondra sat up and extended her left leg. The man looked at it with a shocked expression and immediately bent down to look at it. The large handle of the blade was

hardly a few inches from her hand. With a flick of her hand, she unsheathed the blade and sent a kick directly to the man's face. He was knocked onto his back. Alazondra seized the moment to hold the point of the blade to his jugular.

"Madam! This is uncalled for!" he bellowed.

Alazondra gave him a deadly sneer and replied, "Sir, you're not in the position to make the calls." The man cursed in an unknown language. "Now," Alazondra continued, "I will ask you a series of questions. If you give me something I don't like then I shall give you something you don't like." She pressed the sword to his throat even harder. "Understand?" The man nodded frantically.

"Please ma'am! I know you are the Incarnate and can do great things! Please, I beg of you to save me! I just want you to be where you belong!" he gasped.

"Alright, for question number one: Incarnate of whom? And, where is this place that you are trying to take me to?" Alazondra asked.

The man smirked lightly, "I'll tell you when we get there, vixen!" With unimaginable agility he sent his foot jettisoning into Alazondra's un-gauntleted hand. The sword was sent a few yards back, and Alazondra backed up a few paces.

"At least tell me who you are," she said quietly, with a pleading, polite tone. The man's facial features softened.

"I, madam, am just a humble servant," he said. Alazondra's green eyes peered into his awkward maroon ones.

"You lie. Servants do not carry blades nor do they have the strength such as yours," she replied boldly. For some reason, Alazondra felt braveness, though this man was much stronger than she.

"Of course I do. You're a bright one, Rolath," he replied mockingly. The name, Rolath, struck Alazondra. She had heard it once before, when the Lycan came to her.

"And, I also deduce that you are a Lycan, for no one else says 'Rolath,'" she said. The man smiled broadly and laughed heartily.

"Yes, I am a Lycan, but so are you," he stated. Alazondra grew silent fast. She merely looked at the man with a blank expression.

"I'm...a...what?" she sputtered.

He nodded, "You heard me, madam. You're a Lycan just as much as I am."

Alazondra backed up a few steps, unable to take it in. *Am I a Lycan? Does he speak the truth?* It seemed so odd, but she refused to believe it. Taking a few more steps backwards, she turned and fled. Alazondra's feet flew with a magnificence only known by the rush of adrenaline.

The man was hot on her heels, but she sprinted ever forth. Alazondra dashed around the large trees like a wild rabbit. She went through two creeks, and then back through one she had passed to try to lose her scent. Alazondra, with no where else to go, she shimmied up a large tree. She saw the Lycan man pass near by more than once, though her tracks were completely useless for they never went one direction. Alazondra grew very tired. Her eyes dropped shut, and she slept peacefully.

Alazondra was awoken by a large whacking sound. The whole tree shook loudly. She peered between the thick evergreen leaves at the man down below. He had taken his sword and embedded it into the tree in anger. She found not the Lycan man who had captured her but Fritchel. Silently she peered down at him.

"Where did she go...where can she be?" Fritchel whispered softly to himself.

“Damn the Saints! I never even told her...”

Alazondra jumped out of the tree and landed just in front of him saying, “Told me what?” A small grin formed on her face as she looked upon Fritchel’s face. For a moment, Fritchel was speechless.

“You...you’re alive! Alazondra!” he exclaimed ecstatically. Fritchel threw his arms around her and swung her about like a child with a doll. Alazondra laughed happily. Her eyes met his, and they both smiled.

“I’m glad you came along,” she said quietly. Fritchel’s eyes didn’t leave Alazondra’s, and they both kept smiling. He set her down but kept his arms around her.

He replied, “I’m so glad you’re alive! I’m entirely sorry about this! I fell asleep, and they got you...what all happened to you? Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. It’s alright. I’ll tell everyone what all happened to me when we get back. I’ve got some questions of my own, too,” Alazondra answered, and without another word they made their way towards the two Mages who were standing aside a creek. Sekei and Razule immediately turned their heads.

“Alazondra!” they both exclaimed in unison. After a series of bear hugs and when Alazondra could finally catch her breath, she related them the tale. There was a long pause after all was said. Sekei’s eyes couldn’t meet Alazondra’s.

“Like I said, Fritchel,” Alazondra said, “I have some questions of my own. Who is the silver Lycan I dreamed of? I had an image in my mind of him as a young pup. Did I know him? Who is he? What’s my connection with him? Oh, and most of all...am I a Lycan?” Of all the questions she asked them, the only answer she got was silence. The silence did not please her at all, though she herself merely remained silent.

After the conversation that day, they saddled up and traveled onwards. Each member of the group knew they had to get out as soon as possible. Alazondra still wondered about her unanswered questions. They seemed to hang in her mind and would not dissipate until they were answered, though she knew for awhile they wouldn’t be. She began to doubt the Lycan’s words. She would not allow herself to believe that she was a Lycan, but her dream of the Lycans contradicted her thoughts. Alazondra had the strong feeling she knew that silver Lycan from somewhere before.

The next few days they traveled hard and long. It was approximately a week since they had entered the forest, and on that day, they saw the end. The forest grew brighter, and the dark dreariness disappeared into light. A smile passed between all four of them. Alazondra was overcome with emotion and happiness the moment the light of pure day graced her skin. They had exited a world of dark and entered the outside world. Ice sculpted the terra lavishly. It was a bright world of shining white and sky blue.

Alazondra was overjoyed to be leaving and to be alive. In the front of the saddle, she felt Fritchel’s strong arms squeeze her in a nice hug. She turned around and smiled at him. The sun’s golden rays danced in his dusky blonde hair, and his eyes were glistening.

Alazondra whispered one thing to him, “I’m alive.” Fritchel nodded in response and grinned even more widely.

The landscape was a large plain of glistening, white snow. Large mountainous rocks adorned the flat terrain, and the towering figure of Mount Kuthpast could be seen in the far distance. The sky was a vast blue without a single cloud to pollute its purity. The sun was pinned high, and seeing it was a miracle in itself. The group urged their horses ever forth to leave behind the dreaded forest.

Sekei exclaimed, "One step closer to Witherfroth! Haha! Tonight we will stay at Oribeth's cabin. We haven't seen the old fellow in awhile, have we?"

"Hmm," Razule replied, "I'd say a good five or six years."

Fritchel nodded silently in agreement. Before they knew it they made their way past boulder after boulder only to find a small, wooden cabin hidden within the stones. The horses were untacked and placed in a large crevice in the rocks, making a cave-like shelter. As the group approached the door a cheery-faced elderly man wearing a fur robe of Northern style opened the door. He had a thin, frail structure, but it was all looks; Oribeth hugged the three mages with the strength of a middle-aged man.

"Oh, it's great to see you boys again! Ah! Hmm, Sekei, and Fritchel, and Razule my favorite pupils! Hmm, it seems, well, it seems as if there's one missing. Oh what was his name? Hmm, Nicholas? No, no a 'J' was it?" Oribeth rambled.

"It's Johnez," Razule answered, "but he's dead, sir."

"Oh, what a shame. He mastered in Restoration and did quite well," the old man said. "Well! Let's not stand out here in the cold! Come, come in. I've almost a meal ready."

They all stepped inside the warm cabin eagerly. They hadn't a roof over their heads since they had been in Viland. It seemed so long ago; though in reality, it was about two weeks ago.

Oribeth was a jolly old man who rarely stopped talking, and when he was talking, he never really said anything. His voice, however, was a pleasant one to listen to. In his prime, he was a Master of Magical Arts. Alazondra took a liking to this old man, like a granddaughter to her grandfather. Oribeth may have been scatter-brained, but he was kindhearted nonetheless.

"And who is this young filly?" he said motioning towards Alazondra. "A beautiful lass she is! Fritchel, is this your woman?" Fritchel coughed loudly and blushed. Alazondra blushed some too.

Fritchel hastily replied, "No, no! She's not. No. We're helping her home. She's not my wife or anything, sir. Of course not..."

"Ah, I see," Oribeth said. "My apologies, I noticed you two riding the same horse, and Fritchel was sitting awfully close...well, you know. An old man like me just assumes things!"

An awkward sort of silence passed for a moment. Alazondra looked around at everyone. Fritchel was red as could be, and Sekei and Razule were speechless. Alazondra couldn't help but begin laughing. Everyone looked at her.

"Haha! I'm sorry. It's just funny!" Alazondra exclaimed as she burst into fits of laughter. The cabin was immediately filled with laughter after having said that.

Oribeth seated his guests in a hospitable manner. There was tender venison and a thick broth with a warm loaf of bread. The meal tasted wonderful compared to the dried meat, berries, and other forms of similar plant life they had eaten so much of. They ate heartily and happily. It felt like a small celebration for coming out of the forest. There was much laughter and story telling at the creaky, wooden table. Alazondra listened in quietly. She didn't know many of the names of people or places that were mentioned, but she enjoyed the stories nevertheless.

Soon everyone grew tired and when all was said, Oribeth stood.

"You all may sleep up here," he said nodding towards the large, white bearskins

laid around the glowing fireplace. "My quarters are downstairs, so please knock if you need anything at all. I bid you all a good night!" He pulled open a large trap door in the floor. Sekei let out a small sigh as it closed with a quiet creaking noise.

"You'd think he'd learn..." Razule mumbled. Fritchel laughed loudly.

Sekei exclaimed, "Oh yes! Honestly!"

"What do you mean?" Alazondra asked.

"Well," Razule told her, "when we were in his schooling, heheh, he had a trap door like the one there. One day Johnez was angry at Oribeth for causing him to rip his robe. He fussed like a sick cat! Haha, Johnez placed a chair over the trap door while Oribeth was in there for revenge. Oribeth had to teleport into the room! It was so funny, and I don't think even to this day that he knows who did it."

"Oh! That's funny! What rabble rousers you all were then!" she exclaimed.

Fritchel stated, "Then? I thought we *still* were!"

"Right you are!" Sekei agreed. They all laughed joyously.

Alazondra yawned a bit then walked over by the fire and sat on the rug. She curled up her legs, wrapped her arms around them, and set her head on her knees. Alazondra closed her eyes for a moment, letting the warmth of the fire wash over her. She heard Sekei and Razule go outside.

In her mind, a brief image flashed. It was the silver Lycan as a pup. He was panting and wagging his tail. She wondered furiously who it was and what he meant to her. Fritchel sat down next to her. Alazondra felt his eyes seemingly peer into her soul, as they always seemed to be.

"What is it Alazondra?" he asked quietly.

She looked up at him and simply asked, "Who is the silver Lycan? I keep seeing him, and I want to know who he is so much." Alazondra felt close to tears for some reason.

Fritchel replied, "You see him? How do you mean?"

"In my mind," She answered, "I see him. Quick flashes of images just go through my mind. I feel like I know him from somewhere, and he's a puppy when I see him. It's the one from my dream I know it, but I don't know who he is." Fritchel's gaze averted to the hearth. He fell silent for a few moments.

"Fritchel if you can't tell me, can you at least tell me if you know who I'm seeing?" Alazondra asked despairingly. Fritchel nodded.

"Yes. I know who it is, but..." He glanced out the window where Sekei was standing by Razule outside, "...I can't tell you who it is." Fritchel sighed deeply and closed his eyes. Alazondra nodded and hugged him.

"Thank you for at least telling me that," she said.

Fritchel looked at her. Pain surged through his heart. Once again he had to keep secrets from her, and it hurt him. Seeing her innocent eyes and knowing she couldn't be told the truth which she had a right to know plagued his heart like a vermin, but orders were orders. Fritchel didn't want to follow orders anymore though. He was tired of the pain and seeing her so shunned of knowledge. The travel through the Harthyung made him see she needed to be told the truth, for without it she wouldn't know how to handle certain situations.

"Alazondra," he said. Fritchel wrapped his arms around her shoulders.

"Yes?"

Slowly he whispered into her ear, "I want to tell you the truth, about everything, about who you are, and who the Lycan is. First of all, your real name isn't—"

The door slammed open. Wide-eyed, Fritchel glanced at the door. Alazondra let out a slight gasp. He saw Sekei standing in the door way. Fritchel knew it; he had been caught. He felt it was over for him. His heart was racing.

Sekei exclaimed, "*Lycans!* Coming here! *Get Oribeth!*" Fritchel stood, but his mind seemed lost in all the excitement. His movements finally became coordinated enough to pound upon the trap door.

"Oribeth! Oribeth, get up! Lycans!" he shouted. Oribeth came running out, staff in hand.

"One of you needs to keep the girl safe!" Sekei shouted as he ran from the doorway. Fritchel looked at Oribeth.

"Sir, I need to fight by his side. Would you...?" he asked.

Oribeth smiled and replied, "It would be an honor to protect your woman, son. Hunt well!"

Fritchel blushed profusely and yelled as he headed out the door, "She's *not* my woman, Oribeth!"

Oribeth chuckled in response, and then his appearance changed to a more grave and serious one.

"Now, lass, come with me, stay with me, and do not get behind," he instructed.

Alazondra nodded and followed the man. She was surprised at his agility considering his age. *He is a Mage after all*, she thought as she jogged to keep in pace with him. He stopped behind a large rock that provided much cover. Oribeth held his staff up and turned to view the battle. Alazondra slowly turned her head, afraid of what would be seen.

She saw the three brave Mages standing side-by-side like brothers, fighting off the onslaught of the vicious beasts. There were so many. They leapt and crawled over the rocks like ants and swarmed like wasps. The growling was a terrifying. Alazondra had never been more frightened before, especially since Fritchel was out there fighting.

Then, behind Oribeth and herself Alazondra heard a loud thumping. It sounded vaguely like hoof beats. Alazondra quickly turned her head to inspect where the sound was coming from. A large, palomino horse and its robed rider launched themselves over Alazondra and Oribeth's heads. Alazondra ducked under the large rock they were behind until she heard the horse land in front of them. They were a blaze of gold and blue. *Blue*, she thought. *This must be Neva!*

It was Neva the Swordslinger upon her magnificent horse Silverwave. The horse was very well trained. Neva stood upon the horse's bare back with two blades drawn. One of which glowed with a blood-red fire. *This woman*, she thought, *must be very strong to be able to wield two swords at once.* After her came a young-looking soldier who looked something of a skilled and well-equipped man. Neva rode straight into the heart of the army followed by her companion.

"Neva!" Sekei exclaimed.

She gave him a grin, then turned her attention to the battle. Then came a high pitched whistle and the horse reared up. Alazondra hardly caught sight of the hawk that had flown overhead. Silverwave's eyes became red as deep, fiery embers, and he charge forward. With slashing kicks and vicious shredding, the horse alone took out all of side

ranks of the Lycan attack. There was about two score left to fight, and to give them the fight there were six fighters, including the horse.

Sekei dashed and leapt agilely as he melee attacked a nearby Lycan. Then, with a sparking hex to his chest, the Lycan fell back, crimson droplets soared through the air from its mouth. Fritchel paralyzed two Lycans at once, then sent a fire spell down their opened mouths. They bellowed in pain and fell forward. Razule had his father's mace and struck the Lycans upside their jaws, breaking their very bones and teeth.

The fight continued evermore. In the darkness of the night, the moon's light caused the snow to possess an eerie luminescent glow. The boulders cast large, dark shadows, and the stars overhead shone grimly. Alazondra watched the battling nervously. She focused mostly on Neva. Her fighting was unbelievable. With a swipe of her blade, they seemed to perish freely, and the deaths were abundant. She never stopped either. Neva looked like a very determined woman, and Alazondra could see it. The Mages, too, were amazing in combat. She never knew Fritchel could cast spells as fierce as was being used.

Atop the rock she and Oribeth were hiding behind stood a single Lycan. Alazondra let out a sharp gasp. Oribeth readied his staff.

The Lycan exclaimed, "Tonight will be the night for you Rolath! Our Lord returns to us to rule us for years to come! THE GLORY IS THIS NIGHT!" The proclamation echoed throughout the night sky and over the cries and growls of the other Lycans who were now lessening in numbers.

Fritchel heard the Lycan and spotted him immediately.

"No you don't, you Delta bastard," he muttered. He pulled a poisoned throwing dart from the folds of his robe. With the flick of his wrist, it went sailing straight into the Lycan's back and he toppled forward. Fritchel turned and continued to slay even more of the beasts.

Alazondra took slow, deep breaths to keep herself calm. *All this violence is my fault*, her thoughts told her. *They're after me; that's the only reason they are here...me.* A small tear slid down her cheek, and she brushed it off. She knew she had to keep her wits to stay alive. She turned around to check if Oribeth was still there and found no one.

"Oribeth! Sir! Where are you?" she shouted.

Alazondra's green eyes darted back and forth. Then, she took notice of the moon. A black, wispy cloud had passed over it and was gently blowing away from it. The full face of the moon was now revealed. As Alazondra gazed at it she felt entrapped by its luminescence. Then, pain shot through her legs, and she fell forward onto her hands and knees. She closed her eyes and dug her fingers into the rock hard ice. She opened her eyes and the ground beneath her seemed to spin violently. All went black before her, and she passed out.

Her eyes opened and found she was where she had fallen. As Alazondra attempted to get to her feet, she found, to her utmost horror, that she did not have human feet. She had four legs with large, wolfish claws. Her hair was white as the snow beneath her, and her legs, tail, and head had black markings on them. Alazondra was a Lycan.

Alazondra heard them calling her name. Her doggish ears twitched reflexively. She didn't know whether to answer them or run. Over the boulder she was next to, came four Lycans.

"Rolath!" one shouted. "You have returned to us!" They each bowed lowly before

Alazondra.

Around the boulder came Sekei and Fritchel. The four Lycans were eliminated within seconds. Then, the Mages turned to Alazondra and froze.

"I've never seen one like that. Is this the leader? Why isn't it attacking?" Sekei whispered to Fritchel.

Fritchel stood wordless and motionless. He looked at Sekei almost with a cold gaze, and then approached Alazondra. He got down on one knee and bowed before her. Fritchel raised his head and looked into her violet, canine eyes.

"Alazondra..." he whispered.

Sekei muttered, "What did he say? No...not tonight..."

He walked up next to Fritchel and looked at Alazondra. She looked down at Fritchel with a tear in her eye. Fritchel felt like crying himself. He had come so close to telling her who she was and ending her pain.

"Sekei, enough is enough. I'm through with playing games and lying. This lady's been through too much already. There are too many secrets. It's time to tell her everything," he said. Sekei's eyes averted to the ground.

"I..." Sekei's words were cut off as a Lycan lunged at him from the top of the boulder.

The Lycan viciously slashed at his chest. Alazondra leapt at the Lycan with her newfound strength. She knocked him off Sekei and landed on top of him in the deep snow. Alazondra sunk her claws into her prey.

Following a primordial behavioral instinct, she savagely thrust her teeth into the jugular of the Lycan. The bones severed instantly and the crimson oozed from the punctures slowly. Alazondra stood and peered at the carnage then at the Mages behind her. All was silent.

Fritchel was knelt down by Sekei. He was lying horribly injured. His robes revealed an elaborate tattoo on his chest of some kind, symbols in a different language but were covered in blood. Alazondra nuzzled Sekei's hand with her nose.

"Sekei," she said, "are you alright?"

He let out a small groan. His black robe was thickly matted with fresh blood. Alazondra turned to Fritchel.

"Fritchel, tell me where Witherfroth is from here," she demanded.

"What?" he replied. "It's too far. I don't think you could make it in time."

"It's better than nothing," Alazondra said.

Fritchel nodded, "Okay. It's just north-northeast of here." He placed Sekei on Alazondra's back. "Now go!"

With a burst of speed on all fours, she fled the area and sprinted into the north. Her hind legs kicked up large amounts of ice. Alazondra kept a close eye on Sekei as he grabbed onto her with what little strength he had left. The light of the moon empowered her to run, and her legs pounded onwards with an unmatched endurance. Each thundering step brought her closer to the mountain. Alazondra began panting heavily, but she would not allow herself to stop.

In the vague distance, she could see a large watch tower brightly whose fire twinkled brightly. She assumed it was the city of Witherfroth. Before long, the large wooden walls of the city were visible. The terrain gently sloped upwards and Mount Kuthpast was now a towering figure. Sekei was hardly conscious, and Alazondra hoped

he would live.

Alazondra finally reached the road that led to the main gate. There was a series of tall stones on each side, symbolic in their own way, and lights adorned the top of each one, illuminating the road into Witherfroth. She thundered towards the closed front gate. The soldiers atop the parapet by the gate all looked at her. Some readied crossbows and others watch her as she continued making her way towards the gate.

“Open the gate! This man needs healing!” Alazondra yelled.

The captain of the guards yelled down to her, “Hold it right there, vixen.”

Alazondra slid to a stop in the ice. Sekei gave a small groan.

Alazondra whispered to Sekei, “We’ve arrived to Witherfroth. Just hang on a little longer, Sekei. You’ll get help; you’ll live.” He did not respond, but she knew he heard her. Sekei was a strong soul, and Alazondra knew he would make it now. She was sure.

“Sir!” Alazondra yelled to the guard. “I beg of you! Let this man enter! He needs to be healed. He’s near death!” The gate rumbled open and she lunged forth. A bolt from a crossbow whizzed past her foreleg.

“Not you, vixen. The man,” shouted the captain.

Alazondra was speechless for a moment, but there were things that were more important. She lowered her head in resignation. Four guards came out of the gate and lifted Sekei up. He groaned in pain as they took him into the city. Alazondra remained motionless as they shut the gate upon her, locking her out. An unknown fury arose within her. She became very angry and snarled loudly. Another bolt went hissing past her.

“Get out of here, Lycan! Ye foul beast!” shouted a guard.

Alazondra took a lunge at the gate and the rickety, wooden wall trembled. Shouts and curses were heard, but nothing would stop Alazondra. She backed up several paces and then flew into a running leap. Hitting the wall with the broad side of her shoulder the gate burst into a flurry of splinters and sticks. Guards throughout the city scattered and a few volleys of bolts were fired.

The captain yelled from the parapet, “I warned you Lycan! Alright! Men get ‘er!”

A troupe of guards in gleaming chain armor approached Alazondra. There were fourteen men, all with blades in hand. The odds seemed intimidating, but that wasn’t going to stop her.

The first two men went down with puncture wounds to the throat. They began to scatter around Alazondra. She didn’t know much at all about fighting, but she relied on her primitive instincts. They hadn’t proved wrong thus far.

The next three men she threw her full weight upon them throwing them onto the thick, frozen ground and crushed their chests in. The nine left grouped up and steadied their weapons. Alazondra crouched low to the ground, giving the pretense of an incoming pounce. The guards held their blades at a medium height. She instead made a dive for their legs. With two swift snaps, two men fell to the ground, unable to walk. Alazondra snapped each of their necks with her powerful jaws. Her entire orifice was dripping with a mix of blood and canine saliva. The savagery of it didn’t faze her as she was in an attack state of mind.

She turned upon the remaining seven, which soon became five. Two soldiers lost their wits and fled into the city. One leapt forward at Alazondra and thrust his sword towards her. She jumped back and gripped the blade in her teeth. With a tight yank, she unarmed the man before her and charged straight towards him. A guard behind her flailed

his sword and made a hit.

The blade impaled her back, knocking her out of the course of her lunge. Alazondra fell to the icy ground and skidded almost a yard. Her white hair was now damp with Sekei's blood, the enemies' blood, and now her own. She immediately returned to her feet. The unarmed guard made a dash for his sword, but Alazondra intercepted. She jumped upon the man's back and knocked him to the ground. His neck snapped on impact. Two of the four started to make for Alazondra's left side.

"STOP!" the captain yelled. "You four, get over here. 'If you want something done, do it yourself,' they always said. *I'll kill her!*"

The captain grabbed a spear leaning on the parapet and approached Alazondra. He would be a tougher opponent, for he wore plate mail. The chain mail could be bitten through with applied force, but Alazondra doubted his armor could. Alazondra decided she'd need to get his helmet off first, and then she'd be able to make a kill. However, she knew that the captain knew her weak spot was her injured back.

He made a low slash for her legs, but she was too quick for him. Alazondra grabbed the spear with her canine teeth. Her violet eyes met with the captain's steely grey eyes. She snarled loudly, and dug her teeth into the wooden pole of the spear. The captain tugged the spear, and as he did, Alazondra bit down hard. The long handle of the spear was splintered into two.

"So, you want to play rough do you, vixen?" the captain shouted.

He was defenseless, and Alazondra went in for the attack. She leapt at him with all her force. The captain fell backwards with a bodily thud. His neck did not break because of his armor. Alazondra pulled his helmet off with her teeth. His neck was now bare. Alazondra opened her mouth wide to finally destroy him, but she felt a small prick in the back of her neck. Alazondra turned to see who caused it, but everything got blurry and hazy in her eyes. She fell to the ground, and blackness overcame her.

Alazondra's eyes opened to find a dark, stone room. It was enclosed with rusted iron bars. She wondered vaguely, *Where am I?* Painfully she sat up, and pain flooded through her back. Alazondra managed to stand and walked over to the edge of the room. She saw a long hallway with a door that looked heavy and locked. *I...am in prison. I can't remember anything though. Last night I was...* Her mind could not finish that sentence. Being in the place that she was, she didn't think she wanted to finish that sentence.

She leaned her head on the cold metal bars and sighed. Vaguely, she heard an echoing of footsteps. Her green eyes averted to the heavy door in hopes Sekei or Fritchel might be coming. The door finally did slam open. It was a rather disgruntled guard. He entered the room without a word and slammed the door. The guard then grabbed a bucket and slid it to the far corner of the room. He sat down leaning his back against the stone wall.

"What're you looking at?" he grumbled.

"Well," Alazondra answered, "I'd say I was looking at you, sir." He raised an eyebrow inquisitively.

He replied, "You tryin' to be funny kid?" Alazondra shook her head, though she *was* getting amusement of out it. "Just sit there and shut up, will ya'? Make guard duty easy on ol' Sam..."

"Who's Sam?" she asked. Alazondra knew perfectly well the man was referring

to himself, but if he was going to sit there and watch her, she wasn't going to make it fun.

"ME. Gah...kids these days," he mumbled.

"Ooh. Do you have any kids?" Alazondra inquired.

He answered, "Nope."

She continued with her inquiries, "How about a wife?"

Sam grumbled, "No, no wife. I'm not the marrying type, kid."

"Well, is it that you who doesn't like women or they don't like you? Do they not like you because you don't like them?" She gave a small theatrical gasp. "Are you...a queer one, sir?" Alazondra was near bursting in laughter and keeping a sincere face was tough work.

Sam shouted, "NO! Enough questions! Aye! Are all kids this inquisitive these days?"

"Nope, just me," Alazondra replied cheerfully.

He groaned, "Oh boy, and I have the pleasure of babysitting you all day..."

She gave an almost evil grin, "This'll be lots of fun, sir."

Sam didn't reply, but Alazondra thought she could see a trace of a faint smile.

Then, her thoughts turned to why she was there. Painfully she sat down, leaning against the bars.

"Hey, sir...?" she asked.

"Now I told you..." he began.

Alazondra interrupted, "No, no. I have a real question."

Sam gave a small sigh, "Yes?"

"Well, why am I in here? I don't have any recollection of last night. I don't even remember ever entering Witherfroth. Did I do something wrong?" She slightly turned her head to look at Sam.

He answered, "And you're serious, eh? Hmm, I suppose you would be. Well, kid, all I heard was you killed some guards after breaking into the city. I don't know all the details, but it seems odd that a young 'un like you murdered eight guards. Rather odd...yes..."

Alazondra sat in disbelief, yet without any memory of last night, she had to believe it. *How could I have killed eight guards?* The question plagued her mind.

"You don't know anything else? I just broke into the city and," she paused quickly before finishing, "killed eight guards...?"

"Well, after killing the eight guards the captain mentioned you attacked him and almost had him, but luckily someone had some heavy draught bolts, or he'd be a goner. He also told me...you had brought someone here...I don't know—hey, kid you okay? You look pale."

Two clear images flashed across Alazondra's mind. One was a dark Lycan lying in a gruesome state below her, and the other was a man, a guard. The eyes lying behind the man's helmet showed fear.

"Lycan..." she mumbled to herself lightly.

He gave her a puzzled look, "Eh?"

"Was there anything about a Lycan?" she asked. "Did I kill one in the city?"

"Lycans? Those beasts...? I don't know," he replied.

She lightly nodded and fell into a state of silence. Her mind racked the possibilities of what happened. Alazondra just couldn't recollect anything. *Who did I*

bring here, she wondered. Her mind continued on, and it would not let her rest. Soon, Sam's duty shift ended, and he rose silently.

"Shift's over. See ya' kid. Hmm, I probably will be seeing you again. There's no way you'll be leaving anytime soon," he mumbled as he slammed the door.

Alazondra listened quietly as the reverberation from his footsteps receded finally. She let out a long sigh in the silence. She was thankful there was a small lit lantern in the corner.

She began investigating her cell, though there was not quite anything to be found. It was a room purely with no furniture of any type. The stones in the walls were all plain stones. They were smoothed over and very flat. She found they were all tightly sealed. The bars were sturdy as well. Finally, she lay in a corner. The lantern soon dimmed, and she closed her eyes. That night was one of the longest she'd ever had.

When Alazondra had finally fallen asleep, a dream came to her. She was inside a small wooden room. There was a fireplace glowing warmly, and the windows showed the darkness of the night. In the room, she found three people. Two were men sitting at a table. One was leaning back in his chair with his feet upon the table. The man next to him was slouched over his drink. They both looked nearly identical in their similar armor.

Alazondra turned and found a woman standing beside the fireplace. In her hand was a book, which she seemed to be reading from. She wore black leather armor, and her chestnut hair spilled about her shoulders. Her face held a dark grin as her eyes scanned the page.

Her smile became wider and she turned to the men saying, "Hah, killing and violence. All for gold and cleavage. What has this world come to? We find *this* good literature works now?"

The man with the drink replied, "Of course! Not all books were meant for women, you know. You're the only woman I know who actually does read books."

"Hmm. You know, I'm the only woman you know who knows a few good things to 'spice' up a drink like yours, Seth," she replied wryly.

He coughed loudly as the man leaning back in the chair laughed loudly. Seth looked at the night sky though the window.

"I can do it to yours as well, mister," she said.

The man named Seth began laughing too. Alazondra continued watching the interesting characters. She seemed to know the woman from somewhere. Her face seemed so familiar, yet Alazondra's mind could not think of a name. A silence grew between the three. Alazondra felt her existence was unknown, and she didn't think she could be seen or heard even. The fire glowed as the silence continued. Then, without warning, a single arrow came shattering through the window. The woman turned and looked around frantically. The two men seemed to disappear, and the woman ran from the house as everything in the dream began to fade.

Alazondra sat up in a cold sweat. She shivered lightly, and sat upright. Her back was still in pain but she ignored it. She leaned her head upon the smooth, cold stones. Alazondra thought about what had happened in her dream. She didn't know any of the people, but the woman did seem familiar. *She wore black leather, and her face seemed familiar. Maybe it was just a crazy mixed up dream. Maybe not.* Alazondra had no inkling as to what time of day it was or even if it was the same day.

Soon the sounds of echoing footsteps could be heard. She could tell it was a

guard. The sound of the iron boots against the stone floor rang clearly and the pacing of the steps were also a guard's. She hoped that he was headed to her cell, maybe with food. Alazondra wanted more than anything some light. The echoes became stronger, and then the door slammed open. Her eyes averted to the man entering as a beam of light flooded into the room. He was indeed a guard. In his left hand was a pair of shackles; in his other was the lantern.

"Come here, beast," he grunted. Alazondra looked at him placidly, but remained in her corner. "Hey! Get over here!" he yelled as he opened the cell door and set his lantern next to the door.

"Sir, if you'd like cooperation I recommend you treating me politely. Now, would you like to retry?" she replied half grinning. Alazondra knew it wasn't the smartest thing to test the guard's nerves, but it gave her a sample of who they were.

"Oh," he said, "I'm sorry. How about 'get over here or I beat you in the face'?" Sarcasm was written all over his face, matching suitably with his tone.

Alazondra shook her head, "Temper, temper." She got to her feet and walked over to him. He enclosed the shackles on her legs. A green light was instantly emitted, and it flashed throughout the room. Alazondra felt dizzy but remained on her feet. She gave the guard an inquisitive look.

"That'll make sure you can't use your Lycan form against us," he sneered as he laughed. She peered at him wide-eyed.

"I have a Lycan form?" she asked.

He retorted as he slammed the cell door shut, "Don't play stupid, vixen."

She looked down at the shackles as he made his leave. Alazondra found he left the lantern in her cell. She took it to the far corner of the room and began thinking to herself. Alazondra wondered still what had happened. She turned the lantern off and lay on the stone floor silently. Her eyes closed and she was asleep once more. She awoke to the sounds of whispering.

"Okay. You're new, so today and for the next few weeks you'll be on guard duty," a male voice said.

A younger male voice replied, "Yes sir."

"Alright, go on in. Don't fall for anything, and don't even talk to the prisoner," the older one replied. Then receding footsteps followed.

"Yes sir," the young one replied, his voice quiet.

The heavy door creaked open and then silently closed. She heard the guard sit down on the bucket in the corner. Alazondra began to get up.

"I'm sorry. Did I wake you, sir?" he asked. Alazondra turned the lantern on and looked at the man in the corner.

"I happen to be female..." she stated. His eyes opened widely.

"Ma'am, my apologies. I can't believe a woman is in here," he replied hurriedly.

Alazondra rose to her feet, feeling the burning pain in her back. She made her way to the iron bars and looked at the man sitting in the corner. She could tell he was a new guard. His armor shone brightly, and there were no scars on his young face or scratches on his boots. He, in fact, looked scarcely older than Alazondra.

"So, what's your name? I can tell you're new," she said.

"I'm Frederick Meredin, ma'am, and is it that obvious?" he asked.

Meredin, she thought to herself, *sounds familiar*. She knew she heard that name.

Alazondra gave him a smile and nodded.

He sighed as he stated, "I'm doing as my father asked. He wants me to do something great. I was...never mind. What is your name, if I may ask?"

She answered, "I'm called Alazondra, but I don't know my name."

"You don't know your own name? Didn't your parents ever tell you?" he inquired, perking his brow perplexingly.

Alazondra gave a sigh, "It's a long story." Frederick scooted the bucket next to the cell and looked at her.

He smiled and said, "I won't be going anywhere."

In the dim light, she could make out his facial features. He had a soft look, with brown eyes and brunette hair. Alazondra could see his heart was into being a guard and took pity on him. She sat down in the front corner of her cell and told the story. She left some pieces of the tale for good reason. He listened politely throughout her story.

At the story's end, he said, "Amazing. That's really interesting. You're something else, Lady Alazondra. You survived the forest and meeting a Lycan, and you met *the* Neva?" Alazondra nodded in reply.

"So, tell me your story, Frederick," she said.

"Well," he began, "my story isn't near as exciting as that, but it's who I am. I was born in a small town on the north coast, Port Skymack. It was a fairly prosperous fishing village and all was well. My father, though, lost his business as a fisherman, and we traveled here. He has a fur trapping business now, and my mother does work at the Witherfroth Library. I was interested in studying magicks, especially Restoration. I wanted to be a healer, but my father had other plans for me. He enlisted me in the guards, and here I am. Not much."

"Hmm. You seem awfully young," Alazondra said.

He replied, "I am 19 years old, one of the youngest in the city to be in the guards." He let out a small sigh. As she looked upon the young guard's face, it hit her, *Johnez Meredin*. She wondered if there was a possible relation between the two.

"You don't have any siblings do you?" she asked.

"It's funny you should ask," he replied. "I have one brother. He's older than me, but I haven't seen him in a long time. He's a Mage, specialized in Restoration. I suppose since he is such a wild spirit and travels with odd people my father doesn't want me to become like him. I wish I could see him more often."

Alazondra grew silent. Before, while telling her story, she hadn't detailed the names of the men she had been traveling with, and she feared to tell Frederick his poor brother's demise.

"Johnez..." she mumbled.

"Hey, you know my brother?" he asked. Gravely, she nodded. "Where is he? Do you know?" Alazondra sighed lightly and leaned close to the cell bars.

"I know your brother. Well, I *knew* him. He's..." she began.

"He's what?"

She managed to mumble, "Your brother was killed." Frederick froze at these words..

"How?" he asked after a tense moment.

"In my story, you know how I told you about my first seeing a Lycan? Well, that Lycan killed your brother. I woke up and found him like that. There was nothing we

could do...it was awful to lose a person like him. He was a pleasant person. I'm really sorry..." Alazondra found herself seemingly mumbling in circles. Frederick took a deep breath and nodded.

"Yes," he said after a moment of silence, "thank you for telling me. I no longer have to worry about him at least. My father and mother will not take this well, but at least he did the world good while he was here."

Alazondra nodded and smiled lightly.

"Ah, look at us. Talking away! It would not seem as if I were the guard and you the prisoner, eh?"

Alazondra laughed and replied, "No, hah. It sure wouldn't." In the distance, a light trumpet sound could be heard.

"I must go now. I hope I see you soon," Frederick said as he got to his feet.

"Yes, I hope to see you as well, and good luck on learning Restoration. I think you'd be good at it, like your brother," she replied.

"Why thank you, milady," he said with a smile much like Johnez's smile.

She returned the smile and dimmed the lantern as the heavy door shut. Her thoughts turned to Fritchel, Sekei, and Razule. She wondered if Sekei was alive and where the other two Mages were. *They probably don't know I'm even in here*, she thought. *I wonder if Frederick could tell me.*

For a long time she sat with her thoughts. Her cell was a lonely, dark place. She really did see the punishment in being there. In the dimmed light, she examined her clothes. For the first time in awhile she had actually given any thought about them. She wore her same silk shirt, now ripped and dirty. Her dress she had discarded long ago. Alazondra wore pants, for riding with a dress was uncomfortable. They were regular brown pants, torn and too big. She no longer had her soft deerskin shoes. The only other thing she had were the shackles around her legs.

It seemed like hours passed. She heard footsteps coming, but it wasn't just one set. She heard the familiar stomp of the guards and another set of footsteps. *Maybe it's another prisoner*, Alazondra thought to herself. She turned the lantern off and slid it behind her. She leaned against the stone and peered at the door expectantly. As always, she heard the clank of it being unlocked, and it opened. First, a torch entered the room followed by a guard. After him came a woman. Her long, brown hair shone dimly in the torchlight, and her white shirt was ripped in several places revealing faint scars on her abdomen. This was the woman from her dream. She was Neva. Though, what she was doing in the prison was beyond Alazondra.

"Come on, in you go. Damn, two women in top security now. What's gotten into them?" The guard mumbled.

"Men have gotten into us, that's what," Neva said smirking. The guard took the handle on the torch and beat upside the head. She didn't even show that she felt it. Neva kept on a vicious grin as he shoved her in the cell and locked it. Then, he walked out the heavy door, locking it too. Neva let out a small sigh.

"Hello, what's your name?" she said turning to Alazondra.

"I'm Alazondra," she replied.

"Oh, yes. I remember," Neva said. "You were looking for your home, eh? I don't suppose you've found it though. Hmm." Alazondra merely shook her head in reply. She turned up the lantern some to provide light.

“So, why are you here?” Alazondra asked.

Neva gave a laugh and answered, “Just being me. I’ve a bounty worth more than Cervantes’ vaults, but they can never keep me in jail long enough to claim the bounty. It will be a cold day in Hell when they put the Swordslinger behind bars for good.”

Alazondra nodded and smiled. She admired the woman’s courage.

“Anyway, who’d you kill to end up like me?” Neva asked.

Alazondra replied, “Eight guards.”

Neva gave a whistle, “Yeah, that’ll do it.” Alazondra actually laughed for the first time in a while. Neva began pacing the cell and inspecting it thoroughly.

“Hmm. No loose stones, no windows...” she stated. Her eyes drifted to the shackles on Alazondra’s legs. “Oh my.”

“What?” Alazondra asked.

“You’re a Lycan. I didn’t know that. Come here. Okay, listen well. If I get these shackles off, you’ll change into a Lycan. It’s night right now. Do you think you’d be strong enough to break these bars?” Neva asked.

Alazondra replied, “I might. I mean I broke through the front gate so perhaps.”

“So that’s who did that. Good work. Keep the city boys working.” Neva laughed

“Now, I know when you break it, the noise will make a guard run over. I’ll need you to kill him. If you’ve killed eight, I think you can kill one. Hah. Then, I’ll take his armor and get you in your shackles. Then I’ll be able to get you out without any question.”

Alazondra asked apprehensively, “Where will I go? Do you know where Sekei is? Can you take me to him when we get out?”

“You want to go see Sekei?” Neva inquired slowly. She seemed hesitant, but Alazondra didn’t know why and simply nodded.

“Okay...I can...do that...if you want.”

“Yes, that’d be great. Thanks,” Alazondra said gratefully.

“Now,” said she, “let’s get out of here.”

Alazondra nodded in agreement. Then, Neva inspected the shackles. She grabbed it in her hands and mumbled something quickly. A blue light glowed around the shackles, and they fell from Alazondra’s legs. She felt the dizziness as she had before. The blackness took over her and she fell into a brief state of unconsciousness. She rose as a Lycan.

“Wow...” Neva whispered. “Anyway, go ahead.”

She backed up against the back wall of the cell. Alazondra took a pounce at the door of the cell and the entire room shook. Neva nodded for her to keep trying. Alazondra stuck her head through the bars and bit at the handle. It snapped off, and the door swung open.

“Good work. Now, I know one guard who’ll be coming. I’ll stand back here,” she said quickly.

Alazondra nodded and crouched low before the door, patiently awaiting the entrance of a guard. As planned, a single guard came bursting through the door. Alazondra lunged and quickly executed the man.

“Alright. Now, I’ll put your shackles on you, and then I’ll put on the armor,” Neva said.

She placed the shackles around Alazondra’s legs and instantly a green beam of

light flashed through the room. Alazondra returned to her normal self. Neva put all the armor on piece by piece. Then, she dragged the body into the cell and turned it to appear like a sleeping body. Neva locked the door and turned to Alazondra.

“Well, that worked nicely. Let’s go quickly,” she said.

Alazondra nodded and followed hanging her head to give the outward appearance of being taken somewhere by force. They walked together down the long hallway. The only sound made was the clunking of the armor. Soon two guards came running up.

“What was that down there?” one yelled.

“The prisoners,” Neva grumbled in a very masculine voice, “were fighting like barbarians. This one wanted to rip the other apart. I’m taking her elsewhere.”

The two nodded and walked off. Alazondra kept her eyes held low, as if ashamed. They passed through hallway after hallway. Then there were long stairways. They wended and twisted upwards continuously. It was work climbing the stairs with shackles, but Alazondra longed to see a friendly face. They reached a door carved with beautiful designs. The crack under the door showed a softly glowing light. Neva gave three short knocks and opened the door. Quickly she closed it behind them and turned.

Sitting at a desk in the corner he turned and raised a brow, “Guard...?”

“Mage...?” Neva replied taking off her helmet.

Sekei smiled widely, “Oh, it’s only you Neva. Who’s that...?” Alazondra stepped out from behind Neva and smiled at him. “Alazondra!” Sekei jumped up from his chair and hugged Alazondra. “Where’ve you been at?”

“Well, I don’t think you really want to know...” she said.

Neva looked at her, “I’ve been in prison plenty of times myself. It’s nothing to be ashamed of really.”

Sekei looked up at Neva, “Prison?”

“Aye. She’s had a brush with the city boys. Nothing big,” Neva said.

“Neva, everything is ‘nothing big’ for you,” Sekei replied. They both laughed. “What happened though? How’d she get there?” His gaze fell on Alazondra.

“Um. Killing...eight...” Alazondra said quietly.

He looked at her curiously, “Eight what?”

“Guards...” she replied.

“Yikes. Well, you two will have to lay low for awhile,” Sekei stated. Alazondra nodded, but Neva argued.

“I never lay low, always gung-ho!” she replied.

“Well,” he said, “Lady Gung-ho, you have to. This place is crawling with guards during the day. It’ll look odd if you’re dressed as one and you just walk out the gates.”

“Hmm, yes. Then I won’t walk out the gates. There’s plenty of other ways to get out of the city,” Neva replied.

“And then what? You walk all the way to wherever?” he inquired. Alazondra could see he was trying to talk her out of leaving. She could also see his attempt was in vain. Neva was smart, and she’d end up winning.

Neva said, “You underestimate the intelligence of my horse, Sekei. Hah. Why, by tomorrow night I’ll be on my way.”

He heaved a sigh in resignation, “Where though?”

Her face became serious and grave, “The walls have ears, and the doors have eyes, my friend.” Then, she sent a kick to the door knocking it open and sent the man on

the other side sprawling on to the floor. She gave a smirk, "I knew it. I have to get out of here tonight. I'm sorry Sekei. All I can tell you is that it's...important business." With that, she fled the room. The man outside was still unconscious, and Alazondra merely left him there as she shut the door. Sekei let out a sigh and sat down in his chair. Alazondra sat on the chest next to the desk and looked up at him.

"Sir, if I may ask, is there something between you two?" Alazondra asked quietly.

He replied, "No. Just acquaintances." Alazondra could see it written in his eyes very clearly that he was lying, but she nodded in response. "You'll have to stay hidden up here for the next few days. We'll make them think you ran off somewhere." Alazondra nodded.

"Sir," she asked, "where are Fritchel and Razule?"

He replied, "Staying with friends. You will see them in the morning."

"And," Alazondra continued, "I'd like to hear the truth about myself."

Sekei gave a small sigh, "It's been a long day for you I'm sure. Why not wait until the morning?"

"The day's just begun for me, sir," Alazondra replied. Sekei nodded and turned in his seat.

"You, of course, are not Alazondra," he began. "Your real name is Anne Beomyth Rolath, and you are a Lycan. According to the legends, you are the Incarnate. Rolath was their bold leader. He was god-like in almost every way to them. His form was a large, white Lycan with black markings on the face, legs, and tail, a Lycan unlike any other. Rolath could blend in with the snow and rock. His physical capabilities were far beyond other Lycans and his intelligence was amazing. Now, you are Rolath. Do you understand so far?"

She replied, "Yes. Where does the name Beomyth come from?"

Sekei answered, "Beomyth was your father's name, Derrick Beomyth. Your mother's name was Faye. They both loved you, but the other clans knew about you and the legends. Constantly the rebel clans attacked. They knew if they captured you as a child they could raise you to rule them instead of the Alphas. The rebels gathered forces as many as they could. They also began enlisting Canutes into the battle. When they attacked, you had run out of the camp and luckily not been found. Your father and mother tried to fight the Canutes, but both sadly died. Matthias found you outside the forest the next day. A few years ago I got the assignment from Julius to find you and bring you back when it's safe."

Alazondra thought very deeply and asked, "Who exactly is Julius?"

"Julius Harthyung," said Sekei, "is the current leader of the Lycans. He's a personal friend of mine, and he was a friend of your father's as well. He has a son named Ajax. He's..." Sekei looked out the window, "...not been in the forest in awhile."

"Ajax..." Alazondra whispered to herself. "Is he silver, by any chance?"

Sekei looked at her curiously and answered, "Yes, he is. Why do you ask?"

"Oh, I just thought I read something about Julius and his family line in a book. I used to be fascinated by Lycans, and I'd read about them," Alazondra lied.

"Ah," Sekei replied. Alazondra held her head in her hands thinking things over slowly. *I am a Lycan*, she thought. *Not just a Lycan, I'm the Incarnate*. It didn't seem real to her. She couldn't take it all in.

"For quite some time now I've wondered who I am, and now I know. Now, I

don't know what to say, do, or think though," she whispered.

Sekei said, "I can only imagine, but don't worry. Once we get things cleared up everything will be alright."

"Will I be taken to the forest?" she asked.

After a bit of silence he replied, "All in good time." Alazondra didn't know whether she wanted to go there or not. She feared it, yet it was her true home. *A home*, she thought. *Finally, I have one, but I'm scared of it.* She sighed lightly. Alazondra wanted to talk to Fritchel. *He's a Lycan, and he may be able to help me.* She realized she hadn't eaten for about two days, and the only drink she had was water from a dirty bucket. The pain in her back covered up the pain in her stomach easily.

"Sir, you wouldn't happen to have any food, would you?" she asked.

He gave a smile and replied, "I think I have some leftover bread on that table just there, and atop the dresser there are some apples I believe, freshly imported too."

"Thank you. I haven't eaten, well, in two days I suppose. Oh, how are you sir? You look as if you're recovering well from the attack." Alazondra said as she rose from the chest on which she was seated. She made her way across the room and grabbed the bread and two apples.

"I'm just fine. They took me to the healer here and did a fine job. I feel quite well," he replied. Alazondra nodded and began eating her apple.

"Sekei, what is this place? I mean you don't live here, do you?" Alazondra asked as she looked at the small room.

He answered, "Oh no. This is just the temporary housing in the fort. Hmm, I don't really 'live' anywhere. I tend to travel from place to place. I own a few houses in a few cities, but I never stay put. Maybe I should." Alazondra nodded as she finished her second apple. Her green eyes averted around the room. It was very small. There was a desk with a chair, a dresser, and a chest. In the corner stood a rickety bunk bed that must have been used in the guards' quarters. There were windows in one wall that overlooked Witherfroth. Small fires twinkled and glowed brightly against the dark, night ambience.

Soon, Sekei went to sleep for the night in the bottom bunk. Alazondra stayed up since she had slept so much in her cell. She sat on the windowsill and gazed outside. The deep blue sky shifted to orange before her eyes. The ice and snow glittered and glistened in the rising sun. People began coming out of their houses, and shops started opening. Then, very faintly, Alazondra heard footsteps. It sounded like a guard's steps. She heard him pound on the door a few doors down from Sekei's room.

"Excuse me, but I'm searching for two women that have escaped the prison. Allow me to check your room out and make sure they're not here," the guard asked.

A female voice answered, "Yes sir." Then Alazondra heard shuffling noises and doors opening and shutting. Alazondra became very nervous. She ran to the bunk and shook Sekei profusely.

"Sekei. Get up! The guards are about to come knocking at the door and ask for me and Neva," she whispered.

"Hmm?" he groaned groggily.

She gave an exasperated sigh, "Sekei! When they get to your door tell them you haven't seen me and let them search your room, okay?" Sekei nodded and pulled the sheet over his head. *That man and his sleep*, Alazondra thought to herself. She frantically looked around the room. The only escape was the window. She looked out the window

and saw that it was a long way down. There was a ledge just below the window. Alazondra stepped onto the ledge and scooted away from the window. She hugged very close to the wall. She could hear the guard pound on Sekei's door.

"What?" Sekei yelled. Alazondra almost laughed. He was the funniest when he was just awoken.

"Sir, this is the guard! Open the door," he demanded.

Sekei yelled back, "You know just as well as I do that temporary housing doesn't have locks. You open the door." Alazondra heard the guard heave a loud, annoyed sigh, but opened the door anyway.

"I am looking for two women," he said. Alazondra knew Sekei hadn't remembered what she told him.

"Two? Why on earth do you need two? One's enough trouble," Sekei mumbled. Alazondra almost slipped as she covered her mouth to keep from laughing.

The guard cleared his throat, "I am searching for them. They escaped the prison. I need to look through here to make sure they aren't in here."

"Okay, just don't wake me up...again..." Sekei replied and rolled over, falling asleep once more. The guard shuffled about the room opening things and shutting them. She heard the guard shut the door and walk down the hallway to other rooms. Alazondra finally began to breathe normally and stepped back inside the room. She looked up at Sekei sleeping in his bed and grinned to herself. Then, she returned to gazing outside the window. The sky was a bright blue, and the sun was low in the sky.

She spotted two men walked towards the building. She knew they were Razule and Fritchel. Fritchel's crimson robes and Razule's grey ones were the only ones in the crowd. They stopped outside a shop and conversed. Alazondra grinned as she picked up an apple core from the floor. Very carefully, she aimed and sent it flying straight for Razule's head. She got a direct hit. Razule looked around curiously and rubbed his head.

Alazondra laughed and picked up another core. She hit Fritchel in the shoulder. Razule looked upwards and began waving frantically. Fritchel joined in the waving just after. Alazondra smiled and waved back. They both ran inside the fort. Soon she heard them clamor up the steps and down the hallway. The door burst open to reveal the two Mages smiling brightly. Both had small pieces of apple all over them.

"Alazondra! It's good to see you!" Fritchel yelled as he hugged her tightly.

"Shh!" Alazondra hissed. "I'm in a lot of trouble right now. The last thing I need is attention." She closed the door and received a warm hug from Razule.

"Oh? Alazondra's been the troublemaker? What did she do?" Fritchel asked.

"Pretty bad things," she replied.

Razule inquired, "Hmm, what kind of things?"

"Well, killing eight guards kind of things," she said.

Fritchel exclaimed, "You what?" Her reply was a nod. "Well..." Fritchel seemed lost in words.

Sekei sat up in his bed and yelled, "I told you not to...oh, hello guys. I thought it was the guard, again. Damned fellow wakin' up a poor guy when he's sleeping."

"Hallo Sekei," Fritchel and Razule replied. They both knew him and his sleeping habits well. They knew the man loved his sleep. Fritchel's eyes averted to the shackles at Alazondra's feet.

"That reminds me," he said. Fritchel reached a hand inside a pocket of his robe.

He produced forth a stunning amulet. It was a silver 'A' embedded with dazzling crystals strung on a silver chain. It sparkled in the sunlight that streamed through the windows.

Alazondra said quietly, "Oh, it's...so beautiful."

"It is," he replied, "and, like my ring, it keeps you from turning into a Lycan at night. Now, let me take these off you." Fritchel bent down and looked at the shackles. He mumbled the same thing Neva did, and a blue light was emitted from his hand. The shackles fell to the ground unlocked. A white flash lit up the room for a split second.

Alazondra smiled, "Thank you." She placed the amulet around her neck. As it fell against her chest, the diamonds shortly glowed with a green pulsing. Fritchel smiled and gave her a small hug.

"My, my! You need some new clothes and shoes. Why don't I take you about the town of Witherfroth?" Fritchel asked.

Alazondra slightly shook her head, "I couldn't. They're looking for me as it is."

"Ah yes. Hmm." Fritchel looked out the window stroking his chin. His blue eyes twinkled lightly. Alazondra had the feeling he was getting an idea of some kind. He glanced towards Sekei who had fallen back asleep. Then, he opened his dresser and pulled out a robe and a small handkerchief.

"Alright, put the robe on and tie your hair up in the handkerchief. Then, we can go. The guards in this city are too dumb to notice any similarities," Fritchel said hastily. Alazondra nodded and did as asked. The robe was quite large, but it did fit. She tied her long hair up into the white handkerchief. "Hmm, no shoes though. Sekei's boots are too big...we'll just have to find something in a shop. Sorry." Fritchel looked out the window. "Hmm. Razule, are you coming too?"

Razule replied, "Well, I was rather planning on a nap actually. You two go ahead." Fritchel nodded and led Alazondra out the door.

"Well, this will be great fun. You should meet my friends. Thomas is a soldier all the way from the capital city. I've another friend from Helix, but I haven't seen him for a while. He must have gotten assigned to a fort someplace," Fritchel said. Alazondra listened happily. She enjoyed listening to Fritchel talk. Even though she only spent two days in jail, it really made her see the natural need of human socializing. They walked out of the fort together and made their way to the markets and shops in the town. Alazondra had lived most of her life in the small town of Piliad, and the mass amount of people was shocking to her.

"What a big place," she remarked.

Fritchel replied, "Yes, Viland was about twice as big, and Helix is twice as big as Viland was. Hmm, you know what?"

"What?" Alazondra answered.

"I think," he said, "you could use a nice robe. Maybe a dark green one, with white trimming, would be good. It'd look splendid on you. Would you like that?" Alazondra smiled brightly and nodded.

Fritchel and Alazondra found a fine clothier. They found the perfect robe, which fit Fritchel's description. Then, they made their way through the voluminous, bustling city. The crowds were a good thing in Alazondra's case, for it hid her from the guards. None even looked her way though. They went through quite a few shops. After visits to tanners, fur-trappers, and smiths Alazondra had a new pair of boots, a belt, and a small shortsword. Fritchel bought two pastries and led Alazondra to the edge of a small river

that ran through Witherfroth.

“Well, I never expected Witherfroth to have such a nice armory. You couldn’t tell it from the guards’ armor,” Fritchel laughed.

Alazondra laughed and replied, “Yes, that’s quite true. Thank you very much, by the way. This is all really wonderful.”

“You’re most welcome, for the umpteenth time. Hah. Yes, that robe really does bring out your eyes,” he said. Alazondra smiled, blushing lightly. “I was wondering, did you ever hear the truth about, you know, your past?” Fritchel asked.

“Yes, I did. Sekei told me who I was and where I was from. It’s so hard to take it all in though. You think your one person for so long, but then finding you’re a completely different person. It’s almost overwhelming,” she answered.

“Oh. Yes, I can only imagine such. Uh, did he tell you everything?” he asked. Alazondra noticed his face slightly reddening.

She eyed him curiously, “He may have. You might need to refresh my mind though.”

Fritchel laughed, “Oh, you’re a sly one. You almost had me on that one.”

“What though,” she said, “do you mean by ‘everything?’”

“Never mind, it’s not important. At least you know who you are now, and I apologize for not telling you myself so much earlier. Sekei thought it best to keep the truth from you to keep you safe. I sorely wanted to though,” he stated.

“I understand, but please Fritchel do tell,” Alazondra pleaded.

Fritchel heaved a small sigh, “Alright. You deserve to know. You’ve been put through enough. Well,” he paused briefly thinking about his words, “your father was a very nice man. He was friends with many, if not all, of the Lycans in our clan. My father was one of his friends. They spent much time together, and we did as well. It’s very faint in my memory, but I can still recall. You and I would play together by a stream. You were my best friend when I was young and looking at you now makes those few memories come alive.”

“Wow. That’s what you wanted to tell me?” she asked.

His blue eyes swiftly averted to the rippling river water, “Yes, that’s all. I thought it might help you to know more about yourself and me as well.”

“Yes, it did. Thank you for telling me.” Alazondra smiled at him. In the back of her mind though, she had the feeling he was leaving out something more. Then, she remembered the silver Lycan pup. He seemed to be playing with her and smiling. *Was Fritchel the silver Lycan? Is he possibly Ajax Harthyung?* It all seemed possible enough.

“Are you—” Alazondra’s question was cut off as a guard grabbed her by the neck.

“There you are! You wretched sneak!” he yelled. She recognized his voice as Sam’s.

“Sneak? Why sir! I haven’t the faintest of what you are talking about,” she said holding her voice in a higher tone.

He grumbled, “You bloody know very well what I’m talking about, Alazondra.”

“Ala-zondra?” Fritchel said questioningly. Alazondra knew he caught on to her act. “Sir, if I may interject, this is not Alazondra. This is my sister, Sarah Gamion.”

“Sarah Gamion, eh? I’m a keen old man. You can’t fool me. She doesn’t look anything like you.”

Alazondra gasped deeply, "I hate bringing this up! Oh!" She immediately buried her face in Fritchel's robe, sobbing quite loudly. "I'm...a foster child! I don't know my real parents! Oh!"

Fritchel patted her back nodding, "It's a sensitive topic, sir. Thank you very much for bringing it up! Hmph. She was just beginning to like Witherfroth."

Sam blinked silently then replied, "Oh, well, I'm awfully sorry. You looked like someone else. Please forgive me." He then marched off.

Fritchel remarked, "You are a very clever person."

Alazondra laughed and replied, "I suppose so. I'm clever or just extremely lucky mayhap. That was too close though. I think I should return to Sekei's place now."

"Well, I think we'll be alright now," Fritchel said. His eyes glanced over towards the large fort, and his eyes grew cold shortly. Then, he turned and looked at Alazondra. He grew silent for a moment.

"Alazondra, come. Let's give Sekei his things back. Then, I'll take you to my friend's house where I am staying, and you can stay with us," Fritchel mumbled.

"Well, alright," she replied. They both worked their way through the city and up to the fort. She wondered what was going on inside Fritchel's head. After the many staircases, they reached his door.

"Hey, stay here for a minute. I'll be right out. Then, we'll head to my friend's house," Fritchel whispered as he opened the door. Alazondra nodded and sat outside the door in the hallway. She could faintly hear their voices. Fritchel threw the clothes on the bed and turned to Sekei.

"Sekei, I'm going to take her to my friend's house for awhile. She'll be safe there. He's an honest man, so he wouldn't turn her in," Fritchel said.

"Oh?" Sekei replied. "Why? She's safe here as well. I think I'd feel more comfortable with her here." He spoke with an accusing tone.

"Well, I thought she'd like to meet my friend. He's a nice person with a great house, and I'd like to spend time with her. It'd be fun for her," Fritchel said. Alazondra heard Sekei stand up and walk across the wooden floor.

"Where is she now?" Sekei asked.

Fritchel answered, "She's at his house now. I was coming over to return the robe and to tell you where she was. She'll be fine. You needn't worry about her."

Sekei said in a harsh tone, "It's not her I worry about, Fritchel. It's you. You've been very distrustful lately. I know you've lied to me more than once about things, and I also know you attempted to tell her the truth without my consultation. This does not please me, Fritchel. I wouldn't want her to end up in the wrong hands."

"You're the one telling *me* about wrong hands?" Fritchel shouted. "You're a despicable man! This is the reason I'm taking her away. You can't go through with it. She needs to go home, as you promised her. When I said I'd help you I didn't know you were talking about my best childhood friend."

Sekei grumbled, "You can't go back on your word now. We made a deal."

"The deal was a lie. Just like you are, Sekei. Now, I'm going. The plan's over. You should be lucky I can't deal with you personally right now," Fritchel replied.

"Fritchel, you're a fool. It really doesn't matter in the end. Even if you told her right now, it wouldn't matter. She's not strong enough yet to take on me," Sekei said.

"I wouldn't be so sure of that," Fritchel answered. "Besides, I don't have to tell

her anything.” He opened the door revealing Alazondra seated outside in the hall. She stood up and looked at Sekei. She had never seen a look so dark in his eyes before.

“Go,” he said coldly. Then he seated himself at his desk and began writing something. Fritchel turned around and looked at Alazondra. She was in plain shock and was very confused by their words.

“I’m sorry you had to hear all that, but you had to see. There was no other way I could make you believe the danger,” he whispered. Fritchel placed an arm around her shoulder and walked away from the deceitful Mage.

[Burning Truths]

They walked far through the city. They reached the river and the manor beside it.

“This is his home. He’s, well, I hate to say rich, but he does have a lot of money.” Fritchel laughed a bit. They walked over a small wooden bridge and up to the manor. He knocked on the door, and it opened immediately.

“Ah, there you are Fritchel. I see you have company.” The man who opened the door was a cheerful man. He was happy and talkative. He had short hair that slightly hung in his eyes, and he looked Fritchel’s age. Alazondra could tell he was a soldier by the way he walked. The man led them through the house and into the dining room. There was a large table affixed with candles and the like. A small dinner was prepared already.

“Welcome to my house, milady. I’m Thomas Lowet,” he said stretching out his hand. Alazondra smiled and shook his hand. Fritchel pulled a chair out for Alazondra, and then seated himself.

Alazondra replied as she sat down, “I’m A…” She lost herself. She didn’t know whether to say Alazondra or Anne. “...Alazondra.” Thomas nodded and smiled as he sat down as well. He grabbed his drink and leaned back in his chair.

“I haven’t seen you around here. Are you new to Witherfroth?” Thomas asked as he placed both of his feet on the table.

Alazondra answered, “Well, it’s somewhat of a temporary staying, but yes I am new to the area.”

“Ah. I see. Well, if you need any assistance whatsoever...I’m around,” he said, smiling widely.

Fritchel scoffed lightly, “Thomas, cut the gentlemanly act. You’re so full of yourself.”

“Ah, that may be so my friend,” Thomas laughed, “but I do not act! I *am* a gentleman.” His laugh echoed in Alazondra’s mind. She looked at him leaning in his chair. Her mind flashed back to the dream she had. The image of the man leaning back in his chair seemed so much alike.

“Sir Lowet?” Alazondra said.

“Yes? Please call me Thomas, or as some ladies love Tommy Low.”

“Uh, yes. I was wondering if that was a habit,” she replied.

“Yes, I’d have to say being a ladies’ man is a rather fond habit of mine,” he said.

“No,” Alazondra said, “leaning back in your chair. Is that a habit?” Fritchel looked at her curiously.

“Oh why yes. I’m afraid it is. I don’t have very good table manners,” he laughed.

“And, if I may ask, do you know anyone by the name of Seth?” Alazondra asked. He looked at her curiously, “I do. How do you know...?” Fritchel’s eyes darted to Alazondra. She grew silent. “Well...?” Thomas said.

She shrugged, “I don’t know if you’d believe me if I told you. It’s...all so...”

“Do tell,” Fritchel encouraged.

“Alright,” she let out a long sigh. “Well, while I was in prison—”

“Wow a prison bird!” Thomas exclaimed. “How interesting.”

Fritchel threw a fork at Thomas, “Hey! Thomas, sometimes it’s okay not to talk. Did you know?” Thomas laughed and then got quiet.

“Anyway,” Alazondra laughed a bit and continued, “I was in prison, and I had this dream. I was in this small room, looked like a cabin maybe. I remember there were a fireplace and a table in the corner. Thomas, you were seated as you are now, and next to you was Seth. He was drinking something. Neva was there too. She was reading something by the fireplace. She made a comment about it, and Seth remarked back. It all seemed lighthearted and joyous. Then, an arrow crashed through the window. You two seemed to disappear, and Neva ran outside. The dream ended there, but it was all so odd.” Nothing stirred but the flickering candles as Alazondra finished with her story.

After a silence, “The small cabin-like place you were talking about,” Thomas said, “that sounds like my study maybe. I have a fireplace and a table in the corner. However, that hasn’t happened to us though. An arrow crashing through the window...”

“It was probably just some crazy dream. I’m sure,” Alazondra said.

“Hmm, yes. Quite crazy. So anyway, what’d you do to get put behind bars?” Thomas asked.

Alazondra mumbled, “Do you honestly want to know?”

“Why yes. I do,” he replied.

“I killed eight guards,” she answered.

“My word. A young lass like you killing eight guards? I’ll have to watch my back! Fritchel where did you say you found her?” Thomas exclaimed. He didn’t wait for a reply, but he continued talking. Talking was something Thomas enjoyed doing and made it clear to everyone. He was a fun person to listen to though. Alazondra and Fritchel ate while he related tales of small battles and skirmishes he had fought in, not forgetting to over exaggerate everything. Fritchel occasionally scoffed or laughed. Alazondra remembered that it was like this at Oribeth’s home. She wondered how he was.

“Well, I suppose we should all head off to bed. Or me at least,” Thomas said yawning slightly. “Oh, and I only have two bedrooms. Alazondra will have to go in your room I guess, unless she might wish to join me in my room...” He grinned smugly.

“Oh hush up, Thomas. Gosh,” Fritchel yelled. They both laughed loudly. Fritchel smiled and led Alazondra up to his room. There was a large canopy bed against one wall. The other two were lined with large windows garnished with beautiful drapes. A white drape covered the door that led to a balcony above the river.

Alazondra stepped outside onto the balcony. There were three stone chairs furnished atop the balcony. At the edges, there were beautiful soldier statues with crossbows that looked quite lifelike. She smiled as the cool North winds blew across her face. The sky was darkening into the blissful color of the night. Thoughts began crowding her mind. There were still many unanswered questions on her mind, and after hearing the conversation between Fritchel and Sekei. *What did all that mean? What was Sekei*

planning? She thought. Once again, her mind could not answer these questions.

Fritchel approached her and said quietly as he placed an arm on her shoulder, “I know what you’re thinking about. Sekei, right?”

“Yes. What exactly was he planning to do with me? Has all this been a lie? Am I really Alazondra Graystone? Do you just like my pain?” Alazondra was near yelling. She leaned on the balcony balustrade hanging her head low.

“No, of course not.” Fritchel heaved a sigh and sat on the railing. “You really are Anne, and I want to take you home. Sekei had other plans. They were awful plans. He told me about them, but never mentioned who exactly it was. I foolishly agreed to help him. Then, we found you and began the journey. As soon as I looked at you, I knew you were Anne. I continued to help Sekei, but I tried talking him out of his plan. I tried to tell him you really should return home.”

“He would not listen. He was driven by the madness of power, which can easily corrupt a Mage such as him. Sekei is a fool though. To do such a thing to an innocent person is an atrocity no man should ever even fathom committing. It disgusts me that I ever helped in the first place, though I am glad I did. If I hadn’t then I wouldn’t have the chance to help you home, and now I do. I plan on helping you home, which is also my real home.” As Fritchel finished, Alazondra kept her head low. Her long hair covered her teary eyes.

She composed herself to keep from crying and asked, “What was his plan?”

His face grew grim as he replied, “It is a horrible thing.”

“Tell me nevertheless,” Alazondra said.

Fritchel nodded, “If you wish. Lycan blood is a powerful thing. Myths say that it can be used to make humans strong. The truth is that it will kill them, even the smallest amount. The blood is thick and strong. The mix of human blood and Lycan would surely kill anyone. Sekei has close ties with, well, Julius, the leader of the Alphas. Julius asked him to find you, the Incarnate, and return you to them. Sekei searched wide and far.”

“As soon as he found your location, he summoned Razule, Johnez and I. He told all of us about taking you home, but he never specified who at that time. Then in privacy, he asked me if he would join in with his other plan. His plan was to do partly as asked, which was to bring you to Witherfroth. The forest is terribly unsafe right now, and Julius wanted me to help you with self-defense. You look like you know what you’re doing so far if you can take out eight guards. Anyway, Sekei planned on doing so, but he wanted to get to Witherfroth before you began turning into a Lycan at night.”

He gave a small sigh and paused. Alazondra could tell the next part was hard for him. She encouraged him to continue.

Reluctantly, Fritchel continued, “His idea was to hold you hostage until Julius paid him three times the amount of what he was getting paid to bring you home. Once he received the money, he would kill you anyway. Then, he would take your blood and attempt to use it to make himself stronger. He’s an awful man, though I doubt I should say. I was in on the plan in the beginning.”

Alazondra shook her head, “I understand, Fritchel. It’s alright.”

“If only it were...” he said. “Every time I look at you it hurts me. It hurts me to know I lied and all you had to go through. I, who have always known my real parents and identity, cannot imagine the pain of not knowing your own name. I feel so awful.”

“So, Johnez and Razule knew nothing of the plan?” Alazondra asked.

Fritchel answered, "No. They thought they were really bringing you home."

"And you'll bring me home?" she asked.

"Of course. It's my home as well. I'd like to return to it and give up this life as a Mage. Hmm, I so dearly miss the trees and soil of the forest," he mumbled. Alazondra remembered her unanswered and unasked question.

"Oh, pardon my inquisitiveness, but I have one more question," she said.

"Yes?" he replied.

"Are you a silver Lycan by the name of Ajax Harthyung?" Alazondra asked. His eyes, which were once focused intently on hers, darted away. He turned his head slightly and gazed at the river below.

Fritchel answered after a long pause, "I am silver...and my name is...Ajax."

"Then, you are the Lycan that was in my dream, and the Lycan I had that image of," she said smiling.

"Yes," he said quietly.

"What's the matter, Fritchel?"

He replied hastily, "Nothing. Why, nothing at all!"

Alazondra looked at him, "Now, you can't possibly expect me to believe that." She wrapped her arms around his waist and hugged him. Fritchel smiled and returned the hug.

The stars were emerging from the deep blue sky, and the sun had long disappeared behind the western horizon. Fritchel took Alazondra's hand and moved to one of the stone lounge chairs atop the balcony. He sat down, and then gently set Alazondra beside him. As Alazondra looked up at him, their eyes met and became frozen in a beautiful gaze. Neither pulled away from it. Both faces were close enough to feel each other's breaths. The silence was magnificent. Fritchel placed a hand at Alazondra's cheek and moved forward slightly. Their noses touched and their lips lingered just millimeters apart.

Then a loud snap echoed through the silent night scene. Alazondra and Fritchel turned around looking for the source of the sound. Another snap could be heard following the first one. Alazondra looked closely and saw one statue actually move. He was reloading his crossbow. The other was doing likewise. The one fired his crossbow once more, aimed down by the riverside.

"The statues..." Alazondra mumbled.

Fritchel looked at the statues, "The security boundary's been breached by someone unwanted." He rose and headed to the door. "Alazondra, stay here. These guys will keep you safe. They're enchanted. I'll be back." Alazondra gave a slight nod as he disappeared behind the white curtains. She crouched low and peered through the bars of the balcony balustrade. She spotted the man. He was dressed in armor of some beige cloth. The man was hidden behind a bush near the river. Alazondra could hear frantic shouts from Thomas. Then, she remembered the small blade she had in her belt. She had no training of how to use it but decided to try.

The man was quite still. She pulled the shortblade from her leather belt and silently moved behind a statue. Alazondra decided to throw the blade. She raised her arm with careful aim at the man's neck. With a powerful snap of her wrist, the blade was sent whizzing through the air. It hit the man straight in the throat and he was sent backwards. The statues froze as they were posed before. Alazondra looked around for anything else,

but saw nothing. She jumped over the balcony railing and onto part of the manor's roof. Then, she jumped to the ground and made her way to the man's body.

Alazondra found he was dead. She removed his mask and found an odd-looking man. His eyes were a deep red color, and his teeth appeared more angular than most, especially his canines. The odd man's hair was raven black. She found a note tucked in his boot. She opened it up and couldn't make out any of it. The words were in another language. Behind her, running footsteps could be heard thundering across the grass.

"Alazondra, I said..." Fritchel began, but his voice trailed off.

Thomas said, "Whoa. That's an assassin, and it sure wasn't for me." His eyes brown eyes averted to Alazondra.

"What happened?" Fritchel asked.

Alazondra replied, "Well, I saw the man standing here, and I took the blade I got earlier and threw it. He's dead now."

Thomas remarked, "All the way from the balcony?" She gave a nod. "Wow. She's got an arm *and* she's a killer."

"Thomas, hush!" Fritchel hissed. "What's that note?"

"I don't know," Alazondra answered. "It's in some language." She handed Fritchel the note. Thomas walked over to the body.

"This is a Canute. Hmm, they're fine assassins, too," Thomas said. "I bet that note is in Canuus."

"It is, but I can't make any sense of it. I don't know Canuus," Fritchel replied.

"What is that?" Alazondra asked.

"It's the language of the Canutes," Thomas stated. "Not many people, other than the Canutes, know it." Alazondra looked long and hard at the note. There were four symbols at the bottom of the page that seemed to stand out to her. She turned and looked at the man lying on the ground. The blood was slowly pooling around his neck on the grass. Her mind flashed an image of Sekei lying with his robe ripped. His chest was exposed revealing his tattoo. Those were the symbols.

"Fritchel, those symbols at the bottom of the page are on Sekei's chest," she said.

Thomas looked at Alazondra, "And how, may I ask, would you, uh, know that?"

"His robe was ripped from the Lycan attack," she replied, glaring some.

He murmured, "Oh, of course."

Fritchel asked, "Are you sure?"

"Yes. I'm positive," she answered. Alazondra pulled the cuirass off the dead man. His chest had different symbols. "What does it all mean though?" she asked.

"I don't know..." Fritchel said distantly. They stood in silence as the moments passed. The only noise was the slowly moving river flowing past them. The city even seemed quiet. Then, Thomas gave a small nod to Fritchel and went inside his manor. Alazondra picked up her shortblade. She tucked it in her belt and turned to Fritchel.

"Well, we should sleep," Alazondra said.

Fritchel replied, "Yes. We will make plans in the morning." They both made their way upstairs in the manor and to the room. Without a word, Fritchel stepped out onto the balcony and sat in a stone chair. Alazondra lay in the large canopy bed. She struggled to find sleep and comfort, for the thought that she could be killed before she awoke the next morning disturbed her. She finally drifted off to sleep.

The sleep did not last long however. She awoke in a cold sweat from a dream she

could not recall. She felt a certain warmth though. As she turned to inspect she found an arm wrapped around her waist. Alazondra turned and came face to face with Fritchel. She let out a small gasp in surprise. She blushed profusely as she noticed his shirt was off. *His robe really hides his brawn*, she thought to herself as turned away. She slipped out of the bed and stepped outside.

The cool air blew through her hair. The sun had not yet risen, but the stars had already disappeared into the deep blue sky. She leaned on the balcony and watched the dark waters of the river move by while everything else seemed so still. *Who was that assassin? Does he have a connection with Sekai?* The unanswered questions continued to seep into her mind. Alazondra felt as if every time one question was answered many more came about.

Then, a sudden jolt of pain in her head sent Alazondra to her knees. Her breathing became labored as she came crashing to all fours. The pain spread down her spine like venom. Things grew blurry as the pain continued. The awful feeling soon dissipated from her body, leaving her very dizzy. She rubbed her temples as she shakily rose to her feet. Alazondra didn't know what had just happened. She had an angry feeling in her mind. All the grief, misery, and anguish she had felt seemed like a dangerous fuel.

The primordial feeling dawned on her as she paced the balcony in the early hour. *There is only one thing, one choice that will save you. It will also save Ajax. Sekai's death will bring you safety and glory. His death and the spilling of his blood will not show him pain, but it will satisfy me and heal your wounds.* These thoughts seemed to come from another place than her own mind.

"Why? Why kill him?" she whispered. Her inner thoughts seemed to answer. *Does he not deserve it? His foolishness and treachery against Lycans shall not go any further.*

"Treachery against Lycans?" Alazondra asked. She felt it most odd to be talking to herself, but these thoughts, wherever they were from, seemed to know all the answers. *He is not just a Mage. Haven't you learned yet that nothing is what it seems to be?* She sat down and pondered about this.

"Who are you?" She almost yelled. *I am you.* It answered. *You are essentially me. We are one in the same.*

She whispered one word, "Rolath..." *Yes. I am Rolath, and you are as well. Now, young one, do as I say for my word will save you and Ajax. I know his safety means as much to you as your own does, maybe even more. Go.* At this internal beckoning, she took a lunge off the side of the balcony. Alazondra landed on the roof of the manor's first story, and she jumped off. Then, with sense of courage and a blade under her robe, she began sprinting through the sleeping city. The wide streets and narrow alleys were completely empty. There were no lights, and Alazondra felt a sense of comfort in this shadowy darkness.

The large doors of the fort were shut. Alazondra peered at the building. She came across a window that had been broken. She pondered, *Luck, or is it?* Alazondra slipped inside it, taking care not to cut her feet on the shards of glass. Her green eyes averted side to side in the translucent black she was entrapped in. She felt along the walls and exited the room. Large windows at the ends of the long corridors filled it with a dark blue light. She realized it was becoming day, so she hastened her step.

Alazondra passed through the familiar halls and stairs as she crept towards his

room. The guards were not out yet, which Alazondra was thankful for. She finally reached the last staircase and moved up it very silently. She avoided making any noise of creak or footfall. She stuck to the shadows as she snuck towards his door. Alazondra drew her blade. She reached towards the door and then reeled back. *What am I doing? I'm killing Sekei. Am I a killer though? I'm Anne Beomyth Rolath.*

Her strength allowed her to open the door. She found it wasn't even shut. With a push, the door swung open on its hinges. She crouched low and stepped in. She looked to the bed and found no one. The desk was empty as well. Then, she looked on the rug in front of her and found Sekei horribly mangled. She saw that his chest was hideously marred. Alazondra inspected where his tattoo would be and found the bare flesh savagely scratched away. There was a large puncture wound through his neck. She guessed it was a blade. On the floor, there was a note. This was in the same language as the note found on the assassin. *Maybe the Dog Canutes killed him.*

Behind her, she heard loud footsteps. She knew the guards were beginning their duties. The sun had just barely breached the eastern horizon. Alazondra found that the window was open too. She snatched the note off the floor and walked out to the ledge just beneath the window. Below her were a series of ledges. She scaled down the stone wall of the fort carefully and silently. Alazondra reached the last ledge and jumped for the ground. She landed on her feet and began running through the town.

She placed the shortblade in its place on her belt and made her way through narrow roads and wide streets. People were coming out of their homes now and opening their shops. She came to the bridge across the river and dashed across. Alazondra's breathing was heavy and she was tired, but she would not rest until she had reached the manor with the note. She got inside the sleeping home and charged up the stairs. Then, she went into Fritchel's room where he was still asleep.

"Fritchel!" Alazondra gasped. "Wake up!" Fritchel stirred and sat upright in the bed. His shirt was still off. Alazondra blushed and slightly looked away.

"What is it?" he said through a yawn. She gave the note to him as well as his shirt.

"Look at the note. I found that this morning. Sekei's dead," she stated.

He stuttered, "Wha...What?" Her reply was a mere nod. "Who killed him?" He asked looking her in the eyes as he buttoned his shirt.

"I didn't." She let out a sigh. "I had gone there to kill him myself, but I found him dead. There were scratches all over him and a rather large wound in the neck. I noticed his tattoo was scratched off. I'm guessing Canutes did it."

Fritchel thought about this for a moment and then replied, "Hmm, we need to find someone who knows Canuus, but for now you should sleep. You look tired." Fritchel pulled his robe on and walked out of the room. The sun was slipping above the eastern horizon, and Alazondra slipped into the soft bed letting her mind rest. Later, her eyes opened and found it was late afternoon. Light flooded the balcony but the room was only fairly lit. She heard the men in the dining room and went downstairs to join them. She quietly made her way across the beautifully furnished home and entered the room.

"Hello Alazondra! How are you?" Thomas called out.

She replied, "Just fine, Thomas. Thanks. How are you?"

"Why, I'm dandy as always," he replied cheerfully. Thomas was sitting in a chair, leaning back as usual. He seemed like such a carefree person at times. She enjoyed his company but also found him arrogant. They all talked for a little while. Later they ate

dinner, and things passed uneventfully. Soon days went by and life became easy and relaxed.

After a week had passed, Alazondra woke in the morning and saw a large, palomino stallion grazing outside by the river. She heard the laugh of a woman downstairs.

“Thomas you never do change. No matter how many times I have to beat you over the head with something,” the voice said. Alazondra recognized her as Neva. She silently made her way down the stairs to greet her. She was standing in the beautifully furnished parlor talking with Thomas and Fritchel.

“Hello Neva,” Alazondra greeted.

“Why hello! Glad to see you again, my good friend,” Neva said smiling brightly.

Thomas said, “Good morning, Alazondra. I see you know Neva.” Alazondra nodded in response and greeted Fritchel.

“Yes,” Neva stated, “she helped me out of prison. And actually...hmm, never mind.” Alazondra looked at her. Neva looked like she had an idea but decided to keep it in. “Anyway, I heard about all your adventures with the assassin and death of Sekei. I never would have thought the man to be so corrupt, yet I guess you can never really know a person fully.” She sighed lightly.

Alazondra replied, “I didn’t expect it either.” Behind them, the two men began talking and Neva pulled Alazondra into Thomas’s study.

Neva whispered, “Alazondra, you know the note you found? My friend is a Dog Canute. His name is Hisao. He can translate it for us.”

“Oh great. Where is he?” Alazondra asked.

Neva looked down, “Well, that’s the problem. He’s in jail. I don’t know if you want to risk another bump against the city boys or not, but trust me it could be worth it. He’s smart anyway, so I doubt it would be too much trouble. I don’t want to put you in danger either. I just need your help.”

“Ok,” Alazondra replied, “whatever it is, I’ll do it.”

Neva hugged Alazondra and exclaimed, “Oh thank you so much! You’re a good pal, Alazondra.” She sat down in a chair and looked out the window.

Alazondra asked, “Is he here in Witherfroth?”

Neva answered, “No. He’s in Helix. That’ll be another thing. We’ll have to travel all the way across the country.”

“We as in you and I?” Alazondra inquired.

“Well, it would be you, Thomas, and I. He knows a lot about Helix, since he’s a soldier. Fritchel will stay here and see if anything comes up. We need you because you’re a Lycan. You may be our only chance. I’m sure it’d be great fun for you as well,” Neva explained.

“Do we have to go through the Harthyung Forest?” Alazondra groaned.

“No,” Neva said. “The best way is to sail west along the coast. Then, once due north of Helix we’ll ride down. It’ll be faster and safer, especially for you. Well, it’d be safe for Thomas as well. He’s deadly scared of Lycans. Hmm, yes, it sounds good to me. So, you are willing?”

“Of course,” Alazondra nodded.

Neva whispered lowly to Alazondra just before leaving the room, “Thomas will take you to the docks tomorrow at noon. Don’t be afraid to pack heavy. You may need

it.” Then, Neva left the room. Alazondra stood silent and motionless wondering exactly what she was agreeing to do.

Alazondra awoke the next morning and placed her few possessions in a small bag. She sat on the balcony as the sun grew higher in the sky. The usual happenings of the day were occurring. People bustled to and fro throughout the city unaware of anything but their own lives. The river water moved slowly, trickling over the rocks. Alazondra rose from her chair as the sun almost drew to noon. She went downstairs in the manor and relaxed in the parlor room for a short while.

Fritchel entered the room and said in a low tone, “I hope you’ll find this Canute. He could be quite useful to us. I’m going to see if I can find out anything here.” He let out a long sigh. “Alazondra just be safe.” Fritchel wrapped his arms around her and hugged her.

She patted his back and nodded, “Of course, Fritchel.” As they slipped out of each other’s arms their eyes were once again caught in a frozen stare. Alazondra heard Thomas coming down the steps of the manor and painfully let go of the stare. She rose to her feet and waved to Fritchel as he waved back. In the back of her mind, she hoped it would not be the last time she would see him.

“All prepared?” Thomas asked her as he made his way towards the door. Alazondra gave a small nod. She followed him out the door. He led her past the bridge and through the solid masses of Witherfroth’s populace. The two reached the dock after shoving through the midday bustle. The odorous smell of fish permeated the cool air. The dock was located on a large river named the Black Water River. The water actually did have a dark color to it.

“Now here’s the hard part, finding the villain,” he mumbled to Alazondra. She nodded and searched through the men that dashed across the dock hauling crates. Several large vessels were docked. Each ship had flags of various ethnicities and companies. One small sloop moored at the docks did not have a flag. There were no markings on the ship’s hull whatsoever. At the top of the mast a plain brown hawk was perched. Alazondra jabbed Thomas in the gut roughly and nodded her head toward the ship with the hawk atop it. He grunted in pain but nodded in acknowledgment.

Thomas whispered as he walked towards the vessel, “You hit like Neva does. Very painfully.” Alazondra grinned lightly and followed after him. They stepped upon the ship as their eyes scanned for any sign of Neva.

“I’ll bet anything she’ll pop out somewhere and scare the hell out of us...or just me,” Thomas mumbled as he looked behind some crates that were loaded on the ship. Alazondra laughed as she knocked on the captain’s office door. A young looking man opened the door.

“Ah, you must be Alazondra. I’m Seth Morrison. Come on in.” The young man smiled and opened the door wider. He looked at Thomas and yelled, “Hey stupid!”

Thomas looked up and replied, “Seth!”

“You answered to it! Aha!” Seth laughed as Thomas strode over to him.

“You’re such an annoyance,” Thomas mumbled as he socked Seth in the arm. They all headed into the small living quarters of the ship. Neva was sleeping on top of a grain sack. Seth grinned as he slammed his boot on the wooden floor. Neva remained sleeping atop the large sack.

Thomas laughed and shook his head, “You can’t do it like that, man. It’s like

this..." He raised a hand to slap her hind end. As his hand came within a few centimeters of Neva's bottom, she grabbed his wrist.

"You never change, Thomas," Neva said rising from the sack.

He heaved a defeated sigh, "I had the feeling you weren't really sleeping, but I decided to go for it anyway." Alazondra and Seth laughed as Thomas grinned widely. Neva shook her head at him.

"Well, we should shove off since everyone's here. Seth knows how to commandeer this little stick-raft," Neva said.

Seth yelled over his shoulder as he walked towards the door, "It's a *sloop* for the umpteenth time!" He quickly stepped up the stairs and jogged out the door. The ship jerked sideways and began moving. Alazondra looked out a dusty window. The ship made its way out of the Witherfroth dock and past several small fishing ships. The dock soon became minuscule as they sailed down the river. Time slowly passed as they gently floated down the Black Water River.

As Alazondra sat on a dusty barrel, she heard the quite noise of a horse nickering. She turned to look as to where it came from she saw Neva's great stallion standing on some hay behind a number of barrels. Neva came down the stairs with her hawk on her shoulder and sat down at a desk. She began writing something on some paper.

"One would think this is the wilderness, for heavens' sake!" Seth yelled as he came down the stairs.

Neva raised a brow and said, "Oh, Morrison?"

"Well, we have a horse over yonder and you got yourself a little birdie on your shoulder. What next, goats?" He said. Neva finished her note and wrapped it around the hawk's leg. The hawk flew out an open window in the living quarters. As he passed Seth, he nipped Seth's ear slightly. Neva smirked at Seth but didn't say a word.

Then, Thomas thundered down the steps and greeted, "Hello ladies."

"And me!" Seth shouted.

Thomas looked at him and said, "I *did* greet you. Note the 'ladies' part." Seth looked at him puzzled.

"Seth, you poor soul," Neva said laughing, "he called you a lady."

"He did? Hey! That's not nice..." Seth mumbled as he sat down.

"Anyway," Thomas said, "I was wondering, Neva, what exactly our plan is. You just told me to get over to the docks so we could rescue that odd friend of yours."

She replied, "Well, I plan on having smart-alecks stand in the way of all the bolts and arrows...and the rest will help me get 'that odd friend of mine.'"

"No need to get touchy, missy. I'd say *your* being the smart-aleck now!" Thomas began laughing. Alazondra listened and wondered if there was ever a time they were serious. She enjoyed the light-hearted company though.

Neva said, "Alright. I plan to leave Seth at the boat for three reasons. He can commandeer it; I don't want to risk his career as a guard, and think of the havoc he'd cause if we *did* take him. I'm only kidding good friend. Then, the rest of us will make our way to Helix. Thomas will have to take us in as prisoners. He can take us down to Hisao's cell. Alazondra, you'll need to break off the bars and help to fight any guards that may come. I'll of course be fighting off any guards as well. Then, we get out of there as quickly as we can." Alazondra knew Neva was a little over the edge at times, but she never knew she was this crazy. Alazondra liked the plan though.

Later that night the two men had fallen asleep. Alazondra and Neva were both atop the ship, keeping it sailing smoothly. They were nearing the mouth of the river that lead to the ocean. Once satisfied at the boat's course, Neva sat at edge of the boat and stared languidly at the water. Alazondra got up and sat next to her.

"Anything wrong?" she asked Neva.

"Oh, I don't suppose so. Just thinking about things. I heard you don't know your parents. Is that true?" she asked.

Alazondra said, "Well, it is somewhat true. All I know is that I'm a Lycan who's name is really Anne Beomyth Rolath. It's all so confusing to me. I just don't know who I really am though."

"Ah. I see. Hmm, you're Rolath. That's interesting. I don't know my last name or parents, so I can relate to that," Neva replied. Alazondra grew silent. She had no idea that Neva didn't know her real parents or even her last name. *This legend has her own issues*, Alazondra thought, *yet she's helping me*. She felt a higher respect for Neva.

"I'm sorry you don't even know your name," Alazondra said quietly. "I've at least thought I knew my name, and now I really do know my name. I just don't know where I belong."

"Yeah, that's always the question. I was once told, 'Identity is not specified by a name or title. It is who you choose to be.' That old man may be the smartest man I know. He taught me a lot," Neva said. Alazondra thought about the words. They meant a lot to her, and she could tell they meant a lot to Neva as well.

It took them three days to reach the mooring location. It was a rather chilly morning, and the boat reached an empty dock. Silently and gently, the boat floated up beside it. Seth moored the ship and they all stepped onto the wooden dock. Silverwave clattered onto the dock after them. Standing at the end of the dock were three saddled horses. Alazondra peered at them curiously. They merely stood swishing their tails. She didn't know where they had come from.

"Where did these come from...?" Alazondra heard Neva whisper. She watched as Neva walked over to one and pulled a note off its back. "This guy's good."

"Who is it?" Thomas asked.

She handed him the note and said, "I don't know who he really is, but he always signs his notes with 'A Faithful Admirer.' I just wonder how the hell he found out I was coming north of Helix and to this dock."

Thomas nodded and replied, "Well, I'd say he's your Faithful Stalker maybe. Hah. You've got quite a little mystery there, eh?" Neva shrugged and mounted Silverwave. Alazondra noticed she didn't use a saddle or bridle. *Quite an experienced rider Neva is*, she thought.

"Hmm, see? There's three, but only two of us need horses. He wasn't right about that at least." Thomas noted. Alazondra peered at Neva who was staring at the horses.

Neva thought for a moment then replied, "No, he was right. There *will* be three. Once we get Hisao, there will be three. I just wonder how that man knows it all..."

"Ah, bloody bastard," Thomas mumbled. Alazondra wondered who this mystery man was. They mounted the horses and began riding south. She had never been to the capital city before. Helix always sounded like an exciting place. Neva told them her excursions in Helix, including her training at Fort Derelict, escaping the guards with Hisao, and her assassin jobs.

“Let me clear this up. You think that crazy Mage may have had something to do with the death of Captain Balks?” Thomas asked.

“Yes,” she answered. “We have two notes in Canuus. My little pup can translate those for us. I think the messages contained in those notes will help us all. I have the feeling Sekei was making bad deals with Dog Canutes and the Captain somehow found out. Then, Sekei sent someone to kill him. Maybe he sent a Dog Canute Assassin to do it. He couldn’t have done it himself because Alazondra tells me he couldn’t have been in Helix at the time of the murder.”

Thomas nodded and said, “That makes sense to me. Are you totally sure that Sekei has something to do with the murder though?” Neva grew somewhat silent for a moment.

She finally answered, “I am not sure. There were two pages ripped out of his journal. The only hints that pointed to a murder were the unpleasant dealings with Sekei. There may be a killer out there with some buried secret. We’re not all too sure.” Alazondra grew a little scared as Neva spoke the words. She felt that the killing described was more than simple bad deals with Dog Canutes.

Alazondra said, “If I may give my input, I feel there is something more sinister lying underneath.” Neva turned and looked at her.

She had a grim look as she said, “I think so too, and that’s what scares me.”

“You ladies shan’t fear however,” Thomas said in a mock-heroic voice. “You’re with Thomas Lowet. I happen to be the bravest, and most handsome, adventurer this side of the hemisphere.” Alazondra and Neva broke into fits of laughter. “Well, I do feel my dignity has been injured,” he mumbled. The joke merely broke the tension for the moment. Alazondra still felt worried about what she had embarked upon with this villainous woman and this lecherous man.

They traveled to Helix for the next few days. It was night upon the third day when they arrived at the city. Alazondra’s eyes opened widely as she saw the enormous walls. There were thousands upon thousands of twinkling fires. Huge watchtowers’ fires glowed brightly in the darkness. Alazondra had never seen so many buildings in one place. The sight of it astounded her. She peered to Neva and wondered how many times she had been to Helix. Alazondra saw, even through the lack of light, Neva’s face looking slightly ashen. She wondered exactly what was going through her mind.

They stopped before entering the city and disguised themselves as prisoners. Then, Thomas dressed himself in the guard-type attire. Alazondra found that he looked quite handsome in a full suit of armor. Then, he led them through the city of Helix. Alazondra couldn’t help but gape at the masses of people and buildings surrounding her. The entirety of the populace within the place stunned her. She had lived in a small rural village her whole life. Not even Witherfroth was close to the size of the city she was in. Soon they reached the large fort within the city.

Then a guard standing outside the gates asked, “Halt! Who are you and what are you doing?” Alazondra wondered if the guard might recognize Neva. She hoped that the darkness concealed both of their faces well enough.

Thomas replied, “I am Elite Lowet, second class. I’ve found these two women displaying disorderly conduct in the local tavern. I’m taking them in for a few days.” He sounded very convincing. Alazondra felt Thomas was as good at playing an act as herself.

“Hmph,” the guard grumbled, “women...please continue.” Alazondra almost sighed aloud as Thomas began leading them through the gate. The walls surrounding them were massive. She had never even thought a fort such as that size could ever be built. Then, Thomas led them into the fort and down long, dark halls. They descended into further into the jail cells passing dirty men looking half-crazed.

In a cell at the end of the prison hall was Hisao. Alazondra peered at him in through the bars. He was leaning against a corner of the cell with his head kept low. She had never come across any live Canutes before. His hair was a pale silver color. His red robes were stained with blood and dirt. Of all the things she had heard about Dog Canutes, she couldn't see them in Hisao. She could see in him all the things Neva had talked about, his puppy-like innocence and the ferocity of a powerful fighter. Alazondra watched Neva grab Hisao's ear through the bars and give it a sharp tug. He growled lowly and opened a single eye, which was a crystalline grey color.

“Oh, I should have known it was *you*,” he whispered to Neva. “Are you sure you want to this?” Neva nodded in reply and then peered at Alazondra expectantly. Alazondra hesitantly looked down the hall to check for guards and sighed softly. She slipped the necklace over her head and felt the familiar sensation.

As soon as she was fully conscious, Alazondra stood as both Neva and Hisao gaped at her. Alazondra only hoped Hisao wasn't afraid of her. She nodded for the Canute the back up, and he did so. Then, she charged at the bars. Alazondra felt the stone walls of the prison shudder in response. Hisao pulled the damaged door off its broken hinges and leaned it against the wall. He walked out of the cell smiling happily. Alazondra saw his sharp canines as he smiled. Neva then slipped the necklace back over Alazondra's neck. She became her normal self once more and was helped to her feet.

“Thank you, to you all. I know how dangerous it is to do something like this. I promise somehow I'll make it up to you,” he said gratefully.

Neva replied hurriedly, “I have something in mind. Let's get going.” Thomas, once again, led them back down through the maze of halls. They made a quick stop at the armory and found Hisao's blade. Alazondra felt a small sense of relief when they had exited the building.

As they made their way towards the gate to leave, a loud whistle sounded in the strong silence. Neva's hawk flew above them, and then perched himself on a dark figure atop the surrounding walls. Thomas stopped and they all peered up at the wall. In the darkness, Alazondra couldn't make out exactly what the figure was. It almost looked like a man, yet she didn't know. Then, they continued making their way out of there.

Luckily, all went well and they weren't caught. Alazondra noticed that there weren't guards on the streets like there was in Witherfroth. She guessed it was because the town was too big to patrol. She felt so glad when each of them had arrived at where their horses stood. Everything had gone as planned, which made her anxious.

Then, Hisao asked, “What was Barbados doing with that guy up on the wall, Neva?”

She looked at him and said, “I don't know. I don't even know who that man was. Sure wish I did.” Everyone mounted their horses as the conversation paused.

“So where's Prince at?” Neva asked.

“I left him at the hideaway,” Hisao replied smiling. “He's safe.” Alazondra could see the happiness in Neva's eyes to have her friend back. They rode down the path that

led north towards Port Skymack. Then, as they were riding, Neva fell off her horse.

“Neva!” Thomas yelled. Hisao jumped off his horse and picked up Neva. Alazondra peered around nervously. Neva’s face looked far paler than it did before. She wondered what was wrong with her. *Poor woman*, Alazondra thought.

Thomas held out his arms and said, “I’ll hold her. We need to go on.” Hisao handed Neva to him and mounted his horse. Neva was mumbling incoherently as she twitched slightly. Thomas kicked his horse and they traveled onwards. Silverwave, now riderless, followed with his head held low. After they had traveled a good distance, Neva began awaking. Her eyes flicked open and she shivered within Thomas’s arms.

“Neva! I think she’s waking up. Come on, girl!” Thomas yelled. Neva’s eyes opened widely and her breathing was labored. Alazondra and Hisao peered at her curiously.

Thomas asked her, “Are you alright? What the heck happened?”

She replied feebly, “No...he was....the truth. It’s...” Neva paused and appeared to be thinking about something very grave.

“What are you saying? What truth?” he asked anxiously.

Neva finally appeared to have regained her senses as she said, “He knew about me, about my parents maybe. Someone killed him because of that. Someone doesn’t want me knowing or anyone for that matter. I...” Her eyes slowly drooped closed, and her body became limp in Thomas’s arms. He shook his head sadly as he peered at her. They continued on towards Port Skymack. The group traveled at a fast pace. It was late morning when they arrived to the ghost town that was Skymack. The ship was still where it had been. Seth came upon deck and greeted them happily.

“It’s good to see you all back and alive. What’s wrong with Neva?” he asked.

Thomas shook his head and said, “I don’t know. She just passed out. We’ll discuss it when we get onto the ship.”

“So this is the Canute,” Seth said peering at Hisao. He merely nodded in reply.

“I wonder if we should leave the horses here. They’re that mystery man’s horses after all,” Alazondra said peering at the horses.

“Yes. Let’s do that then,” Thomas said. They tied the horses as they had originally found them and boarded the ship. Soon after, the ship was moving back towards Witherfroth. Thomas laid Neva down on some sacks and met everyone else on the deck. Thomas discussed the happenings with Seth as he steered the sloop. Alazondra sat on a barrel and watched the blue waters of the ocean lap against the boat. She could feel the chilling, Northern winds blowing lightly.

“Hey,” she heard Hisao say. Alazondra turned and found him standing next to her. “What’d you say your name was?”

“Alazondra...or Anne...” she answered. She was still unsure of what to call herself.

He smiled and said, “Nice to meet you.” Alazondra smiled back at him. Then, Neva came upon the deck just behind them.

Thomas stood and said to her, “Hey Neva. How are you feeling?”

“I’m fine, just fine...” she said nodding. Hisao got up and hugged her. Then, Seth and Alazondra hugged her after.

“So much love for the Swordslinger,” Thomas said laughing. Then, Neva peered out at the ocean as she leaned against the mast of the ship.

“What’s the matter?” Hisao asked.

With a distant look in her eyes she replied, “It’s the dream I had. I just don’t know what it all means exactly.”

Neva sat down and Thomas asked, “Well, would you tell us about it then?”

“Alright,” she said. “I was at the temple steps in Piliad. There was a male’s voice whispering. It felt like, well, it was in my mind rather than an actual person. It said, ‘Neva, I know you feel it’s time you knew who you were.’ Then it said, ‘You’ve lived so long wondering, yet I’ve always kept it hidden. I do feel the truth must stay hidden however. Always, always. Hide the truth!’”

“Then, the voice began laughing. It was such a cold laughter, and it scared me. The laughter was just so sinister. I tried calling out to it, but the voice merely continued to laugh. Then, I woke up. Oh, seated next to me on the steps was a, well, large grey wolf. I think it possibly could have been a Lycan. It was hard to tell.” At the mentioning of the grey wolf, Alazondra peered up at Neva.

“A dark grey wolf?” she asked.

Neva answered, “Yeah. It wasn’t the one talking though. The wolf was sitting there motionless, kind of looking down at me. Know anything?” Alazondra thought for a moment. *I wonder if it’s the same one I dreamt of*, she thought.

“I don’t know,” she replied. “I once had a dream about Lycans. There was a dark grey Lycan who I had never seen before. I still don’t know who he is.” Alazondra watched her get up and sit on the side of the ship. For the rest of that day she sat there thinking. Alazondra understood what she was going through but decided on leaving her to her thoughts. The trip back to Witherfroth took three long days. As Seth came down from mooring the ship, Neva gave Hisao the notes and told him to translate them. Alazondra grabbed a writing stylus with ink as he spoke.

“Alright,” he said, “I’ll read the one you found with the assassin first then. ‘Ken-san. I need you to dispose of a young woman by the name of Alazondra Graystone. She may be using the name Anne Beomyth Rolath. I am entrusting you to find her and quickly execute her. All I ask is that you get the body to me as soon as you kill her. You will be paid accordingly. Kail.’”

“Yep. Now here’s the one from Sekei’s body. ‘Kail. You have caused my brother’s death, for this our clan shall shun you. We each feel it is the just thing to do in honor of our brother. May all the unmerciful things of this earth befall you, Betrayer. Mei-san.’ Sekei must have been using the alias ‘Kail’ with these Canutes.” Alazondra quickly wrote what he said down on the back of the notes. She smiled as she peered at the notes.

“Thank you so much, sir,” Alazondra said happily. “I need to find Fritchel now, though.”

Neva nodded and said, “We’ll all take you to Fritchel. He can look after you. I bet he’ll be glad to see you.” They walked through the town with her. Alazondra felt so happy to be seeing Fritchel again. She felt that she had really missed his company. They finally reached the house and Alazondra knocked on it hurriedly. Fritchel opened the door and scooped her into his arms. He embraced her happily, and then set her down. Alazondra saw the look of pure distrust in Fritchel’s face as he looked at Neva.

“Here she is,” Neva said. Alazondra saw that Neva’s eyes were intently focused upon Fritchel. “The notes are translated and she’s sound as can be. I think I deserve some

credit for that, or at least some respect. Don't you think, Mage?"

Fritchel grumbled lowly, "Aye, maybe so, Swordslinger." Then, Fritchel started to shut the door but Neva held it open.

"You say 'maybe?' Now, why is that?" she asked firmly. Alazondra peered up at him.

He replied coldly, "I already told you; I don't trust villains." He shoved her out of the way, and then he slammed the door shut. Alazondra heard Neva yell at Fritchel from outside. Then, she heard the footsteps of the other men approach.

"What's the problem?" Thomas asked.

"Well," Neva replied, "Fritchel refuses to let me in." She heard Thomas scoff. Then, the door shook lightly from a small blow.

"That sure didn't work out like I hoped," Thomas said. Alazondra perked a brow and wondered what he was up to. Then, there came a knocking at the door.

"Neva, get on!" Fritchel yelled. Alazondra looked up at Fritchel again.

Thomas yelled back, "No, it's me. Let me in." Fritchel stands motionless, and then Alazondra finally opened the door. Alazondra noticed the smug look on Neva's face as she walked in. Fritchel's returning glance wasn't too pleasant. The rest came in, and Alazondra closed the door behind them.

"I don't know why you bother with her," Fritchel mumbled. "Nothing but trouble."

Thomas looked at him and replied, "Oh now, come on. Trouble is fun, especially Neva." Alazondra saw him smile over at Neva. Then, he said, "Isn't that right?" His hand slyly slipped down to Neva's hind end. Immediately, she slapped his face. Thomas grumbled to himself but grinned anyway.

"If she's staying, I'll leave," Fritchel said.

Thomas said, "Well, alright. Suit yourself." Then, Fritchel began walking off. He signaled for Alazondra to follow him. She walked up the stairs after him. When they reached the guestroom, Alazondra shut the door.

"Fritchel, why is it that you dislike Neva so much?" she asked as she sat on the bed.

He peered at her and replied, "Well, for one thing she's a villain. She's a rogue, a tyrant, a scoundrel. She honestly thinks the law is just hers to bend or break. The woman is just not a very good person, I feel."

"Oh Fritchel," she said, "I think you're being too harsh. She's helped us a considerable amount, you know."

"Yes, I'm not saying she didn't, in fact I'm thankful for the help she has given us. I just don't trust her. That's all," he said as he threw a bag on the bed. He quickly began putting his things in it.

Alazondra peered at him and asked, "Do we have to leave so soon?"

He replied, "Yes, we must leave. I'd like to take you home finally." She nodded and began packing her own things. They went down stairs and bid a quick farewell to the others. Alazondra knew she was going to miss Neva. She would even miss Thomas and Seth's crazy antics. Fritchel's horse was tied up behind Thomas's house. Ferdinand shook his black mane and nickered lowly as they approached. Fritchel saddled him and placed the bags on. After mounting they set off.

They rode through the bustling city. The bright afternoon sun deceived the actual

temperature. The chilling autumn winds blew strongly. Alazondra scooted closer to Fritchel and pulled her robe up a little. Ferdinand jogged over the ice quickly. Soon, they left the city and were headed back towards the rural wilderness.

“Fritchel...” she said.

He answered, “Yes?”

“What’s, uh, home like?” Alazondra asked.

“Well,” Fritchel replied, “many Lycans live in small shack-like homes. Others live inside a large underground dwelling called Reid’s Hollow. There’s a lot down there. It’s a very pleasant place to live. You’ll see.” She wondered what life was like living amongst all Lycans. She heard from legends that they had a well-developed civilization. Alazondra didn’t know much for sure, but she had high hopes.

She kept on a brave face as they came close to the forest. Fritchel, as he could do so well, sensed her tension. He placed one of his hands upon hers at his belt. She could feel his gentle warmth upon her cold, small fingers. Fritchel’s sturdy hands dwarfed her slender ones by much. Then, his fingers curled around her chilled hand, and a small grin formed on his face. Alazondra felt herself blush as he held her hand.

Past the blindingly white fields of rock and ice they rode. Excluding the crunching noise of the horse’s hooves upon the frost, all was silent as they passed by. Closer and closer they loomed to the forest. Fritchel slowed the horse’s pace as the cool shadow of the forest passed over them. As Alazondra took in the smell of sweet pine, she knew she had now entered the forest. There would be no turning back for her now, but with her arms around Fritchel, she wasn’t sure she truly wanted to any longer.

During the first passing, she never realized how beautiful the forest was. The ice that hung in the trees glistened in the afternoon sunlight. The calm environment seemed pleasant yet almost foreboding. Now all was silent. The sound of Ferdinand’s hooves were quieted by the soft earth that carpeted the forest floor. Small rays of light, shattered by the thick vegetation, randomly gleamed down through the overhead branches.

Fritchel turned the horse off the path and through some low-lying shrubbery. For awhile, they traveled through the dense woodland. Alazondra had no idea where they were located, until they came to a large clearing in the forest. The sun shone down upon the small grassy field. Behind trees were small tent-like abodes.

Then, Alazondra saw a large rock formation. Fritchel dismounted Ferdinand and held his hand out to Alazondra. She took it and he led her towards the formation. There was a small, almost hidden entrance. She could hardly breathe they entered Reid’s Hollow. Stalactites hung gracefully from the ceiling of the cavern. There were intricate carvings upon the walls. As they turned the corner, a whole new scene was revealed to Alazondra.

There was a huge room with many passages leading to and out of it. Lycans, in their human form, walked to and fro. In this place, all was in complete bliss. Quiet chattering and laughter could be heard echoing in the cavernous place. Alazondra’s emerald eyes could hardly take it all in. Hundreds of candles in carved holders illuminated the cave. Then, the talking became silenced as an aged man emerged from one of the passages. He stared at both Alazondra and Fritchel.

“Ajax,” he said. “You’ve returned.”

“Yes, Father. I have,” Fritchel replied. “I have brought with me Anne.”

“I see,” the man replied. Alazondra looked at the man intensely. *This man*, she

thought, *he must be Julius*. He motioned for them to follow him. Fritchel, his hand still grasping Alazondra's, led her down the hall after him. They were led to a room with a large table. Julius seated himself and motioned for them to sit down as well.

"I do believe we have much to discuss," he said. "I will address the most important issue first. The Lord of Liam is dangerously close to starting a war between the races. He has been making several unwise agreements with the Vampires. This has stirred up a commotion with the Canutes, Dog Canutes especially, and seeing as they are close brethren with us, our Lycan clan too has become angered. I fear this will bring about many ruinous things to come." Alazondra took in his words piece by piece and thought about them. The idea of an entire war being fought frightened her.

"We must prepare for this," he continued. "A leader representing each of the allied races will need to be appointed. As for the Lycans, we have you Rolath." A moment of silence passed before Alazondra realized he had meant her to be the leader.

She replied in alarm, "Me? You want me to lead an...*army*?" Julius silently nodded in reply. Then, footsteps advancing down the hall towards the room were heard. They all turned their heads to the passage as a man emerged.

"Nikolai," said Julius, "you are just the man I needed as of this moment." Nikolai bowed lowly and seated himself next to Fritchel.

"I presume it is about the conflicts with the Vampires?" he said. His voice was deep and quiet. His eyes reminded Alazondra of Fritchel's blue eyes. Nikolai's were almost the same shade and possessed a certain crystallized brightness. His appearance truly deterred who he really was, and it was the most cunning of any tricks.

"Yes," Julius answered. "With your fine judgment, I wish for you to choose a leader of all the allied forces. This person must be strong and wise, but keep in mind this person will need to know how to manage Canutes and Lycans. I suggest choosing someone with previous experience dealing with them...in a friendly manner that is."

Nikolai smiled, with a cold grin, and replied, "It would be an honor, sir. I already have a few candidates in mind." Alazondra wondered exactly thoughts were hidden behind his shining azure oculars. She looked at Fritchel, with similar eyes, and could see he was intently listening to every word.

"That's good," Julius said. "Now, I need to assign a general for the Canutes. Hmm." He looked up in thought at the cavernous ceiling adorned with aged stalactites.

Alazondra finally spoke up, "I have a suggestion."

"Why yes, Alazondra. That would be most helpful for me."

"Well, he's a Canute I've only known for a short while. Actually, he's the *only* Canute I've ever known. His name is Hisao, and I'd bet he could do it."

Nikolai perked a brow and said, "Hisao?" She nodded to him. He grumbled, "He's not even a full Canute."

"Which would give him an advantage, right?" Alazondra said.

Fritchel commented, "Full Canutes are stronger."

"But part Canutes are by far smarter," Julius said with a smile. "I will send notice to Hisao as soon as I am able. Thank you for the recommendation, Anne."

Alazondra nodded and said, "I have some questions, by the way, concerning that."

"Yes?"

"Well, I just want to know all about being a Lycan. I have no clue of anything," she replied with a slight frown. After seeing the beautiful place in which the Lycans

lived, she wanted to know everything she could about their culture.

He replied, "In your absence, that is to be expected. However, I am afraid that we cannot give you a full orientation until this situation with the races has been rectified." She nodded and sighed lightly.

Julius looked at Nikolai and said, "You can leave now." Nikolai smiled and quickly left the room.

"The final issue I wanted to discuss was marriage detail," Julius said. Alazondra's eyes opened widely at the words.

"Marriage?" she said quietly.

"You two are ready, are you not?" he said. The serious look in his eyes told her that he wasn't joking. She blushed and looked up at Fritchel, who himself had gone slightly red.

"Father, I...we...haven't talked about...that," he muttered under his breath.

"Oh, oh...I see. Well, I'm glad you are back my son and as well to Anne. She will bring about great things for us, I know. Good day," he said as he stood. Julius left the room, leaving Fritchel and Alazondra scarlet faced and speechless.

After a long silence Alazondra finally asked, "What was he talking about, Fritchel?"

He averted his eyes to the tabletop and said, "It's a long story."

"Better now than never," she said. He nodded and sighed softly.

"Well," Fritchel said, "I told you that we knew each other as kids. I kind of left out something."

"Yeah, I figured," she said. "You're not good at lying." She smiled lightly at him.

"Heh, yeah. Well, we were kind of...prearranged to be wed," he said as his face turned fully crimson.

"Wed!" she exclaimed. He nodded and cast his eyes downwards once more.

Alazondra thought to herself, *We're supposed to be married? I'm seventeen. I suppose many girls marry at this age. This is...crazy. How can I marry Fritchel? Or...Ajax. Do I have to marry him?* Then, she looked at him. His blue eyes captivating her once again. She remembered all the time she'd spent with him and their first meeting. She imagined that the white rose was still in the book she had placed it in at the Graystone's house.

"I'm sorry, Alazondra. It was prearranged when we were young. No one knew anything like this would happen. I'm sure you had plans of marrying some young, handsome man in your old village, but instead here I am. I..." Alazondra smiled and put a finger to his lips. She shook her head at him.

"Don't worry about it Fritchel, I'm sure things will work out. Anyway, I was wondering if you would mind giving me a tour of the cave." He smiled and took her hand. Fritchel showed her everything the beautiful cavern beheld. There were many rooms for different occasions, and each was gorgeously furnished. Much of the furniture was of various precious, earthly materials, like black marble.

Later in the day, Fritchel took her atop boulders above Reid's Hollow to watch the sunset with her. They made their way up and sat down when they reached the top. They could see over the tops of the trees. Green trees, some topped with frost, surrounded them. Together they watched the sun sink behind the horizon and the stars emerge from the depths of the heavens above. Howls from Lycans throughout the forest echoed through the chilly night air. To Alazondra, it only made the ambience all the more

pleasant. A tear came to her eyes as she thought, *Welcome home, Anne.*

“Is something the matter?” Fritchel asked quietly.

“I’m just...happy,” she replied.

Fritchel smiled and said, “I’m glad this place makes you happy. It should. It’s where you belong.” She tightly hugged him and kissed his cheek. Fritchel placed an arm around her and looked up at the stars.

Alazondra said as she placed her head on his shoulder, “Finally. A place I belong.” He looked into her jade eyes. Fritchel saw in them that night a newfound joy. They shone with a light that can only come from a perfectly contented spirit. He gently kissed her forehead and continued to watch the stars with her on that night.

The next morning Alazondra awoke in a large canopy bed in a room. Across the room was another bed, in which Fritchel was lying. She stretched lazily as she rolled out of bed. Alazondra put on a robe and found a tray with assorted food on a table in the corner of the room. She ate half of it and left the rest for Fritchel before leaving the room. At the opening of the cave, several women about her age stood talking. One waved for her to come over to them.

“Hey. You’re Anne right?” one of them asked.

“Yeah, I am,” Alazondra answered. They all suppressed giggles. She looked at them curiously.

“I’m Nereid, that’s Bethany and Arielle,” Nereid introduced. Each woman was beautiful. *Far more beautiful than I,* Alazondra thought.

Bethany said, “So you’re the one who’s going to marry the prince?” The other two looked at her expectantly.

“You mean Fritchel, uh, Ajax, right?” Alazondra inquired. They all nodded and sighed. “Yeah, I suppose so.”

“You *suppose!*” Arielle exclaimed. “He’s only the most handsome Lycan of all the Alphas. In both forms!” Each woman was sent into a fit of laughter. Alazondra realized she had never seen Fritchel in his Lycan form. She thought to herself, *He’s a prince too?*

Alazondra mumbled, “Yeah. I didn’t know I was, well, already engaged to him when I met him, so I dunno what’ll happen now.” They all looked at her as if she had cursed them into damnation.

“Are you *sane?*” Nereid said.

“After what I’ve been through,” Alazondra replied, “I might not be.”

Nereid placed a hand on her hip and said, “You would have to be, well, not right in the head to even doubt marrying the Prince!” Each girl nodded in agreement.

“Oh, well, I’m...just not familiar with your customs then,” Alazondra said. She had no idea what they were on about. Arielle rolled her eyes, and Bethany mimicked the action.

“Look, Anne, he’s been around you know. He’s...well, a fine man, if you know what I mean. He’s so handsome. He could have any Lycan he wanted, without a doubt,” Nereid said matter-of-factly. Alazondra slightly reddened. She had no idea Fritchel was like that at all.

“I didn’t know that,” she said stunned.

“Well,” said Bethany, “now you do.”

“Yeah, it was horrible when his *own* father exiled him,” Arielle said with a sigh.

Alazondra asked, "He did?"

"Yeah," Nereid answered. "He was just doing what *he* wanted, instead of that old father of his, and old man Julius threw him out! Hmph, what a great father, huh?"

"I have a feeling there's more to it than that," Alazondra replied, now feeling slightly agitated with the ignorance of these women.

"Well, that's what happened," Bethany said. The other two once again nodded.

"Yeah, anyway, so aren't you supposed to be some special religious icon or something? I wasn't paying attention when they were talking about it last month," Nereid said looking at Alazondra. She merely sighed and walked off. Sitting at the edge of a small stream, she thought to herself about what they told her. *It's hard to believe he was really like that*, she thought. Then, reflected in the rippling water, she saw him standing behind her.

"Where've you been, Alazondra?" he asked as he seated himself next to her.

She looked up at him and replied, "Oh, just around. I met...a few of the women here." Fritchel frowned lightly and sat down next to her.

"Really now..." he said. He took a deep breath and asked, "What did they say?" Alazondra didn't know whether or not she should bring up what they told her. She decided she had no other choice.

"They told me...about how you used to be," she answered.

He turned away and said, "I was afraid of that."

"They told me you were exiled by your father, and that you were, well...I'll just say it could relate to what Thomas is like," she said.

"Alazondra," he said, "I was young then. I'm not like that now. You can see that, right?" She smiled at him and nodded. The Fritchel she knew was quiet and thoughtful. He was an intellectual man. Alazondra couldn't be mad at him for his past.

Later that night though, she began to wonder. Fritchel had received a drink from one of his friends, and before long, he was at five or six glasses. He was laughing raucously and flirting with several women at a time. Alazondra had realized that he was no longer Fritchel, but he was indeed Ajax. She sat in the corner of the large room. He meandered over to her and pulled Alazondra to her feet.

"Come on, Anne! Let's dance!" he yelled. The pungent smell of alcohol from his breath drifted to her. She cringed and pulled away.

She said, "Fritchel, you're drunk. I think you need to calm down."

"I'm just getting started," he said laughing. Several of the women standing nearby laughed at him. "And call me Ajax, already."

"Well, Ajax, I still think you should ease up on the drinks," she said.

He grinned and said, "Or maybe *you* should have more."

"I haven't had any to begin with," Alazondra replied glaring. "Nor will I start now." She got up and left the room. The sound of high-pitched laughter echoed through the halls as she stormed off. In her haste, she accidentally bumped into Julius. He was in his Lycan form, and was difficult to see in the darkness.

"Oh, sir. I'm sorry. I didn't see you," she quickly apologized.

His canine mouth formed a grin more menacing than heartwarming, "It's quite alright." There came a pause before he spoke again, "You seem tense, Anne."

"I...it's nothing," she answered.

"Now, now, Anne. I as a Lycan have heightened senses. I can tell you're lying,"

he said. She sighed lightly and looked at the grey Lycan before her.

"It's just that I think I'm having doubts," she said.

"About?"

"Well," Alazondra continued, "about...your son."

He replied, "I see. Yes, he is not the most responsible of people, but I do love him seeing as he is my son. I had hoped his time in exile from the Harthyung would make him see the light, but I fear that he is reverting to his old ways."

"Is there nothing you can do?" she asked.

"I am afraid not," he replied. "I tried for years to change him, to make him more responsible and to grow up. It's...something about him, I am afraid." Alazondra sighed and wondered if there was anything she could do to change him.

"Well, I am going to go off to bed. Good night, sir. And thank you again for your hospitality," she said.

"Why, you are a member of the family. It would be a sin not to," Julius said as he grinned again. His sharp wolfish teeth shone brightly in the dim light. Alazondra smiled and continued down the hall to her room. There was one candle lit, letting off a soft glow. She slipped into her large bed and fell into a deep sleep.

The next morning she found food at the table in the corner again. Fritchel was asleep in his bed. He looked rather disheveled as he lay snoring in his bed. Alazondra lit a few candles, as that was the only light. Then, she poured the glass of water from the tray on his head. He groaned loudly and pulled the bed sheets over his head. Alazondra sighed and tugged on them hard. He ended up rolling out of bed, tangled in the sheets.

"Ow...jeez, what the...?" he mumbled as he got to his feet. "Oh, Anne. What's the matter?" Her arms were firmly crossed over her chest, and the look on her face immediately told him she wasn't happy.

She replied in a coarse manner, "I don't know, *Ajax*, maybe a *drink* or two would stir your memory? Or...do I need to go get some of those *women*? I think *they* could tell you what *happened*."

"I...don't recall," he said scratching his head. She sighed in exasperation and sat down in a chair.

Alazondra said impatiently, "You were drunk last night, Fritchel. I just can't trust you at all." He sat down across from her at the table.

"I don't think so," he said. He began eating some of the breakfast food. She threw his plate on the ground. He looked at it in horror as it lay on the ground. "What was that for?"

"You're not listening to me," she said. There was a pause between the two.

He said with a foolish grin, "I'm sorry, what'd you say?" She glared at him.

"Hey! It was a *joke*. Come on, Anne. You and I joke all the time."

"No. *Fritchel* and *Alazondra* joked. Anne and *Ajax*, no," she said. She could tell he was still drunk from the night before.

"What are you talking about?" he asked.

She sighed and said, "Nothing. I'm just shooting the breeze here with you."

"See! That was a *joke*," he said. Alazondra got up from the table and left the room. The three women were standing at the entrance of the cave, as they were the previous day.

"Anne! So, how do you like *Ajax*? Fun, huh?" Nereid said.

Arielle added, "Yeah. He seems just like your type." They all began laughing. Alazondra sighed and looked at the ground. Then, she smiled brightly and looked up at them.

"Ladies, you amaze me," she said.

"Huh?" Bethany said in confusion.

Nereid replied, "What are you playing at?"

"No, no. I am completely sincere that you do in fact amaze me..." she said, "...with your outstanding excellence in pure ignorance." They all looked at her coldly as she turned. She smirked before heading off to the same spot she was before. Alazondra found a man fishing there. He turned and smiled at her pleasantly.

"Well, hello there," he said.

"Hello," Alazondra greeted in return.

She was about to turn away when he said, "Come join me, won't you?" She nodded and seated herself on a log. Alazondra watched the young man throw a net into the stream.

"I heard those girls talking," he said. "Don't listen to them. Don't get me wrong, I respect the prince, but he is a fool at times sadly." Alazondra nodded sadly. "Not all Lycans are like those women or Ajax. Julius is a prime example of those who uphold what it means to be a true Lycan."

"So I thought," Alazondra replied.

"Anyway, my name's Sebastian. Please don't call me Seb. My aunt calls me that, and I rather she wouldn't. I'm not very fond of it," he said.

Alazondra laughed and said, "Alright, I won't. My name is..." She found herself torn between saying Anne and Alazondra.

"Anne, right? Everyone knows about you," he said. "It's an honor to be speaking with the Incarnate herself. It surprises everyone though."

"What does?" she asked.

"Well," Sebastian answered, "the fact that Rolath chose a woman for his spirit to continue on in. I suppose maybe he wanted a change of pace, or there's something really important."

"I wouldn't know," she said slightly frowning, "I'm afraid I don't know a lot about all this. Being gone for so long doesn't help either."

"I see," he said understandingly. "What's it like, you know, out *there*?"

"You've never been outside the forest?" Alazondra asked.

"Nope," he answered as he pulled in the net. A few, silvery fish were springing within the net vigorously. An end slipped out of his fingers and Alazondra quickly caught it before the fish jumped out. "Thanks."

"Sure. Well, it's really different. It's so open and there are many tall buildings, especially in Helix. I got to go there once on this great adventure. We had to help a Canute out of the prison. Ah, the adrenaline and the fear. Hah, it was actually...fun." He looked at her wide-eyed.

"You went to Helix? Is it like the tales say?" Sebastian asked.

"I'm afraid I haven't heard them, but I will tell you all about it," she said.

Sebastian happily listened as she related to him everything that had taken place that very eventful night. In her mind, it was still fresh as though it had happened the night before. She thought about the Canute named Hisao and wondered where he was.

Sebastian commented in awe, "You're really something. I couldn't ever believe having an adventure like that."

"Maybe some day you will," Alazondra said smiling.

He smiled back and then frowned as he replied, "I doubt it. I know that Lycans, out *there*, aren't wanted in cities." She remembered how harshly they had treated her at Witherfroth. *How could I have forgotten*, she thought to herself.

"I know this," she said. "I have hope that one day...it will all change." He nodded in agreement. Then, behind Sebastian, she saw Fritchel walking up.

Fritchel called out, "Hey Alazondra." She could tell he was sober.

"Alazondra?" Sebastian inquired.

She nodded and said, "That is the name I was given by the humans who raised me."

"Oh," said he, "I rather like it, and the bearer of that name as well." Alazondra smiled and blushed lightly.

Fritchel said, "Alazondra?"

"Oh," she finally stopped ignoring him, "hello Fritchel."

"Who are you talking to?" he asked looking at Sebastian.

She smiled and said, "This is Sebastian. I was just talking with him about some of the things I did before coming here." Sebastian got up and looked at Fritchel nervously. Then, he threw his net over his shoulder.

"Yes, good day to you both. I'll be going," he said. Alazondra waved to him as he walked away. *What a nice guy*, she thought.

Fritchel seated himself next to her and said, "I'm really sorry about how I acted."

"Just now thinking that?" she asked slightly glaring at him.

"I just...let old habits get the best of me. You've got to believe me. I lived that way my whole life when I was here. I just need time to fix myself. Please, have patience with me, will you?" His blue eyes shone brightly, as they always did. She sighed lightly and nodded.

"I will, Fritchel. However, I am not sparing much, for I expect you to get over this little 'habit' as you so call it," she said. Alazondra wasn't feeling too merciful about his behavioral problems.

He hugged her and said, "Thank you so much, Alazondra." She smiled at him halfheartedly. She had only hope for him that he really would change. Alazondra was a smart enough woman to know that people do not easily bend to change.

[Bloodshed and Hatred]

It was the next morning, and as was expected, Fritchel failed to live up to his promise. She wasn't in the mood to deal with him in the morning. Alazondra made her way to the stream where she had always gone. She didn't find Sebastian fishing there and was slightly disappointed. She sat alone thinking to herself until she felt a sharp tap on her shoulder.

"Excuse me," a male voice said. She turned to see Hisao standing behind her.

"Oh, good it *is* you."

"Hello Hisao," she greeted with a smile. Alazondra was happy to see his doggish

face. She felt almost empty seeing him without Neva nearby. She immediately wondered where she was at the moment.

Hisao sat down next to her by the stream and said, "So Julius told me *you* said I should be the general of the Canutes."

"Yes, I did," she answered.

"Why?"

Alazondra replied, "Well, I just thought...that...you would like it." She peered at him. He appeared deep in thought for a moment.

He said after a moment of silence, "Well, I thank you."

"You'll do it?" she asked.

"Of course," Hisao replied. "It's not something someone would pass up." She nodded and looked at the babbling stream before her. Blurred images of the trees were reflected upon the water's surface. She cleared her throat, breaking the silence.

Then, both asked in unison, "So where's Neva?" Each was startled by it at first.

"Well," Alazondra said, "I'll just take it neither of us knows." Hisao laughed a bit and nodded.

"Yeah," said he, "but I haven't heard from her at all. She usually would send me a note with her hawk, but I've received nothing. It makes me wonder." Alazondra peered at him once more. His silvery eyes were cast downwards. Again, he appeared to be deep in thought. Then, she stood and looked down at him.

"Well, would you like to come inside and have a drink?" she asked.

Hisao replied, "Hmm, I'm not the drinking type."

"Oh good," she said with a sigh of relief.

"I wouldn't mind something to eat," he said with a smile. As he parted his lips, his sharp canines were clearly visible. Alazondra didn't find them menacing in the slightest.

They gathered a few things to eat and Alazondra took him to her room. They sat down at the table. When she lit up the candles, she found Fritchel was still lying in bed. She sighed and left him there. She sat down with Hisao as they talked. Alazondra found, that behind his serious exterior, he was almost like a kid at heart, lighthearted and humorous.

"What are you doing?" she asked noticing he was holding a piece of bread at eye-level. Hisao held it to his ear briefly.

"Pondering," he said.

"About?"

Hisao answered, "The meaning of bread." Alazondra laughed at him as he took a bite out of the bread.

"Now, I see all of the things Neva told me about you," she said smiling.

He perked a brow and said, "What *things* might these be?"

"Oh, just some things," she replied. He glared at her.

Then, he said, "You're not that different from her yourself, you know."

"How so?" Alazondra asked. She had to admit that being compared to Neva herself was rather flattering.

Hisao said after a moment of thought, "Well, you two can be stubborn as mules and...you both like laughing a lot. There's something else...hmm, I can't quite put my finger on."

“Well,” Alazondra said laughing, “the first one applies to you too, mister, and as for the second one, I would say that is rather true.” He smiled and finished the last of the food on his plate. He stealthily attempted to take a piece off her plate. She glared at him and hit his hand with a spoon. They both started laughing. Then, there came a groan from the bed behind Alazondra. She turned around and saw Fritchel waking up. She sighed lightly as he rolled out of bed.

“What’s *he* doing here?” Fritchel asked.

Alazondra turned away and said, “He’s here for business. Just, go back to bed.”

“Nah, I’m up now,” he replied. He ambled over to the table and took a piece of food off Alazondra’s plate.

“Fritchel! The other food is down in the dining room,” she said.

“Oh come on, I’m hungry,” Fritchel replied. His speech was slurred slightly as he spoke words. Hisao remained silent as he watched Fritchel make a fool of his drunken self. She picked her plate up and walked over to the door. Fritchel followed her curiously. She threw it as far as she could.

“Hungry now?” she said irately. He stormed out of the room angrily. She seated herself down at the table once more and sighed.

“Hmm, so that is the Prince Charming?” Hisao said after a few moments.

“Yeah, welcome to the fabulous life of his caretaker,” Alazondra said.

Hisao frowned slightly and replied, “I’m sorry. You should just let him make an ass of himself though. It would teach him a lesson.”

“Has he not already?” she asked him.

“You’re right,” Hisao said nodding.

Alazondra said, “Anyway, let’s go find you a place to sleep for the night.” He followed her out of the room. She led him to the hospitality room and found a bed for him. Then, she made her way back to her room. She sat on her bed thinking to herself before she fell asleep.

When Alazondra woke up, it was early in the morning. She found a note beside her bed. *I really am sorry this time, Alazondra. - Fritchel.* She angrily tore the note up. She threw the fragments of paper at the floor by Fritchel’s bed, where he lay sleeping unconsciously. Then, she made her way out of the cave and up to the place where she had watched the stars with him before. Alone, she watched the sunrise. The frost on the trees beautifully reflected the vast shades of early morning colors.

She could see the Lycans living in the tents arising. Some of them walked off further into the forest, while some entered Reid’s Hollow. The wind lightly blew over the treetops of the forest. The leaves ruffled, making a soft whispering noise that echoed throughout the serene locale. Alazondra pulled her robe up lightly. The morning was crisply frigid, and she enjoyed it. She heard the sound of quiet footsteps behind her and found Hisao walking up.

“Good morning Hisao. I’m surprised to see you up so early,” she said with a chuckle.

He scoffed and replied, “This is late for me, missy.” Alazondra rolled her eyes and continued gazing at the scenery.

“Anyway, I think we need to do some strategizing. Julius told me that there are some guards rebelling from Cervantes’ command up in the north here. I think they will prove to be worthy allies,” Hisao said.

“I wonder if that includes Thomas and Seth,” she said.

He replied, “I’d be willing to bet it does.” Then, he drew a lopsided circle in the dirt with a small rock. He pointed and said, “Now, that’s Liam.” Making another circle in the top right-hand side of the circle he continued, “The Harthyung is located about here.”

“That’s Liam?” Alazondra said with a smirk. He glared at her. She laughed and said, “It’s a very good Liam, Hisao.”

“Don’t patronize me,” he grumbled.

“Let’s go get a *real* map. I’d be willing to bet that the bookroom has several,” she said as she stood. Together, they left to go to the bookroom. Seated in the bright room, they poured over maps. He explained different battle tactics. Alazondra came to realize that Hisao knew much about the art of war. She was glad that Julius had chosen him over any other Canute. Then, Julius entered the room. His face held a serious look.

“Is there something the matter?” Hisao asked.

“Yes,” he answered, “it is now official; Lord James has begun a war with the Lycans and Canutes. He is in command of the human guards and Vampires, a force not to be taken lightly indeed. I have received word, however, that many of the Northern guards are rebelling against this. We may have them as allies.”

“Yes, I knew about the rebelling guards,” said Hisao. “It was almost granted that they would rebel the first chance they got. Conditions are poor for them in the hostile North, and James is to blame.”

Julius nodded and said, “We need to send out our troops now. We have to drive them back across the Plainlands before they even get a chance to come near the forest. Alazondra and Hisao, I am entrusting you two to take out some men and protect us. I will give you a measurable number of Lycans and Canutes to take command. We will have to wait before receiving human troops, I believe.”

Alazondra smiled and said, “I think we can do it.” Julius grinned back at her and patted her head. She jumped up and said, “Well, I should pack a few things.” As she left, she could hear Hisao and Julius’s voice drop to a low tone. Their words echoed lightly down the hallway.

Julius said, “Please, Hisao, keep an eye on young Alazondra, would you? She’s been taken and now brought back. I’d not like for her to be gone permanently.”

“Of course, sir,” Hisao replied. “I will keep her safe.” Alazondra sighed lightly and made her way to her room. Fritchel was sitting up in bed.

“Alazondra, I...” he began.

Alazondra replied, “I don’t want to hear it, Fritchel.”

“You’re *mad*? Alazondra, please! What about having patience?” he begged.

She folded her arms over her chest and said, “What about changing? You haven’t even *tried* to change. I’m going, Fritchel. A war has just begun, and I’m going.”

“What?” Fritchel said in surprise. “You...they can’t expect you to go into battle! You’re...”

“I’m Rolath. I have to, and I will do it. Besides, I *want* to do it. Maybe you’ll grow up while I’m away,” she said coldly before turning her back. She placed a few clothes in a bag and placed it over her shoulder. She glared at Fritchel shortly before leaving the room. Hisao was waiting at the opening. He had nothing but his blade with him.

In the clearing were hundreds of men and women. They were all Lycans and

Canutes ready to go into battle. They were suited in armor and armed to the teeth, even their teeth were sharp. Many were on horses, while some remained on their feet. A donkey and a horse were brought to them by a young Canute.

"Here you are, ma'am and sir," he bowed quickly before handing them the reins. Alazondra mounted the horse. She felt free knowing that only she was on the back of the animal. Hisao mounted his donkey, who he called Prince.

"Why Prince?" Alazondra asked him.

He looked at her and then the donkey before saying, "Ask Neva when we see her. It was *her* idea." She laughed and looked down at her horse. He was a black horse with white markings on his legs and head. His name was D.M. She wondered what the initials stood for but never bothered to ask. Behind the saddle were bags with supplies. There was a bow with a quiver full of arrows in it too. Alazondra would have to learn how to use them before they reached the enemy.

Then, Hisao nodded to her and they began to walk off through the forest. The soldiers followed behind them. Alazondra followed Hisao as he navigated the way through the thick vegetation. It was after three days of travel that they finally reached the end of the forest.

"Hisao," Alazondra asked, "why did it only take us three days? When I traveled through the forest the first time, it took almost a week."

He replied, "You must have gone on the path. We went straight through. It's a lot shorter, but there's more of a chance of getting lost."

"Glad we have someone like you around," she said. He smiled and nodded in reply. For days they traveled. They made their way north to find the pass to get through the valleys. Then, after passing through they were on the plains. Alazondra grew slightly nervous, as this was where the enemy was expected. In the meantime, Hisao had trained Alazondra to use a bow and arrow. She learned quickly and could even shoot animals in the wilderness.

Traveling with an army taught Alazondra all about teamwork, even if the team contained hundreds of people. She learned that every person mattered. In the duration of their traveling, she had gotten to know many of the Lycans and Canutes personally. She wanted to ensure their safety as much as she possibly could in this war.

Then, as they were traveling one day, the army came upon a large village. It had been taken over by vampires, under Cervantes' command. They entered the village and began fighting.

It was complete chaos as men and women ran everywhere. There was a constant ring of metal on metal. The sound echoed through the village, matching up with the sounds of yelling. Alazondra ran into one of the buildings. She wanted to get atop the roof so she could use her bow effectively. Inside was a vampire with a sword in hand.

"Die!" he yelled as he sprung forward with his sword. He swung it at her and she ducked under it. He attempted to slice her legs, but she jumped backwards just in time. Then, she was pressed up against the wall as he slowly came closer with his blade. Then, a blade protruded through his stomach and he fell to the ground. Behind him was Hisao. He withdrew his blade and looked at Alazondra.

She gasped and said, "Thank you, Hisao."

"No problem," he said. Then, she ran upstairs and opened a window. She leaned on the sill as she tightly pulled the string back on her loaded bow. Her fingers were

shaking heavily as she aimed at a Vampire on the street below. She became nervous as her hands started to become sweaty. Then, without warning, the arrow slipped out of her hand and was sent into the Vampire's shoulder. It pierced his skin and he turned angrily. She sent another arrow, which hit him in the neck. He fell backwards and lie bleeding on the street.

"My first kill in this war," she said to herself. Then, she gathered her wits and shot more arrows from that window. She felled many Vampires before the day was done. The Lycans and Canutes proved to be victorious in that battle. The Vampires were driven out of the village, and they retreated from that place. The army happily rested in the ruins of the village that day.

The next day they continued onwards into the Plainlands. Twice more they fought at moderate-sized villages that had been overtaken by Vampires. They had yet to see any guards fighting. Alazondra was glad, for she didn't know if she had the heart to kill them. She would see in time though.

Then, they came across an odd sight as they were traveling across the plains. There were two men, looking rather messy, riding upon camels. Alazondra looked at Hisao, who had not yet seen them.

"Hisao," she said, "look at those men. They're riding camels...out here in the plains."

"Huh?" he replied as he looked at them. He, too, was baffled by them. Alazondra nodded to him and they both rode over to them to investigate. She found that they were none other than Thomas and Seth.

"Thomas? Seth? What in the world are you two doing?" Alazondra asked.

Thomas looked at Alazondra and said, "It's a long story." Seth nodded in agreement.

"Do you have any food?" Seth asked. Alazondra and Hisao laughed and set up camp for the night.

"Well," Thomas said, "we were at my house when these Vampires came. There were a lot of them. They took us, along with Neva, to this place out in the middle of the desert."

"The Western Vampire Sanctum," Seth put in.

Thomas nodded and continued, "They were doing this odd testing on Neva. I can't explain it all myself. Seth?"

Seth said, "Well, they were testing her against magic, because they wanted to...enhance her."

"Enhance her?" Alazondra asked.

"Yes," he answered. "It's what they do there. It's sick."

"Yeah, we made it out. Neva was supposed to...but I don't know where she is. She didn't come out with us. I hope she's alright," Thomas said.

Hisao asked, "You don't know where Neva is?"

"No," Seth said. Hisao sighed slightly.

Thomas said, "I don't think she's dead though. I...well, at least hope not."

"Why did you two get taken into the Sanctum as well?" Alazondra asked. Seth looked at Thomas, but both said nothing.

"Anyway," Thomas said breaking the silence, "what are you doing with an army all the way out here?"

“There’s a war between the guards and Vampires against the Lycans, Canutes, and rebels now,” Hisao said. “That’s why we’re here.”

“Who are the rebels?” Seth asked. Thomas hit Seth in the back of the head.

“The rebelling *guards*, you ninny,” Thomas said.

Seth rubbed his head and mumbled, “Well, I didn’t know.” Alazondra laughed at the two. She remembered the time spent traveling with them. They were always carefree and happy. However, it still felt slightly unfulfilling without Neva there. She hoped for her safety.

The next morning they traveled altogether. They marched onwards for two days when, in the evening, a small black bird dropped a note into Hisao’s lap.

He opened it and read it aloud, “The chosen general of the entire army is Neva the Swordslinger. Please return to Reid’s Hollow for a brief meeting. Nikolai.”

“We’re supposed to travel all the way back to the Harthyung for a brief meeting?” Alazondra asked. Hisao shook his head.

Then, he turned to a Canute behind him, “We have to be going. I’m leaving you in charge. Alright? Take the army onwards. I don’t know when or if we’ll be back.” Then, Hisao pulled out an amulet. It was a silver wolf’s head.

“This will take us back,” Hisao said. Alazondra looked at his curiously. Then, there came a bright flash emanating from it. An odd sensation overcame Alazondra and she closed her eyes. When she opened them, she was in the bookroom of Reid’s Hollow. She shook her head dizzily.

“The disorientation will pass momentarily,” Hisao said placing the amulet within his robe. Julius greeted them and led them to the meeting room. Fritchel and Neva were seated at the table. Each person excitedly hugged Neva. Everyone looked happy, except Fritchel, who remained seated at the table scowling. Then, they all seated themselves and Julius began speaking.

Neva asked, “So what are you all doing here?”

“Well,” Hisao said, “we’re all head of specific forces in this army. Those two head the rebel guards, Alazondra is head of the Lycans, and I am in charge of the Canutes.”

“You in charge? The world certainly is changing,” Neva said laughing. Hisao scowled at her slightly then smiled. Julius laughed slightly and seated himself at the table.

He said, “So far they’ve been quite successful. Their combined strategies have pushed those bastards to the far edge of the Plainlands. Acrolith has chosen you as the leader of all of our forces. I couldn’t imagine anyone better myself.” Fritchel scoffed loudly.

“I should be in charge, Father. I’m much more reliable than that villain,” he said sourly. Alazondra looked at Fritchel.

Julius raised a brow and said, “If you honestly think you could best Neva in combat, give her a blade and do so right now.” Fritchel fell silent and averted his eyes to the table. “That’s what I thought.”

Neva said incredulously, “You’re putting *me* in charge of the entire army?” Julius nodded as Thomas, Seth, Alazondra, and Hisao cheered. Alazondra was glad Neva was going to be the head of the army.

“It’s nice to have another female to talk to now. These guys drive me insane!” Alazondra exclaimed.

Neva laughed and said, "I know the feeling." The three men glared at Neva before laughing themselves. They began talking of different battle strategies. Neva didn't talk about the Sanctum, but Alazondra still wondered. She was glad that she was with them now.

After all was said, Alazondra made her way to her room to sleep. It had been long since she slept in a real bed. She slept peacefully throughout the night. In the morning, Hisao woke her up.

"Come on. We're going to head off," he said. She groaned lightly before getting out of bed. She threw her robe around her shoulders and her bag upon her back. She and Hisao left the room and headed outside where hundreds of soldiers were awaiting their arrival. It was like the very first day. They all stood, sharpening claws and weapons.

Then, Neva walked out of cave. She strode over to Silverwave her Barbados. Alazondra could see the happiness in her eyes. Fighting was something Neva did by nature. She was now leading hundreds of others to do such. Alazondra felt very confident. Neva mounted her horse and turned to the crowd.

"Well everyone, I think it's time for us to shove off. Our campaign will take us to the Carrick coast. We'll follow it as long as we can. Then, travel across the Plainlands to rid it of them. Soon after, we'll split the forces up and take Helix from two sides. Let's go send some bastards to hell!" Neva yelled enthusiastically. There came cheers from the Lycans and humans. The Canutes remained motionless as they peered at her. Alazondra wondered what was happening.

"Why exactly do we have to take orders from a human?" a dark-looking Canute asked.

She answered, "Because to my understanding Nikolai wants me to."

"Him...I grow weary of taking orders from him," the Canute replied. "I've heard of you Swordslinger. You're naught but a villain." Alazondra could see Neva grow angry fast.

"Rebellious swine," she said coldly, "take your orders and carry them out. That is all I ask. Even try to defy me and you'll be sent on your merry way to the grim gate faster than you can blink an eye. I suggest you keep your fanged mouth shut until spoken to because no one wants to hear your cheek."

"Swine?" he yelled. "I wonder what pigs sired a wench like you!" All of a sudden, murmuring broke out through the crowd. Then, Alazondra saw Nikolai beat the Canute fiercely with a club. The Canute fell to the ground.

Nikolai said in a low tone, "You dare insult me?" Alazondra's sensitive ears picked up the words, but she could not believe them. She wondered what he could have possibly meant by his words. *There's no way that Nikolai could be her father*, she thought. Alazondra wondered if Neva heard what he said. His words deeply confused Alazondra.

"Now that we have an understanding of each other. Who's going to follow me to Hell?" All two hundred fighters hollered exuberantly in return. Alazondra, Thomas, Seth, and Hisao took their places beside Neva. Alazondra felt proud to be riding beside her.

Neva turned to Alazondra and said, "Lead us out of here, to the south, would you?" Alazondra nodded and did so. She had studied enough maps of the forest to know her way around the place with ease.

For days they traveled. However, of all the villages they passed, there was nothing

at all. There were no Vampires awaiting an attack, nor any villagers. All was completely empty. They passed ghost village after ghost village.

As they were marching, Thomas said, "I bet this war will be over before the year is."

Neva said, "Well, I don't think so."

"Yeah, me too," Alazondra said nodding. "There's a lot of Vampires. They're not an easy foe to defeat."

"Bah! They're little parasites," Thomas said with a wave of his hand.

Neva rolled her eyes and said, "Parasites stronger and faster than you are, Thomas."

"Well, it's not all about strength," he said defiantly.

"And you can't charm them to death with your looks," Neva said wryly.

He laughed and said, "Well, then that eliminates all my defenses. Only kidding." Alazondra and Neva laughed. Seth and Hisao exchanged looks but said nothing.

Soon, the days grew shorter and colder. The bitter winds struck up and frigidly bit at them like howling dogs. They continued on however. Each soldier wanted to end this war as soon as humanly possible. Then, as they were traveling, they came across the destroyed ruins of Fort Dover. Seeing them again saddened Alazondra.

She sighed lightly and said, "I remember seeing this when it was first destroyed." They all looked at the rubble of the great fort. Plants had just begun to grow over the crumbling stones that had once made up the city. The wind coldly whistled through the broken remains. Then, Hisao pulled away. There was a look of alarm on his face.

Neva asked him, "What is it?"

"Vampires!" he shouted. "I can smell them, lots of them. Take cover!" Neva gave the signal for the army to move back and take cover. Alazondra mimicked the action to the Lycans behind her. There was little chance of cover in the barren plains. Alazondra rolled behind a small rock for cover. She took the bow from her back and placed an arrow within the string. With all her strength, she sent it whizzing into a vampire's left eye socket. While it fell, Alazondra saw many others swarming around. *This will be a long battle*, she thought to herself.

They fought long and hard throughout the day. Only the long-range infantry could be used, and many of the Lycans and Canutes could not fight that day. Alazondra almost sighed in relief as Neva ordered them to fall back. She was exhausted and needed a break. They made a camp after they had covered some distance back eastwards.

Alazondra sat around a campfire with a female Lycan, Hisao, and another Canute. Each was leaning up against his or her bag, happy to be resting. The fire flickered dynamically before them, illuminating their faces at odd angles. Other fires throughout the whole campsite were lit. Men and women sat around them talking or just sleeping.

Then, Alazondra rose to her feet and walked off to be alone. She leaned against a tree and looked up at the moon, whose luminescence was clouded. She took in the night air that whispered through the leaves, chilling Alazondra slightly. Upon exhaling, the white vapors streamed out of her mouth and hung in the air shortly before disappearing. She felt another presence beside her. She turned to find Hisao standing beside her.

"Oh, hello. I didn't see you there," she said slightly in surprise. He smiled and his sharp canines shone glossily in the darkness.

"Greetings Anne," he said.

“You can call me Alazondra,” she said. No matter how many times they called her Anne, the name didn’t seem to stick with her. She chose the human name for some reason, which she herself didn’t know.

He replied, “Of course. Quite a nice evening.”

“It is,” she said. In the dark, she could see his shining grey eyes peering at her. His silver hair shone in the dim moonlight. His long bangs gently swayed with the cool winds.

“I was watching you fighting today. I couldn’t help unfortunately. My long ranged skills are not so good,” he said.

“I know you master other areas of combat well,” Alazondra said.

“That I do. You surely have mastered using a longbow. It shows in your skill,” said Hisao. Alazondra smiled at him and blushed lightly.

She replied, “I appreciate the compliment.”

“You were looking for your home right? Did you ever get there before all of this?” he said.

“Yes, I did,” Alazondra replied. “However, I had only been home a few days before coming out to fight in the war.”

“Hmm,” he said.

From somewhere off in the distance there came a yell, “John!” They both turned to see three silhouettes. Alazondra saw one figure draw a blade and kill the other. They immediately came sprinting towards the scene. They found Neva and John talking as the corpse lay below them in death.

“I suppose everything’s alright,” Alazondra said. Hisao nodded in reply. “I’m going to get some rest for tomorrow. Goodnight, Hisao.” She quietly made her way back to the others. They were all asleep as she returned. She closed her eyes as she lay upon the ground by the warmth of the dying fire and fell asleep peacefully.

The following three weeks were spent in that place. After the first day, the Vampires received human forces to aid them. Neva’s army constantly fought and retreat until the numbers within the fort lessened by much. Then, Neva seized her chance and ordered the entire army to charge into the fort. It only took the rest of that day to completely exterminate the Vampire forces within the place. The remaining guards surrendered to Neva. They kneeled before her upon the ground.

“Shall we execute them?” Alazondra heard a young Lycan ask. Alazondra looked up at Neva. Her eyes were intently focused upon the young men before her. She knew that Neva wouldn’t be able to find it in her heart to kill them, for they were just like her.

After a short pause, she answered, “No. Let’s make these ruins a prison before moving forwards. We’ll leave a few to guard it.” They spent the next few days changing the ruins of Fort Dover into a prison. They left several soldiers there to ensure the prisoners didn’t escape. *A smart move*, Alazondra thought. *There shouldn’t be any unnecessary deaths in this war.*

The idea that this war was purely founded in hatred began to dawn upon her. She spoke with several Canutes and Lycans, and they all had a deep-welling hate for Vampires. Many of the rebel guards agreed, including Thomas and Seth. Alazondra had never before hated an entire race. She couldn’t feel it in her heart. Though they sounded like rather contemptible creatures, she didn’t believe each Vampire was like that. Alazondra remained firm in her beliefs. She wondered if Neva had ever given thought as

to the causes of the war.

Before long, they were on the move again. Each battle was small, taking only a handful of days to complete. Prisoners were constantly being sent to Fort Dover as they progressed further into the Plainlands.

In the meantime, Alazondra and Hisao spoke with each other almost every night. Their conversations ranged from a multitude of topics, but no matter which, they always managed to enjoy each other's company. They were different in their backgrounds. However, they still understood each other. It was a very wintry evening when they met by a small boulder. Alazondra was seated atop it, watching the sun's light fade away into the infinity of the blue heavens above.

"I heard Neva called in for reinforcements," Hisao said as he approached her.

"Is that so?" she said inquisitively as she turned towards him. He nodded in reply. Under his arm was a blanket. He threw it around Alazondra's shoulders and seated himself beside her upon the rock.

"Thank you," she said gratefully. Alazondra wrapped the blanket around her shivering body tighter. The wind was blowing softly, constantly bringing frigid air.

Hisao smiled and mumbled, "Mhm."

"Hisao, do you ever wonder why the races hate each other so?" Alazondra asked.

"I do," he said sighing lightly. "I myself do not possess any hate towards another race as a whole. It is not in my nature." Alazondra nodded and sighed.

"Have no fear. I am sure something will come out of all of this horrid business. It usually happens so," Hisao said comfortingly. Alazondra believed his words. She knew that there would have to be some kind of redeeming consequences that were derived from the occurrence of the war. She shivered lightly as the wind struck up harder. Hisao placed an arm around Alazondra to give her warmth.

She smiled at him and pulled the blanket over his broad shoulders. Alazondra was happy to feel the warmth from his body heat. Hisao smiled at her and pulled her closer. Alazondra reddened slightly and looked up into his stern grey eyes. His peered directly into her emerald eyes. In the fading light, their cold lips met. Slowly they pulled apart from each other. Hisao's hand found Alazondra's, and he wrapped his fingers around it. She gently set her head upon his shoulder.

Before long, the night had fully set in. The barren plains had grown colder. Alazondra forced herself to take her hand from Hisao's hand. She detested leaving the warmth of his arms, but she knew she had to. Alazondra bid him a good night and after sharing one more kiss, she made her way to her blankets, which lay beside a warm fire, and went to sleep.

The army continued on onto the hills. They fought even more small battles with the opposing army. During the fighting, Hisao always kept watch over Alazondra's actions. She always felt more confident when he was nearby. They grew closer to each other as time went by during the war.

Then, one morning Thomas woke her up early. He silently led her down a hill and pointed at a fresh mound of earth. A large stone sat atop it as a marker.

"Seth..." he said, "...was killed last night." His brown eyes that were always brightly shining were cast downwards in pure dejection. Alazondra almost couldn't believe he was gone. Seth was such a nice person. Alazondra could only imagine how Neva and Thomas felt, for they were closer to him than anyone else she knew. The air in

her lungs seemed to freeze.

"I...I'm so sorry, Thomas. It's awful. How...what happened?" Alazondra said when she could finally breathe.

"Someone shot an arrow. It was aimed for me, but he pushed me out of the way. He saved me...and died," Thomas mumbled lowly. Alazondra gave Thomas a hug and kneeled before the grave respectfully. *Goodbye Seth*, she thought sadly. Her eyes became watery, but she didn't want to cry. Alazondra wanted to be strong for Thomas and Neva, because she knew they would need it.

Before long, news had reached the majority of the army. All were in a somber mood, but there was still a war to be fought. Thomas was one to not simply stagnate in mourning, and he pushed Neva into continuing on. While they were traveling, Alazondra rode up next to Neva with Hisao behind her.

"Hey Neva. I'm really sorry about Seth. It's awful," Alazondra said comfortingly. She could see the distress in Neva's cold, grey eyes.

"Yeah, me too," Hisao said.

Neva heaved a small sigh and replied, "Yeah, Father Crow once said, 'We must endure our sorrows, and carry them upon our back like great beasts of burden. Lo, always know that the sun will rise the next day.' I will do such." *Father Crowe must be a very wise man*, Alazondra thought. *He is very insightful in his words.*

Hisao asked, "So, have any ideas of who it might have been?"

"Hmm," she said, "I don't know. All I do know is that he has a big horse and a good aim with a bow. He might be a vampire." Alazondra listened in sharply.

"That would make sense," Thomas commented.

"The arrow tip was...obsidian. It was also enchanted," Neva said.

Thomas said, "Well, I don't know much about enchanting, but obsidian comes from volcanic activity, right?"

"That's right," Hisao answered, "but there are no active volcanoes in all of Liam. The obsidian would have been imported."

"And with good reason, too. Obsidian can make for nice arrowheads," Thomas informed. Neva nodded at the two. Alazondra thought about all the things Fritchel told her about enchanting.

"Well, I know a little about enchanting. Fritchel is an enchanter, and he's told me some things," Alazondra said.

"What do you know?" Neva asked.

Alazondra answered, "It takes someone of good skill to enchant weapons. Amulets and clothing in general, he told me, are pretty easily enchanted. Some weapons have a more complex makeup and therefore are harder to enchant. It takes a soul of a living thing, be it animal or human, and an elemental type of spell, like ice, fire, or even a lightning spell. That's the basics." Alazondra noticed Thomas and Hisao looking rather confused by her words. Neva seemed to understand and nodded.

"The vampires at the sanctum were good Mages. They had been doing magic for years and years. I would suppose that at least some of them would be enchanters. As far as importing the obsidian, I'm sure they'd be smart enough to find a way," Neva said.

"Hmm, so we have at least narrowed it down to the fact that the killer was a vampire now, but the problem is which vampire it was," Hisao said. Neva thought for a moment.

Then, she said with a sigh, "There's too many. I don't know." They made their way to the next fort, which was Fort Redemption. It was located at the edge of the desert Wastelands in Liam. They wound their way through the rocky hills until they came upon the fort itself. Then, Neva ordered the long ranged forces to remain in the hills while the rest stormed the fort. Hisao quickly kissed Alazondra's cheek as he rode by her.

She whispered into his ear, "Stay safe." A small grin formed upon his face. He rode off following Neva. Alazondra readied her bow, along with the many other archers beside her. A middle-aged Lycan woman, named Ryanel, beside her did as such. She was as fine an archer as Alazondra was. They had become somewhat friends over the course of the war. Then, the sound of arrows being fired erupted loudly from the fortress.

"Archers ready!" Alazondra yelled. The sound of strings groaning in weight echoed down the ranks of archers.

"Fire!" she yelled as she let loose the arrow from between her fingers. It, along with hundreds of others, was sent whizzing into Fort Redemption. Several Vampires and humans atop the battlements were cut down in the fire. Alazondra waited shortly before ordering another rain of fire. She could see in the distance the soldiers climbing the rope ladders. Then, they all fell to the ground. Alazondra saw Neva briefly before she disappeared into the shadows of the fort.

"Archers ready!" Alazondra commanded once more. "Fire!" Once again, the arrows speedily arced into the air gracefully. Even more enemy soldiers were slain by them. After a number of team volleys, she ordered them to fire at will. Alazondra's keen eyes constantly searched for Hisao. She hoped for his safety as she continued firing into the fort. Then, she saw something, a man, fall from a window of the fort. Alazondra saw Neva standing at the window looking downwards.

"Halt fire!" Alazondra yelled. She waited as the hissing of arrows came to a stop. "Move in. I think something just happened." Alazondra found that she was right as they entered the fort. Men were being tied up. Several of their own soldiers were clustered up. Alazondra peered over their shoulders curiously and found a hideous site. It was Lord James. He was covered in his own carnage, which occurred from the fall.

Alazondra turned to Thomas, who was standing nearby and asked, "What happened?"

"He killed himself," he replied in a low tone. *The Lord of all Liam...killed himself. Why?* Alazondra remembered seeing Neva in the window from where he had fallen. They spent the night moving the enemies into the prisons. Walking atop the battlements, she found Hisao sitting atop a crate, looking at the moon.

"Hisao," Alazondra said almost gasping. He smiled at her and held out a hand. She ran towards him and placed her hand upon his. Hisao grasped her hand tightly and looked at her up at her. She looked at him and smiled. "I'm so glad you're alright."

"Of course," he said. Hisao took her into his arms and gazed at her under the pale moonlight. She looked up into his silver eyes, not as stern as they were before. Then, he kissed her deeply. As they pulled away, she looked at the man before her. She thought to herself, *He may be a Canute, but he's not like the rest are.* She kissed him again. He ran his hand through her silvery hair. Deep into the night they embraced each other.

The next day Neva attempted to force the army to move on. Everyone could see the stress she was under, not to mention the deep wound upon her shoulder. None of them wanted to take any risks; none that is save for Neva herself. The soldiers and Neva all

rested for an entire week before moving on. The four leaders discussed the whereabouts of the enemies.

“What about Helix?” Neva asked.

Hisao replied, “No. I hear that it has remained shut away. They sealed all the gates just last month. The citizens there were rather...hostile to the Vampires. Lord Cervantes was forced to move out.”

“I see. Where next should we head then?” she asked. There was a pause between them. Alazondra thought about it logically.

“Where else?” she said. “The most *likely* place Vampires would *be*.”

Both Thomas and Neva replied, “The Wastelands.” Alazondra smiled and nodded. She was nervous about going to the Wastelands because she had never before been there. They traveled onwards. Soon, the terrain became rocky and dry. Sand replaced the green grass of the hills, and trees became even sparser. Then, as they were continuing west into the desert, there was a large shape moving in the distance.

“That must be the other army,” Thomas mumbled. “It’s huge.” Alazondra then realized that this coming battle would be the biggest but last. She feared what was coming ahead. All creatures in the immediate locale readied themselves for battle. A wind began stirring which picked up the dry sand and tossed it aimlessly over the arid landscape. Each step brought them closer to the other army. Alazondra’s heart was racing as they moved forwards. Then, each army stopped as their front ranks lined up.

“Death to Vampires!” Alazondra heard a Canute yell. She looked around at everyone, each so willing to kill. Then, her green oculars averted to Neva. She seemed to be looking at something intently. Alazondra watched her dismount Silverwave and step forward. She looked and saw Lord Dave at the head of the army. The look in Neva’s eyes was unmistakable. *They love each other*, she thought. *They don’t want to fight. That means...the war is over.* She smiled as she gripped the reins on her horse tighter.

“What is she doing?” Thomas whispered. “Someone should do something.” As he started to move, Alazondra grabbed him.

“No, I think she’s going to make the right decision for us all here,” she said. Everyone’s eyes were upon Neva as she moved. Then, after Dave dismounted his horse, both he and Neva threw down their weapons. Immediately, the armies both began whispering and murmuring in low voices.

“Neva!” Dave yelled. They both ran towards each other. Alazondra watched as he caught her in his arms. A smile formed across Alazondra’s face as they embraced each other. A silence overcame those watching. It was then that Alazondra realized that, in the history of Liam, this was the first time a leader of Liam had given away the chance to slay an enemy. Never before had the leader of Liam fallen in love with a villain.

The surrounding crowd began to cheer as the couple pulled away from each other’s grasp. The sound of metal falling to the ground shortly followed. Dave held up one arm as he placed the other around Neva’s waist. Behind her, Alazondra saw Thomas begin to walk away.

She heard him mumble, “I can’t stay through *this*.” Alazondra wondered what he meant. Then, she saw the hurt look in his brown eyes. She pondered to herself, *Did Thomas have feelings for Neva?*

“Today is the end of the Two Year’s War!” he declared. “Let there be peace between every race. Within the month, racial charters will be issued! I’d like new

beginnings to form all throughout Liam! Let us now depart, good people.” Cheers broke out amongst the two armies once more. Alazondra happily smiled and looked to the heavens above. Then, she immediately approached Neva.

“This is great, Neva. I’m so glad you made the right decision,” she said happily.

Hisao said, “Yeah, let’s just hope everyone else thinks so too.”

Dave replied, “I’m sure they will. It’s no secret that they’ve hated each other for years on end. I think it’s a worn out hate by now. I’m just glad we stopped it in time.” They all nodded in agreement.

“Where’d Thomas go?” Neva asked.

Alazondra answered, “I think he went to go celebrate with the other guards.”

“Figures,” Hisao said. They laughed slightly. Neva whistled and Silverwave came running towards her. She jumped on his back and began to ride away.

“Wait!” Dave yelled. “Where are you going?”

“We have some prisoners where Fort Dover used to be. I think they’d like to know that they’re free to go,” Neva said with a smile. “Alazondra, would you go to Fort Redemption for me?” Alazondra smiled and nodded. She turned her horse around and began to fight through the crowds. Alazondra saw Neva riding off hurriedly. Alazondra couldn’t have been happier. The war was over and everything would be at peace.

“Alazondra,” she heard Hisao’s deep voice say. She turned and smiled at him happily.

She said, “It’s over, Hisao. All over...”

He nodded and said, “Allow me to come with you to Fort Redemption.”

“Of course,” Alazondra replied. Together they rode back through the hills and away from the barren region. Within four days, they had reached Fort Redemption. A guard was striding across the courtyard.

“Hey,” Alazondra said.

“Ma’am,” he said straightening up.

She ordered, “Free the prisoners.”

“What?” he said incredulously.

“The war’s over. They solved it peacefully. Just free all the soldiers,” she said. The young soldier smiled and ran into the fort yelling happily. Alazondra smiled at Hisao, who grinned back. Then, she thought about those back in the Harthyung Forest. She wanted to go home, but she didn’t want to leave Hisao.

“Hisao,” she said, “I have to go home. They’ll be expecting me.”

“I understand. I will travel with you until we reach the forest. There are some things I must do at the Carrick Coast,” he said. She nodded and mounted her horse. Together, for many days, they traveled to the Harthyung. She realized that at home was a man prearranged to marry her. The thought dashed her heart. She sorely wanted to be with Hisao, but she knew she couldn’t be. Finally, they stood outside the edge of the forest.

“Here we are,” said Hisao. Though it was summer, it meant nothing for the bitter North, where the frigid winds never ceased in chilling the land. Hisao took Alazondra in his arms and hugged her close.

Alazondra said, “Hisao, I...there is a marriage prearranged for me. They might make me marry the man.” He looked deeply into her eyes.

After a long silence, he said, “I will be at the wedding.” A small tear ran down her

cheek. Before turning around, he brushed it away. Then, he mounted his horse and said over his shoulder, "Goodbye for now, Alazondra."

"Goodbye," she whispered.

Watching him ride off was painful for Alazondra. She turned and walked through the forest to Reid's Hollow. When she arrived there the next day, she was greeted warmly by Julius and several other Lycans. They celebrated her return with a large banquet. Alazondra had not the will to eat. She left the banquet and went into her room, where she silently cried into her pillow. She fell asleep with the tears in her eyes. The next morning she was awoken by a young Lycan girl placing the food upon the table.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Anne. I didn't mean to wake you," said she. Alazondra nodded and looked at the food. She turned away from it and walked outside to the stream she had gone so many times before. She watched the fish dart around in the clear water until Julius approached her.

"Anne, I have come to notice you seem rather disheartened," he said.

"It's nothing, Julius," Alazondra replied with a sigh.

Julius said, "If it was nothing, then you'd be alright. Has all the war affected you?"

"Yeah, that's part of it," she answered.

"I can understand that the massive amount of death and violence could seem overwhelming to many. What else is troubling you?"

"I just don't want to say," she said.

"Alright," said Julius, "however, I am always around to talk to." She nodded as he walked away. Alazondra couldn't help but think of Hisao. She wanted him with her, and the idea of having to marry Fritchel didn't help matters at all. Later in her bedroom, as she was lying upon her bed, Fritchel entered the room.

"Alazondra, you're back," he said.

"I am," she replied.

"I'm glad you're all right," Fritchel said. *I'm not all right*, she thought. She nodded and gazed at the fireplace, which contained a dimly lit fire.

"It was a long two years without you," he said.

Alazondra said, "I'm sure you kept yourself plenty busy." Then, she got up and began to walk away. He sighed and placed a hand on her shoulder.

Fritchel said, "I've gotten better about my drinking."

"But you haven't given it up completely, have you?" said Alazondra. His blue eyes slightly averted to the ground. "In two years, you still couldn't give it up." She sighed and turned away.

"I've been trying," he said. "I just came to see you, and you act completely hostile. Has the war caused you to grow this cold?"

"You have no idea," she said sighing. Everything she saw and did during the war replayed in her mind constantly. All the death and pain just never quit running through her mind. She was rather agitated with Fritchel; she almost felt detest towards him. His old charm had stopped working upon her before the war, and it most certainly would not now.

Fritchel said, "Well, I..."

"You know," she said interrupting him, "I really don't care what you have to say, because it wouldn't be worth my while. Where were *you* when I was out *there*? Yeah, the

look on your sorry face tells me it all. You were here, drinking it up, probably flirting with any female you could lay your filthy hands upon. I, in the meantime, was fighting out there.” Alazondra was surprised by her own vehement words, but she realized that she meant every word. She was angry with Fritchel, and she wanted him to know. He remained silent as he turned and left the room. Alazondra sighed and turned towards the fireplace once more, wondering if her words were too harsh.

“Lady Anne?” she heard an unfamiliar voice say. She turned to find a middle-aged man standing at the doorway. Under his arm was a book, and he was dressed in a dark robe.

“Yes?”

“Well, I came by...to talk to you about...being a Lycan. Julius sent me here,” he said. He looked slightly nervous as he spoke.

Alazondra nodded and said, “Alright. What’s your name?”

“My name is Avery Jericho,” he said. “I heard the...fighting. I didn’t *mean* to. I just...it was so loud and I was right there...”

“Yeah, I understand. Just never mind it. It’s personal matter,” she said as she sighed. He nodded and placed his book upon the table.

Avery said, “Well, if you aren’t in an emotional state to learn, then we do not have to.” Alazondra didn’t have the heart to learn about Lycans, but she figured it would take her mind off Hisao and the war.

“I’m ready as I’ll ever be,” she replied. He nodded and opened his book as they both seated themselves at the table.

“First things first, I should tell you about being a Lycan, an Alpha Lycan to be exact. The Lycan being is a very holy creature. The Harthyung possesses special, natural powers. It’s a pure thing of the world. Being in it for extensive periods of time can purify souls. Lycans are all born like humans, but when they live in the forest for a number of years, the spirit of the Lycan will enter them.”

“So could a human become a Lycan?” Alazondra asked curiously.

“No,” he answered, “you see, another element they must have is the blood of the Lycan. It’s much stronger than normal blood. Delta Lycans have the blood of the Lycan, but not the spirit. They are unholy creatures. Now, the spirit enters one with the blood of the Lycan if they are pure enough and if they remain in the forest for years to come.”

“I see. That explains why I had never turned into a Lycan until the night after I left the forest,” said Alazondra. “Hmm, I didn’t stay for years though.”

“Yes, that is because you are Rolath. The spirit is powerful enough to enter without the aid of the forest’s power,” he replied.

Alazondra said, “Why is it that I’m Rolath? How and why did I get chosen?”

Avery thought for a moment before replying, “I do not know. The ancient spirit Rolath is a mysterious and powerful one. He chooses his Incarnates based upon his own beliefs and reasons.” Alazondra thought about it all for a moment. Then, Julius stepped into the room.

“I’m sorry for interrupting, but I need a quick word with Alazondra,” he said. Alazondra nodded and walked over to him. He placed an arm around her shoulders and walked with her down the hallway a few paces before stopping.

“My son tells me you’re rather indifferent now. This is merely what he said. I’m sure he is exaggerating to some degree or another, but I’m just worried.”

"I think the war has just stressed me out," Alazondra said with a small sigh. She was lying, but she didn't want him to know the truth.

He nodded and said, "I see. Well, I hope things improve. I came to tell you that in a month I have set your marriage to be. It will be a fine marriage, no doubt." He rambled on about it all, but Alazondra heard nothing. She didn't want to hear any of it. All she could think about was Hisao. Alazondra wanted to be with him.

"Alazondra? Are you listening?" said Julius after a few moments.

"Hmm? Oh, no. Sorry, sir. I was...just thinking," Alazondra said hastily. Julius looked at her curiously.

"I asked you if you'd prefer the ceremony outdoors," he said.

She replied distantly, "That's fine." *Why must I marry him? I wish, she thought, I only wish I could choose of my own accord.*

"Alright then," Julius said. His eyes remained focused upon her. "Well, we'll discuss this later. I should let you get back to your studies." Alazondra nodded and turned back towards the room. She headed in and seated herself at the table.

Avery whispered in a low tone, "Something tells me you're not looking forward to the marriage."

"Huh?" she said.

"Well," he replied, "the moment he said the marriage was in a month your eyes immediately dropped."

She sighed and said, "You're right, Avery. I don't want to marry Fritchel, er, Ajax."

"Oh," said Avery, "it's *he* whom you're wed to?" He placed a hand upon her shoulder and said, "I couldn't blame you. He's trouble. Rolath should be married to a more respectable man, but your father and his had wanted it so when you two were very young."

"Can you tell me about my father?" she said.

"Well, I never knew the man personally, but he was a great person. Helseth Beomyth was his name. Your mother's name was Faye. Both each wonderful to be around. Your father helped Julius run things within the clan. They were very close friends. That is the reasoning behind the marriage, I suppose."

"I see," Alazondra said. She wished that she could meet her father for herself.

"He died fighting valiantly though," Avery continued. "He was trying to protect his wife from the Canutes who had attacked along with the Delta Lycans. Unfortunately, they outnumbered him and killed both of them. You had managed to escape before things got bad. No one knows how, but you did it."

"I don't remember any of it," she said. He nodded and closed his book. There came a silence between the two.

Avery then asked, "I have the feeling there is one more reason for the objection of the marriage that you haven't mentioned to me. If it's a secret, I don't mind keeping it. I'm just curious."

"I suppose I can trust you," Alazondra replied. "During the war, I met a man."

"You did, huh?" he said with a grin. "Tell me about him."

"Well, he's a Canute. He's hard on the outside, but on the inside, he's a very nice person. We spent a lot of time together. He protected me during the battles and watched over me. He was always around for me. I..." She realized what she was going to say. *I*

love him. *Do I love him*, she thought.

“I see. Fritchel never came out to the war, did he?” Avery said inquisitively. Alazondra shook her head. “I can only imagine what that’s like. The man you’re supposed to marry is arrogant and a drunkard, while you have feelings for this Canute. What’s his name?”

“Hisao,” she replied.

He smiled as he replied, “I won’t tell a soul. You can trust me.” Alazondra smiled back at him as he rose from the table.

“Well, that’s all I will teach upon today. I’ll let you reflect on what you’ve learned. Good day,” he said as he left the room. Alazondra leaned back in her chair and stared at the ceiling. From it hung many beautiful, stony stalactites. The light hit each one at different angles, casting long shadows upon the ceiling and walls. She closed her eyes, wishing to be far from that place. When she opened them, she found only the cave before her. Alazondra came to realize that this place was her home, and that Fritchel was to be her husband, whether she wished for it or not. She was left only to bear these things. *Like great beasts of burden*, Neva’s voice echoed in her head.

Alazondra thought about Neva. They had become as close as sisters in the duration of the war. In many ways, they were like sisters. She wondered about Lord Dave and Thomas. Alazondra could tell they both loved Neva. She wondered which man Neva would choose. Alazondra felt that Thomas deserved her love. He had been her loyal friend for many years, but that was only based upon Alazondra’s perspective on things. She did not know the entire story.

Then, she leaned forward in her chair and laid her head upon the table. She watched the fireplace flicker softly. The repetitive crackling sound lured Alazondra to sleep. She closed her jade eyes and slept.

When she became conscious again, she found herself in a white room. The sunlight shone through the windows in the room, illuminating it. In the middle of the room, lay a small black book. Alazondra turned towards it. Then, she heard the sound of footsteps running down from one of the hallways leading to the room.

She saw Neva running up. Neva stopped upon entering the room. Alazondra wondered what the book was as Neva slowly walked towards it. She picked it up in her hands and opened the book. Then, Alazondra watched in horror as a man came behind Neva and thrust his sword into her back. He retracted then blade from her and Neva fell to the floor. The sight appalled Alazondra.

The man, who she came to realize was Nikolai, said, “I’m sorry, my dear.”

Alazondra gasped as she woke up. Cold sweat was dripping down her face. The fireplace in the room had been doused. Fritchel was sitting on his bed reading by candlelight. She couldn’t believe what had happened in her dream. It seemed so real. Then, she thought about the other dream. She wondered if that’s what had happened to Thomas and Seth when they were taken to the Vampire sanctum. *If it hasn’t happened yet*, Alazondra thought, *it will*. She immediately stood and began throwing things into her bag.

“Alazondra? What are you doing? Are you...are you going somewhere?” Fritchel asked as he looked up from his book.

She replied, “I have to Fritchel. I think Neva’s in danger.”

“Neva? That rogue? It would only serve her right,” Fritchel grumbled.

“She’s like a sister to me!” Alazondra yelled. “Like you would even know, Fritchel.”

She threw her bag upon her back and sprinted from the cave. She took a horse from the corral in behind Reid’s Hollow. Then, she galloped through the thick brush and vegetation southwest. She needed to get to Helix as fast as she could. Alazondra, determined in reaching Helix, rarely slept nor ate upon her traveling. She had finally reached the city gates after traveling for eight days. She was exhausted and hungry, but she wouldn’t stop until she found Neva.

As she made her way through the bustling city, she saw Canutes, Vampires and Lycans roaming the city freely now. They were talking with the humans and laughing as if they had always done that. Things were very different in the city. She fought through the masses and finally reached Derelict. Her heart almost skipped a beat as she saw the large towers again. She was closer to Neva. She was determined to stop what she had foreseen if she could.

The gates to Fort Derelict were wide open, as they had never been before. Alazondra kicked her horse into a canter as she passed through it. Then, she saw Thomas running inside the fort. She wondered where he was going and sprinted after him. He ran down a series of halls. Then, as Alazondra turned down one more corner, she saw that at the end of the hall was a room. It was made entirely of white marble.

Alazondra watched as Thomas kneeled in the middle of the room. *No*, she thought, *I can’t be too late. Neva can’t die*. She slowly walked down the hallway. She saw Neva as she had seen her in the dream. Neva was lying on her stomach with a large puncture wound through her back. Just by her hand was the black book.

“I’m too late...” Alazondra said in a quiet tone.

Thomas replied with a choked voice, “As am I.”

[Dangerous Game]

Alazondra walked up to him and placed a hand upon his shoulder. She could see a small tear upon his cheek. She then covered her face as her eyes began to water. *Neva can’t die*, she thought. *How could she?* Alazondra looked down at the body once more. She remembered seeing Nikolai kill her. *Why did he do it*, she wondered. Thomas stood and hugged Alazondra. She wrapped her arms around him and patted his back comfortingly.

“Why would someone kill her?” he said. “It’s...horrible. I can’t take it.”

“Hush now, Thomas,” Alazondra said. “This...it must have been fate. Neither of us could stop it, and we tried. I saw it happen in a dream. I came down here as fast as I could. We both did all that we could.” She realized that he must have been engulfed with the suffering of loss. Now, both his friends were dead.

Thomas said after a while, “I just can’t deal with the fact that she’s dead. I really...” Alazondra looked at him. She knew what he was thinking. *He really loved her*.

“You loved her,” she said for him. He looked down at Neva’s body sadly.

“We should tell Lord Dave,” he said. The look of hurt in his brown eyes almost killed Alazondra to see. She nodded and followed him to the nobles’ quarters. Then, as they passed by a hall, someone grabbed Alazondra. The attacker placed a hand over her

mouth and dragged her into a room. She looked up to find Nikolai standing before her.

"You!" she said gasping. "You killed..."

"So my secret is out before I had time to bury it," Nikolai said with a twisted grin. "Perhaps it's not the secret I need to bury." He unsheathed his blade and pressed it to her neck. Alazondra knew there would be no one to burst open the door and save her this time. She was on her own to deal with the man who had killed Neva.

"If you kill me, Julius and the rest of the Lycans will deal with you. There's no way you can get away with this," she said.

"I got away with killing Captain Balks, did I not?" he said. She gasped and covered her mouth in shock. *He's the one who killed Captain Balks.*

"Why? Why do you kill these people?" she demanded.

Nikolai replied, "They know too much. As do you..."

"You're Neva's father, aren't you? You killed your own daughter. For what reason though?" Alazondra said, her voice rising. Nikolai glared at her coldly. His blue eyes were intently focused upon her.

"You would not understand," he growled. Then, he raised his blade to strike her. She threw herself to the floor, dodging his blow. His sword became embedded into the wooden floor. He abandoned it and threw himself at her. She kicked him in the abdomen as he dived towards her. Nikolai wrapped his hands around her neck viciously.

"You'll die slowly, vixen," he said coldly. Then, in through one of the windows came an arrow. It was sent straight into Nikolai's arm.

He looked out the window as he released his grasp upon Alazondra and said, "You bastard!" Nikolai dived out the window before Alazondra could do anymore. Out the window, she spotted a strange, young man. He had short black hair and took off running. She immediately ran out of the room and down the hall towards the white room. She saw Thomas coming down the hall with two other guards behind him.

"There you are, Alazondra. Where did you run off to? When I turned around, you weren't there," he said.

"I...there..." she stopped. She knew that, if she told Thomas what had happened, Nikolai would find out somehow or another. "I thought I saw something suspicious and looked. There was nothing." She wondered who the mysterious person was that saved her. Alazondra wanted to thank the person for what he or she did.

"Anyway, did you find Lord Dave?" Alazondra asked.

"No," Thomas said, "he's conveniently just disappeared."

"Oh," she said. She could just see what Thomas was thinking, that Dave was the one to kill Neva. She didn't want to endanger Thomas by telling him, because Nikolai was a very dangerous man. The guards looked at the body extensively.

Then one looked up and said, "What's this book?"

"Book?" Thomas said. Alazondra looked at it curiously. She wondered exactly what it was that Neva had rushed to. Something that she had wanted so badly, she let her guard down to take it. *Her parents*, Alazondra thought.

"Is it the diary of her parents?" Alazondra asked. Then, she immediately gasped and covered her mouth.

One of the guards looked at her curiously and said, "Yes. It looks like a diary. What's the matter, miss?"

"I shouldn't have said that. He'll find out. He'll..." she immediately silenced

herself. Alazondra placed her hands over her face.

“Who will find out?” Thomas demanded. “Dave?”

“No. I can’t say. He’ll find out and kill me, because I know,” Alazondra said in a low tone. *Nikolai must have blackmailed Neva with the diary*, Alazondra thought. Everything was coming together now. Alazondra just couldn’t understand why he’d kill his own daughter though. It seemed so cruel, yet Alazondra knew not of how cruel the human soul could truly be. She did not want to find out either.

Thomas said, “Hmm, we can talk later.” Alazondra didn’t want to though. She only wanted Nikolai slain for what he had done and wanted it to be the end of all things. The guards wrapped Neva’s body up and placed her in the temple. Thomas led Alazondra back to his home in the guards’ quarters. She lay on the sofa he offered her and looked out the window. She didn’t know what would happen. She didn’t even know if she was going to wake up in the morning.

Thomas seated himself on the sofa and said, “Well, Alazondra?”

“What?” she said, her face was pale.

“I need you to tell me what you know,” he said.

“I..I can’t,” she said nervously. “He’ll kill me if I do.”

“Who?” Thomas asked.

“I can’t say!” she yelled.

Thomas said with a sigh, “Look, if you tell me, I promise to do what I can to look after you and ensure that this killer doesn’t kill you too.” She looked up into his brown eyes. Alazondra could hear the tone in his voice, and knew he wanted nothing else than vengeance upon the man who took the life of the woman he loved.

“I don’t want to put *you* in danger too,” she said.

He replied, “I don’t *care*.”

Alazondra sighed in resignation and whispered, “It was Nikolai Acrolith...her father.”

His eyes opened widely and he replied, “Are you...are you sure?”

“Yes,” she replied.

“So that’s who her father is. I’m assuming then that her mother is Yomi Desiree.”

“I am not sure,” Alazondra said.

“I wonder for what reason though. Why did he do it? No logical reason can come to *my* mind,” Thomas said as he set his feet atop the table.

“I only know who did this. I don’t know his motive,” Alazondra said. She was perfectly honest. She didn’t have any inkling as to why Nikolai would have killed his own daughter. There must have been something. *Maybe it had to do with the fact he blackmailed Neva with the diary*, she thought.

“How did you know she was in trouble?” Alazondra asked.

“Well, I didn’t really,” Thomas said. “We were talking when a bird came with a note. She read it and went running into the building. I followed after her, but I was too *late*.” Alazondra sighed lightly and looked up at the ceiling.

“I bet it has something to do with the diary,” she mumbled.

“The diary. How did you know about that?” Thomas asked.

Alazondra replied, “I simply guessed. It was something that Neva was so eager to get that she let her guard down to get it. Other than her parents’ identities, what else could it be?” Thomas looked at Alazondra and thought for a moment.

“You’re right,” he said. “That makes a lot of sense.” After awhile, Thomas went to bed, and Alazondra slept on the sofa for the night. Thomas didn’t forget to offer to share his bed however. *I’m glad he’s joking*, Alazondra thought. *This means he’s not totally distraught.*

Alazondra woke up the next morning to the sound of men yelling. She placed her robe over her shoulders and meandered over to the source of the noise. She saw Thomas speaking with the guards and Lord Dave. The guards were standing in between the two. Alazondra looked up at Dave curiously. He looked different than his father did. Dave had an intelligent look about him. His soft brown eyes were hidden behind his glasses, which were hanging lowly upon the brim of his nose.

“You bastard!” Thomas yelled. “I know you’re a dirty, no good...” Alazondra immediately intervened. She grabbed Thomas by the back of his shirt and pulled him back. He coughed and rubbed at his neck when she released him.

Alazondra looked at Thomas, “Calm down, Thomas. Cripes, you woke me up with your yelling.”

Dave said courteously, “Hello ma’am. I am Dave Cervantes. I hear that you were a friend of Neva’s.” His voice sounded strained and false as he spoke. She could tell he was strongly trying to hide his pain. *He too loved her*, Alazondra thought. *How hard it must be.* Behind her, Thomas mumbled a few obscene profanities. Alazondra elbowed him in the abdomen, and he instantly silenced himself.

She nodded and said, “Yes. I was.”

“It’s a tragedy, isn’t it?” he said.

“I agree,” Alazondra replied.

“People having to do with this should be punished,” Thomas said glaring at Dave.

Lord Dave sighed and said, “Please listen when I say that I had no part in her murder. I’d never do anything like that.”

“Yeah? Where were you when she died?” Thomas asked. “I went searching for you just after it, but you were no where to be found.”

“I was looking after some fort business. I had no idea of the events that had taken place in my absence,” he replied, sounding slightly agitated. Alazondra shifted uncomfortably as she stood between the two. The anger between them was fierce.

Alazondra said, “Can I say something?”

“Are you going to back *him* up?” Thomas said with a scowl.

“No,” she said sighing in exasperation. “Just shut up! You *do* talk a lot.” Thomas pouted slightly as he closed his mouth. “What I was going to say is that arguing isn’t going to find us Nikolai. We have to look for that guy. I think now, that with the help of all the different races, finding him will not be such a difficult task.”

“She’s right,” Dave said. “We’ll need to send out secretive groups. If we raise alarm about him, Nikolai is sure to flee the country. Let us fall into his little game.”

“It is a dangerous one. He’s a powerful enemy and a cunning foe,” Alazondra said. Both Dave and Thomas nodded in agreement. Then, Dave left to begin preparations. Thomas sat down on the sofa angrily. Alazondra shut the door as the guards walked down the hall.

She turned to Thomas and said, “What’s gotten into you?”

“Nothing,” he replied.

“Is it because you both love Neva? Is it jealousy?” Alazondra asked.

“No!” he said defiantly.

“Look, this is a frank discussion. I can tell you’re lying,” she said impatiently.

“What? I’m not lying,” Thomas said.

“Yes,” she replied. “You cast your eyes downwards and to the left when you lie. You do the same but to the right when you’re embarrassed.”

Thomas said incredulously, “Damn. I do?”

“See, you *were* lying, and I don’t know. I made that up to see if you were lying,” Alazondra said with a smirk. Thomas scowled and grumbled to himself in a low tone.

“Fine,” he said. “Back in Piliad, I asked Jeremy if I could marry Neva. Jeremy wanted *me* to marry Neva. Then, when I heard Dave asked Neva to marry him, I almost died on the inside. Her stepfather never approved of Dave to begin with. I knew I couldn’t compete with a lord. I just wanted to be with her, but...I don’t know...if she ever knew that. I never told her...I was about to just before it happened. If I had made her stay and told her everything, I bet it wouldn’t have happened.”

“Thomas, it just couldn’t be stopped. No matter when or how or who with she went into the room, I’m unfortunately certain that Nikolai would have killed her. He’s a very...determined man,” Alazondra said.

“Still, I just wish,” he said sighing.

“I as well,” she replied. “By the way, I’m really sorry that you never told her how you felt. I can only imagine what it’s like when something so precious slips away before you got to completely grasp it. I...” Alazondra began thinking of Hisao. There was a silence between the two.

Then, Thomas looked at her and asked, “Can I ask you something?”

“You just did,” she said.

“No! Agh,” he said. “What’s between you and Fritchel? I mean, you two seemed awfully close.” She cast her eyes downwards as he mentioned the name.

“We were prearranged to be married,” she mumbled.

“Really? Do you *want* to marry him?” Thomas inquired. Alazondra sighed and looked away. She didn’t want to answer the question. He merely stood and walked to his room. He stopped just before entering and placed a hand on the doorframe.

“Alazondra,” he said, “you remind me of Neva...so much.” He sighed and closed his door. Alazondra didn’t know the complete meaning of his words, but she could guess. She left his home and walked past the fields of men sprinting to and fro. She watched the men in the combat arena for quite some time. Alazondra noticed they seemed to be performing a bit better because of her presence. The captain was quite pleased however.

She noticed that there was mix of young men throughout the entire training grounds. There were Vampires, Lycans, Canutes, and humans. Each with their own natural skills and abilities. Alazondra smiled as she watched a young Lycan boy and a human talking and laughing with each other. *Neva helped to cause this glorious peace*, Alazondra thought as she sat upon bench under a tree, *yet she’s not around to witness it*.

She sighed as the light sifted through the tree foliage. Small lavender flowers littered the area directly beneath the beautiful tree. Birds fluttered from branch to branch as they sung sweetly in the afternoon hours. Everything seemed to be at peace, yet Alazondra still felt empty inside. Neva was gone, and she felt as if Hisao was too. She would give almost anything to have them back with her. Alazondra stood and began to walk towards the guards’ quarters. Then, Lord Dave approached her.

“Alazondra,” he said, “I’ve arranged for the funeral ceremony to take place tomorrow. She’ll be buried near Father Crowe. We’re going to make a special monument for her after the burial.”

“How nice,” she said.

Dave nodded and said, “Just pass the word on to Thomas for me, would you? I...it’d be better if *you* told him, I think.”

Alazondra smiled and said, “Of course.” Then, she walked up to Thomas’s home and entered.

“Thomas,” she said. She found him drunk on his bed. She sighed and took away all the bottle of alcohol. She threw them out the window carelessly. Then, she wrung a wet towel out over his head. The water splashed down on his face, waking him up.

He groaned and said, “Ah...jeez. What are you doing?” She placed the cloth to his forehead.

“Helping. Anyway, Dave told me that the funeral ceremony for Neva would be tomorrow. They’re going to bury her and then make a monument for her,” Alazondra informed.

“Okay. Hey, where’d my damned ale go?” he said pointing to the nightstand.

She replied, “Out the window. You can’t go there drunk, Thomas. I don’t care how much you think you need to be, but I want you sober.” Thomas sighed and nodded as he rubbed his head with the moist cloth.

“I will be,” he sighed and lay down on his bed. Alazondra nodded and sighed as she had heard the same words from Fritchel. She had the feeling Thomas meant them and would keep to his words. Alazondra wondered how things were back in the forest. She hoped they weren’t worried about her well-being.

The next day a low sounding bell tolled, awaking both Thomas and Alazondra. A congregation amassed around the area by Father Crowe’s statue. A large hole had been dug. Alazondra and Thomas rushed down to the crowds. Lord Dave led the line of guards carrying the casket. Designs were carved upon the wooden casket. Alazondra noticed the largest of these was a wolf.

“Only days before, a legendary woman passed away,” Dave said. “Neva was a woman with remarkable fighting talents. We should always remember her as the woman who fought for peace. Her death was tragic. Though she had been denounced as a villain, she was not one at heart. She was merely a lost orphan in this big world wishing for a better existence. She gave all of us one through the war. Her passing grieves us all, but we must be strong and carry her name proudly.” Dave’s speech had moved the audience. Alazondra wiped away the few tears that had fallen down her cheek. After some silence, they placed the casket into the ground and began to throw dirt over it.

She’s dead, Alazondra thought incredulously. *It seems almost impossible*. She sighed and hugged Thomas, who stood beside her silently. His face was taut and grim-looking. She could tell he was resisting the urge to cry. *Oh Thomas*, Alazondra thought, *I bet this is killing you inside*. She also saw Dave standing beside the grave. His face was none different from Thomas’s. Both Alazondra and Thomas stood by the grave for a long time. Each deep within their own thoughts.

Then, Alazondra looked up to the sky in wonder. *Neva*, she thought. Thomas began to walk away and she silently followed him into his house. She lay upon the sofa but couldn’t fall asleep for a long time. Her mind constantly vegetated upon every aspect

of Neva's death. As the night began to turn into day, she fell asleep.

Alazondra woke up the next and opened a window. She sat at the sill and looked out. The skies were overcast, and there was only a dull, grey light illuminating the day. A light breeze struck up, slowly pushing the clouds along. She heard footsteps approaching from behind her. She could tell it was Thomas. Then, the footsteps stopped, and she turned around.

"Morning Thomas," she said as she looked at him. Thomas was staring at her blankly. His brown eyes held a very distant look.

Then, he shook his head and mumbled, "It was...you looked...just like Neva for a moment, sitting at the window." She looked at him inquisitively. *He's taking this roughly*, Alazondra thought. *I don't look like Neva. Or do I?* She gently hugged Thomas.

"It's alright," she said. He patted her back. Then, his patting left her back for lower regions. Alazondra blushed and slapped the back of his hand. He sighed and seated himself on the couch.

"Neva would have...punched me," he said sadly.

"But..." Alazondra couldn't find the strength to say what she was about to. *But I'm not Neva*. The look in his brown eyes prevented her from it. She merely sighed and looked at the floor. Then, there came a knocking at the door. Both of them looked at each other fleetingly before Alazondra stood to answer the door. She found Lord Dave standing on the other side.

"Hello Alazondra," he said. "I'd like to speak with you and Thomas, if now is a good time."

"Of course," she said. Dave nodded and stepped into Thomas's home. Thomas looked up at Dave, giving him a slightly chilling stare. Alazondra perked a brow at Thomas, and he turned his head towards the floor.

Dave said as he stood by the open window, "I'd like for you and Thomas to assist in our search of Nikolai Acrolith."

"What about you?" Thomas asked sourly.

He replied after a small silence, "I would, but I have a job to do here." Alazondra could tell he wanted more than anything to punish the man who killed Neva. She herself wanted such a thing, but Alazondra knew it wouldn't be easy.

"Or maybe we should kill anyone who has anything to do with her murder," Thomas said as he glared directly at Dave. Lord Dave remained silent as they stared.

Alazondra cleared her throat and said, "Thomas and I will gladly look for Nikolai. He does indeed deserve to be put to death. *Also*, we won't make any accusations as we do such. Isn't that right, Thomas?" He lowered his head and nodded. *I don't mean to belittle him*, she thought. *I simply need cooperation with these two. Their love for Neva has made them hate each other.*

"Agreed," Dave said. "Now, if you two need any supplies or extra soldiers, I would be more than willing to give as necessary."

Alazondra said gratefully, "Thank you, Lord Dave." He smiled and nodded at the two of them. Thomas still refused to talk to Dave. He got up and left the small abode.

"Thomas, you really should be nicer to him," Alazondra said as soon as she heard the lord's footsteps recede down the hall of the guards' housing facility.

He grumbled, "Why? I know he had something to do with her murder."

"He didn't, Thomas. He didn't. I can see it in the man's eyes. He really loved her.

I'm a Lycan; I have a feel for these kinds of things. I can tell when you're lying, can't I?" Alazondra looked him straight in the eyes.

"Yeah."

"Just try to be a little nicer," Alazondra said pleadingly. "If not for me, what about Neva? Wouldn't she want you to?"

"Don't bring *her* into this!" he said loudly.

Alazondra said firmly, "She *is* in this, Thomas! It's completely *about* her!"

"No! It's not!" he yelled. "Leave me alone!" Alazondra sighed and stood.

"Fine. You want to be alone. I'll leave you then. I'm going to find Nikolai. Sitting here, arguing with you isn't going to help nor will scowling at Dave," Alazondra said. Without another word, she left his house and found Dave standing at the edge of the training field.

"Lord Dave," she called out. "Get me a horse, a quiver of arrows, and a bow." He smiled and nodded as he turned. Lord Dave motioned for her to follow him.

He asked, "Where is Thomas?" She thought to herself, *Probably pouting.*

"I'm not sure if he's ready to leave or not. I'm just going to head out on my own," she said. He perked a brow and looked at her.

"Well," he said, "you can't go alone. You should take some of my young soldiers with you."

"I'll be fine by myself, Lord Dave," Alazondra said slightly exasperated. She hated when they had a lack of faith in her. It meant they thought little of her, and she didn't like it.

After a moment, he finally said, "Hmm, alright." They reached the armory and he opened the door. Alazondra leaned against the doorframe. The grey stones felt cool against her, as the sun intensely heated the air. The armory was hot and stuffy. Lord Dave returned with a longbow and a quiver of arrows. The fletchings on each arrow were professionally done.

"Are these alright?" he said holding them up. Alazondra nodded and she followed him to the stables. There was a little blonde-haired boy sleeping by a crate. His face was dirty and held a look of melancholy. She kneeled down by the boy. He woke up and looked startled.

She said softly, "It's alright. I didn't mean to frighten you."

"I...I just...do you need a horse L-Lord Dave?" he asked. Alazondra could see that, in his sad azure oculars, he was going through something hard. Dave smiled and nodded to the boy. The boy grabbed a large black horse. He nickered and tossed his mane as he made eye contact with Alazondra.

The boy said, "This one doesn't have a name yet...we were...going to name it, but..." His blue eyes filled up with tears and he offered the reins to Alazondra. She took them and knelt by the boy. She could here Lord Dave heave a sigh behind her.

"Before what?" she asked.

He whispered, "Before she died."

"Who?"

"Neva," the boy answered. Alazondra almost gasped aloud. *Who is this boy,* Alazondra wondered.

She asked, "What's your name?" The boy didn't answer her.

"His name is Hayden," Dave said quietly. "He's the stable boy. Neva was taking

care of him for some time because she pitied him for being an orphan.”

“Oh,” said Alazondra, “how sad.” *An orphan*, she thought, *of course*.

Dave continued, “He wants to train here, as a soldier when he is of age, I believe.” Hayden nodded in response. She held her hand out to the child. He looked up at her nervously.

“I can give you a few of my own lessons,” she said with a smile. Haden nervously took her hand and she led him from the stable.

Lord Dave said, “What? He’s the groom. What are you doing?”

“I’m taking him with me,” Alazondra said.

“He’s a boy!” he exclaimed.

She rolled her eyes and said, “You said you wanted someone to assist me to begin with, didn’t you?”

Lord Dave sighed in exasperation and replied, “Alazondra...come on.”

“Are you really going to take me?” Hayden asked. He was now smiling, and his toothless grin shone brightly. Alazondra nodded in reply.

Alazondra said, “Why don’t you pick out a horse. Then, Dave and I will take you to the armory so you can get a weapon.” Hayden merrily scampered down and picked out a sorrel colored mare. After choosing a light longsword, they rode out the gates of Derelict. As she neared the gates, she spotted, through the window of a bar, a man with black hair seated in a chair. His head was held low and drank silently.

“Hayden, stay here for a moment. I need to go in there for a moment,” she said as she dismounted her horse. Hayden nodded and grabbed the black horse’s reins. Alazondra walked into the bar. The barkeep looked up at her shortly before returning to his work. She tapped the man on the shoulder. He turned towards her and looked at her. His emerald oculars seemed to be filled with darkness.

Alazondra said, “Were you the one who...saved me?”

“Hmm, I suppose,” he said not looking up from his drink.

“I have the feeling that you’re after Nikolai for some reason or another,” she said.

“I might,” the man said vaguely.

Alazondra looked at him and said, “You can trust me.” He merely remained silent as she stared at him. “Would you at least tell me your name, sir?”

“It’s Lee,” he said.

“Well, I thank you, Lee. If ever comes a time you need a Lycan’s help, just call on me, alright?” Alazondra said before turning around.

As she was leaving, she heard behind her, “Who was that?”

“I don’t know, some Lycan. She knew...well, *her* father,” Lee said.

The barkeep, who had been previously speaking, replied, “Really now. You swore up and down that you were over her.”

“Just be quiet Rod,” Lee said impatiently. Alazondra wondered who Lee really was. *Were they talking about Neva*, Alazondra wondered. *How many people did she really know?* Then as she was turning to leave the tavern, Lee walked up. He bumped into her roughly. He drunkenly swaggered out of the bar. She looked at him curiously. She shrugged and found Hayden. Alazondra mounted her horse and nodded to Hayden, signaling she was ready. They both headed out the gates of Helix.

Hayden asked, “Who was that, Lady Alazondra?”

She answered, “Just a man who saved my life.” Hayden nodded and stopped his

horse as they arrived at the crossroads just outside Helix.

“Where are we headed?” he asked. She nervously looked down each road. She had no honest idea where Nikolai would be. *Maybe I should head towards the Harthyung*, she thought. Then, she realized she would have to return there after she was done. The marriage was in a month, and she still had no idea what she would do about it.

Then, Hayden said, “Alazondra, you dropped your letter.”

“Hmm?” she said inquisitively. Hayden pointed to the ground where a piece of folded paper lay gently fluttering in the light breeze. Alazondra jumped off her horse and looked at the paper. She opened it to find it was a letter. *Anne. I know plenty about you and Nikolai. I am guessing you know about Neva as well. You’ll find him in the white house in the northern end of the nobles’ housing in Viland. To repay me, kill Nikolai. Lee.*

She said aloud, “How did he...give this to me?”

“What’s it say?” Hayden asked.

“Let’s get to Viland,” she said. He simply nodded and followed after her.

Together they traveled to the grand market city of Viland. Alazondra enjoyed Hayden’s company, though he was only ten years old. He was a very determined young man, and in the ten years that he had lived so far, his life was very hard. Hayden was very intelligent, and he thought about things deeply.

Alazondra rode past the multitudes of people to the nobles’ housing division. Large houses stood with their adornments in the late evening sun. Long shadows were cast upon the clean, cobbled streets. They walked down the streets past the many aristocrats. Each stared at them disdainfully, but it didn’t deter Alazondra from her intentions of being there. At the north end of the division, they immediately located the white house that Lee told her about.

“This must be it,” Alazondra said looking at it. *How covert*, she thought. The house scarcely differed from any of the other pompous homes that lined the money-filled streets. She dismounted her horse and ordered Hayden to stay outside. She silently broke into a window on the side of the house. Alazondra, using as much stealth as she could possibly manage, crept through the quiet abode with a blade in her hand. She knew that somewhere in the home would be Nikolai, and she was more than prepared.

A woman’s voice sounded with firm caution, “It’s not my fault.”

“It is your fault,” a man answered. “It’s always been your fault!” Alazondra knew this to be Nikolai’s voice. The first voice sounded chillingly like Neva’s, but she couldn’t believe it.

The woman replied, “You can’t blame everything on me.” Then, after a pause she said, “I hate you.”

Alazondra was almost paralyzed upon hearing her voice, but she continued onwards. Alazondra reached the door from where she heard the talking. Then, it burst open and Alazondra slid in behind a large drapery on the wall. She saw a woman running past her. In the dark shadows of the hall, Alazondra couldn’t make out whether it truly was Neva or not.

“You’re useless!” Nikolai shouted from the room. The woman fled down the stairs without noticing Alazondra at all. She slid out from behind the tapestry and silently crept towards the door. She could hear Nikolai writing upon some paper in the room. Alazondra waited for the right moment to strike with shaky apprehension.

Then, after hearing a number of footfalls, she slipped her necklace over her head

and quickly transformed. In her Lycan form, she lunged into the room to find Nikolai lying on the ground in a quickly forming puddle of his own blood. She cautiously examined his body. Then, to ensure his death, she snapped his neck. Alazondra returned to the hall and took her necklace again, returning to her normal form. She lit a small candle and began searching through the office.

After finding nothing in the office, she left the empty home. Alazondra wondered about all the things she had seen and heard. The woman in the home mystified her, however. She walked outside to find Hayden still standing with the horses. He smiled when she walked into the wide street.

"I was worried about you," he said leading her horse towards her. Alazondra smiled back down at him as she took the reins.

She said, "Thanks. Everything's fine. We need to head back to Helix and tell Dave what happened."

"What happened in there?" he asked as he mounted his horse. They rode down the street together as Alazondra discreetly discussed with him the happenings that took place inside the home. However, she left out hearing Neva's name being said. They left the nobles' district and soon the town of Viland itself. Together they traveled back to Helix. Alazondra was happy that Neva's death had finally been avenged. The straining grief no longer pained her but still remained with her.

"It's finally done, Neva," she whispered, hoping somehow Neva could hear her and understand. She wished she knew who had killed Nikolai. The person would have had to have been there when she did. She hadn't seen any sign of another person though. The thought of him killing himself struck Alazondra oddly. Her thoughts were interrupted by Hayden.

"Alazondra, what are we going to do when we reach Helix?" he asked.

She replied, "We'll speak with Thomas."

They had finally reached Helix, and Alazondra immediately sought out Thomas. She found him standing at the edge of the training field with a few other men.

"Thomas," she said.

He turned around and said, "Alazondra, I'm glad you're back and all right. What happened?" She pulled him away from the others as they stared at the two curiously.

"He's dead, Thomas." Thomas' brown eyes instantly lit up. He forcefully hugged Alazondra. She felt a certain comfort within the strong grasp.

"Gods praise you. Thank you Alazondra," he said quietly. She could hear the joy in his voice as he spoke. However, even though her killer had been brought down, Neva was still dead, and her death was not justified. *It will never be right*, Alazondra thought. Thomas finally released her from his grasp. Then, she turned around and saw a most heart-warming sight. Hisao, surrounded by several other Canutes, were making their way towards the nobles' quarters. Her heart skipped several beats. She took a deep breath and started after him, but someone pulled her back. She could hear her name being called.

"Lady Anne! Anne!" the voice shouted.

Alazondra called out as she was pulled back further, "Hisao!" His eyes quickly averted towards her. However, he showed no other sign of recognition. Hisao continued to walk by. A tear came to her eye as she was pulled further backwards.

The voice called in a more demanding tone, "Come on, Lady Anne! We mustn't waste time!" She finally turned to see Avery with several other Lycans. They were

mounted upon horses. She shook her head and turned back to see Hisao disappear around the corner of a building.

“Hisao!” she yelled. There came no reply, and she broke free of Avery’s grasp. She began sprinting away from them. She came to the corner and slid to a stop as she saw not a soul. She ran past several buildings, calling Hisao’s name. However, she found no one. She stopped and looked to the heavens above. Then, three Lycans took hold of her, pinning her to the ground fiercely.

One of them muttered into her ear, “You need to come back to the forest, Lady Anne. Rolath or not, you have no choice in the matter.”

“I...I...” she mumbled. She sighed as they picked her up and led her back towards the horses. They forced her to mount one and tied her horse’s reins to Avery’s horse. Alazondra sighed and took one last look at the fort before leaving. As she did, she thought she could see Hisao leaning against one of the buildings, staring at her. Alazondra turned and looked forwards. Her heart felt heavy as they finally left the city and made their way back to the forest.

Avery said as they started on the road out of Helix, “The wedding, which had been scheduled a week ago, has been postponed because of your absence.”

“The wedding,” Alazondra groaned.

“I hope you realize the consequences of your actions, Lady Anne. Perhaps it is not so in your culture, but a Lycan wedding, of such a great stature as yours, is not a light matter to be postponed. You should not have run off like you did, especially without telling anyone.” Alazondra didn’t want to hear it. She was frustrated with everyone. No one seemed to understand her torment. *Neva*, she thought, *you would understand if only you were here. I bet you could make them listen. You would know what to do. Oh Gods, just tell me what she would do.*

“Enough,” she said in a low tone.

Avery said in a shocked tone, “Pardon me?”

“I said enough,” she said, feeling *Neva*’s courage within her heart. “I don’t want to hear it.”

“You’re not in the position to make the calls,” he said. The words seemed to echo in her mind, but she was too infuriated to think straight.

Alazondra said in a tone very much unlike herself, “Then, I’m going to very damn well put myself in the position to. If you have a problem with that, *Avery*, we can take it up *personally*.” He glared at her but said not another word. Avery, though demanding, knew very well the woman before him was Rolath and that she was not a soul to challenge.

The road to the Harthyung was a long one. The trip took ten long days of silence and slight bitterness between Alazondra and Avery. She refused to speak to him and only spoke with the other three men with them. At the edge of the Harthyung, she looked at intense woodland, an unending sea of green expanding towards the horizon. She remembered the fear the idea of the forest had brought her not so long ago. Now, she thought of it with slight resentment, for it kept her from being with Hisao.

She thought about the last words he said to her. “*I will be at the wedding...Goodbye for now, Alazondra.*” She thought about them over and over. Sooner than she realized, they had arrived at Reid’s Hollow. A number of Lycans spotted her and immediately rushed up to her. They greeted her happily and hugged her.

“Good to see you’re back,” a familiar voice said. Alazondra saw Julius walking up to her. She sighed and hung her head as he hugged her. He smiled and led her into the depths of the cavern. He seated her at a table and looked at her silently.

Then, Julius said, “Why did you leave the cavern in a hurry?” Alazondra remained silent as she stared upwards at the stalactites. They hung grimly in the dark room. She kept her mind and her eyes focused upwards. *I have no obligation to answer him*, she thought to herself defiantly. Julius sat waiting for any answer patiently.

After a long moment of silence, he said, “Not saying anything, Anne?”

“I have,” she finally said, “one thing to say. It was not right. It was not right for them to take me against my will.” She folded her arms over her chest firmly.

“I understand,” Julius said. “You have duties, however. You, as Rolath, must attend to them properly.”

“I never asked to be this...this Rolath person,” she said. Alazondra was feeling increasingly resentful towards being a Lycan and everything that came with it. Julius fidgeted with his glasses and polished them on his shirt.

He said, “But you were given it.” Then, he stood and left her alone. However, she was not alone long, for Fritchel entered the room. He looked a lot better than he had before. His face was cleanly shaven and a new smile was painted upon his handsome face. Even his eyes seemed to shine more brightly.

“Alazondra,” he said sitting near her, “I’m so glad that you’ve returned.” Fritchel took her hand and gently stroked it. She couldn’t smell alcohol on his breath. *Has he truly changed*, Alazondra wondered curiously. Then, he placed a hand at her cheek and kissed her deeply. He pulled away and gently ran his fingers through the ends of her glossy, silver hair as he stared into her eyes.

“Fritchel?” she said in a whisper. Alazondra didn’t know what to think. Her heart belonged to Hisao, but Fritchel had changed. He seemed to be the man she knew before. She couldn’t allow herself to trust him again, however. Fritchel continued to smile at her.

“Whenever will you be ready for the wedding?” he asked. Alazondra averted her eyes to the floor. She didn’t want to think about the wedding. As she sat thinking about what she would do, she came upon the realization that this was something she must endure. *Gods give me strength*, she thought.

She replied, “Whenever you are.” Alazondra hung her head low. It was almost too much to bear as he smiled at her.

“Tomorrow,” said Fritchel. She closed her eyes and nodding, praying that she would not begin to cry. She stood and made her way to her room. It was the same as she had left it. She lay down on the bed and slept for the remainder of the day.

Early the next morning, a young female Lycan woke her up. She pulled Alazondra out of bed and directed her towards the cavern opening. She shook her head and saw a large crowd standing there. At the head of the crowd was Julius standing next to his son Fritchel. Alazondra heaved a deep sigh as she remembered it was to be the day of the marriage. As she approached them, she could hear the light smattering of rain outside. The sun had not yet risen, and it looked as though it would not for some time. Julius tucked a large tome into his robe and nodded to Alazondra. They walked out the cave into the rain. She followed them as they marched in procession to the top of Reid’s Hollow. Julius, Fritchel, several Lycans, and she stood atop the large swelling of earth. Below them was an ever-growing mass of Lycans.

“We shall wait for a moment as the Lycans gather to witness this,” he said. Alazondra walked off a few paces and gazed at the scenery before her. Dark clouds poured cold water down upon the immediate locale. Not much was visible in the very early morning dimness. The heavens above remained a deep shade of sapphire as the crowd below continued to amplify with spectators.

Then, Julius called her, “Anne, we are ready.” Each were in their Lycan forms. Fritchel’s form was almost breathtaking. His hair was a magnificent hue of silver. It shone even in the obscurity of the early hours. Julius nodded for her to join them. She reluctantly took her necklace off and dropped it to the ground. A moment of slight disorientation passed, and she found herself in her Lycan form. She quietly walked up to Fritchel and stood beside him. He affectionately nudged her with his soft muzzle.

“You’re beautiful,” he said. His words did not faze her.

Julius turned and announced to the crowd, “These two here--”

“Canute!” several Lycans shouted. “There’s a Canute!” A sharp gasp passed through Alazondra’s ajar mouth. Fritchel let out a loud growl. He glared at Alazondra silently. Julius stopped and looked down the hill. Alazondra attempted to peer over the edge, but several Lycans pulled her back.

“No, Lady Anne, stay back. This Canute may harm you,” they said. Julius remained silent as he looked downwards. His eyes were searching through the immense crowds below.

Fritchel, with a look of contempt, said frostily, “This is *your* doing, isn’t it?” She immediately shook her head in reply. *Hisao*, she thought, *is it you?* Alazondra broke free of the Lycans’ hold and made a dash for her necklace. She quickly placed it around her neck, returning her to her human state. One Lycan attempted to grab hold of her, but she dodged his lunge. She slipped on the slick ground and fell into the sodden earth. Mud sprayed across her face as she rose to her feet.

“Hisao!” she yelled. Fritchel made a lunge at her, knocking her down once more. He stood over her menacingly.

“It *was* you. Hmph, calling upon a *Canute*’s help? Might as well just ask that no-good villain,” he said callously. “By law you must marry me. Our fathers *agreed* on this, Anne. You *will* be my wife, and *I* will get half of your power.”

“My...*my* power?” she said in shock. His wolfish face formed a fierce grin. She looked up at him in fear. *Why*, she thought. *Neva, I need your strength.* Alazondra closed her eyes, forcing herself to muster what courage she had left. She slid out from under Fritchel and stood facing him.

Alazondra said firmly, “You’ll do no such thing.”

“Then,” said Fritchel, “you will be *exiled*. The life of an exiled Lycan is a low path indeed. It is rough, strewn with thorns, Anne.”

“I’m...not...Anne,” she said in pure defiance. “My name is Alazondra Graystone. I had a home. One that you forced me from. I may have the Blood and Spirit of a Lycan...but never shall I possess the heart of one.” As she spoke the words, behind Fritchel, Hisao emerged from the shadows. He lunged at the Lycan and placed a blade at his large jugular.

“Lycan,” said Hisao. Fritchel snarled ferociously in protest.

Julius yelled, “No! Canute!” Julius, with an astounding endurance for having seen so many years, lunged at Hisao as he grasped Fritchel by his throat. Alazondra withdrew

the small blade from within her robe and drove it into Julius' shoulder as he leapt. Julius fell to the ground.

Alazondra turned around to find Fritchel in his human form. She saw that there were faint rays of sunlight breaking through the clouds. Hisao had a fast hold on Fritchel as he struggled. Now in his human form, Fritchel could not match the Hisao's Canute strength. Hisao looked him coldly in the eyes before throwing him onto the ground below. He walked to Alazondra and took her into his arms.

"I promised you that I would be here," he whispered, "and I am." She was lightly shivering and covered in mire. Everything seemed to stand still as he held her. A small tear streaked down her cheek. Alazondra turned to see Julius in his human form as he lay upon the ground. He was covered in blood and dirt. She realized that he was dead. His human form did not possess the strength to keep him alive. Her eyes quickly averted to Fritchel.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. Alazondra had never meant to kill his father. She didn't want it to be that way. It was that way however, and she knew it was too late to take anything back. She took Hisao's hand, and he led her away from them. No one tried to stop them. The rain continued to pour down upon them, washing the grime off her face. She stood momentarily staring up at the heavens above. *Neva*, she thought, *thank you for your strength*.

Hisao led her through the forest. He stopped shortly and whistled loudly. A large palomino stallion cantered through the mud and straight up to him. Alazondra gasped quietly as she recognized him as Neva's horse.

"Silverwave..." she said. The horse nickered lowly as he swished his tail.

Hisao looked down at her and said, "That he is. I found him just behind Fort Derelict looking lonesome. There was a young boy caring for him." Alazondra gently stroked his soft muzzle. *I wonder if her hawk is still around*, she wondered. Hisao mounted and helped Alazondra onto the horse just in front of him. He gently booted the horse's side and placed an arm around Alazondra. She had started shivering more, seeing as the cold of the rain had begun to set in.

"I sure hope you don't fall ill," he mumbled pulling her closer. She nodded as she buried her head in his warm shirt. Alazondra closed her eyes and soon fell asleep. She heard the sound of whispering. The words spoke clearly but quietly, *You will take your last breath in the place I took my first. Fear not for I shall be with you, do not forget me*. Alazondra's green eyes fluttered open.

She found herself in front of a small fire. She was in a cave of some sort and could hear the constant echo of dripping throughout it. Alazondra let out a sharp gasp. *They brought me back*, she thought. She wondered if the whole wedding was a dream and that the marriage still awaited. However, she looked down to see that she was wearing Hisao's shirt over her own. She smiled as she wrapped it around her closer. She was happy to be warm and dry. Alazondra let out a soft sigh.

"Alazondra," she heard Hisao say. She sat up and saw him across the fire from her. He didn't have his shirt on, and his Canute brawn made her blush ever so lightly.

Alazondra said softly, "Thank you so much." He smiled at her. It warmed her heart to see his fang-like teeth protruding through his canine grin.

"Of course, Alazondra. What man would I be had I not?" he said sincerely. Alazondra nodded as she gazed at him.

She asked, "Where are we?"

"At the edge of the Harthyung," he answered as he stood. Hisao seated himself beside Alazondra. She gently leaned her head against his shoulder. Then, she recalled the whispering she had heard.

"Hisao," she said, "were you whispering?"

"Hmm?" he said inquisitively. She simply shook her head and stared distantly into the fire. *What does it mean*, she pondered. She had no idea who spoke the words. Alazondra put the thought aside as she looked up at Hisao, happy to be with him. She pushed her head further onto his arm and closed her eyes. For a long time, they sat together in silence, enjoying each other's company.

As Alazondra thought to herself, she realized that there were so many unanswered questions. She had to find out the answers. She was determined to find out. Alazondra slipped Hisao's shirt off and stood up.

"Alazondra?" Hisao inquired.

"I have to find out some things," she said. "I need to know." Hisao silently peered up at her for a moment.

Then he replied, "Alright. Take Silverwave if you'd like. Be safe." Alazondra briefly kneeled by him and kissed him softly. Hisao heaved a soft sigh as she left. Alazondra felt the cool night air as she left the cavern. She found Silverwave grazing just by the mouth of the cave. She gently stroked his long, graceful neck. *It's one of the last remnants of Neva*, she thought as she stared down at the beautiful creature before her. He gently swished his tail, which shone brightly in the moonlight.

"I bet you miss Neva too, huh?" she whispered. Silverwave gently nickered and raised his head. Alazondra mounted him and rode off into the night. She thought about many things that night as she rode. *The major thing I need to do is find that man named Lee*, she thought. *He knows something*.

Then, her thoughts changed. She began to think about everything in her life. She remembered Matthias and Kiley fondly. They were her first parents and her real parents as far as she was concerned. She remembered first setting out with the Mages. Until then, she had been an ordinary girl with a safe home. Then, Alazondra had spent her time trying to find her real home. However, when she did find it, she soon grew to dislike it. She realized that now she was homeless, yet she still wore a smile as she rode.

As she was riding, she could hear the sound of hooves thundering in the distance. Silverwave instinctively knew to follow the sound. Alazondra gently booted Silverwave's sides, and he leapt to a gallop. She followed the noise for quite some time. She slept short nights, but never kept too far distance. Alazondra could see the silhouette in the distance and realized, after some time of tailing the rider, that it was a woman.

She chased the rider to remnants of Piliad. Alazondra's heart fell as she saw the ruins of the city. She wondered about Matthias and Kiley, whether they were alive. The thought pained her, but she kept her mind to her task at hand.

The woman ahead of her stopped and jumped off her horse, running into the only standing building, the temple. Alazondra leapt from Silverwave and chased after her, blade in hand. Alazondra slowly made her way up each step. Then, the woman she had been chasing jumped at her from the shadow of one of the statues. Immediately, Alazondra saw her recognizable face and black leather armor.

"Neva!" Alazondra exclaimed wildly.

The woman's blue eyes bore fiercely into Alazondra's as she lunged forward. Alazondra let out a sharp gasp as a sword pierced her slender jugular. Alazondra fell to the temple steps, clutching her neck. She knew no more as her vision turned white. And so the story of Alazondra ends, in the ruins of a small village in the powerful country of Liam.