

# ~ Spirits of the Ancients ~

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Description: Energy, magic and Gods galore... What will a warrior do when she is faced with all three? With only a mysterious blade in her possession and a loyal friend to accompany her, she returns home to see what the Queen of Ardious has summoned her for. Only to find more questions than answers, the Gods intervene and she is left to fix their mistakes while learning who she truly is.

Content Warning: This story contains violence and graphic descriptions of physical injuries.

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## Chapter 1: Gifts

Darkness overtook the surrounding area since the moon was obscured by heavy dark rain clouds. They loomed overhead in a menacing way but not a single drop of water had touched the ground. A soft breeze fluttered through the air as soft boots treaded lightly on lush green grass, soft dirt and sticks without making the tiniest of sound. Grey eyes scoured the path for an easy way through the dense forest trees that towered into the air. Silence had reigned as if all the natural fauna had been scared off but they were now slowly making their presence known once more in the forest. Soft boots continued unheeded as grey eyes pierced the shadows. The flora was thick with multicoloured leaves and the forest floor was covered in soft dirt, twigs, leaves and the odd body or so.

Grey eyes scanned the body that was closest. A soft boot nudged the victim which remained still and lifeless. A closer look at the body determined that it was a male of middling age in a brown robe and white sash. The clothing was torn in many places as if the victim had been running from something. His feet were muddy and scratches could be seen on his arms and legs. Grey eyes took one glance to come to a conclusion that the sword slash to the back was his cause of death. Blood stained clothing and the ground, as well as the air.

"Hmm... Only one sword..."

The other ten bodies that were lying around, face down, on the ground all bore the same slash wound on their backs. Their scattered bodies looked as though they were running away from the sword wielder. They were all dressed in brown robes and only some wore slippers while others only had one slipper on or none at all. It was like they were in so much fear that they did not care

about anything else. Grey eyes glanced around quickly to see if there were anyone around but the forest seemed distant all of a sudden.

"Hmm...What should I do with all of these bodies? Should I try to bury all ten of them? Hmm...Do I have any time? I really don't want to get my hands dirty. Maybe a cremation will be sufficient."

Rough calloused hands grabbed each victim and pulled them easily with strong arms and legs to a small pile, clear of the trees. Slowly those same hands searched each victim for valuables or anything that wouldn't burn easily and needed other methods to be disposed of. However nothing was found. Skilful hands managed to spark a fire with the use of some stones and dry grass.

The wind blew long dark hair away from those grey eyes as well as blew the smoke away from the origin of the attack. A soft small pointed nose twitched as the smell was being swept away. Calloused hands slowly bound together in a light clasp to send up a prayer to the victims who had been hunted down like a pack of animals.

Grey eyes slowly converged to the spot where the sword wielder must have charged out from. Stems from the trees had been broken from the attacker's obvious rampage. Stowing a small travel bag over firm shoulders and the soft boots were once more moving along soundlessly.

Blue eyes from far above watched in fascination at the dark haired passer-by who obviously showed respect to the dead. Cherry lips quirked into a lazy smile before parting slightly to reveal white teeth and then giving a shrilling whistle that could have been mistaken for the wind. Four more sets of bodies immediately met up with the whistler.

These four more bodies were all female and strong. They only carried a small dagger with them for protection and hunting. Their eyes pinned the whistler as they hung from the vines and stayed silent as the passer-by continued without noticing them.

One of the females had dark brown hair tied in a simple ponytail. Her brown eyes stared at strong blue ones before easing off under the pressure from the will of the owner of the blue eyes. "You summoned us?" whispered the young woman.

"Follow that young girl and see what she is up to. We don't want any trouble in our land and if she causes any, kill her. I don't care how or where but make sure she leaves our lands or we send her to where those people were sent to. Also have a group of scouts to try and track the artist of this ugly scene" said the strong-willed, blue eyed woman in a deep feminine voice that could have passed off as a growl.

"As you wish Elaine" replied the brown haired and eyed woman.

"You better not screw up Tiffany or you will have to deal with me. Trust me that won't be pleasant at all. However whatever you bring back better not cause us any troubles." She glanced at all of their faces in turn to drive the message home before continuing. "Remember our teachings and stick to the shadows or darkness. Tonight the night has favoured us so that we can

scour the area in a cloak" whispered Elaine as she slowly made her way to another branch that was lower than the one that she had been perched on.

The four women nodded and glided from tree to tree with the help of vines to disappear into the night. Elaine was left by herself as she slowly made her way to the ground. Her soft boots felt purchase on soft dirt a few paces from the burning mass of bodies. She stood like a sentinel to watch the flames burn and make sure that the fire didn't go out of hand. However she knew that the passer-by was skilful enough to contain this fire. She stood in a daze as she remembered what had lured her here.

*Elaine had heard screaming. There were male voices sounding like they were frightened. Some of the screams sounded breathless. She could hear that they were running. Many heavy boots echoed all around her as she stood in the middle of the forest floor. Her blue eyes scanned the area to find the source and then suddenly a rush of bodies was headed her way. Men in brown robes and some of them were barefoot or only had a slipper on one foot were looking behind them as they ran to her. She had seen their desperate faces. Fear drove them to run without looking ahead.*

*Elaine was baffled. She remained silent as the men started to run around her. Then she finally heard the maniacal laughter that was slightly high pitched. It belonged to a woman with long blonde hair and a pretty face that was now contorted in madness. She held a sword in one arm that looked too heavy for her to carry but she managed to swing it finding the end driving through flesh. The mad woman had chased each man and slashed each one in the back before stopping and standing before Elaine.*

*The mad woman wore a ragged off-brown skirt and top. Her skinny frame was graced with lean muscle. However it was clear that this woman was no fighter. The sword tip was lying on the ground. The mad woman's hazel eyes glanced around at her work. A mixture of emotions flew across her face before she dropped the sword in shock and started to heave the contents of her stomach.*

*Elaine stood there like a statue and watched. There was nothing that she could do or say. It was true that she despised men but she wouldn't kill them in cold blood without a good reason. She wanted to comfort this woman but she was frozen in place. Her blue eyes scanned the area before resting on the sword that the woman carried. It was beautifully crafted and looked quite heavy. The hilt was standard with fine leather wrappings. The blade was covered in small grooves that almost looked like writing but she wasn't proficient enough to be able to read them.*

*The mad woman stopped her heaving and wiped her mouth on the back of her hand. She could still taste the awful bile that wanted to make her gag some more but she suppressed the urge. She was afraid of what she had done. Her hands were already slightly shaking as she slowly stood up on trembling legs before looking around her in fear. Noises from the forest frightened her and so she bolted leaving the sword far behind.*

*Elaine stared at the retreating back. Somehow the person running away from her was totally different to the mad woman who had slashed through all of these men. She couldn't quite put her*

*finger on it but there was a remarkable difference. She also found it strange that she would leave her sword behind.*

Elaine woke up from her haze at watching the flames and seeing the truth that was wrought here. The flames licked at the air and warmed the surrounding area as she slowly wiped her eyes and glanced around to make sure that she was truly alone. Her vision of what had happened didn't surprise her. She had seen many of them before; all of them occurring while she stared at flames. However this time her vision had been very vivid. She turned on her heel to look over at where she had stood while she had watched the events unfold. She was surprised to see that the sword was still lying there where it had been dropped from trembling fingers.

Elaine gracefully walked over without making the slightest bit of sound. Her blue eyes raked the sword and saw the engravings. It really did look like writing. She also smelt and saw the contents of the mad woman's stomach. It was a little off-putting but she ignored it and concentrated on the sword. She had watched from the trees and seen that the passer-by had passed this very spot more than once. However she wondered why the young woman didn't take the sword. It would have been worth a lot of money and the way the passer-by had searched each body showed that this item had deliberately been left behind, but why?

Elaine put aside the thought for later on. She slowly crouched down into a squat and reached for the hilt with her right hand. However she stopped just short of touching it as she felt eyes on the back of her head. Elaine's body had stiffened as she felt the watcher. With her hearing she had recognised that it was someone who was light and that probably meant a woman. She turned her head in shock to find an almost transparent woman who she recognised as the passer-by.

"Greetings" said the apparition in a soft, pure voice.

Elaine crouched there a little stunned at the appearance of the passer-by. A few moments later she was able to unhinge her jaw. However she was still unable to form any words. Elaine could see that this woman was beautiful. Her long, dark, straight hair was shiny and smooth. Her complexion was breath taking and her build was actually lean muscled and not the overly bulky muscled people that she had seen before. Elaine jerked upright and faced the apparition.

Soft lips twitched into a humoured smile. Grey eyes pierced with overwhelming knowledge were staring at blue stunned eyes. A quirk of a thin eyebrow managed to get Elaine to gather her wits. A lean muscled arm slowly raised and an index finger extended pointed to the sword that Elaine had been about to pick up.

"Do you want it?" asked the passer-by.

"Well you left it behind and it seems a waste just to let it stay here unused. I assumed that you didn't want it. However with your presence here I now have come to an understanding that you may want it. Although you don't really look like a warrior" replied Elaine. Her voice remained deep and could have passed off as a growl but the passer-by had heard her.

"I left it because it doesn't belong to me. However you are wrong to assume that I am not a warrior. I could fight you right here without lifting a finger and you wouldn't know what had run you over. Don't be too quick to judge my friend" said the passer-by.

"I am not your friend. I don't know you. I don't even know your name. So who is the one that is trying to assume things now?" asked Elaine a little threateningly. Blue eyes never left grey. "Do you just randomly meet people and assume that they instantly become your friend?"

Flash of white teeth and quirk of lips showed that the passer-by had been humoured. Grey eyes bore into blue, never breaking the connection. "If you only knew..." whispered the passer-by with a voice that mingled with the air. A soft sigh escaped her lips as her eyes became clouded over.

Elaine stood still. Blue eyes watched as the grey eyes which were open and warm were closed to her. Her mind couldn't fathom what had caused the passer-by's attention to slip away. However she was curious about the sword and about the passer-by. "Ahem... What is your name?" asked Elaine in a clear voice that was loud enough for only the passer-by's ears to pick up.

Grey eyes, unglazed, looked into blue fascinated eyes with an overwhelming will. A quirk of lips and warming of eyes made the passer-by even prettier. "I cannot tell you my name. As much as I want to, I can't. You will have to figure it out since you already know me. You just have to try and remember" replied the passer-by.

Blue eyes looked amused at the explanation. "So all I have to do is try to remember who you are. I don't recall having met you before because I am sure that I wouldn't forget your face. Also it's not like I have had any memory problems either. I have lived here all of my life and I know everyone here. This is my community, this is my land. I truly don't know you" said Elaine as she saw the sparkle in grey eyes.

"The engravings on the sword have a meaning. I will have to warn you that if you choose to take it... it will change your life. Are you willing to find out?" asked the passer-by. A flash of sadness entered her eyes as Elaine broke the eye contact and looked at the sword that was still on the ground. However as soon as blue eyes met with grey, the sadness had disappeared only to be filled with warmth. "Farewell Elaine, I wish you good tidings on whatever you choose."

Elaine stood there a little stunned as the apparition of the passer-by disappeared in a blink of an eye. Blue eyes quickly scanned the surrounding area before resting back on the bloody sword lying on the soft dirt, leaves and grass. She slowly crouched down into a squat once more and gradually reached out for the hilt with her right hand. She paused just shy of touching it and glanced around to make sure that there were no more apparitions popping up to talk to her.

Calloused fingers slowly wrapped around the hilt of the beautiful sword. Elaine remained crouched as she felt a surge of energy crawl up her arm and give her tingles. Arm muscles trembled slightly as Elaine felt the hilt of the blade come to life in her hand. The hilt warmed up and slowly the wrappings started to unwind. The wrappings slithered around her hand and tightened slightly to allow Elaine to have a better hold on the hilt. Blue eyes watched in amazement as a light blue aura engulfed the blade and cast a timid light around the forest floor.

"A beautiful sword" whispered a voice among the trees.

Rebecca Calin cleared the trees and entered the open spaced forest area in a lazy flip off a high, thick branch. She landed heavily with a hop and skip, and made sure that her daggers were still in place. Leather clad her body in a skirt that reached just above the knees and a top that exposed her firm abdomen muscles. She flexed her legs a little before approaching Elaine within three paces. Her curly cherry red hair swayed as she moved and placed her somewhat muscular hands on the hilt of the daggers hanging from her waist.

Elaine clenched the sword tightly in her right hand before gathering herself up and standing. Soft boots slowly made circles in the dirt as Elaine turned bodily to face this female warrior. Blue eyes electric in intensity stared into deep brown as Rebecca's eyes lowered to the magnificent sword. Elaine's whole body stood rigid and waited for Rebecca to say something else. She was rewarded for her patience as Rebecca gave a toothy smile. She could see the glint of mischief in those brown eyes.

"You don't need that sword, Elaine Melda. You don't use any weapons at all. In fact, you only use your body to fight. So the sword is actually useless in your hands. Why don't you give it to me since I've been trained in all areas of weaponry? The beautiful blade will sing when I use it as part of my collection" said Rebecca in a greedy tone; her smile showing through the sound of her voice. Her voice was a little high pitched compared to Elaine's and her expression was somewhat more expressive.

Elaine growled as Rebecca tried to take a few steps forward to relieve the sword from her. She placed the blade in front of her in a defensive motion as it illuminated the surrounding area. Blue eyes became dark with anger as Rebecca only stood a pace away from the tip of the sword. Her face was stoic as she looked at Rebecca claim the blade with her eyes. "This belongs to me" replied Elaine in a soft growl that warned Rebecca to stop her motions. "Get out of my sight before I tell Queen Darisa Ilion and Tiffany Parlios that you were here trying to take *my* blade away from me when you are meant to be scouting the far north with your squad. Don't think that I won't tell them."

Rebecca laughed heartily at the threat. "Do you think they can stop me? I am far more skilled than anyone in our society and that includes you. No little threat will do anything to me. They are both too scared of me to do anything anyways. I'm sure that they will just laugh at your story since they know that you don't wield a sword or blade of any kind. Now hand it over before I kill you here and tell them that the psycho who was responsible for the bodies came back and attacked you. They will all be fooled and as for why I am here, I told my squad to head back already and I just wanted to venture a little west to check out some traps. No one will think my running into you is of any importance. They will all thank me for at least saving your body from being massacred" laughed Rebecca as she slowly withdrew her daggers at the hip and began to advance.

"REBECCA!" yelled a voice from the trees as a body appeared out of the darkness. The blade illuminated the person as Tiffany and she looked mighty angry at seeing Rebecca with a dagger

in each hand. She walked up with angry steps and didn't care that she was making a lot of noise. She stood right in front of Rebecca and waited as she stared menacingly with light brown eyes.

Rebecca smiled and slowly sheathed her daggers. She took a quick glance around Tiffany to Elaine before resting her eyes back on light brown eyes. "Hey Tiffany, what's got your leather's in a wad?" asked Rebecca in a casual tone. She looked totally relaxed as she stood there with her hands on her hips. Rebecca watched in her peripherals as three more warriors appeared however not so dramatically but with equal distaste in their eyes for her.

"What are you doing here?" demanded Tiffany in a not so polite tone. Her fists were clenched tight hanging at her sides as she tried to keep her anger in check. She tried to take a few deep breaths to calm herself down but it didn't look like it was working. Her face was contorted in anger. "Why aren't you north checking the border with your squad?"

"Relax," said Rebecca with a huge smile, "I was just checking out the traps out west when I smelt smoke. I came here and saw her with the sword. She wanted to test the blade with my daggers. Also we already scouted the north. My squad should already be back giving a detailed report to Queen Darisa. So just chill out... Anyways I'm out of here. You guys are cramping my style." Rebecca was then engulfed by the trees as she stepped out of the clearing.

Tiffany relaxed and turned bodily to face Elaine. She stood shocked to see that Elaine still held the sword where she had before and was looking at something that wasn't visible to any of them. She stayed where she was as Elaine glared at a spot just beyond her. Tiffany covertly signalled the others with her left hand for them to stay put since each of them had a hand on their sheathed daggers and were ready to pull them out.

Elaine felt the dark brown eyes overwhelm her. She stood rigid as Rebecca's face filled her vision. Small puffs of visible air entered and exited her lungs at an increased rate. She felt the sword tighten itself around her hand as if it didn't want to part from her. The blade was still illuminating the area and it remained warm in her grasp. She could feel the sword was upset. She could feel that the sword had feelings of its own. Her mind was a little stunned but the sword also felt her feelings as well and was imitating it. The sword was angry on her behalf at Rebecca. However the feeling slowly faded.

Rita Vivian, one of the three warriors, slowly approached Elaine from her right. She made sure that she didn't make any sudden movements as she got closer. Her brown soft boot stirred the ground but didn't make a sound. Her dark eyes stared from the sword to Elaine. Her long curly wild black hair swayed gently on the soft cool breeze. She reached out with her strong muscular right arm and placed it gently on Elaine's right shoulder.

Mili Gyal and Lita Miatas stood still watching the scene unravel. Mili's brown eyes and Lita's black eyes glanced at each other as they assessed the situation. They were pretty certain that no harm would befall their friends and were beyond glad when Elaine slowly turned her head and gazed into Rita's eyes with some recognition. They both looked at each other and smiled as Elaine instantly lowered the sword to her side.

Elaine looked around and noted that Rebecca was gone. Blue eyes searched brown eyes and dark eyes for answers as she stood in a state of confusion. Her hands were slightly trembling but she still noticed that the sword hilt was still wrapped firmly around her hand. She looked from Rita to Tiffany as they both sighed in relief and gave her big smiles.

"Let's get out of here and we can talk when we get back home" suggested Rita in a deep calm voice. She was a little taller than Elaine and both were considered tall in their society since they were both at least six feet tall. Rita smiled as the lean muscled, blonde haired Mili clambered up the closest tree expediently. She watched in pride as the muscular, sandy blonde haired Lita followed Mili. She quickly turned to Elaine and saw that the hilt of her sword was wrapped firmly around her hand as if it were clinging on.

Elaine felt the dark eyes stare at the sword and she felt as though the sword squirmed under the scrutiny. Her shoulders slouched a bit as she took in a deep breath. She straightened up and followed Mili and Lita up the tree with only one hand and her feet. She was lucky that she could easily flip to the first branch and didn't have to use her hands. She could feel that Rita and Tiffany were following closely behind to make sure that she didn't miss a branch because of her new weapon. Elaine emerged near the top of the tree with the others and then quickly clambered from tree to tree heading east to make their way back home to the tribe.

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## **Chapter 2: Arduous**

Home was situated in the middle of their territory. It was large enough to accommodate two hundred or more people and was not touching the ground. Among the tall trees, a few branches up from the last branch down stood a winding platform that connected all of the trees. Small huts accommodated two to four women were built on top of each other with vine ladders to get up and down easily. Only the Queen and a select few had their own rooms since they were either of great importance or key personnel to the tribe. Usually three to four huts were built on top of each other but they were always sturdy enough to fend against the weather and to stay upright.

Queen Darisa stood in the middle of the main hall as it was filled with all of the people in her tribe except for the few who were out scouting or were on patrol. Her black hair was tide up elegantly into a bun so that the heat didn't bother her that much. Her black eyes scanned the crowd of women as everyone started to settle down. Her slender frame leant against the main circular desk at the front of the room with the women sitting in a semicircle on benches facing her. She slowly raised her muscular right hand into the air for silence.

"Settle down and let us begin" said Queen Darisa in a gentle but loud and clear voice. The crowd instantly settled down and waited for what their Queen had to say. Queen Darisa smiled at all the women and just loved the way that her position made them all follow her thanks to her brains and strength. "We have had many reports come in today and all is well with our tribe. However there was a brief message detailing that a group of men in brown robes were seen entering from the east. They have travelled past us without noticing and will soon be leaving our forest." A soft murmur rose at this news since men were not part of their society.



"The men have been killed and a report will be coming in soon" announced Rebecca from the door of the circular main hall. She was leaning against the door frame in her scouting outfit. It was obvious that she had only just gotten back since her squad were sitting close to the exit in their gear as well. "The north is clear."

Suddenly a woman dressed in leather ran in from the other entrance and swiftly approached the front. She kneeled in front of Queen Darisa before whispering hastily what she had to say. "A woman was reported to have been running in wildly from the south heading north. A small squad followed her and witnessed her every move. The wild woman killed those robed men with a sword and then left the scene heading south back to where she came from. The squad reported that she was wild and unpredictable until she ran into those men and killed them. She left the sword behind and ran off. The squad is making its way back to the murdered men to give them a burial and to retrieve any valuables" whispered the woman in a babbling frenzy.

"How long until the squad returns, Freeda?" asked Queen Darisa.

Freeda Hayeen swallowed audibly and thought about the question. She looked cute while she was thinking with her hand unconsciously twirling her light brown hair and her hazel eyes transfixed onto the black eyes of Queen Darisa. "I think they won't make it back until just before midnight. I sent another squad out west to check on traps and to check on the men, so I think they will run into each other. Also there was a message of a woman entering from the west" said Freeda in a rattling voice which was not too loud and showed some of her nervousness.

"Have you heard from the squad you sent out to check the traps?" asked Queen Darisa.

Freeda shook her head from side to side in the negative to Queen Darisa's question. She hadn't heard from that squad the whole day since she did sent them out just after breakfast. She was sure that they should have been back by now unless they had caught something or were involved in the murdered men incident. Queen Darisa waved at her to go since there was nothing else that she had to report on and she needed to get back to her post to relay any messages.

Queen Darisa looked around the room since everyone had been quiet to catch what had been said. They were all waiting on her to comment or do something about the current situation since she was their leader. She could feel their expectations almost overwhelm her but there was nothing that she could do except to let her people know of the current situation. So she told them all that the men were killed by a woman with a blade and that squads had been sent out to secure their tribe and deal with the aftermath.

Elaine and her squad hastily moved to the main hall since that was where everyone was at this time of night after dinner. She could see that the village looked very empty with all of the women gathered in the one place. However her mind was focused on getting to Darisa and informing her of the events on their mission to check the traps in the west. They had made sure to pick up their game on the way back since they had detoured after Elaine had a gut feeling that there was something wrong. Elaine entered the main hall with her squad at the third entrance to the hall. She could see that her squad was tired and everyone was covered in forest grime and sweat.

The entire room became silent as all eyes fell onto the third entrance which was closest to where Queen Darisa was standing. They all looked disapprovingly at the small group of five who had interrupted Queen Darisa from informing them of the latest news that Freeda had delivered not that long ago. All eyes followed them as Elaine and her squad came forth and bowed before their Queen. Queen Darisa remained leaning on her desk but slowly straightened herself as she noticed that Elaine was wielding a sword that had a slight glow to it. Murmurs around the room began to add to the noise level as Queen Darisa slowly approached Elaine.

Elaine felt nervous under everyone's scrutiny. Her blade was also nervous at the attention it was getting and by the low murmuring that was slowly increasing in volume. She made sure that she stayed still with her head bowed before Darisa. Her squad remained so unless they were told to stand or relax by Darisa however she did not say anything. Elaine could feel Darisa eye her from top to bottom and then glanced at the beautifully crafted sword that she had in her left hand. She felt awkward and wanted to run away but her loyalty to her tribe held her fast.

Tiffany decided to speak up with her head still looking at the floor waiting to raise it at Darisa's command. She could feel that eyes had swept past her and were now glued onto Elaine. She understood why since Elaine had never once picked up any sort of weapon. She was a hand to hand specialist even though she had been briefly trained in other areas but with wooden instrumentation so that no one got hurt. Tiffany cleared her voice loudly so that the room calmed down.

"Queen Darisa, we have come back hastily from our mission to check the traps in the western area. We managed to catch some animals for a feast however our mission was slightly delayed on our way back. We found the group of robed men all dead in a forest clearing about half a days ride west from here. A woman that we were following happened to enter the clearing and commenced a funeral by fire for them before moving on. However when we were trying to tail her after that, she disappeared from our sights" reported Tiffany mainly to the floor since Queen Darisa had yet to release them from their bow.

The murmuring in the room recommenced as Queen Darisa stood at the front in silence. She was stunned that Elaine was holding a sword and hadn't let it go or put it down. She was also intrigued by how the sword seemed to cling to Elaine's hand in return as if it was seeking support from her. Curiosity plagued her mind at how Elaine had come by the sword. She felt as though the sword could sense her eyes on it and wondered if it could actually feel.

The air thickened around Elaine. Eyes pressed in around her to get a better look at the beautiful sword. Elaine wanted to peel herself from the hall of women. She could feel the pressure build around her and her breath started to increase in rate. Her heart was hammering away in her chest as the sword slightly squeezed her hand feeling her distress. Sweat slowly trickled down her brow as she felt the heat from all the women swarming her.

Rita stayed perfectly still. A cramp was starting to work its way up her leg but she kept a stoic mask on her face. Weakness of any kind would destroy the reputation of her squad which had worked relentlessly for the past two summer seasons. Her dark eyes could barely see Queen Darisa's brown leather booted feet. Pressure was building up in her as her temper was about to

flare at Queen Darisa's obvious shocked form. Long legs were starting to shake under the pressure however were stunned to stillness when dark eyes glanced at Elaine.

Elaine could feel the room start to close in on her but she maintained her stoic face. The sword clenched her right hand even tighter and could feel that it was under a lot of distress. The bindings were slowly creeping up her arm, sliding against her bare slightly tanned skin and across her small invisible arm hairs. The sword had dulled somewhat from her entrance into the hall but it was still beautiful with the engravings barely seen. Elaine's attention was focused on *her* sword. Everything else around her was unimportant as she held the blade in her clenched fist. The sword sensed the different attention and slowly let up its hold on her hand. White teeth shone brightly as she smiled at her sword's reaction. Confidence slowly bloomed in her being as she stared at her sword.

Queen Darisa shook herself bodily before realizing that she hadn't released these women from their respectful bow. Her mind wrapped itself around the situation that she needed to attend to. Her voice was slightly shaky but slowly built up in confidence as she spoke. "Stand at ease warriors" she said finally as the squad of five women gradually got to their feet, shaking out the cramp or two. Her black eyes clashed with electric blue as she sensed Elaine's soul changing in front of her. "This gathering is adjourned and will recommence tomorrow evening." She heard the room murmur its disapproval at not being able to find out about the sword or why Elaine held it. Black eyes stared at the five faces as the room slowly unpacked. "Please follow me to my office ladies. I would like to discuss matters in private if you don't mind waiting a little while before cleaning yourselves up" suggested Queen Darisa as she saw the affirmation in all five sets of eyes.

Elaine found herself in Queen Darisa's quarters alone since Queen Darisa had escorted her other squad members out. Blue eyes took in the room which was neat and tidy. A wooden bed in one corner with furs on top was Queen Darisa's official sleeping area however Elaine knew that Queen Darisa spent more time sleeping at her desk in the adjacent corner of the room. It was stacked with piles of scrolls that were neatly rolled up. Blue eyes took in the tribe mask that was hanging on the wall with colourful long feathers sticking out of it which was worn on special occasions. She heard the scrape of rough wood under her boots as she slightly shifted her body to look at the other two corners of the room. One corner held a big chest that held Queen Darisa's clothes and in the other corner was where Queen Darisa kept all of her weapons. Elaine turned her blue gaze on the door which creaked open upon Queen Darisa's return.

"Queen Darisa..." stammered Elaine before her lips halted.

"Please, Elaine, we are in a private room, my room. There is no need for formalities when there is only the two of us. You should know by now that I really do hate it when all of these women try to distance themselves from me because of my title. I am just like you but with more responsibilities unless you want me to use your title Princess Elaine Melda" scolded Darisa with a huge smile that showed her clean white teeth.

Elaine smiled in reflex and slowly relaxed as she felt the mood change in the room. Blue eyes glanced at the sword that she was still holding even through the debriefing that they just had.

Elaine was glad that the debriefing didn't contain anything that indicated how she came by the sword or of Rebecca's confrontation. The sword felt the stress of the room ease and was slowly relaxed against her hand. It had slowly unbound itself from her wrist and was gently clasped against her fingers. However the blade remained dull compared to the brightness that it showed before when she first touched it.

"I'm sorry Queen... I mean Darisa. Being with the squad for long hours under the stress of the situation has me tuned to address you as such. However you can't blame me that no one knows we are related even though they knew of my mother" explained Elaine lightly.

"No one knows that your father is my younger brother and that they both died for a cause. I miss your mother, Ariana Melda, and your father, Damien Ilion, very much. Enough of that for now, we should be discussing what you have in your right hand. It is a beautiful blade. How did you come by it?" asked Darisa in polite tone, intent for Elaine to begin the telling of a tale.

Blue eyes were hidden for a moment as Elaine closed her eyes to sort out her thoughts. Her mind was racing and the sword in her hand was slowly starting to wrap a little tighter around her hand. However she held the hilt firmly and gave it a reassuring squeeze before opening her eyes. Her mind cleared and she began at the beginning.

"We completed our mission of seeing to the traps in the west. I began to have a gut feeling that there was something wrong. I veered a little off course from our usual route back to the village and we came by a woman. Long straight dark hair, sparkling warm knowledgeable grey eyes, soft small pointed nose, thin eyebrows, soft lips, gentle melodious voice, short but beautiful in her skirt and tight shirt revealing no skin besides that of her lean muscled arms and legs. She walked in her leather boots without stirring the ground or making any noises even while she dragged those men to their funeral pyre. She was skilful with her hands while making that fire" said Elaine as she described the passer-by in a lot of detail.

Darisa interrupted for a moment and asked "Did she speak to you?"

"She knew who I was. She knew my name. She left the sword there telling me that it could be mine if I wished. I was shocked when I was about to pick up the sword. She appeared to me like she was a ghost but it felt as though she held a lot of power within her fingertips. She was so friendly and I was nervous. I kept being defensive and I growled at her" explained Elaine while she glided to the bed and planted her bottom ungracefully onto it. Bright aura from her blade illuminated the room as she continued her tale of the events. Blue eyes occasionally glanced at the beautiful sword trying to find the right words to describe what had happened. "She talked to me as an apparition. She had left the clearing like Tiffany had reported and then I stayed behind. I wanted to make sure that the fire didn't go out of hand. Then it happened. My visions overtook me once again because of the intense emotions that were stored in that clearing. I saw what had happened. I saw those men killed by a single slash to their backs by this sword in my hand who belonged to a mad woman. She caused all of that violence and then stopped and realised what she had done. She dropped the sword and then ran away."

Darisa once again interrupted. "So you went to the clearing where the south squad had witnessed the murder of those men. The sword you have came from her, is that right?" asked Darisa as she tried to make sense of the whole situation. Eyebrows rose at Elaine's affirmative nod.

"I picked up the sword. However that woman appeared to me as an apparition to talk to me. She only talked but never in any way tried to touch or hurt me. She left the sword in my care whether I wanted it or not. I chose to take it and felt like it did belong to me, it does belong to me. Then out of nowhere Rebecca appears" said Elaine with a deep sigh. She was tired but she had to finish the tale or parts of it would be lost. "She wanted the sword and threatened to kill me to get it. She said she wasn't afraid of you or of anybody here in our village. She was going to get her way but luckily Tiffany showed up."

"Rebecca was drawn by the smoke from the fire. She is greedy and has no respect for anyone and that includes her mothers. She is a handful but I have many people keeping an eye on her so don't you worry. Anyways what do you think you will do with that sword? It seems stuck to your hand" said Darisa while indicating the sword with her extended index finger.

Blue eyes fell to the sword with the engravings barely visible due to the aura that it emitted. A slow exhale of air as Elaine sighed and rested her head on her left arm. Wrappings from the sword continued to cling to her skin as if frightened to lose what it had found. Heavy eyelids momentarily closed as thoughts raced through her mind. She needed to figure this out.

"I think I should keep this sword and train with it for a while. I will see how it will go and decide from there whether I should truly keep it or not. However I have a feeling that it won't want to let me go until I am long dead" commented Elaine as she gave a long loud yawn. Strong fingers covered her mouth in a polite manner as she finished her yawn.

"I think it's bedtime for warriors" said Darisa with a huge smile plastered to her face. She slowly stood from her desk that she had been sitting at and moved over to where Elaine was. Strong hands stopped Elaine from getting up and actually pushed Elaine further onto the bed. Darisa carefully tucked Elaine into the soft furs and watched contentedly as heavy eyelids closed tight. She heard Elaine's breathing deepen and her face relax. She slowly and quietly made her way back to the desk and unrolled the first scroll to fulfil her duties as the leader of this tribe.

Suddenly a soft voice filled the room and almost scared Darisa out of her skin. "Greetings Queen Darisa Ilion of Ardious, it has been a long time since we have last met. I'm sure you remember who I am" said a woman with a feminine, soft and pure voice. Grey eyes surveyed the room and hesitantly rested on the sleeping form of Elaine. However her slender frame caught the avid attention of Darisa. Grey eyes burned with a passion into black eyes when two souls fought for dominance in the room. "How many times has it been now?"

Darisa stayed seated however she had twisted in her seat so that she was bodily facing the woman who had appeared in her room. Darisa smiled as she looked up at the woman and saw what Elaine had described. "I see that you have finally made it here. I was wondering when you would show up since *she* has the sword now. What are your plans for her?"

Lips twitched into a smile at the directness of Darisa. A raised thin eyebrow got Darisa to smile before soft boots slowly glided across the floor towards Darisa. Black hair swayed slightly from the movement but not a peep of sound was heard or made. "She has chosen her new path and with that she must leave. You have to send her off and you must make sure that she goes alone. If she strays from her path, so help us all" said the woman who was the passer-by.

"You always talk in riddles just like your sisters" commented Darisa.

"I only lay paths in front of everyone. They all choose for themselves. It is not my responsibility to make sure that they choose the right path or stay on it. However it is within my power to help her by gifting her with the sword that she holds firmly in her hands even while she is asleep. Although it can be argued that the sword clings to her" said the woman lightly as she glanced a few times over to Elaine. Grey eyes saddened for a moment before warmth returned to them and stared at Darisa. "She will return one day and truly know who she really is..."

Darisa nodded and blinked a few times as the woman had disappeared right in front of her. Black eyes raked the room but the woman was really gone. Her eyes finally rested on Elaine and wondered what she had gotten herself involved in for the mighty ones to interfere in their lives.

Suddenly another voice perked up out of thin air and Darisa jumped in fright as a body shimmied into view. "Is she gone yet? I was wondering how long she would take but I guess she didn't have much to say but the obvious. I wonder what father would say" said a young woman who looked very similar to the passer-by. Her voice was very light and young that Darisa was shocked over. "Oh yeah... I almost forgot my manners... Greetings Queen Darisa Ilion of Ardious... I am Artie. I'm the younger sister but that doesn't really matter."

Darisa's black eyes were wide open in surprise. She had never met this woman before but it was obvious that she was related to the woman that Elaine had described. What surprised her most was the fact that Artie was not as mature or sophisticated as the passer-by. Black intrigued eyes scanned the woman before her and could see that the leather that this woman wore was very modest. It was a full one piece of leather that wrapped around her whole body in a very comfortable dress. It was short enough to not hinder movement but long enough not to illicit unwanted attention. Her knee high leather brown boots completed the outfit. Darisa was impressed by this woman's outfit even though this woman talked like she was an adolescent.

"Greetings Artie, what can I help you with?" asked Darisa bluntly.

Artie smiled and Darisa could see the youth that glowed from her face. "I came by to check on my instruments. The sword was forged by me and my sister wasn't even polite enough to let me see or meet the owner. She only told me that I would meet her soon. However with the talk that you two just had, I guess Elaine is out of the loop and I'm not supposed to talk to her yet. All well, everything will come in due time" said Artie cheerfully as she excitedly rocked backwards and forwards on her heels and toes. Grey eyes so like her sister's, however with less intensity, glanced around the room.

"Will you be going then?" asked Darisa with a raised dark eyebrow.

"Not yet..." whispered Artie as she crept closer over to the bed even though her boots didn't make a sound against the wooden floor. Her slender arm slowly reached out and an extended index finger carefully touched along the sword hilt which was still wrapped firmly around Elaine's strong right hand.

The blade felt the touch of its creator and hesitated for a bit before slowly releasing its hold on Elaine's hand. The hilt rewrapped itself and retreated back to its original form where it appeared to be a normal sword. The light blue aura around it had also faded away and the engravings could now be seen clearly.

Artie smiled toothily as she petted the sword that she had created. It was amazing to feel that cold metallic matter heat up and light up as she traced it with her finger. Grey eyes warmed as she absorbed the feelings that it had gone through to get to where it was. Artie could see that Elaine was still reassuring the sword even in her sleep which slightly amazed her. She had never met a person like Elaine before but there was something different about her from Darisa. However she put the thought aside since answers were going to come in the near future. She gently traced the engravings on the sword and watched in amusement.

"Artie" whispered a strict voice.

Artie turned around after recognising the voice as her sister. She could have sworn that her sister had completely left. She smiled shyly up into grey eyes that were still warm but held a slight glint of warning. "Hello sis... so what brings you here?" asked Artie before giving a big smile with teeth in a nervous manner.

"Patience... Now let's get back before father reprimands us" said the passer-by as she quickly glanced at the sleeping form on the bed. Grey eyes looked over at Darisa before speaking. "Remember what I said."

Artie quickly petted the sword one more time before hastily moving to her sister's side. She smiled up naturally at her sister and got a slight grin back in return. Artie then waved a farewell to Darisa before both sisters were gone from sight in a blink of an eye.

Darisa was left a little stunned. She slowly stumbled over to the bed, trying not to laugh out loud because of the numbness in her legs for sitting too long. Black eyes looked at the sword and Elaine before muscular arms gently tucked Elaine in. "Good night Elaine, hopefully you will understand why you must go even though I don't understand it myself..." whispered Darisa before she went back to her desk and scrolls.

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### **Chapter 3: Friendship or more...**

Green eyes sparkled looking up into blue strong orbs that stared back with stunning intensity. Soft lips slowly parted before closing tightly as a throat gone dry found forming words difficult. Sandy blonde hair swayed gently with the breeze in contrast to the long black hair tied in a

simple ponytail of the blue eyed companion. Lean muscled arms grasped gently on firm shoulders as muscular arms held her shoulders in return.

Blue eyes narrowed in concern at her green eyed companion. Her muscular body was practically holding up the smaller blonde from collapsing where she stood. Her tallness came in handy since she was at least a foot taller than her companion however that didn't mean that the blonde couldn't do anything less. Cherry lips opened slowly after figuring out what to say in her clogged mind. "Are you alright?" asked Elaine in a gentle low voice. She waited for her companion to respond but nothing escaped those soft lips.

Elaine looked deep into the green eyes to see if they recognised her. She was a little worried that her companion had somehow become stunned while they were talking about what the villagers were gossiping about in the previous village. They had passed through only staying for one night and getting a single room to share. It was better financially for them to share a single room than having to get two.

"Maria, are you alright?" asked Elaine again but with a little more firmness.

Maria stepped back out of Elaine's grasp and mentally shook herself. Her slender frame was trying to melt against her tall companion's muscular body but her mind was trying to act civilly. Her lean muscled arms dangled by her sides as she looked straight into blue orbs that still held concern over her. "I'm alright, Elaine, just the sun" whispered Maria in a soft but slightly shaky voice.

Soft, heavy boots quickly closed the distance between them as muscular arms came around Maria's shoulders. Elaine had moved quickly just in time to catch Maria before she fell. Blue eyes looked up at the blazing sky before looking around them to find a nice shady spot.

There were few trees on the outskirts of Elaine's home tribe. She was finally going to return home for the first time. She had been gone for a full one summer season and a winter season. Her blue eyes took in her surroundings with new eyes. Everything seemed so different. The very dirt path that she was standing on was so different that she could have been visiting this place for the first time. The colourful flora was so lush and green compared to the barren village with the rumours. The air was fresh however the heat was still the same.

Maria was slowly escorted to a nearby tree which provided little shade. She slowly raised her arm to her head and wiped the sweat that accumulated there. A strong tanned hand holding a water skin was waving itself in front of her face and she graciously accepted it, sipping at the cool content like she was taught to.

"We will take a small break here and then we will see how far we can get before making camp. I know a few spots around here but it's been a long time" said Elaine in a deep voice with a hint of roughness due to her dry throat. She casually unclipped her spare water skin and took a sip while glancing around once more at their surroundings. Her mind was fixated on making sure that her companion stayed safe. "So what did that old woman say that made you turn bright red?"



Maria almost choked on her water as she looked up into amused blue eyes. Her mind went blank as she tried to think of something else to say instead of what she had heard from the old woman. However all she could do was sigh and give in to the inevitable since the more places that they would visit would mean that Elaine would eventually pick it up.

"The old woman who I happened to overhear was conversing to her neighbour saying that we were a rare kind. She had never seen two women sharing a room unless they were family and she wondered what all of our interaction was about. She commented that there was only one place for women like us and that was with the Ardious clan" explained Maria as she picked up a stalk of grass and twirled it in her hands to hide her embarrassment.

Elaine smiled and knew what the implications that the old woman must have stated to her neighbour. It wasn't like it was uncommon; it was just frowned upon by normal society. However she couldn't blame them since Ardious was a very secretive clan and only citizens knew how things worked. "Ardious is where we are headed" stated Elaine in a plain tone. She didn't show or tell her companion about whom she was before. It had been a long journey to finally come back for her Auntie's sake.

Maria slowly stood up and stretched her legs before handing the water skin back over to her companion. She smiled brilliantly as Elaine indicated the path and continued to keep up with Elaine's fast pace. She had been surprised at first on how slow this young woman had walked and ran but now she was fit enough to at least keep up with the walking. There was no doubt that Elaine could simply disappear in a cloud of dust and leave her behind. She remembered their first meeting.

*Elaine strolled along with a firm swagger to her walk. Her muscles were gleaming with sweat since she had covered a fair distance out of her home. A small backpack was hanging over one shoulder as she looked around with blue wide eyes. She had known very little out of her home village that the sites and sounds around her were amazing to discover.*

*Elaine wiped her hands on her plain cotton shirt and adjusted the long red skirt that covered her legs. She had traded in her leathers so that travelling would come easier for her if she was considered as 'a' nobody instead of a walking female warrior. She still had her armour on underneath which had slowly chaffed the skin because of the hot weather. Her sword was still strapped to her back however it was covered in many layers of cloth so that it was concealed and only looked like a walking stick.*

*Blue eyes scanned the road ahead and then spotted something in the middle of the road. Her eyes narrowed to see what it was while she was walking and was surprised to identify the something as an adolescent, barely a woman. She continued her fast pace towards the young woman and was surprised by the green orbs staring past her and at the lovely blue sky.*

*Green eyes slowly retracted to the person who had suddenly blocked a part of her view. She tilted her head a bit and opened soft lips to talk to this strange person. "Do you mind? Can you please get out of the way? I'm trying to wait for a carriage to stop and you standing there won't*

*help me" said the young woman in a soft and melodious voice. Green eyes finally adjusted and became wide as they were lost into blue orbs staring directly at her.*

*Blue amused eyes looked up and down the dirt path that carriages usually took since it was easier travel. At either end of the path, it twisted and turned until it was engulfed by the thick trees on either side of the path. Her eyes narrowed to see if there was anyone on the path but it remained empty and rough. Elaine could see rocks of all different sizes and shapes scattered about, and was now wondering how this young woman was able to lie on the ground with such ease.*

*The green eyed, sandy blonde slowly sat up and dusted herself off. She had been lying down for some time and it was getting quite uncomfortable but she needed a ride. Unless there was some other way to relieve the aches in her legs from her long walk. "Are you searching for a carriage too?"*

*Elaine stared at the young woman but did not utter a word. She looked up and down the path again before slowly putting her backpack on the ground and kneeling over it. Her strong fingers carefully searched her backpack for a small bag. Her blue eyes had been very observant and seen the slight tremble in the young woman's legs when she sat up. Strong hands found the pouch of herbs and slowly pulled it out into the bright sunlight.*

*Green eyes went straight to the small fur bag and watched avidly at the strong hand searching through the bag. She became even more interested as the strong hand came out of the bag with something clasped in them but she couldn't see what it was. Her eyebrows hiked up when the other strong hand swiftly retrieved the water skin and filled a small cup.*

*Elaine kept her blue eyes on making the herbs in her hand drinkable. She had crushed them firmly in her hand and gotten the water out ready to mix them all together. She could tell that the green eyed young woman was very keen at what she was doing but she concentrated on her task. She hastily dumped the herbs into the cup and quickly swirled them in with the water. A small pointed nose sniffed the contents to make sure that she didn't miss any ingredients.*

*Elaine slowly crawled a little closer to the young woman and sat next to her in the middle of the path. Green eyes were fixated on the cup, intrigued to know what it was. Elaine looked over at the view that was permitted to them with their current seating arrangement and sighed as she saw the lush green trees that she usually recognised as home. However she couldn't turn back.*

*Green eyes stared at the cup while glancing at the deep blue eyes that seemed to be contemplating something. She was curious as to the sad look that glazed over those beautiful eyes but was not keen to bring it up in case she drove this stranger away. It had been a lonely trek so far and she had come so far out of her own village for the first time. Her small hands clasped together in her lap as she looked out at the horizon just like the blue eyed stranger next to her.*

*Blue eyes could see in her peripherals that the green eyed blonde was now distracted by the beauty of the horizon. Swift hands caressed the back of the girl's head and slammed the contents*

*of the cup down her throat. Green eyes went wide in shock but after a moment they began to droop and close. The girl was knocked out by Elaine's simple sleeping potion.*

*Elaine hastily packed her things one handed without letting the girl hit the ground. She hoisted her backpack over her shoulder and slowly moved into a squat while hovering over the young woman. Carefully, she lifted the small blonde over her shoulder and started to head towards the trees away from the path so that no one could intrude on them.*

*A small clearing opened up as blue eyes found the perfect spot to settle down. Her eyes raked the place for possible entryways and she was sure that it was secure enough before tossing her bag to the soft grass. She slowly knelt down on one knee and gently placed the girl down on her side. Swift hands quickly grabbed some furs and placed them neatly on the ground.*

*Elaine wasn't sure what compelled her to take this young woman to safety but she had always listened to her gut feelings. Soft boots silently moved around the small clearing to assemble what was needed to make a small smokeless fire and to make sure that they both were comfortable. She paused for a moment while collecting some wood as she heard a soft rumble in the distance.*

*Elaine silently placed the wood near the circle of stone that was going to be the fire and swiftly went to her backpack that her sword was strapped to. She quickly grabbed the hilt and felt the pulse of energy flow throughout her body in welcome. Her soft boots led her to a tree and she swiftly climbed without looking down. Her hearing was on high alert as the rumble became distinct enough for her to make out that it was a pack of horses. She concentrated harder and heard the soft metal and leather that clanked or rubbed together when an armed person was riding a horse. She estimated that there were at least six of them and was glad that the young woman was off the path.*

*The horses pulled up on the path closest to where Elaine had found the clearing. She was relieved that the riders didn't dismount and had only paused to take a small water break. As soon as the riders were hydrated, they were soon off and Elaine sighed in relief. She waited until the horses were out of sight before climbing down the tree and laying her sword down with a little difficulty since it was still clingy.*

*Some time later, green eyes opened and looked around in fear to see where the blue eyed stranger had gone. She had remembered a horrible taste going down her throat and had swallowed instinctively. She had remembered trying to fight whatever was trying to make her fall asleep but she couldn't. Her fear subsided a little when she noticed that she was in a well made camp and she was lying on a pile of fur.*

*Green eyes glanced around once more seeing that the blue eyed woman was no where in sight. She gingerly lifted her arm and noticed that there were bandages wrapped around it. She gently felt her body and could feel the confines of more bandages wrapped around her body and legs. She slowly tried to sit up but was stopped by calloused fingers on her chest.*

*"Don't move" whispered Elaine in a small growl. "You need to rest. I will get you some soup and tea." Elaine was about to move to get the soup and tea but a hand around her wrist stopped her. Elaine's blue eyes met with green orbs.*

*"How did you know?" whispered the soft voice in a sincere way. "My name is Maria, what's yours? How long have I been knocked out?" The green eyes looked deep into blue and could see that this stranger was warring within herself. It was slightly fascinating as well as slightly nerve wracking. The small gentle and soft hand slowly squeezed the wrist that she was holding. "Thankyou..."*

*Elaine looked amused. She had never met anyone who could babble so much after being injured. Somehow Elaine had known that this young woman was in extreme pain. She had sensed it somehow and just acted on it. Her blue eyes had softened when she saw the bruises and scrapes that had come from a beating by a long stick or something similar. Elaine smiled warmly at the young woman and said "My name is Elaine." She was amused that Maria had slowly released her wrist so she could get the soup and tea.*

Elaine continued her fast pace knowing that Maria would keep up with her. After she had tended to Maria, she hadn't thought that the young blonde would follow her. At first she had been a little annoyed that she had to stop often so that she didn't kill the young woman but then it was good. She could listen to Maria's voice as she described all of the things that were in her home village however she didn't ever mention anything about her family.

"Why are we headed to Ardious?" asked Maria in her soft voice that showed how much more fit she was. Her voice didn't portray any sign of being out of breath and she was still keeping up with the pace that was set. She walked with a little swagger to her hips with a backpack over one shoulder and a long sword at her hip.

Elaine gave a wane smile but looked ahead and started to explain. "I received a message from our last village that was addressed to me. It said that I was needed and that I must return immediately. The message was only a few days old, which is very lucky for the messenger who was directed to go far and wide to find me."

Thin eyebrows hiked up with a questioning look. "Did the message say why you had to go? It seems odd that a village full of women would request your presence. It also seemed like they were specifically looking for you as well. Is there something that you are not telling me?"

Elaine sighed and briefly closed her eyes. She came to a stop in the middle of the path and gazed at the green inquisitive eyes staring back at her. "I was there about a year ago just before I met you. The message didn't say why I had to go there but it must be something important. We will know more when we get there" replied Elaine in a soft whisper that could have been the wind if Maria didn't have keen ears.

Suddenly a rumbling could be heard in the distance heading towards them from the direction that they had come from. Elaine instinctively grabbed Maria gently by the upper arm and started to

move her to the trees and out of sight. Her ears were trained on the low rumbling which she knew would turn into a thunder of hooves belonging to horses with armed riders on them.

"What are we doing?" asked Maria, a little perplexed by Elaine's sudden brashness. She was surprised that Elaine had led her to the trees and off the path. She hadn't heard anything that alerted her of trouble but still Elaine was acting as if danger was coming. "Is there something wrong?"

Elaine gently placed her hand over Maria's mouth and waited as the thundering of hooves became louder. Her blue eyes could just make out the riders near the horizon. Which was quite far away and Maria had only just heard the faint sound of hooves. Elaine pressed their bodies as close to the tree as possible so that they couldn't be seen. She didn't want any trouble and didn't need any at the moment with her presence needed elsewhere.

The horses slowly galloped along the path and slowly pulled up at the leader's order. He scanned the area, sensing that there was something amiss. His eyes swept past Elaine and Maria several times but he didn't see them. They were cleverly hidden by the thick vines that wrapped itself around the tree trunk. The leader which was a male slowly dismounted and the rest of his followers followed suit.

Elaine stood perfectly still. Blue eyes could see that the leader in his plain armour and leather was a strong combatant. His sandy brown short hair contrasted with his slightly tanned skin. His long big nose was sniffing the air as if he had detected something. His ears were cocked and listening intently for any sound that wasn't an animal. His brown eyes scoured the air multiple times as his followers did the same. Elaine could see that his brown leather boots were covered in travel dirt and that he was taking his time looking around.

Maria stood stock still and did not dare to breathe. Her green eyes were starting to water as she needed to sneeze. She could see that Elaine was intent on trying to make sure that they were not discovered. Maria's slender arms held onto the tree for dear life as she tried to keep her sneeze in however she couldn't hold it for any longer. Maria let out a loud sneeze that couldn't be disguised for anything.

The leader stood stock still and bodily faced where Maria and Elaine were hiding. He slowly withdrew his long sword which was sheathed to his horse. His followers also took out their weapons ranging from swords to daggers and crossbows. All eyes were fixed on the area that the sneeze had come from.

Elaine swiftly but silently clasped her sword with calloused fingers. She felt the warmth flow through her like an old friend. Her blue eyes briefly closed as she felt the power that she wielded in her hand. Blue eyes opened and looked at green orbs that were worried and watery. Cherry lips softly kissed Maria's head and twitched into a smile before she placed a stoic mask over her face and half stepped out from the tree. Her left side was only visible as she looked around the tree and saw all of the men standing there with their weapons drawn.

"Who are you? What are you doing? Why are you hiding?" asked the leader in a gruff deep voice. He still had his sword trained on her as her blue eyes looked at him and dismissed the others. He slowly lowered his sword slightly but made sure it was in a defensive position in case the woman decided to attack. He was well aware that he was nearing Ardious and made sure to be prepared.

Elaine didn't move away from the tree and didn't show them that she had a sword in her right hand. She appeared to look frightened at them and remained protected by the tree that was full of vines. Her slightly deep feminine voice reached the ears of the leader and his followers. "I'm just a village girl on a walk. I didn't want to be caught by bandits or others with such agendas. I just wanted to wait for you to pass and then be on my merry way" replied Elaine.

The leader smiled and slowly lowered his sword completely. His brown eyes were amused and intrigued by the blue eyed beautiful woman. He glanced around swiftly at his compatriots and made a signal with his right hand for them to return to their horses. He listened for them to dismount before saying anything further. "I'm sorry to have startled you. However we must be on our way. May you have a safe journey and return to your village in case bandits or such like do come across your path" said the leader very politely before giving a curt bow and turning to mount his horse.

"May I ask you something?" asked Elaine before he could mount his horse. The leader turned his head and nodded his head for her to go on. "I was wondering where you were off to and if you had a name?" Blue eyes gently battered her soft lashes at the leader from behind the tree and gave a nervous smile.

"I am headed to Ardious and my name is Daniel" replied the leader before he graciously mounted his horse and set a pace for his men. Dust rose behind the horses canter and Elaine was left in a small cloud of dust as she stepped onto the middle of the path. Her sword was firmly behind her back so that it wasn't seen.

Once the group of mounted men were out of sight, Maria stepped out of the hiding place. She looked inquiringly up at blue eyes and knew that Elaine wasn't going to give her any answers yet. She could see Elaine's mind working extremely hard to complete a puzzle that only had a few clues. "Shall we go then?" asked Maria with a toothy smile.

Elaine turned her head to Maria and smiled in reflex. She collected her bag from Maria's outstretched hand and skilfully sheathed her sword on her back. She then covered the hilt with a bit of cloth so that it wasn't as distinguishable. The sword hilt had obligingly released her hand and was snug inside the specifically made leather sheath with the protective covering. It felt quite content with its treatment and seldom had to bathe in copious amounts of blood.

Elaine shouldered her backpack and looked her companion over before setting a walking pace. She listened to the natural sounds of the wildlife around her and made sure that Maria was keeping up. She was also in deep thought about why Daniel was heading to Ardious and it seemed quite a coincidence that she was summoned. Her mind raced around in circles as she contemplated what had happened.

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## **Chapter 4: Elaine's departure**

Darisa stood at the window in her private quarters and black eyes raked the village centre which was bustling with warriors. They were all preparing for their first official male visitors who were given permission to enter. Her eyes were a little weary from lack of sleep since her messengers had left some days ago to find Elaine. She just wished that Elaine had written to let her know where she was. It would have made things a lot easier.

Darisa took in a deep breath and sighed. Her shoulders were hunched with stress as she had to debate with the council and elders for some time to come to an agreement to let the men into their territory. Darisa would have opposed the very idea but there was always a good reason to slightly bend the rules. Her black eyes found brown that belonged to Tiffany.

Tiffany headed towards the Queen's quarters as soon as she saw that Queen Darisa was there and not still stuck in another meeting with either the council or elders. It was time that she was able to talk to Queen Darisa about the more important matters which concerned about their guest's temporary living arrangements while they stayed for the visit. She swiftly but silently took the stairs at two at a time to reach the door which by now was wide open for her to enter.

"Hello Tiffany, what is the matter?" asked Darisa.

"Good morning Queen Darisa, I have come to discuss about where you are going to put the guests if they have to stay the night. It would be quite alarming if they bunked with the women considering they are men in an only women village. Also there have been reports by the outer scouts that the men will reach our border by tomorrow morning. I was wondering if you wanted us to escort them in" explained Tiffany in a mouthful of non-stop words. Tiffany was just relieved that she remembered to address all the complaints that had appeared at her lap in the Queen's absence.

"We will have to make a temporary lodging for them on the ground that is separate from our village. I also want the rest of the preparations to be completed so that they don't find out that we actually live in the trees. Also please assemble your squad to meet them at the border. Remember to treat them nicely since they are our guests. Now off with you" said Darisa playfully before Tiffany left at a fast march since there was only little time for her to make the proper arrangements for everything.

Darisa watched as the door slowly swung closed and she slowly turned her back to it, only to be surprised by an unexpected guest. Dark eyes fell on familiar grey eyes staring back with great intensity. Darisa hesitated slightly upon choosing where she wanted to go. She really wanted to just go to bed for a small nap after the mornings business. Her eyes considered the desk since she still had some work to do.

"I would choose the bed in your case" said the familiar feminine voice that sounded soft and pure as the moon. Grey eyes and a flick of the head gestured towards the bed which Darisa obediently

obliged. Grey eyes watched carefully and amusingly as Darisa lied back into a comfortable position while keeping her black eyes on her. "You seem very alert in my presence..."

"Anyone would be since you are planning something. You had me send out messengers to find her and tell her to return after a year. Did you not think that our departure was cruel enough? I had to send her packing before anyone got any ideas about her new toy at the time. She didn't want to leave. I had to put her on the spot and ask her to leave for me. Do you know how much that hurt?" vented Darisa as her black eyes began to water under all of the emotion that was running through her being.

Grey eyes softened and soft boots that didn't make a sound on the rough wooden floor slowly approached Darisa. She carefully sat on the edge of the bed while looking down at Darisa and slowly a slender, lean muscled arm gently caressed Darisa's face in comfort. "It is alright child of the moon. Elaine will return to us whole and renewed. She had stayed here for far too long and needed to experience the world to prepare her for what is to come" said the sweet voice.

"Will she hate me for sending her away like that?" asked Darisa in a small sob. Black eyes slowly closed and tears streaked down her face. She had been stressed ever since Elaine came to her the following day after the grey eyed woman told her to send Elaine away. Her mind went back to that moment just before Elaine was gone for good.

*Darisa stood in the village centre just after breakfast was served in the food hall. She was watching warriors prepare to leave for a simple scouting mission that consisted many of the high ranked warriors such as Tiffany's squad minus Elaine. She had left Elaine in her quarters so that she could try to talk her into leaving to discover the world. Her black eyes scoured the many weapons that were going to be taken on the mission and gave a firm nod of approval at their choices.*

*Rebecca Calin was one of the warriors among those that were leaving, along with her squad. Deep brown eyes swiftly glanced around the group of women leaving for the mission and noticed that Elaine Melda was not among them even though her entire squad was. She looked around and saw Darisa standing a few feet away observing the women prepare. Her full lips twisted into a cruel grin and she slowly meandered in Darisa's direction.*

*Tiffany swiftly finished placing her weapons on her body. She had assembled a variety of weapons that she considered that she would need on this mission since it was not only a simple hunting mission. Her brown eyes hastily checked again that she hadn't forgotten anything and she quickly glanced up with a smile. However her bright smile fell off her face when she saw Rebecca slowly squirming her way closer to Darisa. Her soft brown leather boots quickly took off in a straight line to intercept the curly cherry red head.*

*Rebecca came face to face with brown eyes and an unhappy look. Tiffany stood in front of her and impeded her way to Darisa. They were only standing two paces from the Queen and Darisa had already drawn her attention towards them. A quirk of lips into a lazy smile and a slight nod of the head was all the greeting that Rebecca was going to warrant to Tiffany.*



*"Where are you going?" asked Tiffany a little unsure of how to turn the woman back the way she came. She wasn't sure what Rebecca wanted but was sure that it was of no good. Brown eyes noticed that her squad was right near her and flanking the Queen. "What do you want?"*

*"Well I was only going to talk to the Queen. Is that a crime? I'm allowed to walk wherever I want without your permission so do you mind?" said Rebecca with an amused note in her voice. However Tiffany didn't move and stood her ground. "Well if you must know, I wanted to know why Elaine isn't here. She is part of your squad and you are technically one person short."*

*Darisa slowly stepped forward and faced Rebecca. She gently placed her hand on Tiffany's shoulder and gave a slight squeeze in thanks. Tiffany got the hint and stepped aside for Queen Darisa to solve the issue since she didn't know the reason why Elaine wasn't present either. Darisa's muscular form made her a formidable warrior and she was slightly bigger than Rebecca.*

*"Well it's nice to know that there are people who are protective of you even though you don't need it" commented Rebecca with a slight sneer. She bowed her head slightly and never dropped her eyes from the black ones staring back at her. "Queen Darisa, why isn't Elaine present?"*

*Black eyes glanced around quickly to note that everyone had the same question in their eyes but weren't willing to bring it up. Everyone seemed to have noticed that Elaine had never left the Queen's quarters either and were wondering what had transpired in Darisa's private sanctuary. Black eyes fell back on Rebecca and knew that the truth would not be a good idea. She couldn't tell everyone that Elaine was going to leave on an adventure since it would signify that Darisa was naming Elaine as her heir.*

*"Is there something that we should know?" asked Rebecca sensing that Darisa was truly hiding something from all of them. Her deep brown eyes bore into the Queen's black eyes to detect any untruth that she would spill before this crowd. Her lips lifted into a smirk since lying to a tribe would give her a chance to take the leadership.*

*"Elaine will not be joining you on this mission. She has opted to stay here to train and get familiar with her new weapon. She doesn't want to disrupt her squad with amateur sword fighting abilities. She has yet to meet with the weapon's master to discuss this" said Darisa in a clear, steady and powerful voice that held every conviction in what she said.*

*A slow murmur circled the group of women warriors present and Rebecca had an amused look on her face. Her mind was working out the details but there was something not right about what Darisa had said. "She is too old to learn the sword. We all know that to fight with one, you must learn at a young age to develop the right muscles to wield it. Also we all know that she is only proficient with hand to hand combat. She should hand over her sword to a more worthy recipient" said Rebecca with a big grin. She knew that she would be given the sword since she was the best and it was a weapon that she wanted. "You know this..."*

*"It is up to the weapon's master Amelia Niar to decide and she is not back from her expedition until tomorrow. So everything will be decided then. It will also be up to Elaine if she wants to*

*relinquish her sword over to anyone else. So there is no point trying to sway me into ordering her to give up something that is hers by right" said Darisa in a commanding voice that boomed around the centre of the village.*

*Suddenly a voice spoke up outside of the circle of warriors who were going to leave on the mission. "Do you really want this sword? Are you warrior enough to handle it?" said Elaine in a deep growl that caused shivers up everyone's spine. Everyone could feel the anger that was directed at Rebecca and knew that things were going to go out of hand but stood around to wait for it. "If you want it that badly, you have to fight me for it."*

*"Is that a duel you are offering? A sword duel none the less and I am Amelia's finest sword wielder that she has taught. I will accept your duel" said Rebecca as her eyes lighted up at the challenge. She was going to get what she wanted and get rid of this brat in one go. She smiled widely as she knew that once a challenge was given and accepted, the Queen could not interfere and Elaine was Darisa's favourite as well. "I am ready when you are."*

*Elaine's soft leather boots glided across the wooden floor and stopped just short of two paces from Rebecca. Her face had been masked with an expressionless mask. The sword that she wielded had wrapped itself around Elaine's hand tightly in anticipation. Blue electric eyes roared with a fiery fire as she stood ready for Rebecca to draw her long, broad sword from its scabbard.*

*Rebecca stood in the centre and slowly drew out her trustworthy sword that was given to her by Amelia upon her completion of her weapons training. The well kept sword glinted in the patchy sunlight and was firmly grasped in Rebecca's two hands. Her lean muscles stood out as she held the heavy sword pointed up. A flash of white teeth appeared as she smiled in glee at what she assumed was going to be an easy match.*

*Elaine held up her blade one handed and felt the ripples of energy flooding into her being. She could slightly see the dull glow that the sword emitted and was glad that no one else had noticed this. The engravings were hard to see as she stared at them and tried to find out what they said. Blue eyes slowly lifted and glared at deep brown overjoyed eyes.*

*Rebecca charged in first, driving her sword downwards with such brute force. Elaine swiftly held up her blade horizontally and swept Rebecca's sword to her right side, leaving Rebecca's sword stabbed into the wooden floor. Elaine had timed it perfectly so that the brute force was turned against Rebecca. Elaine's agility allowed her to quickly move away from Rebecca who was slightly surprised and fuming about how easily she was flicked aside.*

*Rebecca hastily retrieved her sword from the wood and stood at the ready again. She lunged forward with multiple strikes as Elaine went on the defensive, blocking the blows with her blade. Rebecca tried to find an opening and started to gain an advantage. Elaine was being pushed back since she was unfamiliar with sword fighting. She only had enough skill to see where the sword was coming from and blocking it.*

*Blue eyes continued to swiftly follow the sword aimed at her and her arms swiftly tried to comply at what she was seeing. The sword fighting had sped up and Rebecca was pressing on her without any mercy. It was true that she only held the most basic skills of the sword. She knew which end to hold and how to block and attack. However the intricacies of swordplay were beyond her. Her right hand was sweaty from the repeated blows on her blade. She could feel the blade slightly vibrating from the blows and also felt the hilt bindings tighten more firmly around her wrist. The wrappings had started to move up her forearm and it was slowly getting a firmer grip on her arm.*

*Rebecca laughed in glee as she was gaining an advantage. She didn't let up and continued to pound against the blade that she truly wanted. Her eyes were transfixed on the blade that did nothing but block each blow. It was a shame that such a beautiful blade was being wielded by an amateur. Lean muscles became bulky with power as she added more force to her blows. Her body could feel that Elaine was slowly weakening. It was only a matter of time before Elaine would drop the blade and it would become hers.*

*Suddenly time was stopped and everyone stood frozen in place except for Elaine. She tiredly held up her blade, ready to block the next blow that didn't come. Her confused mind only just registered that everyone was frozen. Blue eyes swiftly glanced around and spotted a very young woman who looked similar to the passer-by. Thin eyebrows hiked up into her hairline seeing that this young woman was staring at her and was not frozen like the others.*

*"Who are you?" asked Elaine as she lowered her blade to her right side.*

*"Greetings Elaine Melda of Ihsoy, I am Artie and have been enjoying your round with Rebecca Calin. You have great potential and spirit. You also have a lot of strength and energy" said Artie in her usual adolescent voice. She smiled widely and looked amusedly at Elaine.*

*"Did you do this?" asked Elaine as she indicated everything around. She was too shocked to correct Artie that she wasn't from Ihsoy. She could still feel the trembles from the vibration caused when the two swords collided with each other. Blue eyes locked with grey as Artie nodded her head enthusiastically with a big grin across her face. "Are you the one who appeared to me in the forest?"*

*"Hah! I don't look that much like my sis...do I?" asked Artie in amusement. However she didn't wait for Elaine to reply to that statement. She sat on a tall crate that was used for storing dried food and kicked her legs out childishly.*

*"What brings you here?" asked Elaine in a soft growl.*

*"I just wanted to let you know that you better figure out what the blade says before it is too late. I was sent here by my sister to tell you this. However I'm sure we will meet again. Get ready!" said Artie and before Elaine knew what was happening, she was standing in front of Rebecca with her blade raised ready to block Rebecca's sword.*

*Rebecca put all her weight behind the swing and was surprised that Elaine was able to block it. Her arms were starting to tire at the amount of effort that she was using to attack with. She was disappointed in her skill level since she assumed she was much more skilled than Elaine. Her muscles stood out as she kept up her assault.*

*Elaine had lucked out with the first strike after Artie returned everything. Blue eyes swiftly glanced around to see if the young woman with grey eyes just like her sister was still around. However she did not see that young woman with a childish manner. She felt the blade in her right hand tighten once more as a sword swing was aimed to take off her head. Elaine instinctively ducked for once and punched Rebecca in the abdomen with her left hand.*

*Rebecca jumped back and held her stomach to feel the damage. It was slightly bruised but she could go on. She wondered why Elaine didn't just simply use that opening and slashed her with the sword. She was a little confused as to why Elaine would punch her instead. Her deep brown eyes looked deeply into blue electric eyes to try and figure out what was going through Elaine's mind.*

*The blade started to bind itself higher up Elaine's arm. It felt a little frightened by the vibrations that ran through it every time it met with the metal of the other sword. It continued to squeeze Elaine's hand and wanted Elaine to use its full potential or at least a part of it. It could feel the slight fear that was slowly festering in Elaine's soul.*

*Elaine felt the blade in her hand and knew that she was lucky to dodge that last strike. There was a possibility that the strength behind that swing could have broken the blade and taken her head if she had chosen to block. Her mind scrambled around to see if she could figure out some way to turn the tide. However her mind had other ideas and was stuck with what Artie had said. She had to figure out the words engraved on her blade to gain true strength.*

*Rebecca charged again at Elaine with all of her might and Elaine was only able to dodge out of the way. However Rebecca was now being completely merciless. Her swings changed direction immediately and Elaine had no choice but to use her blade to block the blows. Rebecca smiled with glee seeing the inevitable. The blade would either break and no one could have it or it would fly out of Elaine's hands and Elaine would be forced to surrender. However either way Elaine was going to die by her hands.*

*Blue eyes could see what Rebecca was aiming to do. This was her final strike to determine everything. Elaine had to figure out something to do. Her mind revolved around mainly thinking about Artie. Her eyes fell briefly on her blade as she glanced at the engravings. They were more distinct now and she could see them clearly. Elaine's mind un-jumbled the symbols into words that she could understand.*

*The engravings read: "Thee whom wields thy blade, call thy name. Strength, power and skill will be yours. I am... Theodore."*

*Elaine glanced up at deep brown eyes excited about her victory when she was half way through her swing. Blue eyes looked at the blade and whispered "Theodore" in a soft growl that no one*

*but the blade heard. The blade in her hand shimmered with blinding light and lit up the whole centre of the village.*

*Darisa stood on her toes in worry. She had seen the seriousness in Rebecca's eyes and knew that the final blow was to kill Elaine. Her hands were clenched tight unable to stop the battle between the two women. Black eyes watched as Elaine's lips barely moved. Then all of a sudden, blinding light filled the arena and everyone was forced to close and shield their eyes. After a few moments, Darisa cleared her eyes as the light dimmed and she was staring at Elaine and Rebecca with her mouth hanging open in shock like so many other women who were watching.*

*Elaine stood over Rebecca with her renewed blade pointed at Rebecca's throat. Rebecca's sword was flung out of her hands and lay imbedded in a tree trunk that was used to support the wooden floor. The blade in Elaine's right hand glowed brightly and a bright blue aura surrounded it. Elaine stood stock still as she held the blade menacingly close to Rebecca's throat. Rebecca instinctively took a loud swallow and looked up into fiery blue eyes holding her life by a very fine thread.*

*"I guess you are worthy to wield that sword" said Rebecca in a weak joke.*

*Elaine raised her blade from Rebecca's throat and lifted her right arm into the sky. Blue electric eyes were trained on Rebecca and her muscles were pulled taut as she was about to let Rebecca feel her wrath. Deep brown eyes looked up in fear as she saw her life about to end. Elaine felt immense power flood into her being.*

*"Elaine stop!" yelled Tiffany with wide eyes. She ran into the centre and stood before Elaine, bodily protecting Rebecca. She looked deep into blue eyes and could not see her comrade in them. She didn't even see her friend in them.*

*Elaine stood stock still with her arm poised to strike. Blue eyes were glazed. They didn't recognise the person in front of her or the many women standing around. Her face was a stoic mask as she stared unseeingly at Tiffany. Elaine felt the pulse of power flow through her arm and immediately swung the blade down.*

*"Elaine stop" yelled Rita as she held a hand on Elaine's right arm preventing it from slashing through Tiffany. Her muscled arm tensed as she tried to hold Elaine at bay. However she suddenly saw Elaine's body shift and the blade was swinging for her. Rita's dark eyes widened in shock and fear, as she watched the blade come towards her neck.*

*"ELAINE!" yelled Darisa in shock as she scrambled up to Elaine's left. She had drawn out Tiffany's sword and swiftly stood in front of the blade's path. Her heart skipped a beat as Elaine's blade continued its path. Her eyes widened and she braced herself for the impact.*

*Elaine continued her swing. Her mind and eyes did not recognise anything. She was just an emotionless body swinging a blade around just because she could. Her eyes suddenly fell on black eyes that looked familiar to her. Her blade was still flowing with the motion. Blue eyes lit up as she recognised Darisa. Her blade soared through the sword that Darisa held and broke it*

*in half. The blade continued its course and she felt the energy surge through her arm. The new energy gave her the strength to stop her blade right next to Darisa's neck. Blue eyes widened in fear and she stood stock still.*

*Darisa stood still breathing hard as she finally saw blue eyes of recognition. She slowly rested her arm at her side with the broken sword still in her hand. "It is alright, Elaine. You can put down the sword now" said Darisa in a soft caring voice.*

*Elaine carefully removed the blade from Darisa's neck and looked around her with wide eyes. She only just noticed that Rebecca was lying on the ground with her sword imbedded in the wood of a tree trunk. She finally noticed that Tiffany and Rita were next to her as well. Elaine slowly felt the blade tip hit the ground and heard silence around her.*

*"Elaine, it is alright. You need to calm down ..." said Darisa however she could clearly see that those blue eyes were not calming down. She gently lifted her arm and placed it gently on Elaine's shoulder, giving it a slight squeeze.*

*"The sword is evil..." said one of the women in the crowd.*

*Blue eyes darted around, wide with fear. However they finally rested on black eyes that she trusted beyond measure. Her ears blocked out the murmur that was going around and her sight zoned in only on Darisa as it did not see the women slowly pressing in. Her arm was slightly shaking as her mind tried frantically to calm down after it realised she could have killed Darisa.*

*"Elaine, listen to me carefully. You must drop that sword" said Darisa.*

*The murmur among the women was slowly increasing in volume and Elaine was finally hearing the small snippets of comments. All of them were not nice and considered cutting off her arm. Blue eyes looked around frantically. She felt unwelcomed as she saw the eyes of her village.*

*"You must leave for me" whispered Darisa into Elaine's ear. She saw the fear build up even more into those blue eyes. Her hand stayed fastened onto Elaine's shoulder. "You could have killed me."*

*Elaine was shocked by the women pressing in. Her ears only picked up that she must leave and that she could have killed Darisa. Her soft boots were moving before she realised where she was going and then she was gone from sight.*

*"She left before I could tell her to wait in my quarters. I drove her away because I didn't step in to stop her from going through with the challenge" sobbed Darisa as she lied on the bed in a hunch over her pillow. Her face was teary and there was nothing she could do but wait and see what the future would bring as the grey eyed woman gently stroked her hair. She had felt frightened for her life that day but she couldn't express her real feelings. She felt as though she had betrayed Elaine's trust.*

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## Chapter 5: Interesting Greeting

Elaine stepped up to the cluster of trees that looked familiar to her. Blue eyes glanced up and could slightly make out the little niche that was made for the outer patrol post. A cloak covered her head so that no one could see who she was. Her lips twitched as she felt the bark of the tree. It was nostalgic and she remembered those long nights in which she had to sit up there.

"Are we there yet?" asked Maria as she unslung her water skin and sipped from it thirstily. They had been travelling for the whole day now and it was almost dark. The sky was already reddening under the sunset. Her green eyes lifted up and faced Elaine who looked amused for once. Her stoic mask was gone, replaced with a small smile. "Hey, blue eyes, can you hear me?"

Elaine shook herself and turned to face green amused eyes. Her blue eyes returned to the present and she glanced around for any sign of danger besides that of the five women sitting in the niche with bows drawn tight. Her ears could hear their steady breathing although the five women were twenty five metres above them. "We are here. We are on the outer skirts of Ardious and their outer post is right above us" whispered Elaine in a soft growl.

Maria stood stock still and was tempted to tilt her head up but twelve months with this warrior told her to stay calm and not look. Her own hood covered her head as she adjusted it to keep the light shower of rain from soaking her fair head. It was only a light sun shower but she had learnt the hard way that weather was not her friend. She had gotten very sick when the weather changed drastically from hot to cold and had put Elaine through a whole lot. "So are we going to make camp somewhere?"

"We will soon but I want to travel at least for another little bit." Blue eyes glanced around at the forest floor to see if there were any signs of travel. She figured that by tomorrow morning the men would reach Ardious village and something major was going to happen. She felt for her sword hilt and was reassured by the warm feel as the hilt wrappings glided gently across her fingers. A long muscular arm pointed east in the direction of the village. "We go that way."

Green eyes looked around in wonder. Her mind was trying to imagine how everything would look in the middle of the day. The lush green foliage, leafy forest floor with bits of bark and sticks around, as well as the many great vines that wrapped around the old forest trees, all caught her imagination. She smiled widely as she wrapped herself around the idea of living in such a beautiful place without the noise and stink of the normal villages she had been to.

They were finally out of earshot from the five warriors when Elaine started to speak up again. Her voice was a soft growl either way since she wasn't sure what ears were lurking about. "We will make camp close to here but we will move on to another spot that I know of. However that would involve tree climbing and it can be dangerous in the dark with the predators that lurk about. Or we could continue and I know a place a little bit south off our path that is a nice clearing. What do you want to do?" asked Elaine gently.

Maria wasn't fond of tree climbing but she could accomplish it. She had balance and appropriate boots however she had never climbed a tree in the dark. Also as she looked around, the many

forest trees around were slick with moss which meant making sure she had a sure footing would be difficult. She was also sure that Elaine was talking about a really high place off the ground and wasn't fond of the idea that she might fall off. "How far is this clearing?" asked Maria.

It was some time later in the darkest of night that green eyes looked around with tired eyes. Elaine had reconsidered her decision about camping for the night and was leading the way through the darkness. Green eyes could barely follow her like usual since Elaine almost blended herself in with her surroundings. Maria readjusted her backpack as she walked and yawned for the umpteenth time since midnight. She was beyond tired but made sure not to slow down or show it to her companion.

Elaine swiftly guided them both between trees, avoiding traps for animals and people alike. She assumed that the group of men would have been greeted just outside of Ardious territory so that no harm would befall them if they were guests. Her blue eyes moved hastily around to make sure that there were no lurking predators however her ears had picked up something else entirely different.

Swish, an arrow flew in a straight line headed for Maria's hooded head. Elaine's ears picked up the sound of the arrow being notched and knew where it was headed. A very swift swipe of Elaine's arm and her hand grasped the shaft of the arrow firmly in her left hand just inches from Maria's head. Two more arrows followed and were swiftly caught. Blue eyes hastily looked in the direction of where the arrows had come from but the archer was no longer there.

Green eyes turned toward Elaine's hand and widened as she saw three arrow points facing her. Her body froze as she sensed that Elaine was trying to find who had sent the arrows. She felt her sword at her hip but there was no need to draw it if she didn't have a target in front of her. She was also at a disadvantage since she was not familiar with the area. However Elaine seemed to know somehow and that was all the reassurance that she needed.

Blue eyes glanced around but could not find the perpetrator but her ears were following the soft boots that were clumsily clambering through the branches in the dark. Her ears could tell that this individual was either young or inexperienced since tree climbing was meant to be done without making any noise. Her fingers grasped around the shaft of the arrows and felt the familiar wood. It was an Ardious arrow and one that was freshly made. Her right hand had rested on Maria's shoulder so that she remained still as she tracked the perpetrator.

Maria felt out of place as she saw with her own green eyes as Elaine seemed to tune into her surroundings as if she was one with the forest. Green eyes followed blue and noticed the head slightly moving to listen for any sound out there. Her own ears were also trying to detect the perpetrator but it was very faint and infrequent noises. Her own body was slowly trying to tune into the forest, to be one with the world.

"Let's move that way" growled Elaine softly as she indicated east. She wanted to get to the village as soon as possible and didn't want to get sidetracked from getting there by sunrise. Her hand gently steered Maria ahead of her so that the perpetrator was behind them. She gently



guided Maria into a light jog, all of their tiredness gone since the adrenaline kicked in from being attacked.

"Any idea who attacked us?" asked Maria while jogging as best she could without tripping over a protruding root from the ground. One hand was on her sword as she ran so that it didn't hit against her body and make more noise than necessary. Also it helped to make sure that the sword didn't inhibit her running.

Elaine upped the pace even more. Her hand still rested on Maria's shoulder as they ran together. Her blue eyes were focused on what was ahead so that nothing would slow them down and to also make sure that Maria didn't trip or fall. Her ears were trained to scan what was behind them. She had picked up a warrior following them now and could hear that there were at least four others following her. Her hood continued to cover her dark hair and she was content to leave it that way since the rain was coming down a little harder. "The arrows in my hand belong to Ardious because of the green tail feathers and the wooden shaft made from the local forest trees. There is no metallic arrow head because those belong to the art of war for men. Also this one in particular is freshly made since you can still smell the sap from the shaft."

"So why are we running away?" asked Maria as she tried to keep up the pace which was very fast and dangerous because of their limited vision. Green eyes glanced around hastily to see if there were more following them but she didn't see any. Her hearing had picked up five people following them swiftly among the trees. "Isn't it better if we just face them?"

Blue eyes glared at the path ahead and remembered her departure from these lands. Her mind was made up. There was no way that she was going to let them try to get inside her defences that she had placed up after that incident. She just wanted to know what her Aunt wanted and be gone before anyone noticed her. She ran swiftly making sure that Maria kept from tripping and that she didn't slow down. Her small growl could barely be heard. "It is better if they don't find out who we are. Also once we find out what the message truly is then we will be able to get out of here."

"You don't sound very fond of this place. Why?" asked Maria as she tried to continue the conversation so that she didn't need to concentrate on her aching legs. Her adrenaline had already passed and she was running out of gas. She needed to stop and the only way she knew how to get a small rest, would be to disappear or confront them.

Blue electric eyes caught Maria tiring and she knew that they couldn't keep this up much longer. Her options were limited since they had decided to run. If they stopped there would be a confrontation that she didn't want to face. Also there was the possibility that Darisa wanted her to come quietly. Her mind tried to swim through all of the solutions that she had in her head and tried to figure out which was best for their situation.

Suddenly Elaine wrapped her strong muscular arms around Maria's small waist and hugged her to her body before leaping into the air. She swiftly and lithely flipped Maria around to get her to hang onto her back before catching a dangling vine. Strong arms managed to swing them both onto a high tree branch before equally strong legs leapt gracefully from tree branch to tree

branch. She was so nimble that she was able to outpace their followers and be able to dodge the many tree trunks that were in their path.

Maria held on for dear life as she felt the wind against her face. Somehow her hood remained covering her head. She was extremely glad that Elaine only had a small backpack and only carried the essentials. Elaine's sword was a slight obstacle in holding on but Maria was just mighty glad that she was off her feet. She just liked her companion's ability to be able to do a lot of things that most others couldn't.

"Hang on tight. I'm going to go a little faster so that we can completely outrun them. Also please keep an eye out and warn me" said Elaine in a growl with her head turned so that Maria could hear her. Her legs were holding up since she was keeping a decent pace but then she put on a burst of speed as she felt Maria's slight nod of the head. The trees and leaves flew by them in a blur as Elaine leapt swiftly and nimbly from branch to branch. Her body was starting to relax at the steady rate and she was glad that she had kept training night and day no matter how tired she had been during her travels with the blonde.

"We're losing them" whispered one of the pursuing warrior women with dark brown curly hair. Aileen's hazel eyes could barely keep up with the lithe body of the hooded person who had stopped Ramira's arrows. Her strong body was having a hard time trying to judge each branch and make the best leap to the next. "Lista, what should we do?" asked the warrior in a soft high pitched voice that was showing signs of tiring.

"We try to keep up as much as possible until we lose sight of them" replied Lista. She wiped her brow with the back of her hand as sweat started to accumulate there. Her tanned arms, black hair and eyes made her difficult to see. However she was as strong as the other members of her squad except for their squad leader, Tunis.

"We are already starting to lose sight of them" replied the last member of their group. Kira was having difficulty trying to keep up with her squad. She was the weakest link but she was part of the squad because of her medical skills. Her blonde hair stood out among them since it was short and she also had blue eyes. Her tall lithe body managed to leap from tree to tree but everyone could see that she was struggling.

"Halt" called Tunis from the lead. Her hand was held up and they all managed to descend safely to the forest floor to rest after pursuing for so long. Her short curly brown hair was drenched with sweat. She knew that she could go on a bit longer but her squad needed a break and there was always ways to track the two hooded strangers if they left tracks. "Take a break. We will follow their trail in a little while. Ramira, I want you to explain what happened to the arrows you shot" said Tunis a little frustrated.

Ramira slowly approached Tunis with a slight smile and shrug of the broad shoulders. Her red long hair swayed gently even though her hair was drenched like the rest of them. She noted that the rain had not let up and it would get worse soon enough. "I don't know what happened really" said Ramira honestly. "I was aiming a foot above the smaller hooded person's head but I didn't shoot."

"What do you mean you didn't shoot?" asked Tunis.

"I only got a good aim and before I knew it, three arrows had been fired. Somebody was below where I was but I didn't catch who" replied Ramira. Her brown eyes slowly followed Tunis's arm as Tunis retrieved an arrow from her pack. "As you can see, they are all there."

Tunis nodded her head, accepting Ramira's explanation. Her light brown eyes had definitely seen the path of the arrows. It had been directed at the hooded people and she had only instructed one warning shot. She replaced the arrow and quickly glanced around to see if the others were ready to go again. She needed to pick up the trail soon before the rain washed the tracks away.

Aileen was already leaping up into the trees and checking the last place that the hooded stranger had landed. She landed gently on the branch, closer to the trunk since she didn't want to accidentally alter the tracks. Her eyes scanned the branch carefully and then her brow scrunched in confusion. She scanned the branch again and looked down at expectant eyes. "She used this branch right?" asked Aileen.

"What's the problem?" asked Tunis as her eyes squinted up to see Aileen because of the rain. She could barely make out Aileen since the rain had doubled. It was going to be a long night if they had to track the two strangers in this weather. "Did you find out which way they went?"

"There are no tracks Tunis. There is not a mark on this bark that is out of place. I could have sworn that she landed right here. The branch had slightly swayed under her weight" said Aileen disturbed by the conclusion. Even the warriors of Ardious were not skilled enough to leave no traces of their path. "I'm sure this was the spot that she started to speed up."

"Is there any sign of her passage then?" asked Lista.

Aileen looked carefully around for a broken twig or crumpled leaves however there were no signs of anyone passing through this spot. She hastily rubbed her eyes to rid them of rain water before glancing around again to make sure. "No sign of passage" yelled Aileen in an annoyed manner. Everyone knew that she was slightly angry being the best scout of the squad and being seen as an amateur by a mere stranger.

"Well whoever it is must be from Ardious since we are the only tree climbers around. Also it looked as though they knew where they were going. They are heading in the direction of the village. If we head straight there from here we might bump into them on the way or meet them at the village. It could be one of the young ones playing a joke and testing themselves" explained Kira with a yawn.

"The young ones can't move like they did" said Ramira as she shouldered her bag. She adjusted her bow and glanced around at the surrounding trees. Her observation skills were only slightly hindered by the rain. "The trees around here are difficult to judge. One misstep and you can fall straight to the bottom. The two strangers were very skilled to guide their way around at their speed and not miss a step."

"It almost looked like they were jumping together as well. I couldn't really see them clearly but it was almost as if the taller one was leading the smaller one. Well almost looked like the taller one was carrying the smaller one actually" commented Lista. She glanced around to see her squad all agree with her observation.

"Let's get back to the village and report to the Queen then" said Tunis as she started to swing up and land near Aileen. Her long legs managed to cushion her landing so that the branch did not move too much and Aileen was not knocked off balance. She waited for the rest of her squad to follow suit before leading them back to the village.

It was sunrise when green eyes opened wide to see the forest floor full of colour. There were many leaves scattered about as well as soft dirt and sticks. Green eyes glanced to her companion who was nestled comfortably next to her under a patchy cloak that blended in with the forest floor and part of a tree trunk. They had worked in the dark of night to assemble the cloak before climbing down a tree some ways off and wandering here. She didn't move a muscle as she felt Elaine softly breathe.

It was very rare to still have Elaine asleep past sunrise however Maria knew that it must have been from the long journey of carrying her to this spot. Maria had actually fallen asleep hanging on and Elaine had laughed at her when they were to work on the cloak. It was quite funny considering she held on for the whole way and made sure she didn't slacken her grip. Her green eyes quickly glanced out at the empty forest floor. She would have looked up at the trees but that would move the cloak and might reveal them to any lurking eyes.

Maria was rewarded for staying still as she heard five women approaching the small clearing that was in front of her. She could tell that they had been the pursuers from before since the sound of their boots and weight identified them to her ears. Slowly the five women came into view and she stayed perfectly still considering the five women were only a few paces away. They were all well built except for one who was lean muscled. Maria almost jumped as she felt a light hand on her arm. She glanced over to see electric blue eyes focused on the five women.

Tunis carefully walked around as she slowly stretched her strong leg muscles since they had been travelling since they had lost those two strangers. She slowly cooled down her muscles and glanced around at her squad who were doing various activities to cool down their muscles. Everyone looked tired and it was almost time for them to report in before knocking off. Brown eyes took in the familiar forest floor but then her gaze stopped. Her brow scrunched up in confusion.

Aileen and Lista noticed Tunis and continued their exercises while waiting for an order. Their squad leader had found something odd and they were duty bound to be back up. Kira and Ramira were oblivious since they were both tired beyond measure. However after a while they noticed that they were taking longer than usual to cool down and kept up their tasks as Tunis carefully walked up to a tree with vines wrapped around it.

Blue electric eyes stilled and could see that the leader of the squad was coming closer to their spot. Strong right hand slowly slithered to the blade and held the hilt with calloused fingers. The

hilt wrappings of the blade slowly started to wrap around Elaine's hand as it felt Elaine's need. Her body became rigid and carefully overwhelmed Maria's presence so that she was fully protected.

Suddenly soft leather boots landed on the piece of log that was lying near many vines and trees that Tunis was looking at. Brown eyes looked at Tunis and smiled. "You guys look wiped" said Tiffany with a huge smile as she glanced around at the squad. "You guys are a little late. I was expecting you a little over an hour ago. What kept you guys?"

Tunis relaxed. It must have been a log that had fallen down during the night. Her brown eyes swiftly met brown and smiled. "We were held up but I'm sure that you will hear it in the report. We are going to talk to the Queen now. What brings you here?" asked Tunis as she placed her hands on her hips.

Tiffany hopped down off the log and closed the space between the two of them. Strong arms enveloped Tunis and Tunis reciprocated the action. "Hello, sweetie, welcome back. You better hurry up and report before the visitors come. Temporary lodging for them is built over in that direction" said Tiffany as she pointed over Tunis's shoulder. She smiled and placed a gentle kiss on Tunis's cheek before letting go.

Blue and green eyes watched in fascination as Tiffany and Tunis slowly made their way to some rope vines that had been let down. The whole squad climbed up first before Tiffany and Tunis had their go. Maria stared at the vines for a moment but was held back firmly by Elaine. She could see that it was an opportunity to follow them but as soon as she was about to voice her idea, the vines were leaving the ground.

A strong hand firmly grasped around a sword hilt slowly loosened as Elaine tried to get her emotions under control. She had wanted to rush out there and greet her old friend Tiffany as if a year had not gone by. However her blade had reminded her that not all of the Ardious women were as forgiving. Her soft lips slightly parted to whisper quietly to her companion. "They are very cautious and apparently more so than usual. Greetings like that are usually done in the village centre after their debriefing. The woman who came to greet them was putting on an act. She was actually checking us out and had observed us for quite some time. Luckily she dismissed us for a log" whispered Elaine as softly as possible.

"So we were actually lucky to not have been found out?" asked Maria surprised.

"Yeah and my head had to pay for it" replied Elaine as she rubbed her head with her left hand cautious not to move their covering. Blue eyes glanced around and slowly peered up into the trees. She could barely see the wooden floor of the village since there was at least two layers of branches hiding it. However she could hear the activity well enough. "We're going to get up there and check it out."

"Aren't there guards?" asked Maria.

"There are always guards" replied Elaine with a roll of her blue electric eyes.

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## **Chapter 6: Unexpected awakening...**

Daniel Gareth stood rigidly as he combed his horse down while waiting for his men to pack up camp. His ears were sharp and had already detected their guides coming back from wherever they had gone. His brown eyes caught the sight of the forest and knew how deceiving it could be. The clatter of noise from his men was something that he had noticed since he woke up. The noise that they made almost made him snap at them to do things quietly but he was sure that this noise was the usual that his men made when getting ready. Daniel casually placed the horse's brush in his sack on the saddle before turning around bodily to inspect his men. He saw four familiar faces among them as if they were his brothers. However they were in no way related by blood.

Christopher Hayem was his best mate and a brilliant swordsman who was built like an ox. His instincts and strength had served all of his brothers well. He was quite attractive with the ladies and was known to show off on a number of occasions. His dark eyes and curly dark hair had landed him in a few situations that needed the local authorities to get involved.

Garron Marsden was Christopher's cousin and he wielded an axe and shield which served really well with Christopher. Garron was always protecting his cousin's back. However his dark eyes and curly dark hair was always unkempt. He would always drink at night and damn all of the consequences. Only his cousin of late had been able to straighten him out so that he kept the number of drinks to a minimum.

Yarra Hugo was the best scout ever and had a fine hand for the bow. He could shoot a moving target in the neck at a hundred paces. His hazel eyes were amazingly sharp and his instincts had gotten them all out of situations on a number of occasions. Even though he had blonde hair and a lean muscled body, he was known to do some unexplainable things. He was always looking out for his mates and never boasted about any achievements even though there were quite a few.

Daniel's last mate was Benjamin Fuller who was the strategist and close confidante. He was skilful with his daggers but could also use a sword. He stayed close to Daniel since his advice had always served him best. Benjamin had outsmarted Kings and generals in their tactics to win at every little game that they indulged themselves in. He had keen black eyes and long black hair that was tied in a ponytail. He was well built but didn't compare to the cousins.

Daniel looked at the other ten men that were assembling noisily. All ten men were strangers to him but he was sure that they would follow his orders or those of his closest mates. So far they had all been friendly and seemed to do their duty. All of them were armoured and had various weapons that they specialized in. Daniel smiled as all the men finished packing and all turned to him for further instructions.

Suddenly four female warriors of Ardious gracefully descended from the lush trees by swinging down with the use of thick green vines. All four women warriors landed on the soft ground without a sound as if the wind had carried it away before ears could pick it up. All of the women

wore leather attire suited for their combat style however only one of them stood out among the others.

Dark eyes looked around at the camp of men and smiled in polite greeting. As soon as dark eyes focused on their leader, Daniel, the smile was nowhere to be seen. Her long dark curly hair was only slightly plastered to her head because of the rain that they had travelled through.

"Where is Tiffany Parlios? I thought she would be here to lead us once more to your village. I don't understand" said Daniel, a little confused. His brow was scrunched up and he was clearly not sure if a problem had risen in the night. "Is there something wrong?" Daniel could see in his peripherals that all of his men were on edge for the answer in case they had to defend themselves against a surprise attack or something.

"I am Rita Vivian and I will be your guide through our forest. Tiffany has been called away by our Queen. Do not be alarmed. We are only here to escort your group since there are many traps that are for animals around these parts" replied Rita in a deep voice. She glanced around at the party and nodded her head seeing that they were ready. "Let's go since the weather is holding." She swiftly turned on her heel and waited for them to follow her on foot since it was too hard to ride with all of the trees around.

The three other members of Rita's team took up positions; one on each side of the group and one on the rear so that there were no stragglers. Rita took the lead and didn't look back. She knew that if something were to happen to her, the rear guard would be able to escape and report speedily to the Queen. However she knew that it would not be necessary since the appointed meeting was important.

"So are we headed to the village then?" asked Daniel.

"Yes, we should get there by midday at this pace" replied Rita without looking back. Her dark eyes were scanning the trees and forest floor around her for any dangers that might oppose the group. Her hands did not stray far from her dagger and her body was fully alert.

Elsewhere closer to the village, Elaine and Maria had managed to move from the guard's sights. They had left their patchy cloak behind in the same position so that no one would notice their presence just yet. It had been Elaine's idea to leave it behind and Maria had been a little hesitant.

Maria closely followed Elaine's tall frame. Her body tried to mimic what her partner was doing and her right hand remained on her sword hilt so that it didn't rattle and give their position away. Green eyes were alert and glancing around to spot anything at all. Her mind had sifted through her vision and tossed out all of the unnecessary things. She was ready for anything.

Blue eyes looked ahead and saw a big forest tree that erupted into the sky. The bark on this rough tree was slowly peeling away and provided little in terms of places to grip onto to climb. However she knew this tree and its secrets. There was a way up that she had secretly carved out for herself. She slowly approached the old tree and felt the rough bark with calloused fingers.

Blue eyes glanced up as a quirk of lips expressed her satisfaction that she had indeed found the right tree.

Slim body stopped right behind the tall frame of Elaine. Green eyes glanced around to make sure that there were no guards. A slight tap on her shoulder brought her attention to blue eyes. Her ears were cocked as she listened to the quiet growl that was Elaine's voice.

"I'm going to climb this tree and you are going to do exactly what I do. Make sure you follow every step otherwise you will fall to the ground and it's going to be a long fall. Also don't stop climbing even if we are spotted. I will cover for you" explained Elaine. She then checked her backpack and placed her hand firmly on the bark of the tree. She looked closer and found the first handhold that she had carved out and was camouflaged. Elaine slowly ascended the tree and made absolutely no noise. Blue eyes watched carefully as Maria followed each step. She was proud that Maria had gotten used to heights. It had made some things much easier although it had also caused a few problems.

The climb was slow going since Elaine had to make sure that Maria followed every single step that she had taken. Any shortcuts could cause the climber to fall since Elaine had specifically made the handholds so that it wasn't capable of holding too much weight. Elaine managed to grab the last handhold before briefly pausing to search the platform that was above her.

The area that Elaine had used was actually the back of the Queen's quarters. It was actually the only spot that she knew of that was not guarded upon approach and had the most cover from villagers' eyes. Blue eyes found the place empty and she smiled because she knew there was a guard posted outside the Queen's quarters. The guard would be able to hear any noise that they made and would spot them by simply rounding the corner. However the village seemed to be in an uproar, busily moving around which Elaine assumed would be the arrival of the group of men.

Elaine slowly and quietly levered herself up onto the platform with ease. Her soft boots landed on the rough wooden floor without a sound. Blue eyes looked around to make sure that her child haunting place was indeed intact and she smiled in glee. It seemed that nothing had been touched and everything remained where it was supposed to. She swiftly turned around and watched as Maria climbed up and hopped onto the platform with soft boots that didn't make a sound.

Green eyes looked around at the very small platform area that they now shared. Soft fingers glided over the woodwork of many carved out pieces of wood that were carved into intricate designs. It almost looked as though somebody had been living here and doing things here. Her soft boots quietly bumped into something on the floor and green eyes looked down to see a carved wooden horse about the size of her hand span. Slowly crouching, she picked up the wooden horse with delicate hands and admired the woodwork.

Elaine watched Maria with interested electric eyes. She had been a little nervous returning here since there was a possibility that someone else would have found this spot. However now that she thought about it, no one would dare play around the Queen's quarters unless they wanted to get into trouble and it wasn't like she advertised this area to the other children either. Strong arms slowly reached out and grasped the horse in her now much larger hands. She looked at it with a



glint in her eyes since the horse had been her first carved project. She placed it gently on the floor off to one side and looked up into intrigued green eyes.

"It's beautiful" whispered Maria in a very soft voice that melded with the soft breeze. Green eyes started to melt as blue eyes stared intently back. She felt like she was falling again. Her small frame was becoming numb and her arm slowly started to stretch out un-voluntarily to caress Elaine's soft cheek. However calloused fingers quickly caught her hand and pulled her bodily into Elaine.

"Are you alright?" asked Elaine in a concerned whisper.

"I'm fine" gasped Maria. She was in slight shock that now she had ended up in a hug with Elaine who was slightly concerned for her well being. She slowly looked up into blue eyes and gave a slight twitch of the lips into a hesitant smile. She slowly stepped back and out of the strong arms that held her safe from the world.

Elaine made sure that Maria was stable on her feet before bodily turning to the exit. Her whole body was tingling after that prolonged hug. She only noticed now that the other times before her body had responded in the same manner and her mind was too shocked or busy to register. She could see now through new blue eyes that something was changing in the way she saw Maria. They had been friends for a year and now she realised they had crossed some sort of invisible boundary between friendship and something else. Blue eyes looked ahead at the exit leading around the Queen's quarters. She had to concentrate and put these issues aside for later on when they were somewhere she deemed safe.

Green eyes lingered on the tall form in front of her. It had been numerous times now that Elaine had turned her back and shut out herself from Maria. Green eyes saddened, slowly retreated to the ground in defeat. There was no way that Elaine would feel the same feelings as she did for her. It would be almost impossible except for the fact that blue eyes continued to melt her on the spot and strong arms held her safe on occasion. She sighed unconsciously before putting her game face on. They were here on business; there was plenty of time later for matters of the heart.

"Let's go" whispered Elaine before she slipped out of the hiding spot and edged around the Queen's quarters. Maria was on her heels and they were both impervious to lurking eyes or guards. Elaine glanced behind her to make sure that they were out of the guard's sights. It would be troublesome if they were caught now.

Soft boots moved swiftly and stopped in front of the door to the Queen's quarters. Strong calloused hands slowly pushed the door open without knocking and the tall frame slid into the small opening with a smaller frame following. The door grated closed and was the only sound that registered their entrance. Two forms stood side by side as green and blue eyes met briefly before eyeing the sleeping form in the large bed.

Elaine swiftly glanced around and noticed that the room hadn't changed much since the last time that she had been there. She noted that green eyes were also curiously looking around and finding odd decorations placed on the walls. Blue eyes remained on the sleeping form. It had

only been a year but it looked as though Queen Darisa had not changed at all. Sceptical blue eyes could tell that Darisa was still the formidable warrior that she knew however she saw that dark circles now stained her features.

"Who is she?" asked Maria in a soft whisper.

"Let her sleep" said a voice from a corner of the room that was behind the two women standing in the middle of the room with their backs to the door. The feminine voice continued to flow gracefully into the room at a moderate level that did not disrupt Darisa from her slumber. "She needs her rest before... before she runs herself down to nothing. She is not the same as you remember Elaine..."

Elaine twisted her head around to her left to look over her shoulder and see who was speaking. Blue eyes met familiar grey eyes. She froze in shock. It was the same woman who had warned her about the sword. It was the passer-by who had cremated those ten bodies before leaving and then shimmering back into an apparition to talk only to her. Her soft mouth dropped slightly open as she stared at those grey eyes which had not aged in any way at all.

Grey eyes looked at Elaine and a slow grin formed on her soft lips as she took in the picture in front of her. Elaine was all dark in her leather and armour but her smaller friend contrasted with her to the extreme. It was like they were complete opposites brought together by their circumstances. However grey eyes twinkled with knowledge that knew this pairing was meant to be. She knew that she had appeared once for both women. She also saw the same shock that covered Maria's face. It was amazing that they had both come so far without so much of a guide. Her younger sister Artie had not been so knowledgeable but had always pointed the two women in the right direction to make sure that they were prepared for what was to come.

"What is your name?" asked Maria as she broke the stillness in the room.

"I already told both of you that I could not tell you my name. You are both going to have to try and remember it. You have met me before and you are both my friends... Please don't be alarmed. Artie told me how many times you tried to run her off but all she has done is tried to help you. We mean you no harm" said the grey eyed woman with a beautiful, strong and clear voice.

Blue eyes looked shocked at Maria for having met this woman before their travels together. Slowly her mind started to piece together the very fine grains of the large puzzle. Some things were starting to fall into place just like why Artie would pop out of nowhere and direct them into trouble instead of away from them. Also there was the fact that if they did not face the dangers that Artie led them to then more trouble was on their heels. She remembered that one act of refusal had led both Maria and her running away from a mass of warriors, hell bent to take their heads off.

"Why were we called here?" asked Maria.

"Everything will be revealed in due time. You must be patient" replied the grey eyed woman before she bodily turned around and faced the corner of the room that she had been sitting in waiting for them. She swiftly glanced back and got a glimpse of blue eyes thinking hard before shimmering out of existence.

"Who is that woman?" repeated Maria.

Elaine slowly reached for her blade that was strapped to her backpack. Calloused fingers slowly wrapped around the hilt as the blade bindings gradually circled her strong wrist. She slowly withdrew the sword from her smooth scabbard and held it up in front of her. The blade gave off a blue aura that brightened up the room with its light. She held it up into the air and felt the power ripple through her muscles. It was almost like ecstasy and her mind was trapped on Darisa.

Maria saw the change in her partner's blue eyes and knew immediately that she had to step in before Elaine lost herself. Maria swiftly drew her sword in a flash of motion and turned bodily to stand in front of Elaine. Her sword was now grinding against Elaine's violently with each blade emitting light; Maria's was green and Elaine's was blue. Green eyes fastened to blue and held back the blue blade with all her might. She had seen this happen on a number of occasions but could never stop her. She felt the strain in her lower legs as she tried to hold back Elaine.

Black eyes opened in surprise to see a light show of blue and green with two strangers in her room. She hastily sat up and was too stunned to do anything else. Her voice had left her and now all she could do was watch. Her dark hair fell messily behind her shoulders as she looked up and tried to identify these two people in her room who were obviously in the midst of a struggle.

"Please stop this" begged Maria in a whisper as she stared up into blue eyes with all of her will. The green light from her sword was slowly wavering and she knew that she couldn't hold on much longer. However she couldn't let Elaine just lose her mind. "Please come back to me..."

Blue eyes glazed over kept pushing. Dark images floated through her mind and all she could see was enemy after enemy trying to slice her down. She didn't have a friend here. She was all alone and the only one she could depend on was her blade, Theodore, which was an extension of her soul. She took a step forward trying to get closer to the source of all the misery that she held in her heart.

Suddenly she heard the small plea coming from somewhere just outside of her hearing. Blue eyes scanned around to find the source of the noise and slowly she saw Maria's face as her opponent. She looked at their two blades and froze. Her mind had realised that she had done something wrong again. She had lost herself once more by giving into her power and feelings. Elaine hastily stepped back and lowered her blade. She watched as Maria slowly smiled and lowered her sword.

"Thankyou for coming back..." whispered Maria before her eyes closed of their own volition and she began to fall forward. Her legs had no more strength in them and she had used too much energy to hold Elaine back. She was not as used to her blade as Elaine was and now the side

effects of wielding it was kicking in. All her strength was leaving her and the only thing she could think about was rest.

Elaine swiftly glided onto her knees to catch Maria in her arms. Blue eyes looked at Maria in concern. "I'm sorry, little one. Please forgive me..." whispered Elaine as she briefly closed her eyes to regain her self balance. Her mind was in a jumble of confusion since Artie had explicitly told her that she would stop losing her centre and mind when she trained with the sword everyday. She had trained but the incidences of losing her mind amidst battle continued. She couldn't control herself.

Darisa watched in confusion as the two strangers were melded together on their knees in the middle of the room on the wooden floor. Black eyes noted that both were women and were very skilled in swordsmanship. However there was something familiar about the taller one that struck her in an odd way. She remained still and quiet as she watched in case the fury of the taller one struck her into pieces on her own bed with no guards around.

Maria slowly opened her eyes and stared up a little shocked to see that she was in Elaine's strong arms. She felt the tears slide down Elaine's face and knew that she had only just managed to stop Elaine for the first time. She had remembered her talk with Artie about getting stronger so that she could help her companion in times of need. Green eyes guessed this was one of those times. Her slender arm slowly reached up into Elaine's hood and wiped the tears away with her thumb.

Elaine felt the small gesture and knew that she had been forgiven. However her tears did not abate. They fell in earnest as she held on tightly to the only person that she had called friend. She knew the consequences of her actions and she could have killed her partner. It was the hardest thing to try and put aside but if Maria hadn't also been given a blade she wouldn't know what to do with herself.

"It's ok, warrior. I'm here for you" whispered Maria as she continued to hold her hand against Elaine's cheek in support. She smiled with a huge grin and slowly Elaine's arms loosened a notch before she slowly disentangled herself from her partner. She slowly stood up with Elaine and both turned to look at Darisa who was staring with wide eyes.

Artie slowly shook her head. This was the twenty-something-time that Elaine had lost control of herself because of the power that oozed from her body. She slowly turned her head and looked at her sister who was also looking through the window at the two women. Artie couldn't see why this was continuing and how she could stop it. Maria was not having the same problem and this puzzled her to no end.

"Artie, there is nothing that you could have done to prevent what happened. She will continue to lose control if she doesn't resolve what happened back then. Once she remembers, everything will return to the way it was meant to be. There is no stopping her on the path that she has chosen" said Artie's sister in her usual tone.

Artie scrunched up her facial features into a frustrated expression. She was angry that there was little progress and everything else was moving too quickly for her liking. However she could not

interfere any more than she had. She had already been scolded for stopping Elaine on one of her rampages already by her father, the mightiest of them all. "Why can't she remember? It's not hard for us to remember things. Why is it so difficult for her? She has already managed to use most of her physical power" replied Artie in a huff.

"The mind is a delicate thing. If something drastic happens, the mind is strong enough to partition that memory away so that it doesn't affect the person's ability to function. However Elaine is a special case as you know. I am sure that father has something up his sleeve as well in her future. Right now he has left it up to us to prepare her for the trials that are to come. Soon she will discover a new part of herself" explained the grey eyed woman as she casually glanced at her hands. She could still see the stains there even though it had been ages since she had been at that place that daunted all of them.

Artie's eyes saddened as she saw her sister stare at her hands and knew that there was nothing she could do to relieve her of her memories. There were just some things that were meant to be like their father had said. All they could do now was try to fix everything so that everything could be restored. "Sister, your hands are no longer stained with blood. Just let it go and focus on what we have to do for Elaine. I know that you miss her."

Grey eyes saddened, slowly looked up at Artie and gave her a weak smile before turning away from the window that could see all and retreating to her quarters. Artie watched the retreating back and could almost kick herself for saying something like that. She knew that her sister was hurting but to bring up the memory again was the most stupendous thing she had done once again.

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## **Chapter 7: Ancients arrival...**

Ariana Melda sat quietly on a branch of a forest tree near the top. Her slender legs swung back and forth childishly as she felt the soft breeze blow her long blonde hair eastward. The bright sun blazed down on the crown of her head and she felt like she was on top of the world with all of the natural beauty surrounding her.

Unbeknownst to Ariana, she was being watched by a young fellow who was dressed in light leather. His dark short curly hair was unkempt and barely moved from his head as he quietly leapt from branch to branch to try and get higher to see who was sitting far above without a care in the world. His black eyes found a good high branch and he jumped over with powerful long muscular legs. The branch only slightly swayed under his weight but he had impeccable balance and found the swaying very relaxing.

Ariana could feel her whole body warm up as she remained perched on that same branch. She was relaxed and content with her duties to her father and sisters. Blue eyes swept the horizon and found the lush green sea of foliage refreshing. Her white sun dress flowed to her ankles and was only one shouldered. She was going to tan herself or get sunburnt if she stayed where she was

any longer. She slowly looked down to see a path down however her eyes caught the unnatural swaying of a tree that was not caused by the wind.

Black eyes looked up and were shocked that blue eyes had captured him. He remained perfectly still just watching her and admiring her beauty. She was well proportioned and looked amazing just sitting there. He felt his heart start to melt just by the sight of her but then he slowly stood up and faced her.

Ariana looked at the young fellow. She could see that he belonged to the Ardious village due to his clothing. His dark curly hair and black eyes made him ruggedly attractive. He was lean muscled and she could tell that he could readily defend himself even though he was unarmed. She felt him watch her and it unsettled her a bit. There was no way that a human would be able to see her unless he was of royal blood or if she allowed it. She slowly slipped off the branch and started to fall to the ground.

Black eyes looked shocked as the young woman began to fall. He immediately jumped into action and leapt from branch to branch to race her to the ground. They were both halfway to the ground before he saw her lightly touch a branch with her soft leather boots. Her fall was slowly being ebbed off with each touch as she reached the ground with a soft landing without making a sound. He swiftly landed next to her and looked intently into those blue orbs that held his gaze.

"Who are you?" asked Ariana.

"Damien Ilion" whispered Damien in a deep growl that could barely be heard. He looked at her from top to bottom and could not see how she could be one of them warriors. She could tree climb like any other Ardious female warrior. "Who are you?"

"My name is Ariana and you must be related to the Queen of Ardious if you are able to see me" replied Ariana. She stared deep into his dark eyes and could see something there that she liked about him but couldn't put a finger on it. She saw his slight nod of his head and smiled beautifully at him which he returned in earnest. "I am headed to Ardious village to see Queen Darisa Ilion. Would you like to accompany me?"

Damien looked surprised by her request and now understood that Ariana was not from the village. The villagers knew that males were not permitted into the village for any reason even if he was related to the Queen. Rules were rules and he was to always remain on the outskirts of Ardious territory or face being punished. He had promised his older sister that he would remain close and stay safe. However there was just something about Ariana that drew him towards her to fulfil every single wish that she might request. "I would be honoured."

Ariana smiled and slowly followed Damien as he led the way. This was going to be interesting since she had initially planned to just pop in and not just walk there. Her blue eyes could not keep away from him and his strong tall frame. He could have been built with more muscle but his lean build showed her his lifestyle. She understood that he remained in the forest and now she would be able to finally meet the Ardious people. Her father had informed her that a visit was due and Queen Darisa would be expecting her.

"Why are you going to see my older sister?" asked Damien.

"I am going to meet her for the first time in place of my father. He has given me responsibilities that I must now oversee. However I think I will enjoy this responsibility even though there is a lot of work involved. I just hope there aren't too many like you" said Ariana in a polite manner.

"There are no men in the village" replied Damien in a distasteful tone. He slowly started to inch further away from her. He was mentally building up a barrier in his mind so that he would not get hurt by this woman.

"Oh really" replied Ariana, a little surprised. She looked at his tall frame and could see him retreating slowly into himself for protection. "That's not what I was implying. I was just saying I hope there aren't too many that can see me is all. It's all a little embarrassing for me. Only people with your line of blood can see me. It is just a bonus that your family line has always held the crown for the village. Although there are other means to take the crown if a warrior chose to rule."

"Oh, well there aren't too many that are trained as well or hard as my family line. It is the only reason that we have remained in power for so long. I wouldn't be surprised if one day there is someone strong enough to challenge for the crown. It is just one of those inevitable things. However the system works well if there is an honest ruler. Ruling for power only is not something that the people want but would have to tolerate until they find someone who can challenge them. Males are excluded from the whole system since Ardious is a place for women to live in peace without the influence of men" explained Damien.

"You know a lot about your history for not being involved" remarked Ariana.

"All royalty, female or male, have to learn it in case there is no female leader, the male can temporary rule until a suitable candidate is found. That is why I have to stay close and it is the only reason I remain in the forest" replied Damien as he continued the long trek across the forest floor.

Ariana glanced around and noticed that there were lots of trees around but there were no animal sounds. She wondered what could have disturbed the animals from the trees. She looked up at Damien in time to pull him back by the shoulder before an arrow could be imbedded in it. She quickly closed her eyes and felt the power run through her body like a warm blanket. She pulled the forces around her and kept a firm hand on Damien's shoulder.

Damien could see the hoard of warriors aiming arrows at him and even though he used the peace sign, they continued to fire arrows at him. He was surprised that they would continue to do so because in his specific signal, he had indicated that he was of royal descent and that allowed him at least an audience with whoever was in charge. However the warriors faded from his vision as he was pulled backwards.

Ariana opened her eyes and found her vision filled with darkness. They were in a room with no visible light. The only thing that reassured her that they were safe was the silence and the firm

feel of wood beneath her soft boots. She could slightly hear Damien's soft breathing and knew that she had successfully grabbed him through the portal that she had created. Slowly, her slender arm extended in front of her as she felt power well through her centre and flow down her arm to her right hand. "*Light*" whispered Ariana in her family tongue which Damien wouldn't have been able to understand if he had heard her. Suddenly the tendrils of power radiated from her fingertips and a small globe of light hovered gently just out of her grasp.

Damien looked at the orb with black eyes in wonder. He had never seen anyone able to form light that was so pure in a person's bare hands. This was something that was out of his world and he could only stare at the ball of light. He didn't even notice that Ariana was inspecting the room that they had ended up in.

Blue electric eyes took in the cluttered stack of boxes that clouded the walls. She assumed they had ended up in a storage room in Ardious village. A quick glance behind her and she spotted the wooden door but common sense told her that it most probably would be locked from the outside. Her slender arm slowly lifted gently and the globe of light bounced slightly higher. She felt a little more power well up from inside her and gently let it ooze a slight yellow tinge around the globe. She slowly rested her arm by her side and was glad that the globe of light remained where it was.

Damien slowly snapped out of it and looked at blue eyes appreciating her ability. He slowly stepped under the light and into her personal space. Her slender, smaller frame made him seem so much larger. He slowly reached out a hand and gently caressed her cheek. He was glad that she didn't shy away and was equally amused that she looked at him wonderingly.

She felt her entire body tingle as he caressed her cheek. She was a little stunned by her reaction and wondered what was happening to her. She felt her core warming up and almost let her arm automatically caress his cheek but she held back the urge. She only met this man and she had duties to attend to. Her father had sent her to rectify the problem that had arisen. She slowly stepped back and out of reach, only to be trapped by the door behind her. If he took a step forward there would be nowhere for her to go and he could touch her again.

Dark eyes looked amused at seeing the blue eyed woman stepping back but her body wanted to step forward and closer to him. He stayed where he was and slowly rested his arm by his side. There was something about her that made him feel like she was everything he wanted and had been waiting for. "Thankyou for saving me back there" commented Damien sincerely.

Ariana felt her face burn in a blush and could barely keep her voice even. "You're welcome. I was just making sure that you didn't get hurt for my sake. It is not my intention to put you in harms way. Actually it would have been wiser of me if I sent you back to the place where I had first seen you" mumbled Ariana in a rush. She felt the wooden door behind her and slightly pulled the handle but it was locked from the outside. She felt a tendril of power build up automatically in her arm and made the door turn into liquid as she passed through it. He followed her and they were both in the centre of Ardious village.



Damien could only see blue eyes as he followed her unknowingly. He stepped closer and closer until he felt cold steel touch his neck. He could feel a strong woman standing behind him, daring for him to move so that she had an excuse to kill him on the spot. He was wise not to move and knew that the custom of the village was that he seek his sister and pass on their visitor before disappearing from the village.

Blue eyes glanced around quickly and were shocked that there were only women about. She had been looking at those black eyes and had accidentally bumped into someone behind her. Strong hands had held her steady as she quickly glanced behind her. Ariana saw black eyes so much like Damien's and knew that this fierce woman was his sister.

Darisa looked quite shocked to see her brother looking more like the predator with this woman than when he usually was in the village. He had always been shy and quiet and this act of his made him seem like a stranger. However she saw his black eyes staring at her and knew that he had other intentions that didn't involve violence. "Release him" ordered Darisa in an assertive tone.

Damien smiled briefly at the woman who had let him go and then he swiftly bent down on his knees and bowed in front of Darisa. He felt a mixture of eyes staring at him. Some were full of loving, some were of wonder and the minor were of hatred. He knew that the only reason the minor group of women hated him was because he was a male but he did not care for them. He had a duty and he was going to fulfil it with honour. "This Lady wishes an audience with you, Queen Darisa. I shall leave her in your care."

Darisa slowly stepped forward and slightly moved Ariana aside so that she could kneel in front of her brother. She placed her right hand on his shoulder and then slowly rose to her feet before turning her back to him. She heard him stand up and then run off away from the many eyes. She knew where he would be and was glad that no one knew the truth that he was her younger brother. He had been raised in secret since her mother knew that a male royal at this particular time would be hazardous. So she had followed her mother's wish and protected him in secret as well as keeping the village whole.

Ariana watched sadly to see him act this way in front of his sister. It was almost like she didn't know him and he was only a man who lived on the outskirts of Ardious territory. Blue eyes looked around to see them all plastered on her. She wondered how they could all see her. It baffled her a bit to see curious eyes.

"Greetings, I am Queen Darisa Ilion of Ardious. You are in Ardious village and I, as well as everyone else, am curious to know how you managed to appear here all of a sudden. It almost looked like you came out of the store room. However it would be best if you introduce yourself to me" said Darisa as she stared intently into blue eyes. She was somehow intrigued by this woman. There was something about her that lured her into finding out more and getting to know her better.

"Well met Queen Darisa Ilion, I would like to have this conversation in private. It is important that we discuss a few things concerning Ardious. Is there somewhere we can talk?" asked Ariana

politely. She waited and was rewarded with a smile. Her blue eyes brightened as Darisa lifted her arm and held it up to escort her to a more private setting. She was surprised to be led to Darisa's private quarters. "I'm sorry I could not converse in the open but first I am Ariana Melda. I have come here on behalf of my father to help you" said Ariana.

Darisa walked over to her desk and sat on the chair before looking at Ariana with incredulous eyes. She slowly drummed her fingers on the tabletop as she stared at Ariana. She waited to see if Ariana was actually serious and could see clearly in those blue eyes that there was only truth in those eyes. "I'm sorry Ariana but there is no trouble here. I think your father has been misinformed."

"My father would have come for himself but the times have changed and I now see that this village no longer wishes to see men here. He has seen the changes here and now he has sent me since I am a woman and he knows that I have the ability to help you solve the problem. Seeing that you don't see that you have a problem on your hands is also worrying as well" informed Ariana in a diplomatic tone. Her voice was light and melodious with something pure about it.

"She is telling the truth, sister" called a hushed voice from the window before Damien entered and stood there smiling. He slowly held his arms open as Darisa hopped to her feet and hastily greeted her brother with happiness. "It is good to see you in so long."

"I couldn't believe it when you showed up with her, although it actually looked like you were hunting her or something. So I think some of the villagers were not impressed when you showed them that you knew of the Ardious ways. Anyways what do you mean when you said that she is telling the truth? What do you know?" asked Darisa in quick tandem. She looked between blue and black eyes.

"The trouble she is talking about is the one where you are not the only leader" replied Damien in all seriousness. He stared into shocked black eyes and knew that she had no idea what was happening. "Someone has been ordering warriors on the border to attack any males in sight. They did not know or ignored the royal greetings that are the custom of Ardious. We were targeted by a group of them and Ariana managed to get both of us to safety" replied Damien as he smiled at Ariana. He seemed a bit more relaxed in this setting and was more cheerful.

"Well I have heard rumours that there have been a group of women running around and stirring up trouble. However I haven't received any confirmed reports so I politically can't do anything. I could ask for a group of scout warriors to have a look around but not knowing who is involved will be a problem" stated Darisa as she started to pace back and forth.

"Excuse me, I don't mean to intrude your thought processes but I have been sent here to help you. I will be investigating this and will do the scouting. I just wanted to inform you of my intentions instead of bombing it all on you when I had the evidence to back up my claims. So if you will be kind enough to give me permission to stay here in the village and to snoop around. I will be on my way" said Ariana quietly by the door as both sets of black eyes stared at her.

Male dark eyes stared at her and could once again feel his body want to react of its own accord. He took an un-voluntary step forward and would have taken another if his older sister hadn't been there. He could feel the strain in his muscles try to overcome his mind. Slowly, he managed to turn bodily and face the window. His shoulders slumped as he felt the strain leave his body.

Darisa was oblivious to her brother and stared at the blue eyed woman. Her thoughts were going around in circles. She had to either trust this stranger or risk the future of the village. Her head told her to review this over a few days but her gut told her to trust this person. "I'm sorry but who exactly are you?" asked Darisa.

Blue eyes looked amused for once. This was a simple thing to explain and all she needed to do was show Darisa who exactly she was. She slowly extended her right leg in front of her and gradually transferred her body weight on it as she stepped forward. She felt the power within her body fill her to the brim as she took another step forward. Her blue electric eyes filled with power and her posture was firmly held as if she was a Queen from another kingdom.

Damien felt the change in the room. Somehow he could feel the room grow colder and the light being sucked into the centre of the room. He stayed perfectly still as an unnatural gentle breeze blew against his back even though he was facing the open window. Black eyes briefly closed as he felt a heavy weight fall on his shoulders. However he was firm and slowly bodily turned around to face Ariana.

*"I am Ariana of the old order, Meldasious"* voiced Ariana as she stepped forward and let the power cover her skin. It was like a light extra layer of skin that was tinged blue however a blue glow could easily be seen. Her voice sounded as if it were the wind as she spoke in the ancient language of Ardious. *"My father has seen what has been going on and has sent me to intervene if necessary. Queen Marietta Ilion was our last contact person before my father chose to watch. Our hands have fiddled with this world and nothing good has come of it. This meeting is a test to see if we should completely remove ourselves from your reality."*

"Mother never spoke of the gods ever visiting us" replied Darisa in a little shock. Her voice almost came out as a squeak. She slowly managed to find her seat as she stared wide eyed at the blue eyed woman in her quarters. She had never seen the likes of Ariana anywhere before and now there was one, one of them.

Ariana easily slipped back into the informal tongue of Ardious as she continued. "We are not gods. People just give us that title because of our gifts. However I am just like any other person. I am who I am and you have a choice to make. Will you accept my help in this matter or not?" asked Ariana as she slowly stepped closer and let the power leave her skin. She didn't even have to look at her arms to know that they were once more pale.

"You don't need my permission. I just want to know what you find out and I will help you in any way I can. Please accept my sincere apology for my impoliteness. I will see to it personally that you have food and a place to rest" replied Darisa in a hurry.

Damien continued to stare at Ariana in shock. He didn't think that she was such an important person. His mind was so shocked that he hadn't realised that he was now standing directly in front of Ariana again. His palm was gently caressing her beautiful, soft skin as he slowly bent his head forward.

Ariana stood stock still as her eyes widened in surprise. She felt his lips caress hers and found her eyes were locked with his. Her arm slowly came up and slowly rested on his firm chest. She could feel her limbs slowly go numb as he continued to kiss her.

SLAP!!!

Damien flew across the room and landed on his back on the wooden floor. His right hand rose swiftly to his face as he felt it start to bruise. His black eyes were now locked with icy blue eyes that did not belong to Ariana. He stared at this woman who looked equally as beautiful as Ariana and knew that this must be somebody related to her. He slowly clambered to his feet and took a few steps back as the icy blue eyes stared threateningly at him.

"Don't you ever do that again" said the woman in a deep melodious growl.

"Sister, what are you doing here?" asked Ariana a little stunned that she was being supported by her own younger sister. She was slightly dazed as she remained in her sister's strong arms that were filled with power to hold her up. "Does father know you are here?"

"Father sent me to help you. He said that he might send Artie later on but I doubt that he will have the need to. He also told me to keep an eye on you. I guess he foresaw that there would be people willing to use you for their own benefits" replied Ariana's sister. Damien and Darisa noticed that her eyes had changed colour and were now grey. Grey eyes stared at Damien and slowly moved to the older sister. "We will be leaving to scout the area. We will be back before dusk."

Ariana felt black eyes on her again and remembered the kiss. There had not been anything malicious or seductive about his kiss. It had been gentle and loving. She was still a little hazy as her sister swiftly created a portal and left the room without saying anything to the two siblings. However she couldn't get those black eyes out of her head.

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## **Chapter 8: Answers...**

Blue electric eyes pierced Darisa where she sat on top of her bed in her quarters. She could not make out who the hooded woman was but it was clear that these two women who were clearly just fighting a minute ago were dear to each other. She had seen those green eyes full of concern for the taller warrior. She could still feel the tension in the room as if the blue eyed hooded woman commandeered every single space available. Darisa felt the urge to bow before this stranger however she restrained herself and spoke in a clear voice. "Who are you?"

Blue eyes full of concern stared down into green tired eyes before resting on Darisa's vulnerable form. She could see the years had finally caught up to that pretty face. It was becoming evident that Darisa was no longer the strong woman of a year's past. "It has been a long time" growled Elaine as she stared up at those black eyes. Her blue eyes were filled with anger. If only she had never stayed. She should have left as soon as she first held the blade. It had given her the impression that she should have left immediately but she had been too loyal to the village to abandon them. "I had wondered if you would still remember me. I was surprised to get a message from you telling me to return."

"Elaine!" whispered Darisa in shock as she recognised Elaine's voice. She slowly scrambled to the edge of the bed and was about to stand up but Elaine swiftly held her blade and pointed the tip at her. She stopped in her tracks and was stunned by the threat.

"Why did you want me to come back?" asked Elaine bluntly.

"You are needed here by my side. There are things that I need to explain and plenty of things that need to be done. Please just hear me out" said Darisa in desperation. Her black eyes were almost on the verge of tears again as she sat there. She could feel the hate that streamed from those blue eyes so much like her mothers. "Please let me help your friend."

Elaine swiftly slid behind Maria and knelt down to support her as she collapsed. She looked down at half open green eyes that were on the verge of closing. She could feel the blade caressing her wrist and warning her that she had to do something before Maria's life was in danger. She could feel her heart pounding away in concern as she held Maria's body close to hers with her free left arm. Blue eyes saw how pale Maria had become and sensitive ears could hear Maria's heart skipping in her chest. "This is my fault. Maria, please stay with me. I will get help" whispered Elaine into Maria's ear. She gently gave Maria a soft kiss on her forehead before turning blue eyes onto Darisa.

"She is exhausted from her fight with you. She needs to be tended to and some rest" suggested Darisa as she tried to figure out a remedy with the limited observation skills she had since she was so far away. She could see that the young woman had grown paler and that her breathing was slightly laboured. "We need to help her now."

"I would if I could but there is no way that rest and tending to will help her" growled Elaine angrily. She looked at her own blade and could feel the power radiating up her arm. She could see that Maria had been weakened considerably and nothing she currently knew of would help her dear friend. "She is beyond any help that we can give her. She used up almost all of her life essence to use that blade of hers to stop me from losing myself. It is my fault" said Elaine as she ended in a whisper. Blue eyes looked frustrated as she tried to think of any way to save her friend but there was nothing.

"You can save her" whispered a male voice into Elaine's ear.

Elaine looked surprised as she looked around the room for the source of the male voice. She finally stared at Darisa who looked confused by Elaine's actions. Elaine felt her blade grope at

her wrist once more but with a calming effect. Softly she could hear a male laughing as if in the distance. "Who are you?" asked Elaine more to the empty room than anything else.

"You will find out soon enough, child. Now empty your mind and focus on your core. You will feel the power familiar to that of your blade. Call to it and wield it however you wish it" laughed the male voice. "Heal your friend and soon enough you both shall meet all of us."

Elaine stared at Maria, confusion evident in her eyes but there was nothing else she could think of to do. She could only hear the male voice suggesting her to do something that seemed impossible. However she slowly closed her eyes and held Maria tighter in her arms. She let her mind go blank as she began to search the core of her being. She could hear her heart pounding away and Maria's cooler body temperature. Her eyes were tightly held as something bright filled her vision. A hand appeared in front of her and she tilted her head to have a better look at what exactly was in front of her.

A male hand waved gently in front of blue eyes and a smile appeared on the man's face. He was a beautiful man with long straight blonde hair and deep grey eyes. He was dressed in a simple white robe that was tied at the waist with a blue sash. "Welcome to my realm, child. This meeting has been long overdue" said the man.

"Who are you?" asked Elaine in wonder. She could turn her head around and look everywhere but it was only a white space. There was nothing else except for the man standing in front of her. Elaine then realised that she was no longer holding onto Maria.

"Don't be alarmed, child. Only your spirit has found its way here. I didn't expect for you to succeed on your first go but here you are. You are gifted as much as your mother was and maybe even more. However I should explain myself. I am-"

"Father" called a young female voice that sounded familiar to Elaine's ears.

"Sorry but my daughter needs me" said the man as he turned on his heel and started to walk away. However he stopped after a few steps and turned only his head so that his grey eyes could see those lovely blue eyes. "If you have found your way here then you have found your essence. Maria has already seen me and that is how she is able to use her blade but she can't control how much of her essence she uses. You should keep a closer eye on her" said the man as he continued to walk away and disappeared in a blink of an eye.

Elaine looked around once more and sighed. There were just some things that you had to accept at face value even though she didn't like it. She opened her eyes and stared into almost closed green eyes. Elaine could now feel her life essence flowing throughout her body just like the power from the blade. She channelled into her essence and slowly placed her blade on top of Maria's chest. Elaine's skin began to glow as a blue aura surrounded her. Her blue eyes sparkled with unknown power and she felt energy start to weave through her body and out of her fingertips of her right hand that wielded the blade.

Maria felt the warmth surround her as her body responded to Elaine's touch. She could hear her heart beat stronger and her breathing had evened out. She no longer felt cold and her skin had a healthy tinge of colour to it. She was starting to feel renewed as her eyes began to open wider. She felt her life essence nurtured by this warm flow of energy that was coming from Elaine. Her body was hungrily consuming Elaine's elixir of life and she was finally able to sit up with little assistance.

"I'm sorry Maria" whispered Elaine as she swiftly sheathed her blade to her back.

"I'm alright, a little surprised but alright. Let's get this over with" replied Maria.

Strong muscled legs extended as Elaine stood up and small hands grasped hers so that Maria could get up as well. Elaine bodily faced Darisa with bulging black eyes and mouth hanging slightly open. "Explain" ordered Elaine in a deep growl.

Suddenly the wooden door swung open and banged noisily against the wall. Brown eyes stared into the room, a little alarmed that there were two hooded figures standing in the room. Tiffany hastily drew out her dagger and charged at the taller warrior when her eyes spotted a weapon. She hastily jumped forward with all her might and swung her long dagger down towards the head of the taller warrior.

Maria hastily picked up her sword that was lying on the ground and jumped in front of Tiffany. She held her slim sword up defensively and held Tiffany at bay. Her hood had slipped off with the motion and her long straight blonde hair flowed gently around her shoulders. Her green eyes penetrated brown orbs with an intensity that forced Tiffany to stop in her tracks.

Tiffany was stunned that this woman in front of her was beautiful and so strong. However her eyes narrowed onto the slim sword that the young woman was using. She saw that the blade's hilt wrappings had slithered up the lean arm to the elbow. She was surprised to see this type of sword since there was only one other that she had seen that had done the same thing. "Who are you?" yelled Tiffany as she tried to push the young woman back.

"Tiffany stop" yelled Darisa from near the bed.

"Maria" growled Elaine as she bodily turned around to see her old friend. Calloused fingers slowly lowered the hood of the cloak from her head and blue electric eyes met Tiffany. Gracefully, she stepped forward and retrieved Maria from Tiffany's wrath. Elaine stood tall and strong with her blade touching Tiffany's as she spoke to her. "Greetings, Tiffany Parlios, it has been a long time."

Tiffany stepped back in shock as her brown eyes and mind battled each other. She couldn't believe that Elaine had returned and that she was now a grown woman who was even more formidable than she was before. She slowly lowered her dagger and tried to process what she was seeing. "Elaine" she gasped.

Slowly footsteps could be heard of somebody running. A blonde head popped in and stared at the queen's quarters with grey eyes. It was a young girl in Ardious clothing and she looked a little flustered. Her voice squeaked out into the quiet room. "Queen Darisa, Lady Tiffany... Lady Rita is back with the guests. Lady Rebecca is waiting for your arrival to proceed."

Maria looked at the young girl and smiled. She had sheathed her sword as soon as Elaine had told her to. Slender legs steadily walked out from behind Elaine's shadow and slowly approached the young girl. White teeth bared into a huge smile for the young girl which was so infectious that the girl immediately smiled back. "They will be coming shortly. Why don't you go and tell Lady Rebecca that she can hold the fort until then?" suggested Maria. The young girl nodded vigorously before disappearing from sight with a trail of loud footsteps running away. Maria turned back around to face the room full of silent women and shrugged her shoulders. "It looked like you needed the little reprieve" said Maria to the others.

Elaine smiled since it was actually customary for the Queen to actually address the visitors to her quarters. However Maria had swiftly stepped in as though she owned the place and was so sincere that no one thought that it was wrong. Elaine slowly walked up to Maria and placed a hand gently on her shoulder. "Let's go. They are busy. We can come back another time-"

"No" yelled Darisa as she took a few steps closer to Elaine and Maria. Tiffany had kindly put away her dagger since she gave a slight gesture of command. She slowly started to approach Elaine again but she heard the warning growl that was coming from Elaine. "You are needed. I want you to meet the guests that we have visiting for a few days. You are my heir."

"I am no longer your heir. You never publicised it and you never will. You already told me to leave and I did. I severed all of my ties to this place. I no longer belong here. You are on your own" replied Elaine as she turned her back on Darisa.

"You are my heir by blood, whether you want it or not. You can't change that fact. You know that by custom you are going to be the next Queen and I am going to make sure that you stay. If you will not abide by the law then I will have no choice but to exact punishment. Do you understand what that means?" asked Darisa with a dead tone.

"What is she talking about?" asked Maria in a soft whisper. She was feeling a little uneasy with the topic considering Elaine had never talked about where she had come from. It was of little surprise that Elaine was born in Ardious village and grew up climbing trees. However something puzzled her. "Why doesn't anyone know that you are also a royal?"

Elaine suddenly collapsed onto her knees and grabbed her head as if in pain. She felt Maria instantly surrounding her with supporting arms and knew that she was protected if anything should happen. Her blue eyes were closed tight as pain seared through her head like a migraine had hit her. She couldn't understand why the topic about royals always caused this. It was like her brain was trying to forget something and she wanted to remember it at the same time.

Darisa immediately swooped down next to Elaine and with Maria's permission started to massage Elaine's head. She could see the lines of tension on Elaine's face and knew that there



were still issues that she could not face yet. However she knew that she had to tell Elaine soon. "I will quickly greet the guests. Tiffany, you stay here and make sure that they don't leave. No one and I mean, no one, is allowed to enter unless it is me, of course" said Darisa. She swiftly rose to her feet and swept out of the door.

Darisa could still feel the many thoughts trying to cram themselves into her already full brain. She looked around and was happy to see that everything had been prepared. She swiftly swung down a long green vine and hit dirt as her soft leather boots touched ground. Black eyes swept the surrounding area which was cleared except for a few women who were warriors guarding the area.

Darisa hastily stepped around trees and swiftly made her way to the centre of the new Ardious village. There were only a few roughly built houses around so that the visitors could rest. Her eyes immediately fell onto Rebecca who was impeding the guests from entering.

"I told you once and I will tell you again. You are not yet welcomed to enter. Please wait for either your host or the Queen to arrive. I cannot let you enter under any circumstances" said Rebecca in a huff. It sounded as though it wasn't the first time that she had said that to the men. Rebecca rolled her eyes once again and repeated what she had said earlier.

Darisa finally came to Rebecca's aid. She gently placed her hand on Rebecca's shoulder which caused the woman to turn her head and then drop to one knee. She bowed her head respectfully before rising to her feet. "I see that you are doing a fine job here. Where did Rita and the others go?" asked Darisa.

"They already parted seeing that they managed to get this lot safely through a set of traps that one of them had set off. No one got hurt but they were tired so I dismissed them. I guess they were going to report to you first or Tiffany" replied Rebecca before she turned to face the group of men who had suddenly grown silent.

Daniel slowly made his way to the front of the crowd of men. He had waited in the back knowing that the Queen would show up eventually to greet them which was a custom that he had heard from travellers. He had also the knowledge that the Queen was also capable of refusing them entry if she saw that they were a danger to her people. He stopped in front of Darisa and bowed gracefully. "Greetings Queen Darisa Ilion of Ardious, I am Daniel and I am here on behalf of King Gareth."

Darisa nodded her head politely to signal that she was listening. She slowly scanned the crowd of men with black cautious eyes before pinning Daniel with a stare. "I see that there are at least fourteen others that are with you. However I have a small problem. You see there are only eight rooms" informed Darisa.

"It is alright. We can share rooms. It is not something that needs to be sorted out. We can certainly manage ourselves. Also I would like to thank you for giving us the option of this meeting. It is an honour to meet you" said Daniel graciously. He bowed once again in total politeness as Darisa waived his thanks.

"I'm sorry but there is nothing for you to thank me for yet. I have some business to attend to but would be honoured if you would join us for dinner later on. I am sure we can talk business on the morrow. Please rest and ask one of the warriors if you require anything" replied Darisa before she swiftly but curtly turned around and left.

Daniel was left standing there with all of his men staring after the Queen of Ardious with ludicrous expressions on their faces. Daniel was quite puzzled as to why they were not going to commence the meeting so that they would be on their way and back out of Ardious territory. He looked over to his four close mates who were also confused by the short greetings. It was almost as if she had brushed them off.

"I believe that is our cue to go and get settled before dinner. I think they want us to rest and enjoy ourselves before we have to indulge ourselves into business. We should just go with the flow until then" whispered Benjamin as he looked around at the small clearing. Black eyes spotted the temporary barracks that they were going to use until their departure.

"I could do with a nap" piped up Christopher.

"Second that" replied Garron as he hoisted his pack over his shoulder.

"I will sort out the men and who will be staying with whom. I suggest that Daniel gets a room to himself though. That will leave the rest of us to pair up for rooms and I don't think the men will mind. However I understand that the four of us will be taking turns with our shifts" explained Yarra hastily but in an undertone so that the women warriors could not hear them.

"I will be taking first watch" replied Benjamin before any of the others could volunteer. He looked around at the small village and sighed. "There are a few things that I need to discuss with Daniel, anyways. Also keep a sharp ear out. There is something that isn't right about this place. I'm having a bad feeling."

"Let's go and tag our rooms" suggested Daniel as he hoisted his own pack over his shoulder and left his horse in one of his men's care. He gracefully headed towards the barracks and was not surprised when the women warriors escorted them. He was amused to see that there were quite a few warriors for such a small village and wondered if there was another gathering place and this was just a test.

Meanwhile, back at the Queen's quarters, Tiffany stood near the closed door in silence. There were a million questions that she wanted to ask and things that she wanted to say but whenever she found the courage to, it would wither away as soon as her eyes found icy blue. She could see clearly that this formidable warrior in front of her was no longer the woman who had left. It was clearly marked in her posture and eyes that there was more to Elaine than just a warrior.

"Hello, my name is Maria. What's yours?" asked Maria out of nowhere. She had quietly approached Tiffany while she was so focused on Elaine and had literally appeared out of nowhere on her. White teeth flashed into a big smile and it was really infectious. Maria was amused that she got a smile in return so quickly. "So what's your name?"

"My name is Tiffany Parlios" replied Tiffany hastily. She had never seen someone so beautiful that was so blunt at the same time. She could see clearly into those green eyes and was surprised to see warmth in them when earlier she had only seen anger. "How was your trip here?"

"Oh, I guess for us it would be the usual. You know, we always get followed and then have arrows almost imbedded into my head. We get chased and then we seem to make it to our destination in one piece" replied Maria cheerfully as she smiled while she talked. Her sword was firmly sheathed by her side and she was using her hands effectively to communicate like she always did. "So it was really the usual for us. Although I guess all the walking around is paying off. I'm as fit as a fiddle and can do numerous things."

Tiffany stared at Maria in shock. She looked over towards Elaine and was stunned to see her give a hint of a smile. Tiffany slowly turned her head back to green eyes and put up her hands to stall Maria from saying anymore. "Did you say that you were chased while getting here?" asked Tiffany in obvious shock.

A deep growl filled the room. It was a smooth vibration of sound that issued out of Elaine's mouth. Anger was deeply expressed in her voice as she spoke. "The warriors who you met up with today were our pursuers. They fired arrows at us without due cause and we fled. What are you training your warriors to do these days? Shoot first and ask questions later?" growled Elaine.

"They reported to me this morning. Their target was actually the tree just above where you were standing. However somebody else fired those arrows from below their archer but the archer did not catch who it was. It was only going to be a warning shot so that they could talk to you however you fled. They pursued since they were unsure whether you were passing through or a threat and also wanted to make it clear that they didn't fire the three arrows. It was also clear in the report that you outpaced them. They were not sure whether you were one of the youngster's showing off or not" explained Tiffany.

"Why are we here when you have guests?" asked Elaine as she put aside the new information that there might be somebody else out there that wanted them dead. Her blue eyes had seen that Tiffany had not lied.

"I don't know why you are here. Queen Darisa has been keeping her own council. We are all concerned about her actions. She wanted the guests to come. She requested that they have a meeting and they chose to have it here. I didn't even know that you were sent a message until the messenger got back this morning" replied Tiffany in panic as she could hear Elaine's anger boiling underneath the surface. She swallowed audibly as she wiped the sweat beads that ran down the side of her face from the confrontation. "I'm pretty sure that Queen Darisa will explain everything. Be patient until she finishes greeting the guests."

Maria slowly meandered back to Elaine's side and slowly placed her hand on her shoulder. She had seen Elaine's temper before and knew that it was only because she was close to the edge with emotion that she wasn't able to keep her anger in check. "Elaine, please be a little patient. She is almost back" whispered Maria in her soft melodic voice.

Elaine looked up into green eyes and felt her anger slip away. How could she be angry when Maria was smiling at her and being so calm and cheerful? There were just some things that Elaine could not control and this was one of them. She would always retreat back into her shell and make sure that her anger would not surface. If she let it simmer for too long, she would take it out on everyone around her and she knew for a fact that it was a bad idea with Maria. Maria had an even worse temper than she did sometimes. "I will wait" replied Elaine glumly.

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## **Chapter 9: Dinner interruption...**

Maria sat on a comfortable bed while watching Elaine pace backwards and forwards. Her green eyes following wherever those soft leather boots walked and ears hearing the gentle creak of wooden floor boards rubbing against each other under Elaine's weight. She could see clearly that Elaine was a little more than angry considering that they were ushered out of the Queen's quarters and into this room without an explanation.

Maria didn't mind the soft brown colours of the room. It was a simple establishment with the bare basics. There was a desk in one corner for scholar work with ink and other materials ready for use. There was also a small cupboard which was currently empty but was meant for clothes and other garments. Then there was the comfortable bed which was light and soft. However there was nothing in the room that marked it as belonging to anybody's room. So Maria assumed that this room was not yet occupied by anyone from the village.

"Do you think we will have to wait much longer?" growled Elaine angrily as her steps continued across the floor keeping in time with her heart rate. She whirled around and continued her steps in the other direction until she could go no further before repeating what she did. "They still haven't explained anything and we are imprisoned in this room like some common prisoner."

"Why didn't you tell me that this was your home village?" asked Maria softly which stopped Elaine in her tracks. Green eyes could see the muscles in Elaine's arms and legs stiffen at this point. "Why didn't you tell me that you were part of the royal family or anything?"

Heavy head slowly fell in defeat. There was no way in avoiding this much longer. Maria had the right to know the truth and prepare for anything that might happen. "The last day I spent here was not pleasant. I first found my blade in the forest and another warrior tried to claim it as their own. They challenged me or I challenged them, I'm not really sure which one it was. Anyways, in the end I won. However I lost control like I did earlier today and almost killed Queen Darisa who is my Aunt. I fled. The villagers don't like me, well, who would after that spectacle" explained Elaine in a mere whisper.

"Why didn't you tell me that you are part of the royal family? You haven't answered that question yet" replied Maria in a simple tone. She made sure that all of her questions were answered. She knew that any information that she could find out about this place would be of vital importance and may help them in the long run. "Please just tell me everything that you know so that I am on the same level as you."

"I didn't tell you that I am a royal because technically I am not. My father was the previous Queen's son and so he was not recognised as being a royal of the house of Ilion. He was trained and taught but never got involved in matters of Ardious. He was outcast and so I am not recognised. However since I am the only person who is of the royal bloodline, they may make an exception. Darisa had explained that it was best if we just kept it quiet. She never told me why. I don't even know my father or mother. My earliest memories of when I was young was only with Darisa but she used to tell me all sorts of stories about my parents and how they were in love" said Elaine as if she were holding her breath.

"So no one knows that you are a royal?" asked Maria.

"No one knows, not even Tiffany. I took my mother's maiden name so that no one would suspect a thing. No one questioned me about anything really. I think Darisa told them that I was an orphan and she was going to take me in since she liked me. So now, since everything has happened, I don't know why she would want me here" whispered Elaine as she finally collapsed into the only chair in the room. Her head was slumped onto the desk in a depressing way that Maria was intent to change it.

Suddenly, a knock on the door alerted Maria and Elaine of a visitor before the door slammed open. A deep brown eyed woman with curly red hair stood in the doorway looking in. She slowly placed her hands on her hips while she studied the two women. First she looked at the green eyed Maria who was about to stand up from sitting on the bed. Brown eyes could see the sword at the hip and looked sceptically at Maria's slender form who was a little on the short side.

"What do you want Rebecca Calin?" growled Elaine from her seat. Her back was ramrod straight as her hand had made its way to her blade hilt. She stared at Rebecca with menacing blue eyes as she had seen those brown eyes glued to Maria. She slowly stood up as brown eyes slowly swept in her direction. Blue eyes could see the slight widening of the brown eyes and knew that Rebecca still remembered her. "What do you want?"

Firm jaw went slack as Rebecca stared at Elaine as if seeing a ghost. She slowly shook herself out of her stupor and slowly bowed her head in greeting. "Greetings honoured guests; I am Rebecca Calin and will be escorting you to dinner. Queen Darisa has informed me that there were two more guests and sent me to find you. However I don't see the point of doing so since I think you remember the way."

"Queen Darisa is just being politely cautious. If she has summoned you to escort us then we shall be escorted" replied Maria in her sweet voice which literary stopped Rebecca in her tracks. Green orbs looked amused as electric blue smiled. Soft, quick hands swiftly checked her clothes and sword before looking back over at Elaine. "Well, shall we?"

Maria and Elaine slowly followed Rebecca to where dinner was served. They were both a little surprised that they had to actually leave the village and head towards the ground. It looked as though Darisa was being very cautious since her other guests were men and she didn't want them to disrupt the lives of the people of Ardious. Blue eyes swept around the area where dinner was

to be served and were a little surprised at the tight security. There were so many female warriors standing guard and Rebecca was one of them.

Maria looked around cannily with her green eyes. She saw so much of Ardious history here but it was all a sham to protect Ardious if the meeting were to go bad. She could see that two tables were summoned to accommodate the fifteen men that had just arrived as well as everyone else who was attending dinner. The tables were grouped with a maximum of ten people per table. Five of the men sat at one table where Darisa and Tiffany were already seated. The rest of the men filled the other table and Maria knew where they were going to be seated. "We've got the table with the important people" whispered Maria.

"We might just get some answers at dinner after all" replied Elaine as she guided Maria to her seat. She made sure that Maria had Darisa on her right side and herself on the left. On her left side was going to be one of the male guests and she immediately recognised the man as Daniel the leader of the small group headed to Ardious. "Darisa, are we waiting for anyone else?"

The entire table noticed that the blue eyed woman did not use Darisa's title to address her. However they all remained silent as the two women conversed. They didn't want to intrude since it seemed as though they had a lot of history with each other. They assumed that this woman was an exception since she was not scolded for not using the proper title to address Darisa.

"Weapon's master Amelia Niar will be joining us this evening Elaine. She only came back recently from a trip up north to visit the land of Artemos. Of course you would know that the King and Queen of Artemos are currently indisposed. They could not make it to the meeting. Rita Vivian returned around the same time from the east, Endlam Kingdom. Their ruler, King Vosnic, actually could make it but refused to have the meeting here. So he said he would get all of the details off me later. I sent Rebecca Calin to the south to Laurangue Kingdom and she came back with news that their kingdom was at the moment without rulers. Now I only have one party in attendance from the west, from Arianosu Kingdom. King Gareth has sent some of his close advisors to attend since he arranged the meeting place" explained Darisa in a monotonous way. However everyone was glued to her words instead of being disinterested. "You did visit all of these places, haven't you?"

Elaine rested her elbows on the table and hid the bottom half of her face from everyone's view. So no one knew her reaction to that statement. However Maria slowly smiled brightly and decided to answer the question instead. "We have been to many places for the past year. We have been to all of those kingdoms but we only passed through Arianosu Kingdom. We did not linger since there was nothing of interest there. The other kingdoms, however, were more inclined to stop us from our journey. We've had to help them solve some of their problems mainly peacefully. I guess that the rulers of these kingdoms had a hunch that we would be in attendance" said Maria casually. She sounded so cheerful throughout that explanation that everyone had to smile with her. She was slowly wrapping them up into her small soft hands with her melodious voice. "King and Queen Lymere of Artemos were having trouble with brigands of outlaws. We managed to deal with the situation and they are busy trying to put everything back in order as well as form a militia for the outer regions for the people's safety."

"Why did King Vosnic refuse to have the meeting here?" asked Daniel.

"Oh, sorry for not introducing you to each other" interrupted Darisa hastily. She quickly let everyone introduce themselves and smiled in satisfaction. The food hadn't arrived yet and everyone seemed to be relaxed with Maria's explanation about their journey. Darisa had noticed how Maria had taken the lead with conversation since Elaine had sat there passively. Black eyes could see how Maria would skilfully remove the spotlight from Elaine.

"King Vosnic is to be married soon and didn't want to leave his fiancé alone. He was kind enough to actually let us dine in his court after we managed to deal with a situation. In Laurangue, they had a coup d'état and the heirs are in hiding until they can sort out the matter. We have been further out but the food seems to be arriving" said Maria as green eyes spotted a group of women with trays of food and her nose caught the intriguing aromas.

Food and drink flowed around the table and small conversation filled the air as they divulged themselves into the interesting foods of Ardious. Even Darisa was surprised at the chefs' audacity to actually try out the old recipes with a few new ingredients so that the dish became more tasteful. Daniel and his friends were having a great time tasting the different tastes and textures than he was used to.

It looked as though business was going to wait until the morrow since Darisa and guests were intent to just relax. However Elaine was simply passing the time. She was waiting for an explanation and was not at all surprised when Maria dumped a whole lot of food onto her plate. Her lips twitched into a knowing smile. She could see green eyes full of determination to see her eat and taste each piece of food rather than scoffing it down with water or any other liquids.

"So, how long have you known each other?" asked Daniel as he stared at Elaine. He was trying to figure out where he had seen her before. His brown eyes were mesmerized by blue electric eyes that looked so determined and cold.

"We met only a year's past" replied Elaine in a deep feminine growl that gave the other people at the table shivers. Even Maria felt the ice chill run down her spine and immediately gently rubbed Elaine's thigh to calm her down. "We have met once before while you were on your way here just outside of Ardious on Gelleth Pass" said Elaine in a mere whisper which held less of a chill.

Daniel's eyes widened as he recalled the brief meeting where only he had told her his name. He had also told her about where he was going and didn't even think twice about it. His whole body stiffened as he realised that this was that shy woman who had hid behind a tree. "You said you were a simple village girl" recalled Daniel.

"We just wanted to make sure that our path would be safe. We didn't know you and weren't going to trust blindly. You have your own agenda for being here and we have our own" interrupted Maria as she shovelled more food down her palate. It was quite amazing that she was keeping up with conversation even though there was food in front of her which usually took hold of her entire attention.

"You were there too?" asked Daniel a little surprised.

"Yes, tired and sore from the day's walk and the culprit for the sneeze. Elaine just wanted to make sure that if a fight ensued that I would be able to escape unharmed or wait until she was done. She doesn't like taking chances" said Maria ungracefully since her mouth was full but tried to cover her mouth with her free hand. Green eyes sparkled as Daniel looked at the both of them a little surprised but humoured.

"How did you manage to get here so quickly? I didn't see you having any sort of horse or cart. It's virtually impossible for the both of you to be able to walk all that way and be here. I would at least take a couple of days more to arrive here from where we first met" said Daniel a little surprised.

"Well we walked and Elaine made sure that we got here quickly" replied Maria casually. She looked over at sparkling blue eyes and knew that behind those hands was a smile. She looked over at Darisa and could see the sparkle in her eyes knowing full well that anything was possible. Maria smiled cheerfully around the table even though Benjamin, Christopher, Garron, and Yarra were sceptical.

Swish! Swift strong hands moved lightning fast in front of Maria's face and caught the flying arrow from midair. Two more arrows tried to find their mark but Elaine caught one of them with her free hand and the last was caught with her mouth as she pushed Maria out of harm's way. Elaine hastily dropped the arrows onto the table and searched in the direction of where the arrows had been fired from. Blue eyes could see that Rebecca had swiftly dispatched a group of warriors to investigate but the shooter was nowhere to be seen.

Suddenly three more arrows tried to hit a new target which was Darisa but Tiffany had hastily pushed Darisa out of harm's way and was hit by all three arrows in the back. Tiffany lied on top of Darisa as a small amount of blood issued from her lips while copious amount of blood was seeping out of the wounds. Brown half closed eyes slowly peered up at Darisa's shocked form with a slight smile. She had done her duty in protecting her Queen.

Blue electric eyes pierced the air and spotted the bowman. Strong muscular legs firmly bent, quickly sprung into action as Elaine leapt into the air towards the bowman. Her calloused fingers grasped her sword over her shoulder and she swiftly drew her blade free from its scabbard before a soft boot connected with a tree branch briefly to launch Elaine further into the air. Elaine quickly closed the gap between the bowman and her before the bowman could put his weapon away. Her right leg extended out in a vicious kick to the bowman's head which knocked him towards the ground.

Women warriors of Ardious hastily surrounded the bowman with their weapons drawn but were too slow to detain him. His dark short curly hair was unkempt and his blue eyes peered around with anger clearly written in them. He drew a long broad sword from his scabbard that he hung over his back and was about to bloody his way through all of these women but he was stopped in his tracks.



Elaine stood menacingly before him but he did not care. She held her blade up against his with incredible strength. She was slowly overpowering him and could see his arm muscles so unused to the power that she held that he was quivering. Blue eyes bore into blue with equal anger and they were locked together with each body trying to hold up against the other.

"DAMIEN!!!" yelled Darisa.

Damien looked around and saw his sister. His blue eyes grew dark with anger as his temper began to flair. Elaine was a little shocked but she kept her composure and held her father back from hurting anyone. Blue eyes tried to look at him and tried to take in every single detail. However something struck her gut. There was something wrong with her father and she could see it through his pain filled eyes that were full of anger.

Damien slowly deteriorated for a moment before pushing back with more force than he had delivered earlier which momentarily took Elaine by surprise. She stumbled backwards but Damien was already up in the trees before she could get her balance. Suddenly he disappeared without sound in a blink of an eye.

Elaine stood there a little frozen from the shock of finding out that her father had not died and the fact that he was intent on killing Maria and Darisa. Blue eyes stared intently at the ground to try and piece together the large puzzle in her head. Why would she be summoned to this place where she was born and why was she here at the exact moment that her father was to attack everyone. There were too many questions and Elaine didn't have anytime to work any of it out as her name was hailed by Maria. She hastily made her way back over to the table and was surprised to see that Tiffany was still breathing. Maria had carefully stripped her back bare and tried to stem the bleeding without removing the arrows.

"The healer is on her way over. Amelia called for her as soon as Tiffany fell and she should be here soon. We shouldn't remove those in case she bleeds out" instructed Darisa as she was Tiffany's pillow for the time being. She had noted that the men were standing with their weapons drawn in a circle around them facing outward like a guard. She was very grateful for the gesture.

Blue eyes looked at the wounds and skilfully sheathed her sword before kneeling down beside Tiffany. Her gaze slowly lifted and met with green trusting eyes that had faith that Elaine could do something. Elaine carefully pulled away some of the material around an arrow that was sticking out of Tiffany's middle of the back where the spine was. There was no doubt that the arrow had pierced her spine and Tiffany was already showing signs that she couldn't feel her legs. Everyone had been amazed that Tiffany was still conscious as she lied there in excruciating pain.

"What do you think?" asked Maria as she glanced at the wound that Elaine was having a look at. She could see that Tiffany was going to have no more use in her legs after the arrow was removed. She could also tell that some of the other wounds were either going to be long healing periods or lethal if pulled out. "Can you help her?"

"I can but it will be painful and I don't know if it will work" replied Elaine calmly as she covered up the first wound and had a look at the second one. She could see that the second one had pierced a kidney and would heal up fine if she didn't get an infection. The likelihood of that was very slim. "The healer might have a better method. We can wait and see what she will say." Elaine then slowly looked at the last wound and saw that it had punctured straight through to the other side. The arrow head could be seen and the positioning indicated that the arrow could be removed. Elaine looked closely at the blood slightly squirting out and was glad to see that there was minimal leakage.

Finally the female healer arrived and immediately knelt down to review her new patient. She looked at the three wounds carefully and then turned her head as she spotted her fellow comrades making their way with a litter. "I will need to take her back to the healer's hut to tend to her" said the healer to the group of women.

"You can't move her. She will lose mobility in her legs if we do" replied Elaine.

"I don't have the right herbs with me for such a delicate procedure for her to retain her mobility. I would much rather make sure that she survives. At the rate of the bleeding, she needs to be moved now before it is too late" said the healer in a gruff tone that dismissed Elaine for knowing a thing about healing.

Maria slowly knelt closer to Tiffany's pain strained face. Her melodic voice whispered gently into Tiffany's ear and slowly calmed her. "Tiffany, if you trust me, I will help you. I can help you retain your mobility and the healing period will be quite shorter. However there is one small catch. You also have to trust and believe in Elaine. She will be the key in helping you. I just need your consent."

Tiffany's tear streaked face slightly lifted and looked into green trusting eyes. She could see that Maria was being caring and truthful. Something about Maria just made her trust her and follow her every suggestion. It was almost as if Maria's voice held a strong power behind it like a leader would. "I trust and believe in you both" said Tiffany in a strained voice.

Maria smiled and slowly straightened up as the others around her were staring at her. She could feel the heat coming from blue eyes that she knew were questioning her. She could also see that the healer and Darisa were looking at her sceptically. "I'm sorry lady healer but I have another method in helping Tiffany. She has given me consent to try and you are no longer required. However if you are worried, you may stick around although there will be little you can learn about our procedure."

The healer was so stunned that her next words were spluttered into nonsense. She looked outraged and was about to take control but she found icy blue eyes staring intently at her. Her rage was extinguished before she could think of anything and so she sat there in silence with eyes wide open. She looked ready to jump in if Tiffany's life was in danger.

"How will we do this?" asked Elaine.

"I can only stop the bleeding and pain temporarily. You will have to find a way to heal her" replied Maria as she gave a huge smile that held all her faith in Elaine's abilities. She looked back at Tiffany and swiftly jabbed her in various places with her fingertips to hit certain pressure points. Small hands found the end of the arrow which had gone straight through and broke it gently. She swiftly pushed the arrow through and dropped the tip on the ground before proceeding with the arrow that had hit around the kidneys area. Gentle hands skilfully removed the arrow and was poised to remove the last one but hesitated for a brief moment. "Elaine, are you ready?" asked Maria in a mere whisper. However she only waited for the briefest nod of the head before yanking out the arrow that had hit Tiffany's spine.

Elaine stared at Tiffany's pain filled face and could feel all eyes staring at her. She had healed a few people who were hurt while they travelled but nothing as severe as this. Her strong arms slightly shook as she slowly placed her fingers around each wound to test the extent of damage. Blood was slowly oozing out instead of gushing out and blue eyes lit up at the fact that each wound seemed to be free of arrow particles.

"What are you waiting for?" whispered a voice just outside of Elaine's hearing.

"Don't look with your eyes" whispered another voice although this one was male.

"I don't know if I can do this" whispered Elaine but everyone in the circle had heard her. Her blue eyes were glued to Tiffany's face and she could see that the pressure points would not hold off the pain for much longer. Out of her peripheral vision, she could feel the healer look at her in outrage. Elaine slowly placed her hands onto Tiffany's back and closed her eyes. She needed to calm down and think.

Green eyes looked over at Elaine's tensed face. She could see the slow formation of perspiration as Elaine looked at Tiffany with a lost look. She didn't understand why Elaine was hesitating. She had seen Elaine heal people in worse condition than this. She had seen Elaine do miraculous things and so she was a little confused as to why Elaine looked like this was the first time that she had healed a person.

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## **Chapter 10: High price to pay...**

Thump-thump, thump-thump...

Soft boots connected with branches high in a tree. Ariana Melda and Damien Ilion were swiftly leaping from tree to tree. Their eyes determined not to look back as they tried to focus on the path they were creating in front of them. It was slightly hard for Ariana to keep up with Damien but somehow she managed. Their precise stepping, making sure that they didn't brush against anything that would slow them down. It was a race for their lives.

Just inside of their hearing, Damien could detect a group of soft boots swiftly making their way trying to catch up. However they both knew that only severe torture awaited them and Ariana

could not use one of her tricks to get them out of it either. They were on a mission to bring down the last of the rebellion that had been discovered since Ariana and her sister had arrived at Ardious two years prior.

"Ariana, how far until we reach our destination?" asked Damien as he kept up the pace. His strong lean muscled legs stood out since he was wearing Ardious warrior garments. It looked a little too feminine but the fit was perfect for maximum performance in them. He could feel that his range of motion was not limited in any way and his garments made sure that environmental factors did not inhibit any of his skills.

Blue eyes with a little glitter to them, looked over and smiled. She could see that he was quite relaxed as he moved and it made him look even more handsome than he already was. "We should be there soon" replied Ariana in her melodic voice that was slightly out of breath. Black eyes looked over a little concerned but she smiled at him. "I'm alright." She slowly began to review in her head what had happened earlier for them to be chased.

Ariana had been walking with Damien just inside Ardious territory toward the north of the main village. She and her sister had been working tirelessly for the past two years trying to extinguish any hopes of rebellious activities after they had caught their leader and submitted her to a tribunal. The tribunal had come to the decision that she should be stripped of her title and would work in the main village under supervision. Ariana and her sister had slightly relaxed but knew that there was still work to be done. They both knew that there was still a chance that the rebels would be able to overthrow the current Queen, Darisa Ilion.

Ariana and Damien were not on an aimless walk. She and her sister had pinpointed the rebel's headquarters and Ariana and Damien were slowly meandering their way there so that it didn't look like they knew where they were going. It was a solid plan. They would unexpectedly drop into their quarters and then rush out hoping to get them to follow. It made things even easier since it was a known fact that Ariana and Damien were bundled. They even had a little one that was waiting at home for their return.

"Do you think Darisa will be alright with our little one?" asked Damien as they held hands and were walking around. He casually stopped by a tree and gently pulled her up close while softly kissing her on her knuckles. "Darisa is like a very tough leader and she can handle any situation well that involves the village but do you think she will be truly alright? We did kind of dump our little one on her with all of our stares since your sister was headed out as well."

Ariana smiled brightly. She found out after giving birth to their beautiful daughter how overprotective and concerned Damien could be. She found him adorable at times and frustrating in other ways. It almost drove her crazy one time when he wouldn't leave to take care of business with her sister and kept on sticking around making sure that the baby was alright and that she was alright. "Your sister will be fine. I'm pretty confident that her maternal instincts will kick in soon. Otherwise she will probably have a small contingent with her trying to look after our little one."

"I think it would have been better if I dropped her off since you don't know how to use a door" replied Damien with a smile as he kissed her tenderly on the lips before pulling her along once again. He looked around as if he were just enjoying the scenery and peacefulness.

"It was much faster and will be better for her. There will be nobody who will try anything while we are away. We still don't know who, in the main village is part of the rebellion. They would have a lot of power over us if they knew who she really was. I would much rather her be an anonymous baby that happened to fall into Darisa's care rather than announcing to them that she is our baby girl who can be a valuable bargaining chip" replied Ariana in a whisper since they were close to the enemy head quarters. They walked along like two lovesick people who were oblivious to the dangers around them.

"Well I guess you do have a point. But then that means you could have left her to your parents or something. However I guess it is only for a few hours more and we will get her back out of my sister's care. But then wouldn't she be questioned about where the baby came from? However she could just say she found her in her quarters..." Damien seemed to rumble on for a few minutes arguing while Ariana was trying to hold in her laughter. It was just so funny to see her lover look so confused and then confident and then confused again and have that repeated over several times.

Ariana and Damien slowly came to a crest and casually walked up to the top before stopping dead in their tracks. They looked around with stares of honest surprise on their faces. Their minds could not believe what they were seeing. It was amazing but horrifying. It was the rebel headquarters which looked more like a camp than anything else. There were tents pitched up everywhere with some men sitting around campfires and Ardious warriors walking around.

Blue eyes stared in shock as she spotted a group of innocent village girls, who must have come from one of the bordering villages to Ardious territory, in chains. The group of young girls were wearing little but rags and were crying or had looks of despair on their faces. They were grubby and were grouped together with the main chain tied around a tree so that they couldn't escape.

Black eyes looked around in horror at the number of men in the camp and how there were also young males who were kept in cages. Damien had never seen such a place before and knew immediately that this must be a slaver's camp. He could see a group of Ardious warriors and men alike who were sitting or standing there staring at them. Silence reigned for a few seconds as Ariana and Damien tried to understand what was in front of them while the camp looked on too stunned to move because two people had somehow wandered into their camp.

Ariana quickly pivoted on her heel and pulled Damien along with all of her might. She could hear that people were already trying to chase them on the ground and knew that there would be some warriors in the trees as well. Her heart was hammering along as her mind tried to wipe away what she had seen so that she could focus on what they had to do to stop the whole thing altogether.

Damien and Ariana finally made it to their destination point where everything was going to be resolved. They had both swiftly made it to the ground and landed quietly. Blue eyes could see

the large group of Ardious rebel warriors descending upon them. Her eyes saw the bowstrings pulled taut. It looked as though they were not going to be tortured after all. Death was upon them for discovering the enemy camp.

Damien quickly pulled out a bow and arrow that was neatly strapped to his back. He pulled the bowstring taut and released the first arrow. However, as though it were a cue for the warriors descending, they released their arrows toward Ariana and Damien. Ariana swiftly pulled Damien around a tree and wondered where her sister was. "Where is Laura? She should be here by now with a group of Ardious warriors that we trust" whispered Ariana as she cursed under her breath.

Damien quickly released several arrows in concession and hit a few of the female warriors. He was fast running out of arrows and their only choice would be to stand and fight or quickly get away with Ariana's little trick. "Should we get out of here in your fashion?" asked Damien as he heard the thunder of footsteps hitting the lowest branches of the trees near them.

Suddenly a roar of voices could be heard and men with Arianos Kingdom insignias on the front of their armour could be seen charging in from the forest. They ran into the fray with swords blazing and confronted the group of rebels. Far above, a rain of arrows fell and met its mark as Ardious warriors loyal to Darisa fired upon those that they had once called sisters. Blood and guts filled the air as Damien and Ariana looked on.

A louder roar of voices could be heard as the rest of the rebel camp came into the fray and Damien and Ariana had no choice but to abandon their hiding place and take matters into their own hands. Damien drew his long dagger out and swiftly sliced through a group of men while Ariana held a beautiful white sword which she had plucked out of thin air and was watching his back. The two of them made quite a formidable pair as they carved a circle around them.

Ariana could see that the fight was slowly dying down and that they were winning. There were only a few left and then they could round up the rest and sort out what to do with the camp. Her blade carved through flesh, bone and blood. She danced in a tight circle as she carefully manoeuvred around enemy swords and made sure that Damien was still safe. Her bright blood stained sword, sang to her ears as she felt the power that she wielded flow throughout her body. She was a being far beyond those that she was cutting down and knew that this fight was necessary for those that were imprisoned against their will.

Suddenly six arrows rained upon Damien and Ariana. Ariana stood there for a moment trying to comprehend what this new feeling was. She had never felt this way before and her blade was firmly imbedded in one of the male slavers. She swiftly retrieved her sword from the dying man and turned with surprised blue eyes to see Damien falling to his knees with three arrows sticking out of his back. One arrow was in his spine, a second hit around his kidney area and the third looked as though it protruded all the way through. Shaky legs found its way over to Damien and slowly knelt by his side.

Damien looked up at Ariana with a pained expression. However he was a little surprised to see that Ariana had two arrow heads protruding out of her stomach. He could see that she had not registered that she had been injured and looked concerned at her. "Honey, I'm alright. I just need

to lie down for a bit and I will be up in a minute. You should go and find your sister, Laura, so that she can fix you up." He remained lying on his front as he tried to will the pain away but he knew that there was a slim chance of him surviving since he couldn't feel his legs anymore.

"I need to tend to you first. I will go and see Laura after I know that you are alright" replied Ariana as she gently placed her hands on his back. She felt her tendrils of power slowly materialize like strings out of her fingertips. They slowly wrapped around his entire body and she could slowly see that his pain was ebbing away. She smiled beautifully at him as she felt a cough coming on but held it in. Her slightly calloused hands found each arrow and yanked them out with care to make sure that she didn't injure him any further. "You know, the amazing thing about my family is that they will lovingly accept our daughter readily. The only bad thing is that her memories are locked with mine. She will be able to remember things that I have done and what my mother has done and so on. It can be a little burden but it is mainly useful in situations like this when people are wounded. I can heal everyone with the knowledge of thousands of years of injuries that my family has had to heal" whispered Ariana.

"Well it is good to know that if I get injured like this again, she will be able to heal me if you are not immediately with me," joked Damien as he looked into those lovely blue orbs that were her eyes. He could slowly see that her eyes were slowly glazing over. His worry came back tenfold as he looked at her. "I think you should call your sister over right now."

"I will call her after I'm done with you. I just need to sew you up doing it my way instead of with those gut strings and what not" replied Ariana as she felt her power surge through her body and into his. She could feel his body healing as her eyes registered that the wounds were closing up. Her mind was slowly closing down and she was not really thinking about what she was doing. Finally a blinding flash of white light erupted from Ariana's hands and then she slowly moved away from Damien so that he could get up.

Damien slowly got to his feet and looked around with new eyes. He found that he was still holding his sword in his hands and slowly swung it around as if he were a child. Then all of a sudden Laura appeared out of thin air in front of Ariana. Damien didn't even look at her as he played with the sharp object in his hand.

Laura slowly looked at Ariana and could see that she was exhausted. She could see that Ariana's eyes were glazed over and a significant amount of her power had been drained out of her. She could also see the two protruding arrow heads and looked back over her shoulder towards Damien. She was confused as to why he was not showing any concern towards Ariana. "Damien, what happened?" asked Laura urgently as she tried to steady Ariana who was about to fall onto her side if she wasn't supported by her sister. "Damien?!" yelled Laura, however she finally got a good look at his eyes. Her own grey eyes widened as she saw that his eyes were no longer black, they were blue just like Ariana's had been.

Damien looked over and finally registered that the two people who were kneeling there was his lover and her sister. He took a step forward but then his sword arm was in the air and ready to swipe the both of them away. Damien looked alarmed at his arm and took a few steps back so that he was away from everyone. His calloused fingers quickly dropped the sword and his feet

moved him further away from his lover and her sister. He grabbed his head and felt immense pressure there. "What's happening to me?" asked Damien a little bewildered. He felt his brain overload with information and memories. He couldn't handle it and fell to one knee.

"Damien, you need to calm down" said Laura as she stared at Damien. She could see that his body was slowly slipping out of his control and his mind was trying to battle with the involuntary motions. However the toll that his mind was suffering from was too great for him. She could see him slowly deteriorating right in front of her grey startled eyes. "Damien...DAMIEN!"

Damien felt like his brain was going to explode. He yelled out in a huge roar of pain and anger before looking around once. His new blue eyes glowed with power before in a blink of an eye he was sucked out of sight into a vortex. The only thing that was left of him was his sword which remained on the ground where he had dropped it.

Laura swiftly turned her head back around to look at Ariana and try to heal her. Grey eyes slowly started to glow blue with power as she gathered it up and prepared to remove the two arrows that were protruding out of Ariana's stomach. "I need to break the tail off the arrows" said Laura as she looked into Ariana's glazed eyes. She got the barest of nods and slowly peered over Ariana's shoulder, only to freeze at the sight.

Ariana looked around and felt the cough slowly start to come on again. She couldn't hold it in this time and quickly covered her mouth with her hand. Her blue eyes could see that the fighting had ended and Ardious warriors were sweeping the field to see who could be healed or not. The male warriors from Arianosu Kingdom were doing the same but one man who seemed to be more decorated than the rest started to approach them.

Laura slowly sat back with a blank expression on her face. She had seen a third arrow that had not penetrated the whole way through. She had seen the positioning of the arrow and knew that it was only a matter of time. She could not transfer any more power into Ariana because of that third arrow and knew that anything she did do would harm her older sister further. She sat there and heard a male voice that could only belong to King Daniel Gareth Senior.

King Gareth knelt in front of Laura and Ariana. He bowed his head deeply and as he looked up, he saw blood on Ariana's lips. His brown eyes widened in shock as he looked at her. He was about to come closer however he felt the slight hum of power and immediately halted his motions.

Laura quickly snapped out of it and hastily broke the two arrow ends. She swiftly extended her fingers and allowed her power to materialize into small tendrils. The small tendrils snaked out and slowly formed a circle on the ground which was an arm's length away from her foot. She slowly whispered as she felt the slow flow of energy within her body. Her hand slightly glowed as the circled patch of ground sunk an inch as if someone had punched it. Her hand finally had a blue aura around it as a small flame and pile of wood appeared out of thin air. Laura suddenly gritted her teeth as she materialized her black bow into her hand with metallic arrows.



King Gareth stared with wide eyes as he knew what she was going to do to Ariana. He looked around and could see that there were a lot of his men standing around. With two swift hand signals, they came running over and formed a circle facing outward. King Gareth stood among his men and smiled towards the edge of the bloody field. His son was sitting high on a horse with two guards protecting him on either side.

"I'm going to do this as quickly as possible. You are going to have to bear with the pain" said Laura as she placed the metallic shaft of her arrows into the fire and waited for it to heat up for the task. She looked deep into Ariana's eyes and knew that there was still a chance. She just had to quickly do this task and then think about what to do with the third arrow.

"Is that what I'm feeling?" asked Ariana all of a sudden. She looked into glowing blue eyes and could feel the power of her sister swimming just outside of her being. "I didn't feel this when I gave birth to Elaine" said Ariana in a wondering tone.

Laura smiled briefly at her older sister wondering if she knew what was really going on. She swiftly but delicately used her tendrils of power to remove the arrows by gently pulling them out. She didn't want to make the arrows suddenly disappear in case that method might cause more damage. Laura hastily grabbed the black metallic shafts of what was left of her arrow and seared both ends of each wound. She sat there while wondering what was going through Ariana's head since nearly everyone that she had treated would have screamed out in agony.

"Laura, if you find Damien, can you tell him to pick up Elaine? Tell father and mother that we managed to fix Ardious and that there are only a few minor details to work out like the enemy headquarters. You should send someone over to release those people" whispered Ariana very slowly as if she were falling asleep.

"Ariana, don't go to sleep yet. I still need to fix you up by removing one more arrow. You have to stay still. This one will hurt" said Laura calmly as she ignored her sister's request. She slowly reached out her hand and gently grasped the arrow shaft which sent a small tremor of pain through Ariana's body. "It's alright, just hold on to me" said Laura encouragingly. She felt slender arms wrap around her back and knew that she had to do this quickly. She also had to heal up the hole that she was going to make and make sure that her sister was stable.

"Laura" whispered Ariana through soft lips. "Can you sing to Elaine? Tell her that I love her...Thanks Laurie, you're the best. I love you." Laura swiftly yanked the arrow out as tears slowly fell down her face. Ariana's blood gushed out all over her hands and she stared at them for a second before trying to feed her tendrils of power into Ariana's body.

"Come on... This has to work..." sobbed Laura as she tried to feed healing power into her older sister. She had felt Ariana's body slump against her just before she yanked out the arrow. "Someone... Father... Please come and help her" whispered Laura and as if her words were an alarm, three people arrived out of thin air by her side.

Grey eyes watched as her father slowly moved Ariana off her and poured his own power to wrap totally around Ariana's body. Bloodied hands began to shake as the reality hit her. Her sister was

dying or was dead because she didn't immediately go to her sister's side when she had brought all the warriors to help out. She was numb as she knelt there and stared at her hands. Grey eyes could see that Artie, her younger sister, was watching and assisting their father while mother was slowly patting her back. "I should have been by her side the whole time" whispered Laura as she slowly rose to her feet.

Artie looked over her shoulder and could see her mother's worried face. She immediately turned around and approached Laura while their mother helped their father. Artie had one look at Laura's face and knew that they were going to leave immediately to where their niece was.

Laura stood in front of a shocked seated Darisa. She had told her story of what had happened and how Damien had disappeared when he knew he was going mad. She also told her that Ariana had passed away and that Elaine would remain in Darisa's care. "Elaine is your niece. However as much as we would like to welcome her to our family, she belongs here for now. Later on she may choose where she would like to go but at the moment I think it is best for you to look after her. Your younger brother will be labelled as missing and dangerous. My mother would have already made the arrangements. I am sorry to dump all of this on you but it is time that I return to my sister" said Laura eloquently. She slowly bowed her head in apology and slowly made her way over to the bed. She gave the sleeping baby a slight pat on the head. "Ariana would want her to know that she was loved by both of them. However she would not want the villagers finding out about her heritage. Continue the story that you weaved earlier. Ariana would want that."

Darisa nodded her head once in acknowledgement and in a blink of an eye, Laura and Artie were gone. Her black eyes were tearful but had seen those bloodied hands and knew the extent in which Laura had cared for her older sister. Black eyes slowly moved over to where Elaine was sleeping and slowly sighed. She had a new task and her niece was to be introduced to the community.

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## **Chapter 11: Lost memories...**

"I don't know if I can do this" whispered Elaine as lost blue eyes stared at the wounded Tiffany. Her body was frozen as she stared at the three arrow wounds which were positioned in vital areas. One wound was in the middle of the back where the spine was, another was in the kidney area and the third wound was near her lower back and had penetrated straight through to stick out of her stomach. "There is no practical way of doing this unless we can quickly gather the necessary things but that will take too long."

The healer kneeling nearby looked at Maria and Elaine as if they were all talk. She looked angry as she saw how Tiffany was fairsing. She could see that the pain was worsening after her minor reprieve at what Maria had accomplished. Her skilful hands were about to shove Maria out of the way but then she felt two hands on her shoulders and looked up in surprise.

Grey eyes stared at the stunned faces and dismissed them in a casual glance. She had her slender right arm on the healer's shoulder and looked to her right to see that Daniel had his left hand on

the healer's other shoulder. "It's nice to see that you are here, King Daniel Gareth. You're father has spoken well of you" said the grey eyed woman in a melodic tone that seemed to sooth everyone's minds.

"It is an honour to be speaking with you, Laura of the old order, Meldasious. If there is anything that you need, please don't hesitate to ask. My Kingdom owes your older sister and I am duty bound to repay it" said Daniel in a casual enough tone that held all the respect he had for this deity that he worshipped.

Maria ignored Laura and continued to focus her attention on Elaine. Green eyes full of concern stared at lost blue orbs. She could see how Elaine was hesitating and revolving ideas around her head for an answer to this current situation. Her mind recalled all of the incidences when Elaine had healed people over the course of their journey and she suddenly realized the difference. She realised the difference between Elaine's practical healing and miraculous healing methods. She could now see that the practical healing that Elaine used was only the normal Elaine that she saw everyday. However the miraculous healing that Elaine used was actually a different Elaine, with a different persona.

Elaine continued to stare and could feel her arms start to move of their own volition to rest onto Tiffany's back. She could see what she was doing and feel how right that small motion was. She slowly closed her eyes to take a deep breath but blue eyes did not open. Her limbs were gathering up energy and she could feel it as though it were a gentle pull from the core of her being. She felt the waves of energy and concentrated on the course that the energy was flowing. Her mind finally registered that the energy was pooling into her hands and as she opened her eyes, she was stunned to see that her hands had a blue aura around it. Slowly tendrils of blue light slowly slipped from her fingertips as if her energy had materialized right in front of her.

Maria watched in fascination. She had never seen Elaine do this before and it was exciting. She could feel the tension in the air; slip away as if a blanket had been lifted. Her mind and body were becoming soothed by the blue energies that surrounded Elaine's body. Green eyes stared into glowing blue orbs that sparkled with unknown power.

Laura stood there patiently and watched with surprised grey eyes. She knew that Elaine had this kind of power but also knew that Elaine's mind had disassociated her from it because of the past. She could see that Elaine was slowly opening up her mind to the unlimited knowledge of healing that had accumulated over the many generations of her family line. She could see and feel the soothing effect of healing power and felt her eyes start to tear up. This power had been her sister's main gift. She remembered how her sister had also given up her own life to heal the man that she loved and unknowingly caused the chain of events to occur.

Strong hands gently slid down Tiffany's back and began to erase the pain that was being registered by her nerves. Calloused fingers glided softly over smooth skin and slowly allowed tendrils of power to seep into the skin. Blue glowing tendrils swiftly wrapped Tiffany into a gentle haze where she was unaware of her body. Glowing blue orbs carefully focused on the main areas of injury and gradually encouraged the cells to start their healing process at an accelerated rate.

Tiffany's kidney and lower back wound healed up and scarred for a few fractions of a second before disappearing altogether as if there had been no wound. Her colour was leisurely returning to her skin as blood cells were being replenished to replace all of the blood that she had lost. However her spinal wound was slower to heal.

Elaine delicately weaved her tendrils of healing power into Tiffany's final wound. She could immediately sense that one of the vertebrae had been crushed by the arrow head and had dispersed the bone fragments into the surrounding area. Blue glowing eyes now understood that Tiffany's spinal column was being slowly severed by the bone fragments and knew that immediate physical action was required to allow the magical healing process. Elaine slowly shaped one of her tendrils of power into thinner threads almost like string and inserted it into the wound. She slowly felt around and finely removed all of the bone fragments while supported the rest of Tiffany's spine with the rest of her power.

Sweat poured down the side of Elaine's face as she concentrated on her task which was very taxing. She had to finish soon or risk the chance of damaging Tiffany further and cost her own life in the process. She could feel the pool of energy at her fingertips, slowly evaporating away as she delicately worked. Finally all of the bone fragments were pulled out and Elaine slowly encouraged the spinal column to grow anew. Her blue sparkling eyes could see that she needed to grow new bone material to replace the crushed vertebra. Elaine gradually placed her hand over the wound and fed into it a small amount of energy which she slowly transported bone matter from Tiffany's limbs to the wounded area. However the bone matter from the limbs, were being grown from the undamaged bone tissue so that there was less stress on the body.

Elaine leisurely closed up the wound which scarred and disappeared entirely after making sure that the wound was no more. She smiled at knowing that Tiffany would not have a problem with movement of any kind and her life was spared. Elaine fell back onto her bottom and sighed in relief that she had finished her task.

Darisa stared at Tiffany as she began to get up and tried to stop her. Tiffany was too amazed by her recovery that she ignored Darisa's warnings and was feeling quite tired after the whole ordeal. Brown eyes stared at the healer who had passed out upon her sitting up and looked over towards Elaine with a smile. However she stopped as she saw Elaine's glowing form.

Maria and Laura fixed concerned eyes onto Elaine who had suddenly gone blank. They remained still not knowing what was wrong with Elaine and were about to burst into action but Elaine was already grabbing her head and yelling out in excruciating pain. Maria jumped to her feet and rushed to Elaine's side before she registered that Laura had done the same thing that she had.

Laura hastily materialised her power and enveloped Elaine into a glowing ball of liquid. She swiftly tried to ascertain what the problem was and where Elaine might possibly be injured. Grey eyes had already turned into glowing blue orbs as she delved inside of Elaine's body with her power. She tried to poke around and see if she could find the cause of Elaine's distress and came up with nothing physically wrong. Blue glowing eyes swiftly turned back to normal grey and looked over toward green worried eyes that looked imploringly at her. "I can't help her" said Laura in a mere whisper.

"What do you mean?" asked Maria hastily as her heart felt the weight of Elaine's pain. It was so painful to find out the one person she thought could do anything, could not help out the one person that meant the world to her. Green eyes saw the slight shake of the head and found herself holding tightly onto Elaine with tear filled eyes.

Images, pictures, people and places were scrambling uncontrollably through Elaine's mind. She could not stop it or process any of it. Her own mind was already stressed from healing Tiffany and these images were creating more pain to surge through her skull. She could hear her voice screaming out but knew that no one would be able to help her. She could feel in the depths of her soul that this was her path and she must try to strive through it all.

Elaine could feel that the pools of energy in her fingertips had disappeared entirely. She could still feel her core being with waves upon waves of energy that revolved around like a vortex of unbelievable speed. Her mind could slowly grasp onto this energy and found that it soothed her mind and slowly calmed her. The images were gradually slowing down and she could finally process each one. She then saw what was being remembered. She could see Tiffany's wounds on another man, her father's body; her mother had healed him and done something else that caused him to go mad unknowingly.

Elaine ceased her screaming and found she was being caressed carefully by Maria who was crying. Blue eyes swept around at the various faces looking at them and then were captured by green watery eyes. Calloused fingers slowly extended and lifted up to caress Maria's cheek to reassure her. "I'm alright Maria. I finally understand now where I truly belong" said Elaine in a melodious voice that no longer contained any more of its usual gruffness.

Maria stared at Elaine blankly for a minute not sure what Elaine was trying to get at. She slowly eased her hugging and looked carefully into blue orbs that sparkled with power even though Elaine had not summoned any. "What are you trying to say?"

"I finally understand who I am. Everything is falling into place. I can see it all now. I can see it so clearly. I know the reason why our paths were destined to intertwine. I found you to help Darisa. You will be heir even though you do not have Ilion blood in you. For I do and I have chosen you to replace me" said Elaine in a clear, loud voice.

"What are you trying to say?" asked Maria unbelievably.

"I am going to leave for good" said Elaine as she hopped up onto her feet and pulled Maria with her. Strong calloused hands held Maria's soft calloused fingers tightly. She smiled widely at Maria and looked deep into green eyes. "I have to leave and restore everything to the way it should be."

"She is right" said Laura with watery eyes full of happiness. "Elaine is our only hope to restoring everything to the way it should be. She has a long list of things to do and one of them is reviving her mother, my older sister, Ariana. Elaine is part of my family and she will be welcomed by all in our family. Father and mother will be thrilled and so will Artie. After we revive Ariana, we can finally go and help her father, Damien Ilion, Darisa's younger brother."

"Damien is wild and will remain so until Ariana can tell us what she did to him" said a male voice that suddenly appeared next to Daniel. He was a beautiful man with long blonde, straight hair. His grey eyes were filled with love as he looked at Elaine. "I formally welcome you to the family. My name is Ardium Meldasious. I am your grandfather" said Ardium in a humorous tone full of happiness. He glanced around carefully and smiled at all of the shocked people. "Elaine, I am sorry but time is of the essence. I sent Laura, your aunt, to collect you since I knew that it was time. Now come along. We have to hurry."

Elaine and Laura swiftly proceeded to follow Ardium however Maria hung tightly onto Elaine. Blue eyes stared at green and smiled. She swept Maria into a tight hug and swiftly kissed her gently on the forehead before letting go. "I will miss you" whispered Elaine into Maria's ears only and then she turned on her heel to follow Laura. Before anyone could say anything, Ardium, Laura and Elaine disappeared in a blink of an eye.

Maria stood there. Her heart was heavy. She didn't get to tell Elaine how she felt. She never got the chance to show her. Green eyes saddened and looked at her calloused fingers. She had frozen upon Elaine's touch and for her hesitation all she got was a gentle kiss on the forehead.

Daniel slowly approached Maria and hesitantly placed his hand on her shoulder. "It looks like we will get to know each other since Arianos Kingdom and Ardious are very close to each other. Darisa will teach you well and I'm sure you will pick up everything. You are in good hands" said Daniel confidently.

Darisa slowly approached Maria, not knowing what to say to the young woman. She had seen that Maria would make a great compassionate leader and that she could probably take Ardious to new heights. However she was shocked at being planted by another bombshell. She could see that Daniel's little speech did not phase the girl one bit and suddenly felt that there was something wrong.

Tiffany slowly got things back into order and had the healer carried back to the healer's hut. She was tired but content that everyone was safe. She had served her Queen well and would continue doing so entirely. Her smile seemed to light up everyone's mood except for Maria and Darisa. The rest of the guests started to gather around the bomb fire that had been created prior to the dinner. The feasting would continue so that the guests could enjoy themselves before business was to be tended to.

Maria stood there as activity flowed past her. Only Daniel and Darisa remained by her side. She could feel the many brief stares but she didn't care. The only thing that she cared about had left in a blink of an eye without knowing the truth. She wanted so badly to be angry at Elaine but she couldn't summon the strength to do so.

Suddenly three arrows were headed towards Maria. Daniel swiftly pushed her out of the way and was relieved that all three arrows had imbedded the ground. Brown eyes swiftly looked around to try and find the only person he knew of that would send three arrows towards one target... Damien.

Darisa swiftly drew out her dagger and found her eyes connecting with blue glowing eyes. A roar filled the air and Darisa could feel the anger that was contained in it. Her limbs froze at the sound and would not move as if someone had frozen her in a block of ice. Black eyes glanced around and found Maria on her feet with a blade in her hands.

Maria held up her sword which was surrounded by a green aura. It glowed brightly and filled the clearing with its green light, surprising everyone. She slowly bent her knees and exploded into the air towards Damien while he leapt down off his branch. Blades collided, vibrating the very air around them with the force of their blows. They both simultaneously pushed each other back before clashing together once more in a frenzy of slashes.

Damien, in his rage, tried to take Maria's head off but she was able to deflect his sword away skilfully without using much force. He could see that she was trained well but did not care. He just wanted her blood drenching his sword. His mouth was a wide grin as he began to smother his sword in her essence of life. A slash down one arm, a nick of the other across the upper arm, a superficial slash across her stomach, a nick across her back, and a small nick across her neck was slowly satisfying his sword.

Maria gingerly sucked in fresh air since he had somehow managed to plant a foot into her side, breaking a few ribs. The blow was effective enough to give him space to rethink his attacks since none had been fatal. She had narrowly slipped out of many fatal blows that would have ended the fight. Her mind was reeling at what to do since it had always been Elaine who had decided. She missed Elaine and her heart felt very heavy. Energy flowed sluggishly throughout her body and she knew that her blade would falter soon. Green eyes stared into glowing blue orbs so much like Elaine's when she had lost control.

Suddenly Maria's eyes widened at the realisation of what had happened. She knew these blue eyes that held no disregard for anyone and only knew how to inflict pain. Maria could see Damien's flexing muscles but with her sharp eyes she could see that they were actually twitches. Green eyes could see the veins popping out of his temples as if he was concentrating but that contradicted with his fighting style. Damien used easy flowing motions that were aggressive and technical. However if he was concentrating, he would use short and precise movements that should have minute moments of hesitation.

Calloused fingers gripped the blade hilt steady as she was determined to resolve this in her own way. Green eyes bore into glowing blue and slowly intimidated him into attacking. Her sharp eyes followed his movements carefully and watched the strain of his face. It was almost as if his head did not belong to the body that it was attached to. She swiftly stepped to the side while raising her blade and manoeuvred his sword skilfully away from her body. Her blade quickly changed direction and followed up with a short jab with the hilt of her blade across his face. He was momentarily knocked off balance. She hastily took the opening and sliced the tendons in his sword wielding wrist which made him automatically drop his sword. She then swiftly roundhouse kicked him in the back of his head which dropped him to the ground. Maria's whole body weight pinned him down where he couldn't move. Her faltering green blade resting against the back of his neck completely immobilised him.

SLAP!!!

Daniel suddenly took a few steps forward from the force of the blow. He quickly twisted his head around with an angry look but swiftly wiped it off his face as he stared into grey eyes. Artie stood there uncharacteristically, looking like a menacing tyrant however that image was blown away by her whining voice that pierced the air. "Daniel, what are you waiting for? Go and get some men to help pin him down so that Maria can rest" said Artie in a high pitched childish voice. She then casually jogged over to the pile of men to help Maria up. Her soft fingers quickly tugged on Maria's upper arm and supported her before she had the chance of falling on her backside from lack of energy. "You overdid it again. I have to get either mum or somebody to come and heal you before you kick the bucket. Nice job, by the way, I didn't figure it out until I realised what you were thinking about."

Maria smiled weakly as she hobbled slowly towards a nearby tree with Artie's help. She was still holding her blade tightly and the light emanating from it was slowly fading away. Her entire body was exhausted and all she could think about was a nice soft bed. Green eyes saw the tree and soft grass. She barely felt Artie help her to sit and didn't even register that she had closed her eyes and drifted off.

Artie looked at Maria concernedly. She was the youngest out of the family besides Elaine but that was understandable. However she had no such talent in healing and could only support her family members. Her only skill was making weapons and problem solving, although there were times that she got up to mischief. Grey eyes looked around and spotted Darisa standing midway between where Damien was and where Maria was. Artie could see that she was undecided about where she had to be since it was her duty to go to Maria but also her responsibility to go to her brother. Artie quickly caught her attention and pointed her finger over to Damien where she reluctantly went.

Artie quickly checked Maria over and knew that things were looking bad. She already knew that Maria's chances of recovering were slim since it had only been earlier in the afternoon when this had happened before. Her mind knew that any more magical energy used to heal Maria could become harmful since her body hadn't received enough time to rest. She swiftly spoke into the air, in ancient Ardious language. "*Mother, father, somebody come quickly. Maria needs help now.*"

Suddenly a firm feminine hand gently squeezed Artie's shoulder. Artie turned around and was surprised to see blue eyes staring at her. Blonde, straight hair slowly swayed with the soft breeze as a reassuring smile graced her lips. She slowly knelt down next to Maria's exhausted form and casually placed a hand onto Maria's chest and the other onto Maria's forehead.

Artie was smiling brightly at the woman who was about to heal Maria. However she felt another hand on her other shoulder and turned around to be happily surprised by her mother, Enola. She smiled and immediately looked back over towards Maria who was now showing signs of coming to. Grey eyes glowing with happiness stared at the outcome of a long wait.



Maria stared up into unfamiliar blue eyes which belonged to a beautiful blonde woman. She glanced around and saw Artie with another unfamiliar woman who looked older, standing slightly behind her. "What happened?" asked Maria who was a little stunned. "Did I miss something?"

Ariana smiled beautifully at Maria. Her soft melodic voice filled the air and made heads turn towards her, seeking out the source. "I am Ariana Melda. It is nice to finally meet you, Maria." Blue eyes blinked in surprise as Maria seemed to sit up unexpectedly. Ariana was too slow to react and could not intercept Maria from bolting towards the pile of men. "Where is she going?"

Maria hastily ran over to the pile of men with her blade in hand. Green eyes immediately noticed that the men were struggling to hold down Damien and Darisa was also trying to subdue him. "Get off" yelled Maria and as everyone faltered for a few seconds, her soft leather boots were already off the ground and landed right next to Damien. Her knees pinned him down and her blade once more rested on the back of his neck. All the men scrambled away fearful of the look in Maria's eyes.

"What are you doing?" asked Darisa a little concerned.

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## **Chapter 12: Family Reunion...**

The very air vibrated as it thickened with immense power of unknown origin. A strong wind blew and unsettled leaves and dirt alike which seemed to be caused by Maria. The night sky became dark and only the moon shone brightly. Silence permeated as Maria knelt there with her once more glowing blade that cast a green light around the small clearing. Her glowing left hand was firmly clasped onto Damien's head and glowing green orbs met glowing blue. Maria's very skin oozed power, materializing into existence as if it were a blanket of blue light covering her. Maria slowly shaped and nudged her core energy around within her before she pooled it into her left hand so that it felt more familiar since it had been hastily replenished by Ariana.

"Damien!" exclaimed Ariana as she stood nearby, having approached silently while watching Maria carefully. She had been about to interfere, knowing that this amount of power used after being healed was reckless and dangerous. However she had stopped in her tracks after seeing Damien's face with glowing blue orbs. "How...? What? Mother...?"

Suddenly Ardium, Laura, and Elaine appeared out of thin air just outside of Maria's aura. Ardium looked on in fascination as he monitored the waves of energy that was flowing from Maria. He had never experienced such rich energy come from a single being before and it had been right under his nose the whole time. "When did this start?" asked Ardium in a deep melodic voice that hid most of the urgency in his tone.

"Only a couple of minutes, honey" replied Enola.

Laura hurriedly rushed to Ariana's side as soon as she appeared and made sure that she was alright. Her grey eyes scrutinised over Ariana from head to foot since Ariana had only just been released from her prison of magic that just barely kept her alive for all of these years. "You need to rest" suggested Laura kindly but Ariana simply placed her hand around Laura's upper arm in a kind gesture to refuse Laura's request.

Elaine stood there in shock. She had felt the immense familiar energy but her mind could not grasp the idea that this was Maria. Blue eyes were glued onto glowing green and knew that Maria could not keep this up without help. She had an inkling feeling what Maria was up to but she couldn't know for sure until she immersed herself into Maria's aura which could mean that she was giving up her physical being. Strong legs finally moved and she confidently walked forward and into Maria's aura. She turned her head briefly back and smiled at everyone before Maria's aura engulfed Elaine and she was physically no more. Only her energy core remained, which gently moved forward towards Maria and Damien.

Elaine carefully forced her being forward until she was right next to Maria. She firmly caressed Maria so that Maria knew that she was there. It felt strange that Maria's energy was somehow trying to fill up her being even though she was pure energy. Her mind felt muddled as thoughts from years past flickered through her mind. She could see Damien with her mother in their final moments together before their separation. However as she was viewing it, another set of images looped into her memories. Her mind recognised that she was watching herself going out of control on those many times that she had let her feelings control her actions.

"Do you see the similarities?" asked Maria in her melodic voice that echoed around in the energy field. Her green eyes plastered onto what was left of Elaine's being. Her heart felt heavy but she knew that this must be done for the sake of everyone. "You shouldn't be here."

"I belong here right by your side. There is nowhere I'd rather be. You know that, don't you?" asked Elaine in her somewhat gruff voice that seemed so distant. Her being had wavered for a few minutes before she could get a grasp of it. "I want to be wherever you are. I want to be right here by your side like I have always been. I've taught you so much and in return I have learnt so much from you."

"You wanted to leave. You needed to leave. There was no chance that I would ever see you again. That was what you were planning since you knew that you could not be at two places at once. I just wanted to stay by your side. You wanted to give me a home. I am home wherever you are. Don't you understand that?"

Elaine could once more feel her being wavering in and out of existence. She couldn't hang on much longer and knew that she had to either leave or submit herself to Maria's energy. She could feel the energy becoming violent as time progressed. It was zapping at her strength and will slowly. "What did you want me to do?" asked Elaine sincerely.

"I wanted you to take me with you" yelled Maria as she let out all of her frustration. The energy within the field began to electrify as Maria's anger continued to bubble out. "I wanted to tell you everything that I have felt for the past year. I was too scared that you wouldn't feel the same way."

I was too scared that I would lose our friendship. I was just scared. You made me fall to my knees just from the simplest of touches. I hate you!"

"Do you really hate me?" asked Elaine calmly, knowing the answer.

Maria slowly shook her head. Her eyes closed in frustration as she pinned Damien where he was. "If it wasn't for him, you and I would be travelling around the world for years to come. We could do anything we wanted and no one would care. But he is your father. I can't do or say anything. It is your duty..."

"So what do you want me to do?"

"I don't want you to do anything. I just want to take your place to deal with him. I know what it will cost for you to help him. I know what it will cost everyone. It is why I want to take your place. No one will miss me. No one will care as long as he is alright and so are you... I will miss you... I love you... goodbye..." said Maria before her energy forced Elaine out of the field of her energy.

Elaine materialised just outside of the energy field and landed on her back like someone had tossed her out. She looked around and felt the tears gathering in her blue eyes. This was not how things were going to be. She didn't want it to end this way. Elaine hastily got up onto her feet and went to walk back into the swirl of energy but she couldn't force her way in. Elaine was electrocuted backwards and fell onto her back. She bodily shook herself before trying again.

"Elaine that is enough" said Ardium softly. He stared with wise grey eyes at Elaine. His posture was composed but his family knew that he was tensed and trying to work out if there was another way. "It is what she has chosen."

Elaine stood back up determinedly. Her blue orbs slowly glowing with immense power. Her whole being started to glow and matched the intensity in which Maria was releasing her energy. "No, it is what she thinks is right but she is wrong. I will not die" said Elaine in a growl that chilled everyone's spine. Elaine walked up to the field of energy once more and slowly forced her entire being into Maria's aura.

"Father, what did she mean?" asked Ariana in an alarmed state.

"She was meant to heal Damien with her own energy. By my calculations, she has enough power to perform the task required of her but not enough to help her sustain life. It would have been a suicide mission considering she had pulled you back from death as well. Her current energy level is not enough. If she forces Maria to not interfere, she will die. I'm sorry daughter, I was told not to tell you by your daughter" explained Ardium.

"What will happen if Maria does it?" asked Laura.

"She has enough energy to complete the process but not enough to live. She will forfeit her life. If she had our blood, it would be a different matter. She knows what she is doing. They both

know what they are doing. All we can do is wait for an outcome" replied Ardium as he monitored the new waves of energy that was Elaine as well as Maria.

Blue and green light swirled around in a thick light show that cast spots of materialised energy beaming into the clearing. Dust rose around the dome of pure energy as an artificial breeze began to blow out from the force of the waves of energy. It was unclear on how long the light show was going to continue considering Ardium did not know who was going to heal Damien.

"He would gladly trade his life for theirs" piped up Darisa as she stared at Ardium. Black eyes so like her brother's had been were tearful and knew of the circumstances involved. "He would gladly give it up for their sake. He is a warrior and he knows what that means. There is no need to heal him if it will cost either Elaine's or Maria's lives. He would truly give it up."

"It is out of our hands. Maria and Elaine will be the ones to decide on an outcome. I cannot interfere even if I wanted to. I don't have enough power to overthrow the both of them. They are both singularly stronger than me" replied Ardium in a quiet voice so that only Darisa could hear.

Elaine fought her way back into the centre of the dome of energy. Glowing blue orbs found Maria and Damien at the dome's centre. She quickly placed her hand onto Maria's shoulder and linked her being together with hers. "I said that I would always be by your side. I love you too..." said Elaine with a smile that warmed Maria's heart. "Now shall we?"

Maria concentrated all of her core energy into the palm of her left hand while Elaine did the same. Elaine placed her hand gently on top of Maria's as they slowly weaved their energy into Damien's head. Energy filtered through his entire being as he was being cleansed by pure energy. Maria and Elaine felt their core energy being drained as they continued to purify Damien's being so that he would remain in control of his mind and body. They had to rid Damien of the impure energy that Ariana had accidentally given him since she had been injured at the time of healing him.

Energy swirled violently around them like a huge vortex that funnelled into the crown of Damien's head. Blue and green energy mixed together to become an aqua pure energy source that was more intense than the ingredients. Thickened air of energy slowly thinned out and finally the fog of light began to lift away from their bodies.

Maria and Elaine remained kneeling by Damien's side as he slowly started to sit up. He blinked a few times and looked around with refreshed black eyes. He gradually got to his feet and rushed into Ariana's arms in an emotional state. Ardium and the rest of the family sighed in relief as the mission had been completed. However Enola remained focusing in on Elaine and Maria. She felt that there was still something amiss.

Maria and Elaine stared at each other for a long while. They had not even registered that Damien was already up and about. Both were breathing heavily and were totally drained. Maria smiled at Elaine and slowly leaned forward to give her a gentle kiss on the lips before her eyes closed and she slumped forward. Elaine smiled at being kissed and slowly slumped forward in exhaustion as well.

Enola rushed forward and hastily checked both young women. A smile broadened her face as she felt their life forces strong in their bodies. She slowly shook her head in disbelief at seeing both young women healthy but tired. She looked around at everyone else and smiled toothily. "They are fine, just exhausted."

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Three weeks later...

"We are off" said Maria joyfully. She swiftly checked her backpack and sheathed blade before staring up into blue orbs of love. Her hand extended shyly out for Elaine to accept which she did. They both looked back at their waving family. "Do you think it is alright for us to leave like this?"

"Mum and Dad are fine. Artie and Laura are happily working together to sort something out about Laurangue Kingdom. Grandmother Enola and Grandfather Ardium will expect us in three weeks time. So it should be alright considering we are now together" replied Elaine in a deep melodic voice.

"I was referring to Darisa" said Maria as they started to walk after they waved eagerly to the family. Green eyes stared up into blue, knowing that Elaine was hiding something up her sleeve. "Come on, spill it."

"Well alright" said Elaine in defeat. "Tiffany, will temporary take your position until you return. So I left a message on Darisa's bed telling her this but I forgot to tell Tiffany."

"You didn't forget to tell Tiffany. You purposely didn't tell her" replied Maria.

"Well if I did tell her, we wouldn't be able to leave."

"You do have a point there" replied Maria.

"Of course I do since I'm stronger, smarter and taller" said Elaine before she ran up ahead. Maria having only just caught on to the light teasing quickly tried to give chase. They both laughed happily together as they continued on their new adventure.