

# Battle for Arcania

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## Prologue

Ariana more stumbled than ran through the forest. She was exhausted from running for hours, and she had been tired when she started. She was drained emotionally and physically. And most importantly, she couldn't figure out how. How did they know where to strike? Her and her sister were on their way home to Alandaria from Ceranda when they were attacked. The men in white had come out of nowhere. They were obviously after her and her sister. The men probably wanted to kidnap them for ransom. Two daughters of the king of Alandaria would fetch a high price. Their guard of ten men, overwhelmed by the enemy, killed twice their number and injured a dozen others defending Ariana and her sister, Kalanna. But the men in white kept coming and eventually her guards were all killed. Ariana herself was a sorceress, but there are limits to what can be done. Alandarian magic was more healing and growing, but it uses the same magic to stop a heart as it does to keep it going. She killed a dozen men herself, but it had mentally exhausted her in the process and her sister was captured. There were still a lot of men chasing her, and she had not had time to stop and rest to regain her strength.

Ariana was nearing the end of her endurance and possibly her life. A slice in her leg was slowly losing blood, even with it tied off. She no longer had any idea where she was or where she was going; she was lost. She had grown up in this forest. Usually, she would recognize the trees, notice the mounds of earth, and distinguish the shadows on the ground. But she was lost in thought as well. Thoughts about her sister Kalanna floated through her hazy mind. Kalanna was not a sorceress like Ariana and was now in the hands of the enemy. New tears ran down Ariana's face, tracing the path of the old ones and blurring her vision.

Ariana had no idea how far behind her pursuers were, or even if they were still following. Almost, she did not care any longer. The only thing keeping her moving was the thought of finding help for her sister. Then she felt it.

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Two men half supported Kalanna as they dragged her through the double white marble doors. Men dressed in white from head to foot with a white leather scabbard on their hips held open the doors on either side. A pearl hilt stuck up out of the scabbard and a pearl dagger was on their waist opposite to the sword. The two men who pulled her through the gleaming doors were dressed identical.

Kalanna was forced into the chamber beyond; her eyes squinted from the blinding brightness. It was a throne room, though not for any kingdom in this world. The whole room was carved in white marble, floor, walls, ceiling, and the ten great pillars to each side of the white carpet leading to the throne. The throne itself was bleached bone. It seemed to be all one piece, like skeletons, melted and molded into a throne. Kalanna wouldn't have thought it possible. There were no lamps or torches, but there was light. It reflected off everything, or maybe it came from everything, Kalanna couldn't tell which. She could barely keep her eyes open. Then she saw him.

He was sitting on the throne staring through her with dead eyes as Kalanna was brought before him. She found herself unconsciously trying to fix her hair with her fingers; she couldn't help it, he was the most beautiful man she had ever seen. She felt like an animal in the presence of a god. White robes brocaded with white gold trim adorned him, and on the left breast a single white gold lightning bolt. Though he was covered in white, the light did not reflect off him, it seemed to be drawn into him. His hair was silver and hung down past his shoulders, his chiseled

features pale, as if he had never been out in the sun; it added to his beauty. But his eyes were light gray clouds, and showed no emotion at all. A window to the soul; he had no soul. His look pierced into her heart. The hair on her neck tried to jump off her skin. She knew who he was. She knew what he was. She knew no greater fear.

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Xzyche watched her eyes. You could learn a great deal about a person from their eyes. He watched as she turned from the shock of his beauty, to wonder, to realization, to fear, to acceptance. She was intelligent; most would have taken twice as long for comprehension. He liked inflicting fear in intelligent people. Intelligent people had reason behind their fright; common people just had blind terror. He remained silent for a while to prolong her agony and his pleasure. The only thing bleeding his pleasure was that her sister had escaped. No matter, she would be found.

“How is the search?”

“We have her trail. We should have her soon, my lord,” the man to the prisoner’s left answered.

“You should have had her already.” Both men flinched. They knew someone was going to pay for their failure. Xzyche directed his gaze to the woman before him.

“Well princess, you don’t look very regal now.” She had gotten a hold on her emotions and her face gave nothing away as she refused to respond, although he could still feel the fear in her. She was beautiful, or would be if she were cleaned up; she had been treated roughly during her capture. She had a large purple bruise on her left cheek, a cut above the right eye, a broken arm, and smaller bruises over most of her body; she was strong. Some men wouldn’t be able to stand after what she had gone through. He admired strength. Light brown hair flowed down

past her shoulders, her soft brown eyes shining from the tears she was holding back. The soft features of her face gave her a rare beauty. Any man would fall in love with her the second his gaze fell across her. Fortunately, Xzyche was more than a mere man; her beauty had no affect on him. She knew he had no misgivings about killing her.

“Where is your sister, my dear?” he asked knowing she wouldn’t answer. He already knew she had no idea. He liked to let her feel strength from defying him. It didn’t matter; he would have her sister soon enough.

“You are lucky, princess, that I am not willing to take the chance of you escaping, miniscule as that may be, or I would give you to my men for a while. There are never enough women around to satisfy them. I would let you suffer in their hands for months before I finally killed you.

“But I cannot take any chances. Too much is at stake. Neither you nor your sister can live to fulfill the prophecy. Regretfully, I do not know which of you the prophecy speaks of, so one of you will die needlessly, but that is the price we pay for uncertainty.

“It is believed that twins hold a special bond with each other, sometimes they can feel each other’s pain. I hope that this is true, so your sister will feel your death. But have no fear princess, she will follow you closely.”

Kalanna was impressive. She did not even blink. Of course she knew she was going to die and was holding on to the fact that her sister was safe for the time being. It was a shame he could not persuade her to join the white movement. The daughter of the king of Alandaria would be an invaluable ally. She would never betray her family or her people though; even he could not turn her. Which said a lot for her soul, but he could not let her live either. The prophecy was

too important. She must die. The problem was, he feared it was Kalanna's sister, Ariana, that was named in the prophecy and she was still free.

“Kill her.” Xzyche commanded the man on her left. As the man reached for his dagger, he heard the princess whisper her sister's name, “Ariana, I'm sorry.” He would have preferred her to cry it out, but from her it was equivalent. In his mind he could hear her screaming it; it was music to his ears.

The man pulled his dagger and sliced open her throat. As blood began to flow from the gash in her throat, she fell. They both froze solid. Even the blood froze in mid-air as it was spraying out from her throat. The man who cut her throat fell limply to the floor, his knife suspended in the air, still touching the princess's throat.

“Fool! Blood is never to touch any surface in this sanctuary. You,” Xzyche pointed to her other guard, “get these bodies out of here.”

“Yes master.” The guard bowed low and went to get help.

He should have taken care of it himself, killed her with but a thought as he had the man on the floor, but Xzyche found letting his men do simple things like executing a prisoner lifted their morale. He would have to kill her sister himself of course; she was a sorceress. He should have sent more men, but one hundred men should have been enough to capture one sorceress and one woman. All they had to do was knock her out, or exhaust her.

How easy it was to ensure his conquest by two simple deaths. Xzyche felt like laughing. Almost. He did not have Ariana yet. He was not one to consider something as fact before it had come to pass, but once Ariana's lifeless body was before him, there would be nothing left to stop him. The world and everything in it would be his. And if he did not get Ariana, he would just have to go after the man. Maybe he should have gone after that one at the start. He had weighed

the decision and thought the two princesses would be the easier targets, but he could have been wrong. One or both would die, ensuring success. He could almost taste it, almost.

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Ariana heard Kalanna whisper her name, felt the knife slice open Kalanna's throat. She screamed, a high-pitched wail. Kalanna's death stole the last of her strength and the last of her will. She slumped to the forest floor and lay there staring at nothing, unfeeling, uncaring.

Ariana had no idea how long she had been lying there; it could have been a few minutes or a few hours, it did not matter. She no longer cared. As she heard the men surrounding her, she almost welcomed death. They probably would not kill her here; somebody obviously wanted to see her. She thought she might know whom, but she did not care anymore. Nothing mattered. Her sister was dead.

"So Ariana, it looks as though your strength has run out at last. You gave us quite a chase." She did not respond to the words, barely heard them. Her mind was dead, as was her sister. She hoped death would soon find her as well.

The men closed in. Ariana waited for their hands to drag her to her feet; they never came. Dimly, somewhere in the back of her mind, she recognized the sounds of fierce fighting. It stopped abruptly; she didn't care. A voice and gentle hands helped her to her feet. Her eyes did not register the dozens of dead bodies lying around her, mostly clad in white. She barely felt the tingling in her body as she was healed. Whoever healed her had given her some strength as well. She dimly recognized her brother's voice telling her it was going to be all right.

"She's dead Dex, Kalanna's dead." It came out as a whisper.

"I know Ari, I know." His voice was strained as he spoke. "You're okay now. You're safe. We're going home." She could see tears in her brother's eyes; he never cried. It was

strange to see him that way, almost alien. She saw something else in his eyes as well, anger.

The look in his eyes scared her even in the state she was in; she had never seen him that angry.

## Chapter One

The sky was endless gray. Light and dark patches could be seen in some areas where individual clouds could be made out. There was a light drizzle and drops of water fell from the leaves of the trees as little blue and red birds chattered to each other. The footsteps of four companions could occasionally be heard splashing through the mud and water on the dirt road. They walked in silence wondering about being summoned before the king. Behind them padded Wolf, a direwolf half as tall as them. The tall green trees on either side created a sanctuary, a tunnel of sorts unburdened by the problems of the world as they traveled home to Selvin.

The war of the three kingdoms of Arcania had ended forty years ago and there was still high tension among the lands, but with each new generation the tension lessened and acceptance increased. Mikel looked around at his friends. They all three were staring ahead at nothing. He could see on their faces that they were worried like him. Wolf didn't look worried, but he never did. Mikel and Jontha were sons of the Kandaran king, but Mikel was only an adopted son. He grew up in the palace and was taught everything a prince should know along with his brother.

Mikel feared the rumors whispered that nobody wanted to believe. The white movement, a religious sect that cut through all the kingdoms, seemed to be gathering forces. *Why would the white army start to grow after all these years? What if Xzyche is not really dead?* A voice in the back of Mikel's mind kept telling him that he existed for a great purpose. He feared that purpose might have to do with Xzyche, and that he would not live up to the expectations.

As they entered through the main gate of Selvin, the capital of Kandaran, the guards were serious and unsmiling. The wall was four stories high and half as wide with a huge portcullis that was lowered each night on either side of it. In the war of the kingdoms, Selvin had been besieged twice, but no army ever set foot inside the walls. The town stretched over two miles

before them, housing over one hundred thousand people. The few people who were out on the streets were unsmiling and reclusive. The whitewashed houses Mikel and his friends passed were closed. Street vendors were not even trying to entice customers; they just stood there silent and gloomy behind their wares. The city guards that the party encountered on their way to the palace glared at them, blaming them for doing nothing or failing to recognize the prince and his companions.

“Can you feel that?” Mikel asked his friends.

“The feeling that the air is going to burst? No, I can’t.” Nikoel often spoke with sarcasm. Nikoel was small, five and a half feet tall with a slight frame, but her size was deceiving as she was a short-bow marksman and deadly with a dagger.

“It looks as if at any moment some of these people are going to attack us.” Jesska looked around warily. Almost as tall as Mikel with an athletic body and long blond hair, Jesska was the type of woman that people stared at constantly.

“Let’s just go see what my father wants.” Jontha silenced the others. He always expected people to obey him. They always did. He was over six feet tall with a strong powerful build.

Mikel started to break away from the others. “First I must go see Master Darien. I’ll meet up with you at the palace.” Wolf followed Mikel.

Jontha said, “Be quick. I have a bad feeling about what we are going to hear.”

“Really? Whatever gave you that opinion?” Nikoel looked wide-eyed at Jontha. He walked away without responding as the others followed.

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Mikel soon found himself walking up the path to Master Darien’s house. It was a small building with only two rooms. One to sleep in, slightly bigger than the bed that occupied it, and

one to eat in, with a table taking up half of it. The enclosure was large, though; you could fit ten more houses in the fenced in area. There were trees and gravel paths and ponds surrounding the house. There was also a gazebo where Darien meditated. Darien was a meditative master and was training Mikel to become one. A meditative master enters a trance in which he is more attuned to nature and his surroundings as well as his own body. He can heal faster, move quicker, sense life around him, and a first rank master can even project commands into somebody else's mind. Mikel was already a sixth-rank master. Not many people made it higher than that. Darien was a first-rank master and told Mikel that he had promise.

As Mikel went to knock on the door, it opened. "Master Darien."

"I have been expecting you Mikel."

"You knew I was coming?"

"I knew you would be home soon." Darien walked hunched over into the house. Mikel and Wolf followed. Darien was one of the oldest men in Kandaran, already past his seventy-fifth year, but still strong as a petrified branch.

"I have been summoned to the castle. Me, Jontha, Nikoel and Jesska."

"You will soon be going on a journey that will change your life. You may find what you seek, or you may find your death. Only your strength and courage will tell."

"Have you had a vision of the future?" Mikel poured some tea from the pot on the table for him and Darien and sits opposite the table from him. Wolf lied down on the floor and appeared to fall asleep immediately.

"There are more ways of telling the future than just visions, Mikel." Mikel waited for more. "I have friends in the castle."

"But what about my training?"

“I have taught you all that I can and taken you as far along the path as I am able. It takes you only a minute to enter the trance, you heal four times faster than normal, and you are able to sense all life and water around you for one hundred feet in every direction. In order to reach first-rank, a master must teach himself, unlock his own secrets. I can instruct you no further.”

“But Master, how will I know what to do? How will I know when I have reached a higher rank?”

*Lie down.* Darien sent the thought into Mikel’s subconscious. Mikel immediately obeyed the command without thinking.

“You are a bright pupil. A master can feel when his rank has increased. And you have always known what to do; I taught you little and showed you less than most.”

Darien seemed to jump from one side of the room to the other without being in the middle.

“You have the potential to reach the higher levels. There are few capable of reaching level one, and fewer still who make it there. You must meditate often and concentrate.”

“You think I can reach first level?”

Darien *jumped* back to his original position and implanted the command Rise into Mikel’s head. Mikel got to his feet. Darien continued. “The question I ask myself, and you, is whether you will take the time and effort to do so. *If* you have the discipline, you will be able to see the commands I implant in your mind. You will be able to slow down time as I do and keep pace. You may be able to accomplish it years before I did.”

“I will, master. I will do everything it takes.”

Wolf, who was not asleep, said to Mikel, *If you start to slack, I’ll bite your ankles.*

Mikel smiled. “Wolf says that if I start to slack, he will give me a bite to get me going again.”

“That is good to hear. You can learn much discipline and patience from Wolf.”

*See. Master Darien is a smart man.* Wolf had a smirking tone.

“You shouldn’t have said that master, now Wolf is going to be impossible to live with for the next few days.”

“It is truth, and you must go now. They are waiting for you.”

“I’ll come by before I leave to say goodbye, master.”

As Mikel and Wolf left, Darien whispered to himself, “You have forgotten one of the first things I taught you, my son. What you hear is not always what is said. I have had a vision of the future, but even I cannot see which end will follow. Telling you could have drastic consequences.... I will pray to Zem for you, Mikel. I will pray for the world.”

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As Mikel approached the doors to the throne room with Wolf, his friends were waiting for him.

“It’s about time. We almost forgot you were coming.” Jesska was smiling with her blonde hair, flowing partway down her back, tied with a ribbon. She slipped her arm through Jontha’s; she and Jontha were seldom apart. Jesska was a year older than Nikoel, and her opposite in most ways. She was strong and agile, making her a good swordsman. She was honest and open. Jesska and Nikoel were both training to become wizards. The Alandarians differentiated their male and female magic users, sorcerers and sorceresses, but Kandarans just used the one name. A wizard is a wizard regardless of gender.

“Master Darien says we will be going away, and it may be dangerous.”

“Sleeping is dangerous.” Jontha was not smiling. Jontha was the oldest of the four, having just reached his twenty-fifth year. His short brown hair was plastered to his head from the rain outside, and his light green eyes focused inward in contemplation.

“That’s why I sleep with my teddy bear.” Nikoel, only a year past being named an adult, often made jokes about being young. This time it helped to lighten the mood a little. Even Jontha’s scowl turned more towards a smile.

The doors to the throne room opened and a guard bid them to enter.

Everyone could feel the tension in the room. The throne room was large with marble pillars running the length to the throne. The king sat on the throne with a serious expression on his face. Tapestries adorned the walls, and a skylight was cut into the roof far overhead. Torches were lit interspaced around the room as the clouds outside let little light enter the room. On either side of the floor was a large design of three teardrops joined head to tail forming a circle, a symbol standing for Soleism; the main religion on Arcania. The teardrops were blue, red, and yellow, standing for spirit, body, and mind respectively. The odd twisted triangle that is left in the middle was purple, standing for the universe. Inside the twisted triangle was two teardrops joined side-by-side creating a smaller circle that was black and white representing the good and evil always balanced in the universe.

When Mikel and his friends were only halfway down the red carpet, the king addressed them. “The Alandarian princess is dead.”

“Ariana?” Mikel asked. He had met Ariana five years ago at the ceremony officially naming Jontha as heir to the throne. She was beautiful, and he still thought of her on occasion.

“No. Kalanna.”

“Why? How? Where were the guards?” Jontha was first to respond.

“Three days ago, my son. In the Serus wood. She was kidnapped. They tried to capture Ariana too, but she escaped with help from her brother Dexindar. The guards were all killed. The attackers were all wearing white.” Mikel gasped and heard the same from his friends. *The rumors are true.*

“Xzyche.” Mikel was afraid. Wolf, unconcerned, laid down for a nap.

“That is what is feared, and in case Xzyche is back, you must go on a journey.”

“The Kahl.” Mikel wasn’t even sure the Great Book of Magic existed.

“Yes. We must be prepared. I’m sure by now you have all heard the rumors. There is a white movement sweeping the land. People who worship Xzyche. There is fear that Lerrick the Great did not destroy him two hundred years ago as we all believed. There are still obscure prophecies that refer to him.”

“But father, what if the Kahl doesn’t even exist?” Jontha gave voice to Mikel’s thoughts.

“The book exists, and you must find it. It is our only hope against one as powerful as Xzyche. I have spoken with representatives of the Alandarians and the Darkons. They both agree with me. We must find the three keys to retrieve the book. We are going to work in cooperation and each send our four best young warriors to search for the keys. As you know, the keys are on the dark side, over the Winchelles wall. You will meet your other companions at Desnolol.”

“Why send only twelve? Why not a hundred?” Jesska interrupted.

“A hundred will not succeed where twelve fail. Nor a thousand. Also, we will need the men here to hold off the army of the light if the white movement decides to attack in force. You must leave immediately.”

“No problem Kingie. We’ll be back in no time.” Nikoel’s optimism was not shared with anybody else.

“Nikoel, this is a serious matter.” The king frowned at Nikoel.

Nikoel got a serious look on her face and said, “We will seriously be back in no time.” The king sighed and smiled slightly. He had always had a fondness for Nikoel and her light easy nature.

Mikel, seeing that Jontha was going to remain silent, decided to give his own voice of optimism. “We will obtain the keys, and retrieve the Kahl. If Xzyche is back, he will not find us unprotected. You have my word, father.” Mikel hoped that his assurance was prophetic and not his life-parting speech.

Jontha took command again, “We must prepare for our journey. You all have one hour to gather your things.” Looking to his father, “With your leave father.”

“You are dismissed. I will see you off in an hour. Pack well. It will be a long journey.”

## Chapter Two

The four Kandarans rode in silence until dusk. Wolf kept pace along side the road in the trees a ways, so as to not frighten the horses. They were a few days ride away from Selvin.

“It’s getting dark. Let’s stop here in Lan for the night,” said Jontha. These were the first words spoken in two hours. It sounded loud in everyone’s ears and brought them back from thinking about the journey and Xzyche. They nodded and slowed the horses as they entered the town. Lan had only one inn. Jontha led the group to the Sunlight Inn and they dismounted and tied up the horses. Once inside, Jontha procured rooms as the others went into the common room, except for Wolf who went upstairs for a nap. The four ate in silence, which was in contrast to the noise of the other patrons. At the end of the meal, Jontha took command again, “We must discuss our plans. Let’s go upstairs, where we can talk in a quieter and more private atmosphere.”

On the way to Mikel and Nikoel’s room, Jontha decided to stop in his and Jesska’s room to light a candle so they wouldn’t be searching around in the dark when they came to bed. The others went on. Jontha entered his room. His body was wearier than it had ever been in his life, but his mind was not tired at all. There was a large bed under the window for him and Jesska. The bed was soft too. The Sunlight’s resident cat, Scarf, was taking advantage of that softness at the moment. Jontha addressed the cat, as he crossed the room and looked into the mirror on a small table with a washbasin. “So Scarf, what do you think? Am I going to lead us all to our deaths?”

Scarf meowed.

“Yes I know, if we do nothing, Xzyche will kill us. Or worse.”

Jontha wandered past the small fireplace to the wardrobe. He checked to make sure his belongings were untouched. *The hope of the world lies on the shoulders of twelve people. Why do I feel all of that weight then?* Jontha walked over to Scarf and petted him.

The cat purred.

“Maybe the others feel the same way, but they are not the ones charged with responsibility. I don’t know if even together we can defeat Xzyche.”

Scarf nuzzled Jontha’s hand and mrowed.

“Yes, I know, positive thinking.” *None of us said much today. I suppose I shouldn’t have let it go on so long.*

Scarf just kept purring.

“We must be together, not just in body, but also in spirit. We must be one.”

Scarf opened his eyes and looked up at Jontha.

“You’re right, enough of this. Time to face my responsibility as leader.”

Meow.

“Thanks Scarf. I needed this talk.” *I hope the rest of them are more optimistic than I am. Of course Nikoel always is.*

Jontha got up and lit the candle by the bed. It was a nice room; he had seen a lot worse. All in all it was quite cozy. He stretched and crossed over to the door.

As Jontha opened the door, there was a man standing there all in white and light from the room flickered off a dagger in his hand. The man was just as startled, but Jontha recovered first. He drew his sword and in one motion impaled the man through the heart. As the man screamed, three others in white with daggers started towards him.

Jontha leapt for the stairs, and used gravity more than his feet to reach the bottom. He hoped the men were following. The people in the common room were being too loud to hear the scream, and didn't notice Jontha run down the hall past the door and out into the street. The three men came out of the inn and circled him, each with a large dagger in their hand and a sneer on their face.

Jontha turned from one to another, sizing them up. The first man had a broken nose and was almost as tall as Jontha. He looked like a brawler. The other two were shorter. The second man held his dagger with a hint of practice. He had birdlike eyes that were concentrating on Jontha. The third man seemed the least frightening. He just looked like a farmer with a dagger in his hand. *Three against one. Why are they hesitating?*

With a shout from the brawler, all three charged. Jontha took a couple steps towards the farmer and then turned and ran towards the birdman. He swung his blade up across the birdman's chest slicing him open before he could parry. Jontha then turned and with the same motion brought his blade down in an arc across the brawler's throat and went down on one knee. This put the farmer behind him, and as the farmer came up to attack, Jontha thrust his sword back and upwards into the farmer's chest.

It took about five seconds after the charge to kill all three. The men were untrained and unprepared to faced a swordmaster. As Jontha pulled his blade from the farmer's chest, Mikel, Nikoel, Jesska, and Wolf ran out of the inn. They had stopped to check the dead man in the hallway outside their rooms. The farmer and the brawler were dead from Jontha's blade, but the birdman had cut his own throat with his dagger.

Nikoel asked, "Why would he kill himself like that. I saw him do it. It was creepy."

Mikel answered her, "He fears his master more than us."

Jesska ran up to Jontha and gave him a long hard kiss. “I am so glad you’re okay.”

Mikel said what nobody else wanted to, “They are wearing white.”

Jesska stopped staring at the bodies and said, “I am surprised they did not send more competent men.”

Jontha could see something pass between Wolf and Mikel and knew that the wolf had voiced his own thoughts. *They will.* Mikel did not voice it allowed, and neither did Jontha. Instead he said, “Let’s go inside and have some drinks. I think we all need some. We need to relax and be together.” They all agreed and went back into the inn. The party wanted to stay where there were a lot of people, so they decided to discuss the quest in the morning, and drank more alcohol than they normally would have trying to forget Xzyche and his first attempt on their lives.

Mikel said goodnight to Jontha and Jesska, and went to his room. Nikoel was already in her bed. Wolf was curled up at the bottom of Mikel’s bed. *Well, old buddy, what do you think?*

Wolf looked up sleepily. *We should sleep.*

*I meant about the Xzyche. About the Kahl.*

*So did I. Sleep.*

*That’s what I love about you Wolf. You’re practical. Never worried.*

*I’m tired though.*

*Alright.* Mikel could remember the day he met Wolf. That was the day he first learned that he could understand animals, an ability unique to him.

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Mikel was twelve. It was winter, his favorite time of year, and he had wandered off from Jontha and their guard, looking at all the wonders of frozen water. They were not far from the castle, so the only danger lay in getting lost. As Mikel followed a swallow from branch to branch, he heard a faint whimper and decided to investigate. He followed the sound off the path. There in the snow, around a large tree, was an enormous wolf. At first he was frightened. Mikel had never been this close to a live wolf before, but it didn't move. Not even its chest. *It must be dead. But what was making the sound?* Mikel searched the snow around the wolf, and found a wolf cub that was about six weeks old mewling in the snow. "Come here little guy." The wolf cub looked up from its mother.

*I'm hungry.*

"What?" *I must be hearing things.* Mikel bent down and looked into the wolf cub's eyes.

*I'm hungry. My mother won't get up.* The cub's eyes looked back into Mikel's with an intelligence that was unexpected.

"Did you just talk to me little guy?"

The cub tried to move through the snow, but tripped and fell face first into it. *I'm wolf. I'm hungry.*

Mikel laughed at the little thing falling over in the snow and then felt guilty for it. "Well, Wolf, your mother is no longer alive. I can't just leave you here; I'll have to take you with me."

*I'm hungry.* Mikel reached for the wolf pup and it snapped at his hand. *I'm hungry.*

Mikel laughed at his own folly. "I know you're hungry little one. I'll feed you."

*Feed me?* The wolf pup gave a little jump and then shook the snow off its nose and looked up hopefully.

“That’s right. I’m gonna feed you. But first you have to let me pick you up.” Mikel tried again to pick up the pup, and this time the cub almost jumped into his hands. “That’s it Wolf. We’ll go get you some food.” Mikel made his way back to his brother and their guard and told them the story. One of the dogs in the castle was nursing, and Wolf was just inserted as an extra puppy. Mikel kept the fact that he could talk to Wolf a secret for the first few months. He enjoyed having something special to himself. Eventually he learned that he could communicate with all intelligent animals to some degree, but wolves were the easiest to talk with. Mikel was the only case in Kandaran history of a human being able to communicate with animals.

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Mikel blew out the candle on the table beside the bed and snuggled into his pillow. As he was starting to doze off, Wolf let out a low growl. Mikel opened his eyes to see Nikoel climbing into his bed.

Nikoel spoke to Wolf. “Wolf, go sleep in my bed tonight.” Wolf looked to Mikel for conformation, but he wasn’t paying attention.

“Nikoel, what are you doing?”

“I don’t want to be alone tonight. After the excitement this evening, I want someone to hold.”

“We haven’t *held* each other for almost a year.”

Wolf, seeing where this was heading, got up and jumped across to Nikoel’s bed. He then circled twice and buried into the bed to sleep.

Nikoel asked innocently, “Don’t you want to hold me?”

“It’s not that. We tried the relationship thing. It didn’t work. We agreed. Are we just going to climb into bed with each other every now and then?”

“Twice in two years is hardly every now and then. And besides, you’re single; I’m single; why can’t we be single together for a night?” Nikoel ran her hand across Mikel’s bare chest.

Mikel questioned her. “Does that even make sense? ...And I didn’t say I didn’t want to; I’m just asking if it’s a good idea. You have been drinking, and you need somebody real in your life.”

“I am not that drunk, and you are real, Mikel. You need to forget about Rena. She was a witch.”

“She wasn’t a witch. And I can’t forget about her. We were together for a year. That’s the longest relationship that I’ve had. The only one to last longer than a month.”

“And she broke your heart. I know. You have to find somebody to mend it for you.”

“I don’t know if there is anybody who could mend it. And why should anybody try?”

Mikel rolled away from Nikoel.

“You’re a good guy Mikel.” Nikoel climbed the rest of the way into the bed and put her hand on Mikel’s shoulder. “Any woman would be lucky to be with you.”

“Rena would tell you different. You know what she said to me when she left.” It was three years ago.

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“We have to talk.” Rena spoke with a seriousness that terrified Mikel. They were sitting on Mikel’s bed. They had just celebrated their one-year anniversary. Mikel was away on

official business for a couple weeks at the ceremony naming Dexindar heir to Alandaria, but now he was back in Selvin for two months. He tried to kiss her, but she backed away.

“What’s the matter?”

Rena stood up. “I can’t do this anymore.”

Mikel’s terror doubled. “Can’t do what anymore?”

Rena looked away from Mikel staring at the walls. “Us. I can’t do us anymore. It’s not working.”

Mikel managed to whisper, “What’s not working?”

“It’s just not working between us. Here.” Rena handed Mikel a ring.

“What am I supposed to do with this?”

“I don’t know, I just don’t want it anymore. I have to go.” Rena walked out. Mikel’s heart was pounding in his chest. He lay back on the bed. His heart felt like it was going to rip through his body. He started to hyperventilate. He couldn’t breathe. His vision was starting to fade from lack of breath when Wolf came running into the room.

*What’s the matter? What’s wrong with you?*

Mikel started to regain some control. His breathing slowed a little and his heart stopped puncturing his ribcage. *Rena left me.*

*I’ll kill her.* Wolf was serious.

Mikel jumped up. “No. Leave her be.” *It’s not her fault.*

*She hurt you.*

Mikel fell back onto the bed. *I hurt myself. I should have seen it coming. Maybe I can still talk to her.*

*You are better off. I always told you that.*

*I know you two don't get along Wolf, but she is not evil like you think.*

*I am a wolf. I have intuition. She is not evil; she is not your life-mate.*

“Enough. Let me be alone.”

*Fine. But if you change your mind, you know how to find me.*

Mikel gave Rena two days to think over her decision, and then went to talk her into giving him a second chance. She agreed to come see him, but didn't let him speak first. She walked into his room. “It's over, Mikel. You are not going to change my mind.”

Mikel quickly jumped up. “All I ask is a second chance. Men worse than me get a second chance all the time; don't I deserve one? What did I do wrong?”

Rena walked over face to face. “You didn't do anything wrong. It was just not working.”

“Since when? I thought everything was great.” Mikel looked at the floor.

Rena's voice did not soften at all. “It hasn't been working for a very long time.”

Mikel pleaded, “I know I've been away for a couple weeks, but we were going to be together for two whole months. Can't we just try and see if it gets better.”

“Mikel, listen to me!” Rena poked him in the chest with her finger. “It hasn't been working for the past five months. I was just trying to pretend like nothing was wrong, but I can't do it anymore. Even when it was really good, it was still kind of bad.” Mikel's heart wilted. “I was relieved when I broke up with you, and I'm happier now without you.” Mikel sat down on his bed, numb. Rena continued towering over him. “It's over. That's final. I can't be with you anymore.” Rena walked out of the room.

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Nikoel, laying behind Mikel, ran her hand through the hair on the back of his head. “It couldn’t have been as bad as Rena said it was, or she wouldn’t have stayed as long as she did. And she is only one person. That was three years ago. You need to forget it.”

“When she is the only person who loved me, and the only person who I have loved, it makes a difference. Women deserve to feel wonderful with a man and she didn’t. So why would any other feel differently.”

Wolf interrupted. *I agree with Nikoel. Rena was a witch.*

Mikel passed on the comment without feeling. “Wolf agrees with you about Rena being a witch.”

“Wolf’s a smart animal. And trust me, you’ll find somebody else to love and forget all about Rena and the pain she caused you. And speaking of forgetting...” Nikoel slid her hand down Mikel’s side and around to the front.

“I’m still not sure this is a good idea.”

“You feel sure to me.” Nikoel laughed and kissed the back of Mikel’s neck. “It’s been too long for both of us.... Besides, it will lift our spirits on the journey ahead. It’s just one night.”

*Just shut up and mate with her already. I’m trying to sleep.*

Mikel laughed. “Wolf told me to shut up and mate with you already.”

“You should listen to him.” Mikel rolled over to face Nikoel and kissed her. For the next hour both of them forgot the Xzyche, the Kahn, the journey, their names.

## Chapter Three

The capital of Alandaria, Asenumia, was located in the middle of Jalarn forest. Trees and bushes and shrubs surrounded it; they were so thick that the only way to get through was to go over them. The Alandarians traveled through the treetops to reach Asenumia. The forest grew through the town, and sometimes intruded through the floors of the buildings. Alandarians had a magic that allowed them to affect the growth of trees and plants, so only those people who wanted trees in their house had them. The Alandarians magic was also one of healing animals and people. They had an affinity for the creatures of the forest and these creatures helped to keep the city protected by harrying anyone who came too close.

Ariana lived in the palace of Asenumia. She woke with a start. Her room seemed empty without her sister in the next bed. They had slept in the same room their whole lives. She had been having a nightmare, but it was gone already. It would have left her with a bad feeling in her stomach, but she had felt little of anything since the day her sister died. Her family and friends constantly asked her how she was doing. She always gave a non-committal, 'Fine.'

Ariana sat up and brushed her curly hair away from her face. Her long brown hair was a mess as she had forgot to braid it the night before. She thought about the journey ahead as she fought with the tangles. The Kahl. *What if we don't find it in time? ...We'll probably all die and not care anymore.* She had made all the preparations the day before. The only thing left to do was leave. Ariana climbed out of bed and put clothes on. *No sense in waiting any longer.* Ariana was feeling restless. If it had been up to her, they would have left already, but her father insisted on having a feast to see them off. Dexindar, her brother, had readily agreed not wanting to miss a chance for a party.

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Tomorrow. They were to set out for Winchelles Wall to meet the Kandarans and Darkons *tomorrow*. Ariana couldn't see why they had to have a big feast before leaving. They should have left in the night without a word to anyone. She was uncomfortable around so many people with her sister's death so recent. Especially with everyone coming up to her and wishing her luck. Kalanna had been the social one. Ariana turned away as another man caught her eye and headed towards her. Unfortunately she turned right into Seren. He was a hand taller than her, with the same color blue eyes and light brown hair, though his hair was short and straight. Seren had had a crush on Ariana since they were children, but she had never developed feelings for him.

Seren smiled. "Hello, Ariana. I was wondering if you would like to dance."

Just wanting to get away, she blurted the first thing that came into her mind, "Why would I want to dance?"

"I...I just thought..." Seren was embarrassed.

Ariana took his moment of pause to leave, "If you'll excuse me, I must speak with my brother." She walked away as Seren still fought for words.

She skirted the walls of the hall searching for Dexindar to tell him she was leaving the party. People everywhere were dancing, drinking, eating and celebrating. Ariana wanted no part of any of it, but her father had commanded her to be there. She saw Tekar drinking and laughing with a group of men at one table. Tekar would be going with them on the journey. He was a muscular man who tended to rely more on his strength than his intelligence. He was not unintelligent, but he was not a genius either. With a sword, however, there was nobody in Alandaria that could better him. Except maybe Dexindar. He had performed the miracle on a couple occasions, but most often it was Dexindar lying on the ground. Tekar wasn't strong in

magic though, so Dexindar's pride did not intrude on their friendship from the defeats, as he was a strong sorcerer and bested Tekar in magic duels. Unfortunately, Dexindar was not one of the men drinking with Tekar. Ariana continued her search.

Salenda giggling and flirting with a group of men at another table caught Ariana's eye. Four men practically draped themselves on her. She would be the fourth companion to make the trip. Ariana didn't much like Salenda. She was fairly conceited and always had men hanging off her. She was one of the most beautiful women in Alandaria, and she knew it. She strutted rather than walked. She acted like she had no brains most of the time, which seemed to impress the big strong men that felt they needed to take care of her. The worst part was that Salenda was intelligent and one of the most deadly shots with a short bow in Alandaria. She was also very proficient with a dagger if any enemy lived past her arrows. She needed no protection from anyone, but always acted weak in both body and mind. Everyone seemed to be enjoying themselves.

Dexindar was heir to Alandaria and quite attractive. He was seldom unaccompanied by a woman at feasts, so Ariana considered herself lucky when she spotted him at a table alone admiring a woman from across the room. Ariana walked over and sat beside her brother. "Dex, we must leave early tomorrow. You should not drink too much tonight." She was still upset about having to be at the feast. That was not what she meant to talk to him about. Besides, he wouldn't listen to her sound advice.

Proving her right, Dexindar replied, "Don't worry about me, Ari. I can stay on a horse hungover. Besides. It's better to pass out than to dream."

*Why would he say that?* "Why? What's wrong with your dreams?"

"Nothing. You should loosen up. We won't have much time to relax once we leave."

Ariana looked around at the people drinking and dancing. “I don’t need to loosen up. I don’t know why we are even having this celebration. We should have waited until, or if, we return.”

Dexindar frowned at his sister. “We are having this celebration in honour of us, dear sister. We’re going to be heroes, after all. And, of course, so that the common folk don’t worry too much. They see us having fun and relaxed, and they assume everything is going to turn out alright.”

“Yes. We get their hopes up, and then when the world ends, it will be that much worse for them. Do you really think even with the Kahl, assuming we can find all three keys, that we can defeat Xzyche.”

“I’m sure we won’t have to face Xzyche.”

“So you don’t really think Xzyche is back?”

“Even if he is, *we* won’t have to worry about him.” What did Dexindar mean by *we*? Before Ariana had a chance to ask, a young blonde woman a head shorter than Ariana approached them. Ariana noticed Dexindar’s eyes scanning up and down the woman. The woman spoke to Dexindar, “Excuse me Dexindar? I was hoping that you might dance with me?”

“Why of course, my dear. I would love to dance with you. But only one dance, or I might want to stay here with you instead of going off on the quest. And who would save the world then?” The woman giggled as Dexindar lead her onto the dance floor. Ariana caught his meaningful look as he walked away: humor them.

Ariana wandered through the hall, scanning the faces. The night was getting late and the feast was starting to wind down. Of course the heavy drinkers wouldn’t leave for another few

hours, but Ariana decided that she had obeyed her father and attended the celebration. She headed back to her room to try and get some sleep.

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Finally they were ready to leave. As Ariana walked into the throne room, she barely noticed the exquisite marble craftsmanship. The many spiraling pillars running up to the throne in ocean blue like waves rolling in with the tide. The throne, a giant red dragon with wings spread, about to take flight. The large ceiling mural of the Victory at Celeste was not painted, but molded out of marble. Darkons had created the throne room. In peaceful times, an Alandarian king of long ago hired the best Darkon builders he could find to build his palace. Darkons molded rock and metal with their magic into shapes that would otherwise be impossible to obtain. King Leidor was sitting on his throne speaking to Ariana's older brother, Dexindar.

Ariana approached and addressed them without emotion. "Father, brother, preparations are complete. We are ready to depart. Tekar and Salenda will meet us at the south exit."

Dexindar, ignoring his sister, continued to his father, "I still think that sending twelve Alandarians is a far better plan than taking four Darkons and four Kandarans with us. We could obtain the keys and be back before those others had time to reach the wall."

"No, my son, you are wrong. If we send out twelve of our people and do not cooperate with the Kandarans and the Darkons, they will also send out a party each to obtain the keys."

"So what? They can search all they want."

Ariana interceded, "What father is trying to say, Dex, is that we would most likely each end up with one of the keys and then fight over them. Instead of having a united front against Xzyche, we would be starting another war... Besides, there is nothing wrong with the Kandarans."

Dexindar glared at his sister. “Are you joking? Kandarans are nothing but a barbaric, inferior race. And as for the Darkons...”

The king interrupted, “That is enough, Dexindar! You will cooperate with both the Kandarans and the Darkons. You may be surprised at what they can teach you.”

Dexindar mumbled under his breath, “The only thing they will be able to teach me is that I am right not to trust them.”

The king addressed Ariana, “Ari, my dear, I am giving command of the Alandarians to you. I know you will treat the others with respect and courtesy. As for your brother, try to keep him out of trouble. We do not want, nor can we afford a war at this time. Make haste. You must reach Winchelles wall in a week. Goodbye, my daughter.” He gives Ariana an unreturned embrace and turns to Dexindar, “You are a good person Dex, but you must learn tolerance. Be careful.”

As Ariana and Dexindar left the throne room, Ariana noticed a sour turn at the corner of Dexindar’s mouth. She was starting to worry at this uncharacteristic racism he was developing. It was strange to feel concern. The first thing she had felt since her sister’s death. *Dexindar has taken the death of our sister harder than he has let anyone know. I’ll have to keep an eye on him.*

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The rain drizzled down upon Ariana’s hood as the party of four trotted their horses along the road. The rainy season was almost at an end and Ariana would be thankful for it. She didn’t want to spend the entire journey sodden to the bone. It didn’t seem to bother Dexindar or Tekar, but they were men and seldom cared about little things like being wet. Salenda sympathized with Ariana; of course she was more concerned about the appearance of her hair than of being

wet and cold. Salenda took great pride in her beauty; many men and women of Alandaria admired her long dark hair and dark eyes. Ariana seldom thought twice about her appearance any more. Her blue eyes were somewhat rare for Alandarians, and her light brown hair was usually curly as it fell across her shoulders, but with the rain it was wet and frizzy, and her eyes seldom smiled since her sister's death. Dexindar was explaining where the keys were to Tekar and Salenda. Her father put Ariana in charge of their little quartet, but Dexindar knew the way better than her, so she let him take the lead until they reached the wall.

Dexindar spoke in his usual cavalier voice, "We will meet the others at Winchelles Wall. We will probably decide upon a leader for the quest. I will of course offer to be that leader. Regardless of who it is though, there is only one logical course of action after we go over the wall. The first key we should obtain is the one located in the Three Peaks of Darkness."

Tekar interrupted, "Why that one first?"

Salenda also asked, "Who names these places anyways?"

Dexindar, ignoring Salenda's question, answered Tekar, "It is the closest key to the wall. It is located in the bottom of the valley formed by the three mountains surrounding it. We do not know exactly where, but there should be a pedestal or some such thing."

Salenda asked another question into the pause, "What if it's not there? What if all the keys aren't there?"

Dexindar, not knowing the answer to this question either, again ignored her as he continued, "The second key is in the Great Pyramid. There are a series of traps and trials to get through before we can obtain the key, but I don't believe it will be much trouble." *Hah! Not much trouble indeed. One of these days Dexindar's arrogance is going to get him into trouble, and I will probably have to save him.*

Tekar asked, “Physical trials, or mental?” Tekar liked using his strength and dexterity.

“I presume both. There will most likely be puzzles to solve, monsters to kill, the usual sort. I am sure everyone will play a part.” The way Dexindar said everyone, implied that only he would accomplish the important tasks. Ariana just kept quiet. She didn’t feel like starting an argument over something that was still to come. “The final key will be the most difficult to obtain. It is located in the Endless Caverns. Most who have entered them have never come out. Just wandered around lost until they starved to death or were eaten.”

Salenda interjected a quick question, “Eaten by what?”

Dexindar actually gave her an answer, but didn’t tell her anything. “Oh, by all sorts of monsters. Some nothing more than animals, some almost human. Anyways, I presume that the key is located far back under the mountains. I shouldn’t have too much trouble leading us through. We shall see. Anyways, it shouldn’t take us more than a few months to obtain all the keys. We’ll be back before the snows.” Ariana covered a laugh. She remembered back when they were kids and Dexindar had gotten lost in the castle. She doubted very much that he would be the one to lead them through the caverns. That was a problem to think about when they got there though. First they needed to get the other two keys. Then worry about the Endless Caverns. Dexindar went on to talk about some of the great feats he would perform on the journey. They were only a couple days ride from Winchelles Wall now.

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Mikel was glad that they would reach Winchelles wall before night. They should be the first party there and have a chance to relax before heading over the wall. He hadn’t gotten much sleep the night before with Nikoel.

“What are you smiling about?” Jontha’s question caught Mikel by surprise as the four rode along towards Winchelles Wall.

Mikel, realizing that he had a broad grin cutting across his face, stammered out, “Nothing.”

Nikoel giggled.

Jontha let it drop and turned to matters of importance, “We never did get to the talk last night after the attack. Xzyche is back. I would bet my life on it. We must obtain the three keys quickly in order to get the Kahl and stop him. This is what I propose we do. First, we will of course meet the Darkons and Alandarians at the wall. Then I suggest we attempt to obtain the key in the Three Peaks of Darkness. That is the most...”

As Jontha went on, Mikel stopped listening. He had heard Jontha tell his father his plans before they left. Instead, Mikel tried to meditate. It was a bit difficult to do on the back of a horse, and his mind kept slipping back to his lessons with master Darien instead of remaining empty.

“You must clear your mind of everything. Let blackness envelop you. Feel the energy in the air around you and embrace it. Pull it into your body. Let it awaken your mind from its usual slumber. Enter the trance. As you advance in your training, you will be able to enter the trance quicker. At fifth level a meditative master can enter the trance in under a minute. At first level it takes a fraction of a second. Some who start out can take as long as an hour to enter the trance, but I feel promise in you. You will do well.”

“Yes, master Darien.” *I can’t believe I’m going to become a meditative master. And Master Darien is one of only three first rank masters in all of Kandar*

“Once you have entered the trance, you will be able to sense all life and water around you for a certain distance. At tenth-rank, you can only sense an area of ten feet around you, but at fourth-rank you can reach the maximum of one thousand feet in any direction. You will also heal faster as you move up in the ranks.”

“Can I stay in the trance all the time master?”

Darien smiled. “A good question, my son. Yes, it is possible to stay in the trance for hours or days at a time and there are penalties. You would only be able to hold the trance for a couple of hours at this point in time. The length of time increases as you move up in the ranks. I could stay in the trance for three straight weeks, but I would not be able to enter the trance for over a week afterwards.

“To continue, if you reach the top ranks, you will be able to slow down time, sense feelings in others, including lies, read the most prominent thought in another’s mind, and at first-rank, you can implant a thought into somebody else’s subconscious that is obeyed without thought.”

Mikel smiled, “I could tell someone to do something and they would have to obey?”

“They do not have to obey, they obey without realizing they are doing it. But that is a long way off. For now, let us go back to entering the trance.... Now close your eyes and concentrate.”

“...Then we put them together and find out where the Kahl is located.” Jontha was just finishing telling his plans to a bored Nikoel and an attentive Jesska.

Mikel realized he was not going to be able to enter the trance today. With the jolting of riding and his mind wandering back to master Darien, he decided to give up. Soon they would

meet up at Winchelles Wall, and then they would all head into the dark side of the world to search for the three keys. Wolf was off hunting for food, and Mikel suddenly realized that he was hungry as well. “Jontha. Let’s stop in the next town for lunch. The horses could use a break as well.”

Jontha looked over his shoulder. “Very well.”

## Chapter Four

Mikel was in the main tower of Winchelles Wall when he saw them. Four riders were approaching from the Nakai trail. He started breathing slow rhythmic breaths, and refocused his eyes. Suddenly it was as if he was down on the trail 100 paces from the travelers. It was the Alandarians. The front two were Dexindar and Ariana. He had met them at Dexindar's ceremony naming him heir to the throne of Alandaria. Ariana was the most beautiful woman Mikel had ever known. He had felt guilty about that when he first met her, as he was still with Rena, but now he felt hopeful. He refocused his eyes again and Ariana appeared to be a pace in front of him. Her long brown curls caressed the side of her neck as she rode. Mikel could make out the blue of her eyes, and her lips, so plump. He thought about what it would be like to kiss those lips. Suddenly Ariana looked up directly at Mikel, or rather at the window in the tower where he was standing. Could she feel him watching her? He refocused his eyes to normal releasing his wizard sight and went to inform his brother of the Alandarian's arrival.

Mikel found his three friends finishing their midday meal. "Looks like we have company."

"Trouble?" said Jontha jumping up.

"No, of course not. The Alandarians."

"So it is trouble," Nikoel said.

Mikel looked at her and she smiled and shrugged her shoulders.

Jontha said, "For once, I agree with Nikoel."

"Oh, of course. You finally agree with me and I was only joking."

"You're always joking though," Said Jesska.

"You're just taking your boyfriend's side."

“She’s got a point though, Nikoel.” Mikel smiled at Nikoel.

Nikoel looked hurt, “You’re all against me. I thought at least *you* would be on my side Mikel. After all we’ve been through. Don’t you want to defend me?” Nikoel batted her eyelashes.

Mikel smiled and said, “Why Nikoel, I don’t know what you are talking about?”

“How easily they forget.” Nikoel glared at him.

“If you two are finished making faces at each other, we have comrades to meet.” Jontha started towards the door.

“Just a second,” Nikoel said and glared at Mikel for a moment longer then broke into a smile. “All done. Let’s go.”

Mikel frowned. “I wasn’t finished yet.” Jontha and Jesska were already on their way out of the room.

“Sorry.” Nikoel patted Mikel consolingly on the shoulder on her way by. “You can glare at me later, okay?” She skipped from the room saying under her breath, but just loud enough for Mikel to hear, “I won, I won, I won.”

Mikel sent a thought out to Wolf as he followed the others, *We have guests. Maybe you should join us.*

*I saw them too,* Wolf responded. *I’m already waiting.*

The Alandarians were almost to the wall when the Kandarans walked outside. As the four people on horse approached, Mikel couldn’t take his eyes off of Ariana.

Nikoel asked Mikel, “How friendly do you think they will be?”

Mikel's attention was on the Alandarians as they road down the trail to the wall, and the sun overhead seemed to shine directly on Ariana. He was completely captivated. Even Wolf looked at him sideways. Nikoel poked him in the side.

“What?” Mikel didn't turn his head.

“Nothing.” Nikoel frowned.

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As Ariana followed the other Alandarians to the wall, she felt a hand tickling her stomach from the inside. She had been anticipating and dreading this moment. First, she was the leader of the Alandarian group, and held responsibility to keep the peace while not giving any ground to the Kandarans. Second, Mikel stole her attention away. Ariana had met him once before, and could not stop thinking about him for days afterwards. His short blond hair parted in the middle. His sharp intelligent blue eyes. His slender, but muscular body. She marveled at feeling.

Ariana had not felt anything since her sister's death but as she rode up to meet the Kandarans, Mikel caused something to stir inside of her. Maybe it was respect. Or possibly friendship. That is what she told herself. How could she let herself care about another when they can be suddenly ripped out of your life? Especially in a situation where the whole party could die at any moment. She just rode slowly up to the wall, and pushed the feeling down.

Ariana rode up to the Kandarans and dismounted with the rest of the Alandarians. She was still staring at Mikel when Dexindar started introducing people.

Dexindar spoke with a sneer, unlike his usual smile. “I am the great prince Dexindar. This is the beautiful Salenda, don't let her looks fool you she is the best marksman in Alandaria, and deadly with a knife. And this strong man here is Tekar. He is a specialist with hand weapons: axes, swords, and daggers.”

Ariana broke out of her trance and approached Jontha. “Now that my brother has introduced the others, I am Ariana. I speak for the Alandarians.” Ariana made a point of not mentioning her royal status. Dexindar scowled at her, and then curiously at Mikel. Had he seen her staring at the Kandaran?

“Allow me to introduce myself, I am prince Jontha. This is my half brother Mikel, my betrothed, Jesska, and our friend Nikoel.”

Nikoel stepped forward. “I’m very pleased to meet you Ariana. I’ve never met a real princess before.”

“Nikoel.” Jontha frowned.

Nikoel looked at Jontha questioningly. “Yes? Did you want something Jontha?” He just looked away.

Mikel tried to speak, but as he began, Ariana looked into his eyes. “You.... Uhm, I mean...”

“I think he is trying to say that you’re gonna love me.” Nikoel smiled innocently.

“Yeah, something like that.” Ariana had redirected her gaze towards Nikoel allowing Mikel to speak.

Ariana smiled. “I am sure I will become fond of you.” She looked at the big wolf that was lying by Mikel’s feet. “And who is this handsome fellow?”

“This is Wolf.” Mikel laughs. “He says that you are attractive, for a human.”

Dexindar, who had not said a word since Ariana had taken the leadership from him, spoke sharply, “You can converse with the animal?”

Mikel spoke up, and only Ariana heard Wolf’s low growl. “Yes. I can.”

Dexindar replied, “Interesting.”

Ariana glanced at Dexindar. It sounded more like he found this news troubling. He was still glaring at Mikel and the wolf in turn. Luckily the Kandarans were busy shaking hands with Tekar and Salenda. She could not understand what Dexindar had against Kandarans.

Ariana saw the wolf perk up his ears and look towards the east, then lay down and presumably go to sleep. She looked in the direction the wolf had glanced and saw a party of riders in the distance. As they got closer, she could see that instead of riding horses, they were riding large goats. This must be the Darkons, but why would they ride goats instead of horses? In the excitement of meeting, nobody else seemed to have noticed the riders. Ariana looked at Mikel and decided that the wolf had told him already, as he was watching the trail out of the corner of his eye, while shaking hands with Tekar.

Suddenly Nikoel jumped up and down saying, "Ooohhh, more people." Everyone looked to where she pointed and saw the approaching Darkons, who were only fifty paces away. Dexindar snickered when he saw the goats. Mikel looked thoughtful, and Jontha looked puzzled. Ariana turned to await the approaching Darkons.

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Mikel smiled as the Darkons dismounted. He was surprised at first, but it made sense for them to ride goats. They lived high in the mountains, and the goats would have an easier time navigating than horses. The Darkons were short, with curly dark hair and light gray eyes. The two men had big bushy beards, and hair as long as the women. All of them had their hair tied back with a ribbon. Mikel supposed it was to keep it out of the way when fighting. They each had a large battle-axe strapped to their backs with a haft that would go up to their chins when resting on the ground. The women's axes seemed to be shorter by the exact amount of their difference in height from the men. The double blade of the axe was two feet across. Mikel had

never seen a Darkon in battle, but he could imagine the damage they could do with an axe that size. Especially considering every Darkon was supposedly trained with one from the age of eight. Mikel watched as one of the women stepped forward.

“I am Jalarn ba’ Gwind, Princess of Darkon. This is my brother Nekat be’ Demisak.”

Nikoel interrupted, “Excuse me, but why does your brother have a different last name?”

“The Darkon women honor their mothers, while the Darkon men honor their fathers.”

Mikel answered Nikoel.

“I am impressed with your knowledge of our culture.” Jalarn smiled at Mikel, and then turned to Nikoel. “Your companion is right. Nekat and I share the same mother and father. Kerix be’ Demar is also my brother, though of a different father. Alaran ba’ Gwendal is my second sister.”

“Where is your first sister? And what happened to your father? Or your brother’s father?” Nikoel asked.

Jalarn looked puzzled. “I don’t understand the questions?”

Mikel said, “Second sister means that their mothers are sisters, Nikoel. And presumably nothing has happened to either father. Darkon women can take more than one husband. And before you ask, no, the men may not have more than one wife.”

“More than one husband?” Nikoel got a wicked smile on her face. “How many can a woman have?”

Jalarn looked to Mikel, and when he shrugged ignorance, she answered, “Typically women choose only two. Some have three. One woman once had four husbands, but they proved taxing and she died at an early age. Luckily she had two young sisters to split them

between when she entered the Mist. There are rumors of a queen of long ago that had as many as six husbands, but I believed it to be exaggeration.”

“Interesting.” Nikoel tapped her bottom lip with her finger.

Dexindar interrupted the conversation and turned it back to the matters at hand. “Now that we are all here, we should choose a leader. I believe I would be the best choice to lead us on this quest.” Dexindar’s smile seemed forced.

Mikel saw Ariana frowning at her brother, and stepped forward and made a suggestion. “I suggest a council of sorts. One member of each kingdom to co-lead. A vote to decide what course of action to be taken. Jontha, of course will be the Kandaran representative.”

Ariana stepped forward in front of Dexindar. “I speak for the Alandarians.”

Jalarn said, “I speak for the Darkons.” Mikel smiled. So far, she was the only one of the Darkons who had spoken.

Jontha said, “Well then, for our first order of business, I suggest we stay here today, and start out into the dark side tomorrow. Do you agree?” Ariana and Jalarn both agreed, and the party disassembled into the tower.

Nikoel fell in beside Mikel as they made their way inside. “So I noticed you watching the princess.”

“Which one? There are two.”

Nikoel followed him to the dining table and sat across from him. “The one that you couldn’t keep your eyes off of, Ariana. She is quite beautiful.”

Mikel looked at the table and tried not to blush. “I suppose she is attractive.”

Nikoel laughed. “I’m not going to get jealous if you call somebody else beautiful. I know I’m the cutest.”

“Nikoel, I...”

“Did you notice that she was staring at you too?” Nikoel cut him off. “I think she likes you.”

Mikel barked a laugh. “More likely that she would have an attraction to Jontha.”

“Some women prefer the quiet, shy type. Especially to the obviously whipped type.”

Mikel looked into Nikoel’s eyes. “Nikoel, you know I care for you...”

“Anyways, I think you should go for it. It would really promote peaceful relations. I was thinking that Dexindar looks pretty handsome in that tall dark and handsome kind of way.”

“Thank you. I’m not sure about Dexindar. I don’t think he likes us.”

“Speak for yourself. I’m gonna make him like me. If I have to tie him down and talk him into it.”

Mikel looked concerned. “You should be careful around Dexindar. He looks dangerous.”

“I am always careful. And I like dangerous.” Smiling, Nikoel flipped her wrists and a dohl came out of each sleeve. A three and a half inch long, quarter inch thick rod with a sharp point, similar to a dagger. It was an uncommon weapon. One that required great skill. They were used to puncture arteries, or sometime the heart itself. Masters with the dohl could defeat swordsmen, parrying until an opening presented itself. Nikoel was a master. She had been training since she was six.

Mikel asked, “And where do you hide them when you have no clothes on?”

Nikoel responded, “Don’t ask. Besides, it’s not like I don’t know how to defend myself with my bare...hands.” Nikoel was also adept at fighting with her hands and feet in an almost dance-like fashion.

Mikel raised his hands. “I’m just saying be careful. Wolf doesn’t trust him, and neither do I.”

Nikoel smiled. “It’s not like I’m planning on marrying him. I promise I’ll be very, very careful. I’ll make sure I thoroughly search him before doing anything with him.” She laughed. Mikel groaned. “And you be careful with Ariana. She may be too much for you to...handle. If you need any help...”

“I can handle Ariana fine all by myself, but thanks for the offer. Now if you’ll excuse me, I need to get something to eat.”

Nikoel got up and walked away, “You’re excused.”

## Chapter Five: Friends and Enemies

The party of twelve were riding through the woods on the dark side of Winchelles Wall. They had been cutting a path through the trees for most of the day. There were no roads, and few trails. Humans had not been over the wall in hundreds of years. Occasionally they were able to follow an animal trail, but most did not run in the right direction. The three groups were travelling in separate clusters. Nikoel had made some effort at being friendly with the Alandarians, but Dexindar ignored her completely. The only time he said a word to her was when she asked when the land would get dark. He just laughed at her and called her a foolish child. The less than talkative Darkons did not even speak among themselves. The other two groups held murmured conversations, but even these were few and far between. The forest was treacherously uneven, so that close watch had to be taken; else the horses could twist a leg. They only had four spare horses, and it was a long journey ahead.

As the sun was starting to set, Nikoel asked Mikel in a hushed voice, “So when does the land get dark?”

“In about an hour the sun should be down.”

“And it doesn’t come back up?”

“What do you mean?” Mikel was puzzled.

“We’re on the dark side of the wall.”

Mikel smiled. “Oh. It’s only called the dark side because there is no civilization and evil creatures such as the Crellions live here. The sun still rises and sets relatively normal. There is a place where the sun doesn’t set for a few days once a year.”

“So it’s not really dark all the time. No wonder he laughed at me.” Nikoel frowned.

“Who laughed at you?”

“Dexindar did. I asked about the darkness. He called me a child.”

“Maybe you should stay away from him, Nikoel.”

“Nonsense. He’s just bugging me because he likes me. I’ll show him I’m not a child.”

“Who’s not a child?” Jesska said as she fell back to speak to Mikel and Nikoel.

“Never mind. What is happening up ahead? It looks like Jontha is speaking with Jalarn.”

Mikel noticed Ariana riding back towards the Alandarians from the pair.

“We’re stopping for the night a half a mile up ahead. Jontha has found a clearing there, and it is getting dark.” Jesska answered.

Nikoel said, “Imagine that. Dark on the dark side.”

“What?” Jesska did not understand.

Mikel said, “Well, it should make for an interesting camp.”

“We must decide who will take which watch. One hour intervals seem best to me.”

Jontha said, sitting with Jalarn and Ariana around the fire.

"Agreed," Jalarn said, "but I propose we three do not take a turn at keeping watch. I know we are all capable, but we better serve this mission by being well rested in order to make sound decisions."

“I agree with Jalarn, a rested mind is a sharp mind.” Ariana stated.

Jontha nodded. “Agreed then. As for those who will take watch, I suggest we take turns between our three peoples. Mikel can take the first watch.”

“Nekat can take the second.”

Ariana thought for a moment. “Dexindar can have the third watch.” She didn’t want him interacting with Mikel at all. He seemed to have a dislike for Kandarans in general, but more so

for the king's adopted son. Ariana didn't know where this sudden change of attitude came from. Dexindar had been friendly towards the Kandarans at his heir-to-the-throne ceremony. This way it would be one of the women who relieved him. Dexindar was always charming towards women. Jontha and Jalarn nominated Nikoel and Kerix as the fourth and fifth watch while Ariana was lost in thought. She brought herself back to the conversation. "Tekaran will cover the sixth, and then I presume the last three will fall into place, Jesska, Nalar, and Salenda."

Jontha nodded. "So it is settled. I will go work on being well rested."

Jalarn stood as well. "I must inform my people of their duty. Good rest to you both."

Ariana said, "In the morning." As Jontha and Jalarn walked away, Ariana looked up at the sky. Clouds were moving in overhead, blocking out the moon. The night grew darker. The fire painted light across the trees creating a column that reached up to the sky. It felt safe inside. But the fire would soon be put out, and night would cover the camp. It had been over twenty years since anyone had journeyed to the dark side of the wall. Ariana only knew rumours of what the dangers were. Staring into the fire and thinking about what might come, Ariana jumped when a nose brushed her arm. For a second she thought that one of those rumours had come to life, but it was just Wolf. He nuzzled his head against her arm, and she scratched behind his ear.

"He likes you."

Ariana started again at the voice from behind her. She should have expected Mikel to be near by. She had to stop jumping at every little thing. A leader needed to have composure. She wondered if Mikel had seen her start. Ariana slowly turned her head to face him. "Do you have a habit of sneaking up on people in the night?"

"Wolf was the one walking silently. I was not concealing my steps or my presence."

Mikel smiled at her. "Besides, you should have known I would be right behind him."

“I did.” Ariana had thought of it afterwards.

“Then why did you jump when I spoke?”

She changed the subject back. “I like him too. He is quite the intelligent creature.” Wolf nuzzled her arm again.

“He says you are intelligent to notice.” Mikel walked over and sat by the fire with Ariana. “So Jontha informs me that I have the first watch. It is good, I am not tired yet anyways.”

“Yes, and you will still get an uninterrupted rest. Jontha must think highly of your skills.”

“Or he believes that I need more rest than the others. Either way, I prefer the first watch. If anything is to happen, it will likely be within the first couple of hours.” Mikel stared into the fire, and the light from the flames gave a prophetic look to his face.

Ariana frowned. “Do you expect an attack already? Surely the enemy does not even know we are here.”

“I do not know if you were told, but we were attacked on our way to the wall. Four men in white. Jontha took care of them, but they knew where to find us.”

“Jontha mentioned an incident, but he did not tell us the details. Something similar happened to me and...” Ariana couldn’t finish the sentence.

Mikel whispered, “Your sister.”

“Yes.”

“I’m sorry for your loss.”

Ariana sat there in silence staring at the fire. She didn’t know what it was about Mikel's presence that allowed her feelings to come to the surface. For the first time since her sister’s

death, she was starting to feel the weight of sadness and emptiness. She needed to change the subject. “How long have you known Wolf here?” She scratched behind the wolf’s ear.

“I found him when he was a pup. His mother was dead. That was when I learned I could talk to animals. I took him home with me, and we became friends.” Mikel paused as if he were listening. “Yes. Wolf says that I should tell you how he got his name. One of the first things he said to me was ‘I’m wolf. I’m hungry.’ I thought he was saying that his name was Wolf, but he was just informing me that he was a wolf. So I started calling him Wolf.”

Ariana smiled. “So does he call you Human?”

Mikel laughed. “Thankfully no. Wolf likes his name. He feels that he is special to be named after his species.”

Ariana looked around, and noticed that everybody else was already in his or her blanket rolls. “I suppose I should get some sleep, and let you take up your watch.

“Good night then.”

“In the morning.” Ariana rubbed the wolf’s head. “And you too Wolf.”

Wolf looked up at Mikel, and then Mikel said, “He says may your dreams end. It is a wolf’s way of saying goodnight. It means that he hopes you will wake in the morning.”

“Thank you.” Ariana stood up and walked towards the Alandarian mini-camp. When she got there, Dexindar was still awake.

“Where have you been?” Dexindar spoke accusingly.

“Sitting by the fire.” Ariana didn’t feel the need to explain herself, but she wasn’t in the mood for a fight.

“With who?”

“By myself. Everyone else is asleep. In the morning.” Ariana rolled out her blanket roll.

“In the morning?” Dexindar didn’t sound like he believed it would come.

Ariana felt like she had just closed her eyes when she was startled awake by shouting. She looked over and saw that Dexindar was gone from his blanket roll. Looking around, she saw shapes moving in the night. Too many to be just the eleven other members of the party. They were under attack.

## Chapter Six: Life and Death

The only thing Mikel saw on his entire watch was a deer. Wolf kept him company. They were able to cover both sides of the camp at once, while talking silently. He could talk to Wolf up to a mile away, but at that distance it was sometimes hard to understand each other. Wolf communicated more in pictures than in words. There was something in Mikel's head that translated the pictures. He assumed it was something passed on from one or both of his parents, but he knew neither of them. The king knew his mother, but would never speak of her. She died when Mikel was still a baby. His father died before he was born. He didn't even know his father's name.

Nekat had come to relieve Mikel from his watch. He shockingly spoke, although he said only, "You may go." It was the only phrase uttered by one of the Dharkons other than Jalarn.

Mikel wasn't yet ready to sleep as he unrolled his blanket roll. Wolf seemed to be sleeping by the time Mikel sat down. He decided to practice his Meditative powers. It took him at least five minutes of hard concentration to enter the trance, and it didn't always work for him. For that reason, he didn't attempt it before his watch. He put his hands in his lap, and closed his eyes. He slowed down his breathing, and focussed his mind on the darkness bringing his heartbeat to a steady rhythm. Thump-thump. Thump-thump. Thump-thump. *Breath in and out with the beat of the heart. Let the blackness envelop you.* Thump-thump. Thump-thump.

Five minutes passed, and then it was like a door opened in Mikel's head. The world around him flashed into his mind to replace the blackness. He could see, or rather feel, each person in the camp. All but Nekat were sleeping. Nekat was now patrolling the perimeter.

Mikel could feel each tree surrounding the clearing, each a separate entity. He could feel a fruit bat as it passed overhead, its wings beating effortlessly. He could sense all life around

him within a hundred yards. As he moved down in rank towards First Rank, he would be closest to the earth, and that limit would expand outwards. He opened his eyes and looked up at the stars. He didn't need his eyes closed to concentrate powers.

He let his mind wander over Ariana. He could feel the life in her. Also power. She was strong. Magically and emotionally. If he achieved Second Rank as a Meditative Master, he could actually read her emotions. She was interesting. Mikel couldn't help thinking about her. Why did she evoke such strong feelings in him? He was sure that she had no such feelings towards him. He blinked...

Mikel was standing alone at the edge of a cliff. Completely alone. He reached out to Wolf... and found nothing. Wolf was always there. His concern was forgotten as he examined where he was. The red clay under foot stretched out endlessly. There were no plants. No life. The cliff fell away into darkness. A few yards out from the cliff face was a wall of dull white light, as if the world ended there. The sky was a rolling confusion of crimson clouds with flashes of silver beneath their pillowy surface. What did it all mean? Where was he?

"Hello Mikel." A woman's voice from behind him.

Mikel turned slowly. The red baked clay stretched to the horizon where it merged with crimson anarchy. The only way to distinguish sky from earth was the movement of the clouds and silver flashes. He felt enclosed in a red bubble; the boundaries were constricting.

Rena stood two feet in front of him. How had he not seen her before? She was smiling. Mikel smiled back at her. He loved her smile.

She spoke as she spread her arms. "I made a mistake." She stepped towards him and put her arms around him. "I love you." She squeezed him. "I need you back." She kissed his neck.

Something wasn't right. Rena held him in her arms and said the words he had wanted to hear for so long, but it didn't create a warm feeling low in his stomach, it created an emptiness, like great open space a few steps behind him. He looked down into her eyes, and she stopped smiling.

Again she said, "I love you." She pushed off hard on her feet and propelled both of them backwards over the edge. The cliff face sailed by. The top was lost from sight. The air grew darker as they fell.

Rena twisted and squirmed and somehow she wasn't Rena anymore, she was Dexindar. Dexindar gave Mikel a cold smile and then laughed. "You will follow me down to the depths."

The darkness grew stronger and Mikel could barely see, but he watched Dexindar change into another man. A tall man with white hair and a beautiful face. A silver lightning bolt was on his left breast. Mikel had never seen him before, but he knew who the man was, Xzyche. Xzyche opened his mouth and said, "Wake up!" But he spoke in Wolf's voice. Why would Xzyche sound like Wolf? Why would he tell Mikel to wake up? Wolf's voice repeated, "Wake up! We are under attack!"

Mikel's eyes sprung open. There was too much light coming from the night. Too many running footsteps. Metal clashing on metal. That had never happened before. He must have fallen asleep while in the trance, because he could still feel everything around him. Mikel shook his head to orient himself. Sleeping while in the trance was restless at best. He grabbed his sword from its scabbard beside him, and headed towards the chaos.

Mikel could feel the party, and the enemy. There were only thirty, with five of those already injured and dying. It seemed like a small number to launch an attack. And why was

there no alarm cry? Two thirds of the enemy were human, the rest were creatures. Mikel couldn't tell from their life-force what they were; he had never experienced them before. The moon stole out from behind a lone cloud and Mikel caught sight of one of the creatures ten yards away.

He recognized them from description; they were Crellions. Hideous creatures, more so for their human shape and size. Their skin was dark green, leathery and hairless. They had protrusions running from the middle of their foreheads over their scalp and down their spine. Their long sharp teeth and clawed hands were as strong as any sword. They could go days without food, water or rest. They were resistant to pain, cold, fire and magic. Xzyche used them as assassins. Strong proof of Xyche's return.

The Crellion he had spotted turned to face him. Mikel raised his sword and stepped forward to meet it. In two leaps, it closed the gap between them and slashed at his head with its claws. Mikel swung his sword around just in time to parry. The Crellion swiped again with its claws and he parried while stepping back. It swung its head in an attempt to bite Mikel's face, but he managed to duck away and regain his footing. It attacked again with claws, and he parried them down with the sword, and then brought it back up in an attack. His sword bit into the Crellion's right shoulder. It lashed its right arm out and dug its claws into Mikel's left shoulder, his sword arm. He knew if this battle didn't end quickly, he was going to lose. With the Crellions claws digging into his shoulder, its right side was open to attack. Focussing his mind to ignore the pain, Mikel brought his sword down and drove it into the Crellion just below its right armpit. It screamed and threw itself backwards, tripping over a rock. Mikel lunged forward and drove his sword into the chest of the creature as it hit the ground. He withdrew his sword and pierced it twice more. Crellions did not give up on life easily.

As Mikel focused his mind on his surroundings again, he could feel only a handful of strong life-forces coming from the enemy. Four Crellions still stood and one enemy human. All but Ariana, Dexindar and himself were engaging them. The Crellions were wounded and would die soon. Wolf was hunting down the human. The battle was over.

Mikel sheathed his sword and noticed Dexindar heading towards him. Judging by the stars, Dexindar must have been the one on watch. He was probably coming to explain why no alarm was raised. Mikel focussing on his companions could feel that Jesska had a gash on her leg, and Tekaran had a couple small slices in his arm. None of the others had any major wounds. Nikoel, Jontha, and the Darkons all seemed to be untouched by blade or Crellion, and all six seemed to have been in the thick of the battle.

Dexindar wasn't smiling as he approached Mikel. Mikel felt something wasn't quite right with him. He seemed cold and distant. But then the Darkons were even more distant. A party of heroes that didn't interact. Mikel noticed that Dexindar still had his sword out. He probably didn't know that the last of the enemy were being dealt with presently.

Mikel decided to speak first, "The battle's over. Minimal casualties. I wonder how they got the jump on us." That wasn't too accusing.

Dexindar did smile then. Everything seemed to slow down. Dexindar raised his sword and plunged it towards Mikel. Somebody somewhere screamed. A woman's voice. Mikel grunted as the blade entered his chest and pierced his heart. His eyes widened in shock and pain. Mikel saw Dexindar's eyes shining with hatred. Then they flinched, and he began to fall backwards. Mikel was still in the trance. He acted without thought. He slowed the blood flow from the wound as much as possible and began the healing process as the blade pulled free from

his chest. He knew it wasn't enough as his vision began to fade. He was going to die by an ally's blade. He felt a tingling in the wound, and then nothing else.

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They were under attack? Ariana jumped up from her blanket roll. Standing in her shift, she looked around trying to take in the scene of the battle. Why had there been no alarm raised? Who was on watch? Who were the attackers? The moon climbed out from behind a cloud and illuminated the clearing. She could see men in white glowing in the moonlight. There were also a few human-like creatures that blended into the night. Crellions. The army of light and Xzyche's assassins. Certain proof that the Lord of Light had returned from the dead.

Two men in white who caught sight of Ariana. As they started confidently towards her, she reached down without taking her eyes off the men to grasp the dagger beside her bedroll. She was skilled with it, but knew that she couldn't face two men with swords at once. She needed to do something fast. Alandarian magic dealt more with life and healing, but there were things that she could do. It used the same magic to stop a heart as it did to keep it beating.

Ariana refrained from this. It would drain too much of her power, and she had never taken a life in that manner before. Instead, she wove a spell of fear around the man on the left. It increased his heartbeat, caused shortness of breath, created all the effects of blind terror. The man stopped. He stood there for a second as his companion continued to advance, and then turned and fled. Ariana saw an arrow go through his chest before she turned back to the second man.

With only one opponent to face, Ariana decided to rely on steel. The remaining man still exuded confidence. He had no idea that it was magic that had caused his companion to flee, and he faced a mere woman in her nightclothes. Ariana could use that to her advantage. She

changed her grip on the dagger and her stance to imply incompetence. The man in the white robe lunged at her as soon as he was within range. She awkwardly sidestepped his attack and swung her dagger well away from her intended target. The man smiled, and said, "You should put down that knife. I promise we won't harm you. We're not here to kill you."

Ariana smiled inwardly. He must think her a feeble-minded inexperienced woman. Men were so gullible. She waited for the man to strike again. She jumped back and fell. She let go of her dagger in the process and lay on her back. The man slowly walked over and pointed his sword at her chest. "Do you give in now my darling?"

Ariana smiled outwardly this time. "No." She swung her leg around knocking his feet out from under him. As he fell, she grabbed his wrist with one hand and the pommel of the sword with the other wrenching it from his grasp. The sword nicked her arm in the process, but it was a shallow cut. She stood up and drove the sword through the man's heart. Ariana looked around and saw no enemy nearby. She started towards the centre of the camp.

Ariana spotted Dexindar heading towards Mikel. She could still hear some clashes of metal, but a ways into the trees. The battle must be almost over. As she headed towards her brother, she noticed that he still had his sword out. He wouldn't do anything stupid, would he? She quickened her pace.

Ariana was ten yards from Dexindar when he reached Mikel. She watched in terror as Dexindar drove his sword into Mikel's chest. She heard someone scream "No!" and realized it was herself. She couldn't believe her eyes. Suddenly she felt inside of her a overpowering need to stop her brother. Instinctively, she reached out with her power and grasped his heart. She squeezed with all her might and felt more than heard a popping sensation. Dexindar stood motionless. After what seemed a long time, he fell backwards pulling free the sword.

She ran in slow motion towards Mikel. Reaching out her hand and her mind, Ariana's power jumped the gap between them with the strength of her will. Frantically she started knitting the torn tissue of Mikel's heart and chest. She was a strong healer among the Alandarians, but she had already exerted a great deal of her power on her brother, and she could feel herself starting to fade along with Mikel. Ariana didn't know if he would have enough strength left to survive even if the healing worked. She was surprised at how little blood was exiting the wound, and noticed that his heartbeat was extremely slow. She couldn't keep her eyes open. She was working through her mind's eye now. The wound was almost entirely closed when she felt the last of her strength leave her and she slumped to the ground. Her last thought was that Mikel's heart hadn't beat for nearly a minute, and she may have just paid for a lost cause with her life.