

BLIZZARD ENTERTAINMENT

Crusader: The End of Her Journey

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I

Gauntleted hands shoved open the inn's front doors with a bang. Swirling ribbons of sand flowed into the common room. Reiter's broom went still. He stared. In the fading twilight, all the boy could see was a silhouette standing in the doorway.

For a long moment, only the unending drone of the sandstorm broke the silence.

The figure stepped forward. Heavy armor rattled. A white tunic spilled down his chestplate, bearing a strange symbol. But it was the weapon that held Reiter's eyes. A short length of black chain connected a handle with an evil-looking spiked weight. The man even carried a massive shield. It was taller than Reiter. The armor shook the inn's wooden floor with each step. The figure's head, encased in a thick helm, turned to look at the boy.

Reiter was too terrified to run. So he just stared. And waited.

The man raised a hand to his helm and removed it. Flowing brown hair fell to his shoulders—*her* shoulders. Reiter's mouth dropped open in shock. *That's a woman!* He had never seen such detailed, frightening battle armor in his life, not even among the elite merchant guards that passed through town, and those crews were always men. At least, that was what Reiter assumed. He hadn't actually met that many.

The woman coughed, and sand tumbled free from her armor. Had she been walking around in this sandstorm? Insanity. She turned her eyes toward Reiter and smiled. It was a gentle, kind expression. "Let me guess," she said. "You're the son of the innkeeper?"

Reiter swallowed and nodded. "Father?" he called, not looking away from her.

A grunt echoed from the inn's second floor. "Ya, boy? Yeh done sweeping?"

"We have a guest."

"Not'n this weather, we don't," he said, coming down the stairs. "What're you—oh." His gutter accent vanished in an instant, replaced with warm speech, the language he saved for guests. "My apologies, good sir—madam, I mean. I wasn't expecting any new arrivals. Not with this storm, anyway." His charming act was spoiled a bit by his nervous glances toward the woman's armor. "Welcome to the Oasis Inn. Are you two looking for a room?"

Two? Reiter shifted his gaze. He hadn't even noticed the woman's companion, a girl wearing simple clothes. She was younger. About Reiter's age, in fact. The lack of armor seemed to have left her a touch windblasted, though. Specks of sand clung to her hair. Reiter decided he could overlook that.

The woman gently rested her shield on the floor. "I hear you have a fondness for books and that you lend them out to your patrons. Is that true?"

Books? These two had trudged through a sandstorm for *books*?

"You heard true, madam," his father said. "Some say my inn has the finest library in Kehjistan. Outside of Caldeum itself, of course."

She smiled. "In that case, we would like to board here," she said. "On one condition: you don't need to call me madam. My name is Anajinn."

"Of course, ma—Anajinn! Plenty of room at the Oasis Inn today." Reiter's father spread his arms warmly. "Not too many people as brave as you two, to be traveling in this weather."

The second new arrival laughed. "Brave. Sure. Getting caught in a sandstorm. I can already hear the poets rushing to compose sonnets of our courage." Reiter smiled at her. She met his gaze and, after a moment, gave him a polite smile back.

The armored woman grinned. "Perhaps we were taken a bit by surprise. Perhaps we would have been here a few days earlier if a certain apprentice could keep up."

"Perhaps a certain apprentice wasn't the one who wanted to explore every cavern in the desert," the apprentice said.

"Perhaps." Anajinn removed one of her gauntlets and upended it. A small waterfall of sand cascaded to the wooden floor. Reiter frowned. He was going to have to sweep that up. "We managed to be productive, in any case," Anajinn added in a wry tone.

The innkeeper cocked his head, but no further explanation was forthcoming. "Well, I'm sure you two must be thirsty, and the Oasis Inn always has plenty of cool water stored," Reiter's father said. "Reiter? Can you bring two cups for our guests?" He paused, looking at the boy. "Reiter?" He snapped his fingers sharply.

Reiter jolted upright, pulling his gaze away from the apprentice. "Water. Yes, Father." He grabbed two cups and opened the hinged door on the floor, lowering dippers into the water casks.

He was glad to be hidden behind the counter for the moment. The armored woman's companion... Reiter struggled to keep a grin suppressed. The apprentice had lighter, almost blond hair, longer than her master's, and her eyes were radiant. The way her chin curved elegantly to her neck... She had even given him a smile. A cool smile, but a smile nonetheless.

She likes me, Reiter thought.

Reiter handed the two women their cups. They both downed their contents in single gulps. He watched the younger guest. She gave him a questioning glance. He looked away.

"Follow me upstairs, and I'll show you to your room," Reiter's father said.

"Actually, I'd like to see the library now," Anajinn said. "Do you have any books discussing the city of Ureh?"

In short order, the woman had shed her armor and followed Reiter's father to the library, while her apprentice stayed in the common room. "Can you spare a cloth and a small bowl of water? I might as well start cleaning," she said.

"Sure," Reiter said. He collected the items from behind the bar.

The apprentice called out, "On second thought, don't mind the cloth. I'll use a bit of my shirt."

"It's no problem. We have plenty."

"You won't get the cloth back. You won't *want* it back. I'll have to burn it when I'm done," the apprentice said.

"That's fine," Reiter said, returning with the bowl and the cloth. He gave her his most winning smile, the kind that made the daughter of the trade goods storekeeper down the road bat her eyelashes at him—Bea was her name. Reiter put the local girl out of his mind.

"We have plenty."

"Thank you," the apprentice said. She had an odd cleaning technique. She dipped a couple fingers into the bowl and let only a few drops wet the fabric. She began scrubbing the chestplate, a thick slab of metal with intricate etchings and workings.

Reiter sat down next to her. "Need help?"

"No, thank you."

The boy nodded and leaned over. "What do those symbols mean? They look like Zakarum markings."

"They are."

Reiter was impressed. "Really? Your master is a paladin? I've seen lots of paladins come through town before. She's a lot prettier than most paladins." And then, feeling that the time was right, he added, "So are you."

She gave him another cool smile. "Anajinn is not a paladin."

Reiter nodded again. He didn't really care. "Staying in town long?" he asked.

The apprentice kept the cloth moving in tight circles on the armor. "Probably not. Up to her. Maybe a few days, at most." She scowled at a stubborn stain and splashed more drops of water on the cloth. Gingerly, she pressed the damp rag against the armor. After a moment, she seemed satisfied and renewed her scrubbing.

"I heard her say she's looking for Ureh. Is she a treasure hunter? We get all kinds of treasure hunters here," Reiter said. He carefully leaned back in his chair, slouching a bit, trying to appear relaxed and confident.

She considered him. "Treasure hunter? I've never thought of it that way before. The term almost fits." With one last look at Reiter—and his posture—she went back to work, shaking her head.

"My name is Reiter. What's yours?" he asked. She smiled but said nothing. He waited. The silence lengthened. *Fine*. Her name wasn't really important anyway. "If she's not a paladin, what is she?"

"A crusader," she said.

"Oh, right. A crusader. I knew that," Reiter said. She gave him a sideways glance. Reiter's smile slipped. She seemed to know he was lying.

Another period of quiet. Reiter fidgeted.

Still, she was talking to him. That was the first step, right?

A month ago, a group of guards had hired rooms in the inn and spent most of their time swilling the cheapest drinks they could find. Reiter had enjoyed their company. One of them, a swarthy, sweaty man with a stained tunic and patches of rosacea spattered amid his thinning hair, had taken it upon himself to teach Reiter "the ways of the world." Most of the conversation had focused on how to get "any little pretty"—his words—to agree to a night of companionship.

Get a girl to talk with you, and she's interested. Get her to smile, and you're halfway there, the guard had told him in loud, drunken whispers. His cloying breath had seemed to take up residence in Reiter's nose. Make her think you have a lot in common, keep her smiling, and you win. If she stops smiling, change the subject. Compliment her. Reiter had been amazed it could be so easy.

"What's your name?" Reiter asked the apprentice again. No response. "Do you do a lot of cleaning for your master? My father makes me clean all the time." Still no reply. Reiter

continued. "My father always tells me that we need to have the cleanest inn in Caldeum's Rest."

"Interesting," she said. She scraped at another troublesome stain with her fingernail, then jerked her hand away as though it had been burned, muttering to herself. She pushed down hard on that spot with a dry section of the cloth.

Reiter watched her closely. She wasn't smiling anymore. He changed the subject. "If you've been walking around for a while, you could probably use a hot bath. We have plenty of tubs in the back, and I can heat some water for you. If you'd like."

"Maybe later," she said.

"It would be no trouble," he insisted, and then said, casually, "I wouldn't even mind joining you."

The apprentice set down the cloth and fixed Reiter with a glare. "Excuse me?" she said.

Reiter felt heat rush into his face. Desperately he racked his brain for an explanation. "Oh, I'm so sorry! I forgot some people don't consider that modest. It's not unusual here in the desert. Helps to have someone else help clean the sand out of hard-to-reach places." It only made things worse. The silence, once again, stretched...

"Here," he said, suddenly reaching for the cloth. "Let me help with that." He quickly dipped it into the water. His hand brushed her hair, and he felt a thrill run up his arm. Without hesitation, he placed the rag against the armor and began scrubbing.

The apprentice gasped. "Wait—"

When Reiter touched the wet cloth to the stain, everything seemed to happen at once. The apprentice yelled. The bowl of water flipped. The table *underneath* the bowl flipped. Smoke, vile smoke, smelling of sulfur and festering blood, filled the air. Reiter screamed and tumbled out of his chair. The apprentice took the chestplate and flung it out the door in one smooth motion. It arced over the balcony, into the sandstorm.

Just before Reiter landed on the floor, he saw a ball of green flame rapidly expanding over the chestplate, disappearing in a flash. Just after Reiter landed on the floor, the table fell on top of him, pinning him down, knocking the wind out of him.

Yelling, crying, Reiter struggled to push the table away. Strong arms pulled the weight off his chest. Anajinn, the crusader, stared down at him with concern.

Reiter's father stumbled into the common room, wide eyed. "What happened?"

"Excellent question," Anajinn said. The crusader turned her gaze from Reiter, to the chestplate lying outside in the sandstorm, to the apprentice. To the last, she gave a hard look.

To everyone's shock, the apprentice began laughing. Sobs of pure mirth shook her body, and she had to sit down to keep from collapsing on the floor. Reiter's father looked outraged. "What in the name of Akarat happened to my son?"

The apprentice wiped away tears and said exactly what Reiter hoped she wouldn't. "He offered to bathe with me. And then he tried to help clean the armor to apologize for it." More peals of laughter filled the common room. "I'm sorry, Anajinn. I wasn't expecting him to put water onto dried demon's blood."

"He did what?" Reiter's father's eyes darted between his son and Anajinn. Reiter shrank back. "Dried *what?*"

Anajinn was still looking at her apprentice. "Truly?" she asked. The apprentice stifled her laughter long enough to nod. "How much?" The apprentice made a gesture with her fingers the size of a large flea. "Good." Anajinn breathed a sigh of relief. "So no harm should have been done."

Reiter's father seemed caught between concern, anger, and fear. "What harm? What did my son do?"

"Nothing terrible, as it turns out," Anajinn said. "Do caravans heading to Caldeum sometimes disappear? Yes? I don't think they'll be having problems for at least a few years. Just before the sandstorm hit, we encountered a... nest. These creatures in particular don't enjoy the presence of water. For obvious reasons. The desert made for a happy home."

Frowning, she picked up another piece of her armor, a leg guard, and examined it closely. "I

had thought we cleaned off everything dangerous, but it's hard to be thorough when you're blinded by sand for three straight days." She bowed toward Reiter's father. "I humbly beg your forgiveness. Even if the danger was slight, the oversight was mine."

Reiter saw his father's mouth moving soundlessly. Finally, he cleared his throat. "I... see. No harm done. I also apologize. For the behavior of my son," he said, glaring down at Reiter.

"Oh, no apologies are necessary," Anajinn said immediately. "If my apprentice is taking a shine toward your son, it's fine with me."

The apprentice sighed. "That's not—"

"No need to explain," Anajinn interrupted her, grinning openly. "Young love. So beautiful. Flowers blooming in spring. Desert roses and such. You know, there's nothing in the crusaders' oath that prevents you from—"

"My oath? No," the apprentice grumbled. "My sense of good taste? Yes."

The uproarious laughter of his father chased Reiter back into the inn's main storeroom. He made it his personal mission to avoid the two women for the rest of their stay, which lasted about a week.

He was mostly successful. At one point, the apprentice sought him out and attempted to apologize for her last remark.

"Anajinn's sense of humor is rubbing off on me. We can be... biting... toward each other from time to time, but that's no excuse. I'm sorry for what I said."

Reiter mumbled and waved her off. She and her master seemed crazy anyway. *Demon's blood*. He shook his head. That must have been a lie. Unreasonable to think otherwise.

"Strange woman," Reiter's father remarked after they left. "Bett'n she has salt, though. Called herself a crusader. Interesting story. She's from the swamplands. Came ovah to the desert to search for some religious thing, I guess. Yeh should've asked her about it. Fast-natin' stuff."

"I suppose so," Reiter said.

II

"Make sure to sweep," Reiter's father said weakly. A coughing fit shook his frail body. He clasped both hands over his mouth, but Reiter could still see phlegm leaking through the gaps between his bony fingers. "Inn... clean..."

"I will, Father. Finish your soup," Reiter said.

"Can't... don't like the taste..."

"Bea made it especially for you this morning," Reiter said with more patience than he felt. "You need your strength. Finish it all."

He closed the door firmly and went back to the common room. The midday meal had been served hours earlier, and there were only three customers left at the tables: the two tired merchants, discussing the prices of Westmarch wine, and the religious fellow, quietly paging through a thick book. Reiter walked behind the counter. His wife was sharpening one of the cooking knives.

"Would you mind taking my father some more tea?" Reiter asked. "He's not doing well today."

"Spare a little honey for him?" Bea asked with a sympathetic look.

Reiter sighed. Honey had grown expensive over the past few months. The merchant from Tristram was late. Reiter hoped he would be back by next week, but if he wasn't, the Oasis Inn would run out soon.

"I don't think so." At her disapproving glare, he quickly added, "If we don't have enough honey, our customers will be unhappy and our reputation might suffer. My father wouldn't want that." Bea's expression grew darker. "I'm sure he would tell you himself to skip the honey if he knew the situation. This inn is everything to him. It's his legacy." Reiter fidgeted for a moment, then held up his hands in surrender. "Fine. Give him the honey. A little bit."

If anything, her glare grew even more heated, but she made the tea—with a generous dollop of honey—and disappeared up the staircase.

Reiter sighed again. Even though he had given in, he was sure she would bring it up later. She seemed to delight in making him feel low for no reason.

The door of the inn swung open. Footsteps echoed through the common room. Reiter let his gaze linger on the staircase a moment longer and then began his welcome speech.

"Welcome to the Oasis Inn, good sir. Can I help you?"

"'Good sir'? At least that's better than 'madam,'" an amused female voice said.

Reiter turned. The new visitor was clad in heavy armor, the same heavy armor he had seen maybe eight or nine years ago. Helm, chestplate, shield, flail, white tabard embroidered with a Zakarum symbol—it was her. His mouth fell open.

The crusader? "I... my apologies, madam," he said without thinking.

She chuckled easily. "'Madam.' My name is simply Anajinn."

"My apologies... Anajinn," Reiter said. Had that been her name? She looked different than he remembered. Her hair was lighter and longer, her jaw more defined, her nose a bit smaller. Strangely, she also seemed younger.

He could feel the stares from the others in the common room. It was a little comforting to know he wasn't the only one intimidated by her appearance. "Do you need a room? Is your apprentice staying with you?" Apprentice. His stomach clenched. Images of a flipped table and a troublesome stain surfaced in his mind. Embarrassment welled up, and he banished the memory quickly.

"I'll only need a room for one. I have not yet found an apprentice," she said. "I would also like to revisit your library."

Reiter led her out of the common room, toward the library. "Certainly. We have the finest library in..." He trailed off with a frown. *Not yet found an apprentice?* Anajinn had one when she last visited. Then again, Reiter seemed to be remembering the entire ordeal incorrectly. He dismissed the thought. "Finest library in Kehjistan. Outside of Caldeum, of course."

Anajinn kept pace with him, armor clanking heavily with each step. "I've been to nearly three dozen outposts around this desert, and I believe you and your father are right," she

said. "You do have the largest library I've ever encountered outside of a big city. In fact, I've never seen its like in a town like this."

"My father's idea," Reiter said. "Caldeum's Rest is small, but almost everyone heading to and from Caldeum along the southern route stops here. The oasis, you see. Last chance for water before you cross the nasty part of the desert. My father noticed that there were plenty of academics and scholars and religious pilgrims who didn't want to stay at the tavern down the road, so he created something inviting for them." *A waste of time and effort*, Reiter didn't add. There was far more coin to be made in wine and spirits than in providing a quiet study room for destitute students. "He let merchants know he was willing to buy any books they had."

"Your father. He is well?"

"He is dying," Reiter said.

Anajinn inclined her head in sympathy. "Is there something I can do to help? Can I see him?"

"He isn't lucid these days. I wouldn't want to upset him with any old memories."

Anajinn looked at him for a moment. "As you say." The library door was just ahead. "Are many of the books new since I last visited?"

"I think so," Reiter said. He hadn't read any of them himself. He held the door open. "Here we are."

"Thank you," she said.

As she stepped back, a bit of her hair brushed Reiter's hand. A bit of her *blond* hair, he realized. It all rushed back to him in an instant—the master, the brown hair, the name.

"You... you're not Anajinn. You're the apprentice!"

He got a wry smile in return. "Not anymore," she said.

"But... the armor... You said your name was Anajinn!"

"That *is* my name," the woman said.

Reiter's confusion turned to anger. It felt as if she was having a laugh at his expense. Again.

"That was your master's name!"

"And it is my name." She still smiled. "Is it really so strange?"

"*You—!*" Reiter lowered his voice. "You talk like you *are* her," he hissed. "Were you trying to trick me? Didn't you embarrass me enough last time?"

"I meant no disrespect. I am a crusader. I am Anajinn," she said. "As my master was. As her master was before."

"You were *all* named Anajinn?"

"When I took up my master's shield, I took up her cause and her name," she said.

"Took up her shield? Why? What happened? Is your master..." *Dead?* Reiter suddenly didn't want to know. He hurriedly changed the subject. "Are you still looking for books about the city of Ureh?"

"No," she said. "I'm seeking information on the lost memoirs of Tal Rasha."

"I... see." Reiter didn't. "I'll leave you to it, then." He hastily made his exit and returned to the common room.

Bea was waiting. "A new guest?" Reiter nodded stiffly. "Who was she?" Bea asked.

"She visited here a few years ago. I think she might be insane," he whispered. Bea gave him a skeptical look.

Reiter cleared away the dishes from the merchants and took a fresh pitcher of water to the lone man sitting at another table. *She is crazy*, Reiter thought, filling the man's glass to the brim. *Nobody sane takes someone else's name and tries to live their life. It's not reasonable.* Coldly he wondered how long it would take to sell off all the books in the library after his father died. It might be best if this crusader never had reason to return.

A severe voice interrupted his thoughts. "Innkeeper." It was the man whose glass he had just filled. The religious fellow. "Who is that woman? The one in the armor."

"I'm honestly not sure," Reiter said. It was the truth. "She is a strange one."

The man firmly closed his book. On its cover was one of the familiar symbols of the Zakarum faith. It was remarkably similar to the sigil the crusader bore. Come to think of it, this man had arrived wearing armor of his own, not entirely dissimilar to Anajinn's. "She's been here before?" the man asked.

There was an edge to his voice Reiter didn't like. "Once. Years ago. I was just a child," he said, hoping he sounded dismissive. "She seemed odd to me then. Not terribly reasonable, but harmless." Then he wondered if he had misjudged this man's intent. "Is... is she a friend of yours?"

"No." Ice was warm compared to his tone. "Not reasonable, though. Interesting. What about you, innkeeper? Do you consider yourself reasonable?"

"I suppose so," Reiter said.

"Really? Why would a reasonable man shelter a heretic?"

Reiter stepped back. "What?"

"I saw the symbols on her armor. On her tabard. Those signs are not meant to be decorative trinkets." The man stood up, giving Reiter his first look at his powerful stature. "I am a paladin of the Hand of Zakarum. I root out corruption and heresy wherever I find it." He jabbed a finger into Reiter's chest. The innkeeper nearly fell over. "I do not sense the Light

within her. I sense something else. She cannot be allowed to dwell within your inn if you serve the faith. Do you, innkeeper?"

"Yes, yes, of course," Reiter squeaked.

"Then why do you tolerate her presence?" the paladin said.

Reiter quaked beneath the looming man. He had never seen a paladin so angry before. "I give courtesy to all who claim the Light's favor. How could I have known what she is?" An idea occurred to him. "She called herself a crusader. I assumed she was faithful to your order. Forgive me," he said, dropping to his knees, prostrating himself. "I fear my ignorance has led me to grave sin. Can you forgive me, good sir?" He held his breath.

There was a long, long pause. "A crusader?" Reiter stole a quick glance upward. The paladin wasn't even looking at him. "Why does that name...?"

"Say the word, and I will have her removed from my inn immediately, good sir," Reiter breathed.

The paladin seemed lost in thought. "Yes. Tell her to meet me out front. I will examine her intentions myself. And if need be, I will deal with her." He strode up the stairs, taking his book with him.

Reiter stood uneasily, wiping sweat off his forehead. *This is good*, he told himself. Anajinn could sort out her own issues with the paladin. Outside. As far away from the inn as

possible. He could hear the paladin stomping around upstairs. The clanking sounds meant he was putting on armor. Reiter shivered.

But he didn't want Anajinn to know how scared he was. She had already seen him humiliated at the hands of a little water and blood. No, he decided. He would simply tell her to leave. The rest was unimportant. This was Reiter's inn—or it would be, once his father died—and he wanted her gone. That was reasonable.

Anajinn was reading through a thick tome when he entered the library. "Anajinn, or whatever your name is, you need to leave now." She glanced up at him and turned a page, tracing along the text with her gauntleted fingers as she read.

"I heard some angry words out there," she said.

"There's a man... a paladin. He says you're a heretic," Reiter said.

She laughed. "I suppose he would." Her eyes never left the book. Reiter stammered incoherently for a moment. "Did he threaten to kill me?" she asked.

"Well, not... Yes." Reiter tried to make his voice firm. "I think he means to kill you. He's waiting outside for you now."

"Nice of him to send you to warn me."

She continued to read. Reiter shifted uncomfortably. "Aren't you going to... face him?"

"Eventually. If he's still there," she said. "He might be waiting a while. I have a lot of reading left. Maybe he'll find something better to do."

Reiter felt utterly helpless. Dragging her out seemed like a bad idea. Still, he pressed forward. "Anajinn, I want you to leave my inn. Right now." She didn't immediately respond, and Reiter exploded. "What is *wrong* with you? What is in that book that's more important than a man trying to kill you? Why in the Hells have you come back to my inn?"

Anajinn sighed and set down her book, sitting up straight. Her armor clacked together lightly. "Your father asked my master—"

"The real Anajinn? The first one?" Reiter interrupted without thinking.

She didn't seem to take offense. "Her, yes. But she wasn't the first. Anajinn began her crusade a couple centuries ago," she said. Reiter blinked at that, but she moved on. "Your father asked all about our crusade. He didn't share that with you?" Reiter shook his head, lips pressed together. "Then I'll be brief. I'm searching for something to save my faith."

"From... what?"

Anajinn's smile was sad. "Decay. Corruption."

"So why does this paladin hate you so much?"

"Would you be happy to have someone tell you your faith is flawed at its core? Doomed to rot and cause untold suffering and pain?" She sighed. "I don't think this paladin outside is of

high rank. Knowledge of the crusade is suppressed to all but the leaders of his order. If he were one of them, he would not wait patiently."

"What would he do?"

"He would level your inn to kill me." Anajinn's expression hardened. "I don't know whether I can talk sense into him. If I can't, I'll likely need to leave town. So until I'm ready to leave, I'm going to finish my reading."

"But he threatened to kill me too!" There. It was out.

A pause. "Did he?"

"Well, not in so many words..."

Anajinn cut him off. "But you felt threatened." It wasn't a question. Anajinn closed her book.

"Then I will leave immediately. I don't want you to feel at risk because of me.

"But this book," she said, holding it up. "Would you be willing to sell it? I can pay a fair price."

Reiter stared at her.

Amphi could feel his patience slipping away with each passing heartbeat, like grains of sand tumbling through the neck of an hourglass. Wind whipped through the road in front of the inn, grinding sand against his armor.

"Crusader," the paladin muttered. He could not recall where he had first heard the name. Perhaps he had read it? Studied it as an acolyte in Kurast? No. He was certain of it. So why did the name trouble him so? Crusaders were not friends of Amphi's order. He knew that much, but even that knowledge felt incomplete. The symbols on her armor were carefully, reverently rendered. No obvious blasphemy. She was not a clown, nor was she one of the actors who painted Zakarum symbols on their bodies and pranced around in low taverns.

Cennis. That was a name Amphi hadn't thought of in many years. One of his best friends in the Travincal temples, the boy had had an insatiable thirst for knowledge. Maybe that was it. Cennis had snuck into the study of one of the Hand of Zakarum's elders one night and stolen a book. He had excitedly told Amphi about all the things he had learned, things the students had never been taught. He was even a little frightened. He had found hidden knowledge, lost crimes. Fractures within the faith. Strangely, Cennis disappeared soon after, and Amphi...

What had happened to Cennis? Amphi grew angry. It was a familiar feeling. Every time he thought back to his childhood, hatred and rage flowed into his mind. It was as if the

memories were buried in a toxic cesspool, covered in vileness. Soon, his curiosity faded in a whirlwind of fury and—

The crusader. Amphi could feel his patience slipping away with each passing heartbeat like grains of sand. He pressed his hands to his head and blinked. What had he just been thinking about? A childhood friend? That was it. He put it out of his mind. There were more important things to focus on.

"You wanted to speak with me?" The voice brought Amphi back to the present. There she was.

Amphi spotted people darting indoors up and down the street. Travelers and inhabitants alike were taking cover. Wise of them, Amphi judged. He abruptly realized that the woman was giving him a strange look, her head cocked to one side. "Are you feeling well, paladin?" she asked.

"Tell me your name," he said harshly. "Tell me who you are, if the evil that compels you—"

"My name is Anajinn. I'm a crusader." She raised an eyebrow. "And I'm hoping we can have a calm conversation."

"I don't negotiate with evil. I smite it where I find it," Amphi snapped.

"Good," Anajinn said cheerfully. "Then we have something in common. But I believe there's no need for smiting today. What troubles you?"

Amphi drew his sword in a swift motion. Her gaze didn't waver, which only angered him more. "You are a heretic, are you not?"

"I am not," she said.

"You claim my faith?" he roared. "You claim obedience to Zakarum?"

"Not in the way you mean," Anajinn said. Pausing, she regarded him with sympathy. "We have much in common, paladin. *Much* in common. We both want the same things."

Amphi spat on the ground. Why were this woman's words gnawing at his insides? He could barely keep himself from attacking her here and now. The urge only grew stronger, yet he resisted, pressing on in a tight voice. "Those symbols you wear. They are sacred. You have no right to wear them."

The crusader shook her head. "That is not what troubles you, is it? Tell me what you know of me."

"You desecrate my faith," he said.

"How?"

"*I... don't... know,*" he growled.

"Here's what I know," Anajinn said. "I know that evil can thrive anywhere. Anywhere at all. Even among those who claim virtue and justice. Especially if they are not watchful."

"Be quiet," Amphi whispered. His anger was slipping away.

"I know that the path that led you to where you are is filled with regrets," she continued. "I know that you value righteousness, and I know you've come to suspect that something is wrong within the faith. I know that you've struggled to understand it, and most importantly, I know that you are strong, because you've not truly succumbed to evil yet."

"Please stop talking," Amphi begged. She was right. About all of it. There were endless moments when he questioned the actions of his order. His thoughts were in a tumult.

"I know you've felt the Light's glory, or else you would have discarded your oaths," she said. "And I know that you've felt it in the fields, among the world, among its people... but never in Travincal. Never in the temples of your order. And I know that you know why. Deep in your heart, you know. Even if the answers have been hidden from you."

Pain blazed between his eyes. He silently lowered his head. A storm raged within. He sank deep in its fury and looked for truth.

What he saw was a stone. Darkness surrounded it.

Something gave way. His turmoil vanished in an instant.

Hatred. Hatred took its place. Pure, naked hatred.

Amphi pointed his sword at the crusader, feeling clarity of purpose for the first time since laying eyes on her. He raised his hands above his head and summoned the power of the Light. "I am done with words, heretic. Die!" he roared.

Anajinn simply nodded. "So be it." She smiled sadly as Amphi cast his might down on her.

Reiter couldn't make out the paladin's words, but there was no mistaking how the expression on his face turned ugly. The innkeeper's son continued to peer through the front window of the inn. A moment later, Bea joined him.

"Get back," he hissed. "It's not safe."

"You first," she said. Reiter glowered at her, but a flash of light drew his gaze back to the street.

Bea inhaled sharply. Reiter flinched. The paladin had summoned... something... that glowed like the midday sun. The man held it above his head, shouted at Anajinn, and then cast it down on her.

Just before it landed, Reiter saw Anajinn smile.

There was a tremendous sound, and a great, billowing cloud of fire flared where Anajinn had been standing an instant ago. Of the crusader, there was no sign.

For the briefest moment.

Light crashed down from above, a bolt of pure power and radiance. Anajinn crashed down with it. The paladin didn't see it coming. And then he saw nothing at all.

Reiter shouted in fear and stumbled backward, throwing up his arms to shield his eyes from the blinding light. When he lowered his hands, the sharp purple shape of the bolt still danced in his vision. Blinking fiercely, he squinted. Anajinn stood alone, calm, flail slowly swinging at her side.

Of the paladin, there *were* signs. Many of them, scattered across a great distance. The sand surrounding Anajinn seemed damp.

Reiter felt himself beginning to tremble. Bea stood with her hands clasped over her mouth. Reiter stared numbly as Anajinn carefully placed the flail's shaft in her armor's securing loop, and then with one final look toward the inn, Anajinn walked west, down the road and out of Caldeum's Rest, with the setting sun as her guide.

She was accompanied by total silence. The town watched her go with bated breath.

Reiter heard noises from upstairs. From his father's quarters. Reiter sprinted to the second floor and opened the door. "Father, are you well?"

His father hadn't been so alive in months. He was staring out the window, eyes following Anajinn as she vanished into the desert. "She's the one, right? From years ago! I wish she had come up for a visit. I knew she had salt. She took proper care of that bastard, eh?"

"I suppose so," Reiter said.

III

"I am not a heretic. I've walked in the faith my entire life." Reiter fought to keep his voice steady. Three impassive faces stared back at him. He couldn't tell if they believed him. "I am but a humble servant who hopes to live by the words of the wise prophet Akarat. I'm sure I stumble from time to time, but I—"

The smallest of the paladins, a thin, balding man with a pinched face, interrupted him.

"That is precisely our concern. You seem to have stumbled," he said, shoving the innkeeper back. "You knowingly gave shelter to an enemy of the faith, and one of the righteous died trying to rectify that. One of our brothers."

"No, no!" Reiter gasped as the paladin slammed him against the wall. The wooden slats creaked under the impact. "When your brother asked for my help, I gave it to him. Without hesitation!"

"With Amphi dead, we only have your word for that," the second paladin said. "But what we do know is that, of all the buildings in this Akarat-forsaken outpost, the heretic chose to rest at yours."

"I cannot see what is in a person's heart when they step through my door," Reiter pleaded. The first paladin's hand squeezed his shoulder. Hard. Reiter squawked in pain. "I've not held anything back! I've told you everything I remember about her, and she's not returned for years!"

The third paladin broke his silence. "He did tell us her name," he said. "Anajinn. That is more than we knew before."

The first paladin shook his head. "I still think he's hiding something." He kept Reiter pinned against the wall with one hand and lifted his other in front of the innkeeper's face. A shimmering light danced between his fingers. "I want him to understand how serious I am." Reiter fruitlessly tried to squirm out of his grip. Sparks leaped from the paladin's fist. One landed on Reiter's nose, and he screamed as pain stabbed through his skull.

"Enough, Cennis," the third paladin said. "If the reports are true, if the crusader is in the area, we will find her. She can't hide in the desert forever without visiting this oasis. There's no need to torment this poor fool any longer."

"Do *not* question me. I am in charge." The first paladin slowly pushed his hand closer to Reiter's face.

The second paladin firmly gripped the first's arm. "Enough." The two stared at each other for a long moment. Reiter, blinking away tears, feared they would turn on one another. This was far less frightening than the thought of both turning on him.

"Fine," the first paladin said, and he released Reiter. The innkeeper dropped to his knees, clutching his left shoulder and wheezing, snot dripping from his nose to the floor. "Perhaps you're right. The news out of Travincal, the temples... Maybe I am a bit hasty, but I will not apologize."

"There is no need," the second paladin said. "He *did* give her shelter, however unwittingly. I assume he won't repeat that mistake."

Reiter shook his head desperately. "No, never."

"Good," the first paladin said. "And if you catch a glimpse of that foul being ever again, you will inform us without hesitation." He leaned down, placing himself nose to nose with the innkeeper. "Do you understand?"

"Yes. Yes!"

All three of the paladins turned together and left the inn. There were no customers in the common room. Reiter was alone, gasping and weeping.

A hesitant voice spoke. "Are you all right, Father?"

Reiter gave one final sniff, wiped his eyes, and turned to face his daughter, Lilsa. "Of course. I'm fine. Just some sand in my eyes. Makes me look like a fool sometimes." He stood up and forced himself to smile. She was barely four, though she often seemed smarter than most children twice her age. "Those nice men decided to stay somewhere else for the night."

She bit one of her thumbnails before answering. "They didn't seem nice to me."

Reiter made himself laugh. "I suppose they weren't." He wiped his eyes again. "Where's your mother?"

"Out back with the nice ladies wearing the shiny metal," Lilsa said.

Her words, delivered with total innocence, made him freeze in mid-step. Reiter felt all of the blood drain out of his face.

It wasn't possible. It couldn't be.

Quickly he knelt down, getting face to face with his daughter. She flinched back at his expression, and he tried to smile again. "What nice ladies, Lilsa?" She drew away from him. Maybe his smile hadn't been terribly convincing. "Which ladies, Lilsa? It's important," he repeated.

Her eyes were wide. "Two ladies. I think one of them's hurt," Lilsa finally said.

Reiter gently picked Lilsa up and strode through the storeroom, opening the back door. The blistering desert sun assaulted his senses, but there was no mistaking what he was seeing. Three women sat together on the long wooden bench behind the inn.

Sitting on one side was Bea, carefully handling a damp cloth. On the other side sat a teenage girl Reiter had never seen before. In the middle was...

... her.

"What are *you* doing back here?" Reiter hissed in a panic, setting his daughter down.

"She's injured, Reiter," Bea said firmly. "Be calm."

"I don't care! My inn was just invaded because of her." Reiter turned on Anajinn, who had her head lowered and was breathing slowly. "You have brought your enemies down on my inn, crusader, and—" Reiter went silent with a frown. The dirt underneath the bench was wet. Blood dripped from beneath her armor. "What happened?"

The younger woman, the teenager, answered. She was about as old as Anajinn—this Anajinn—had been when Reiter first met her. "We ran into a bit of trouble out in the desert yesterday, and Anajinn forgot to dodge." She carefully removed the crusader's chestplate. Reiter gasped. An angry, gaping tear reached from one side of Anajinn's abdomen to the other. "Wounds from demons' blades don't close easily."

Reiter felt his daughter clutch his leg. "Demons?"

Anajinn spoke in a slurred voice. "You don't need to worry about it. It was taken care of."

The younger woman snorted. "*You* were almost taken care of. I need to try healing you again." She knelt in front of Anajinn and opened a thick book, an old tome written in ancient script. The apprentice marked out a place on a page and showed it to Anajinn.

"Should I start here?"

"Yes," Anajinn said. "Focus. Concentrate. Reach out with your faith."

Reiter looked between the two with confusion. "I don't understand; what are—" Bea's hand sliced through the air. He quieted.

The crusader said nothing further. Her apprentice began to speak, reciting an old law of the Zakarum faith. Reiter frowned. What would a sermon accomplish here? Though he had to admit, the words of hope weren't unwelcome. The day suddenly seemed a bit brighter, a bit warmer. Inviting. Reiter lifted his gaze in wonder. It was as though the Light was shining down on them all.

The apprentice finished the passage and closed the book. "Done," she said. Anajinn raised her head and stood up. She wobbled on her feet for a moment but waved off the apprentice's offered hand. She rolled her shoulders and stretched. Her shirt was still stained red, but there were no signs of fresh blood.

"Well done," Anajinn said. The apprentice beamed.

Reiter blinked. The crusader's wound was gone. As though it had never existed. "Did... what...?" He gathered himself. "It doesn't matter. You need to leave right now."

"Reiter," Bea said in a warning tone, but he shook his head and went on.

"I have a daughter; I have a pregnant wife; and I have an inn to protect," he said. "There are three paladins—I hope only three!—in town, and they know you're in the area. Leave my inn in peace. Please."

Reiter expected an argument. He expected Anajinn to object. But she simply nodded and wearily strapped her chestplate back on. "I'm sorry they've troubled you. Most of their hearts used to be in the right place, but in the past few weeks, they have grown truly lost."

Her apprentice handed her a sheathed sword and her flail. The weapons hung naturally off her armor, and finally, Anajinn picked up her shield. "Be very wary of anyone who hails from Travincal. Something dramatic has happened there. They may be unstable."

"I know that, crusader," Reiter snapped. "One of them was a heartbeat away from taking my head off. They blame me for what *you* did! They hold me accountable for that other paladin's death."

Anajinn stopped moving. "Do they?"

"Yes!" Reiter leaned toward the woman, his face growing red with anger and embarrassment. "You came to my inn. Not anybody else's. Mine. They think that makes me guilty. They told me they thought I was hiding something."

"Where are they now?" Anajinn asked quietly.

"They're someone else's problem. It sounded like they wanted to search the rest of Caldeum's Rest." Reiter pulled back, satisfied at the look on her face. "So. You've caused me enough trouble. I want you to leave my inn. Now."

Anajinn and her apprentice exchanged unreadable glances, and then the crusader let the edge of her shield slide back onto the sand. She shook her head. "We can't leave."

"Good," Bea announced. "You two need to rest before going anywhere."

Reiter's mouth fell open. "Bea!"

She gave him a challenging stare. "We have plenty of room. We have no customers. We can keep them safe for a couple nights of sleep."

"The paladins!"

"What about them? They left," Bea said. "These two came in from the south. The desert, not the main road. Nobody saw them. We'll set up cots in the second storeroom and pile boxes of turnips and dried beef in front of the door. If the paladins return, they won't know there's a room there. You can even invite them to search. That's what we did when the bandits showed up last year. You thought it was a great idea then."

"There's a bigger problem," Anajinn said. Bea and Reiter both turned to look at her. "The paladins will return, and it won't matter whether they see us."

"What? Why?" Reiter asked.

"They already blame you." Anajinn's voice was cold. "They are not in their right minds. There is a very high chance that when their search of the town yields nothing, they will take out their anger on you. Or others. They are fueled by hatred, not divine purpose. You and your family are in danger, innkeeper."

"Because of you!"

"Yes," she said. "And I will not leave you and your town to their mercy. If you don't want me to protect your inn directly, my apprentice and I will set up camp in the desert, out of eyeshot. If we hear or sense—"

"Oh, don't be absurd. You'll be fine in one of our storerooms," Bea said. She cut off Reiter's splutters of rage with a sharp look. "It won't be trouble. Let me talk with my husband for a moment."

Reiter allowed her to lead him and Lilsa back inside, out of the crusader's earshot, before erupting in harsh whispers. "Are you out of your mind, Bea? Those paladins will kill us!"

Bea waited until he finished. "Lilsa, can you go up to your room for a minute?" she asked. The girl disappeared up the stairs. Bea rounded upon Reiter, her tone filled with contempt. "That's what you want your daughter to see? Her father sending two people—one of them wounded!—into the desert because he's scared of what three strangers will think?"

"That's completely unfair," Reiter said. "Anajinn has brought death on our heads, and no matter how much those men hate her, they wouldn't possibly kill us just because she stayed here six or seven years ago. Not unless they actually *did* find her here. Think of Lilsa. Think of the one on the way." Reiter laid a gentle hand on Bea's swelling stomach. "Our children need Anajinn to leave. Now. Be reasonable."

Bea looked down at his hand and then raised her gaze to meet Reiter's. "So you're willing to believe those paladins over Anajinn?"

"As I said, I'm sure Anajinn is just overreacting," Reiter said.

She removed his hand from her belly. "Those men threatened to kill you. She has been nothing but kind and honest." Her eyes narrowed. "I don't know why you dislike her so much, but I believe her. If the paladins might still harm us, we need her here. To protect our children. How's that for *reasonable*?" She turned but offered a final parting shot over her shoulder. "Whatever your father's faults, he was not a coward. He would be ashamed of you right now." She stepped outside to speak with the other women.

Reiter felt sick. *She doesn't understand. She'll get us all killed.* He could hear armor rattling outside; the crusader was preparing to enter. He fled to the common room. He didn't want to see her. He needed to think.

My father would be ashamed? Reiter frowned. His father certainly once had a fondness for charity, which Reiter had never shared, but above all he was a practical man. A reasonable man.

Though Reiter had to admit Bea was correct about one thing: the paladins might come back. He shivered.

Maybe, just maybe, Anajinn and her apprentice could stand against them. He had seen what she had done to that other paladin all those years ago. Reiter hadn't understood it, but he'd seen it.

But she had been healthy that day, he reminded himself. Rested. Confident. Today was different. She was near death only minutes earlier. No matter how powerful her apprentice was or how effectively they fought together...

She can't beat them, Reiter decided. All it would take was one surviving paladin, and his family would suffer the consequences.

Inform us without hesitation, the paladin Cennis had told him.

Reiter stood up. That was the way out, he realized with a rush of hope. The paladins might be unreasonable until they found Anajinn, but once they did, they would undoubtedly calm down. And if Reiter was the one who led them to her, they'd know he was sincere about not wanting to help her. They'd probably even praise him for his forthrightness.

But Anajinn... she and her apprentice would die. *Better them than my family*, he told himself firmly. He quietly slipped out of the inn.

Caldeum's Rest was not a large place. Reiter was confident he could find them. He strode west. *Inform us without hesitation*. His calm strides quickened. Then he began to jog.

Soon, he was running.

The blacksmith didn't slow his stroke on the anvil. "I understand, good sir." Sparks flew each time his hammer landed. "If a woman in strange armor enters—"

"If *any* woman enters," Cennis snapped. "The heretic may try to disguise herself. She would seek to trick you and lead you into sin."

"Yes, good sir," the blacksmith said. "If any woman enters, I should come find you or one of your brothers." He picked up the thin slab of red-hot metal with tongs and examined it closely. With a grunt, he laid it back on the anvil and began hammering the edges again.

"Was there anything else you needed, good sir?"

Cennis's fingers twitched. "Look at me when I'm talking to you, blacksmith," he said softly.

"Of course," the blacksmith said. He gave the paladin a cursory glance and went back to work. "Whatever you say, good sir."

There wasn't an ounce of mocking in the man's voice, but Cennis felt anger bubbling up anyway. He stepped closer to the blacksmith. "Am I distracting you? Am I keeping you from your important work?"

"No, good sir, I'm listening," he said. He met Cennis's eyes again and blinked, seeing something dangerous there for the first time. With a heavy sigh, he tossed the steel haphazardly into the nearest quenching barrel. Steam rose with an angry hiss. "I apologize. What else do you need to know, good sir?"

"What were you making?" the paladin asked lightly.

"A barrel scraper," he said. "The innkeeper down the road needs one."

"The owner of the Oasis Inn?"

"That's him."

Cennis nodded calmly. "I understand." He truly did. He understood more than this fool would ever suspect. *This entire town is close-knit. They live in sin together. They deserved punishment together.*

A wonderful idea occurred to him. He glanced around; his fellow paladins were elsewhere, interrogating other people. Good. "And if you had already seen the heretic, you would tell me, right?"

"Of course, good sir," the blacksmith said.

"I don't believe you."

The blacksmith frowned. Cennis casually raised his right hand, as though inspecting his gauntlet. Wiggling his fingers, he leaned over the anvil. The blacksmith took an instinctive step back. *Afraid of a servant of the faith? What are you hiding?*

"I want you to know how serious I am," Cennis said. He clenched his fist, and the Light filled him. A glowing shape appeared between the two men. "I'm sure you make fine barrel scrapers. What do you know about hammers?"

The blacksmith stumbled backward. Even his sinful eyes could not mistake the hammer of pure Light suspended in midair. Oddly, the man's gaze darted around the room. Cennis

followed his look but saw nothing of interest. Maybe the shadows seemed a bit strange. Growing and shifting. Cennis remembered when a blessed hammer of Light would banish all shadows. That felt like a long time ago. A lifetime ago. When he was a boy.

Cennis held a hand to his forehead and frowned. His head hurt. The hammer wavered and vanished. Thinking about his childhood brought pain and interrupted his concentration. He grimaced and shook away the notion. A lifetime ago. Not relevant now. The hammer reappeared.

"Good sir." The blacksmith's voice trembled. "I—"

Cennis lightly swung the hammer. The anvil exploded away from him. The blacksmith clutched his middle and fell, screaming, a piece of metal lodged in his guts.

"I'm sorry, *good sir*," Cennis said. "You were saying?" The look on the other man's face was delicious. Total helplessness. Total fear. Cennis held the glowing hammer mere inches from the blacksmith. "Why don't you tell me what you really know about the heretic?"

The blacksmith begged. He wept. He swore he knew nothing. He cried out for Akarat's mercy. *A little late for that*. What sort of lost creature would continue to lie? What had he seen with his eyes that he refused to mention? Cennis hesitated. Perhaps stronger measures were needed. He reached out, just a bit, toward the blacksmith's face, and...

The other man's cries went silent. His eyes, wide open, reflected the hammer's Light in an interesting way. In a pure way. Unblemished by iris or pupil.

Then red crept in, ruining the perfectly white orbs, pooling beneath the man's eyelids. Cennis watched, fascinated. Twin pops, unexpectedly loud, sent crimson flowing down his cheeks, joined by tiny streams of white fluid. Still, the man didn't scream. His tongue was paralyzed by sheer terror.

Cennis abruptly realized what he had done. This man would likely be unable to answer questions for hours, if not days, he chided himself. *A waste.* Shaking his head, the paladin reached out with the Light and removed the blacksmith's tongue with a quick tug. He didn't even need to use his hands. The pink flesh flopped onto the sandy floor, and finally, the blacksmith screamed, a tortured, wordless sound. Cennis let him. This was a fine idea. The crusader was in the area; he was certain of it. But what sort of shelter could she find if the entire town was filled only with the blind and the mute? It was no less than they deserved for harboring a heretic years earlier. Yes, he decided, he would go door to door—

"Akarat save us." A breathless whisper at the smithy's entrance. Cennis turned calmly. The innkeeper. *That* innkeeper. He stared at the blacksmith, who continued to wail.

"Akarat cannot save you," Cennis told the innkeeper. "Nobody can."

"I..." The innkeeper's eyes jerked between Cennis and what remained of the blacksmith. "I came to tell you... as you commanded... without hesitation..."

"Oh, I doubt that," Cennis said sadly. He hooked his finger, and a shimmering loop of Light encircled the innkeeper's throat. The paladin cinched it tight, very tight. The innkeeper began to choke. "The woman returned, didn't she? And you waited to tell me. I know your

kind. You waited." He hooked his finger again, and again. More loops of Light cinched tightly, pinning the innkeeper's wrists together, pinning his elbows together. The gasping turned into whispered screams.

Cennis stepped outside, tugging the innkeeper along. "Brothers!" he called out. "Brothers, the sinner is here!" After a moment's thought, he raised his hands again and showered sparks across the smithy's roof. Smoke rose instantly, tiny flames joining together into large sheets of fire. He nodded with satisfaction. His fellow paladins sometimes felt squeamish about treating evil as... decisively... as Cennis preferred, so he would ease their minds of the knowledge. Fire was wonderful for cleaning up loose ends.

The innkeeper was forcing words through his constricted throat. "Family... mercy..."

"Hush now," Cennis said.

"Honey, don't touch the nice lady's shield," Bea said gently, lifting Lilsa into her arms. Patting her daughter on the back, Bea frowned down at Anajinn. "You're not planning to sleep in that armor, are you?"

The crusader raised her head off the bed and smiled. "Looks silly, doesn't it?" With a deep sigh, she lay back. Her apprentice sat on a stool at the foot of the bed, pouring tea into three cups. Anajinn shifted her weight, and the armor softly clinked together.

It did look silly. Bea suppressed a grin. "I'm pretty sure you'll sleep better if you take it off," she said. Lilsa giggled into her ear. "See? My daughter agrees."

"She's probably right," Anajinn said. Her smile looked sincere, but fatigue pinched her eyes. Bea suspected this wasn't the first time she had been close to death recently. "But if those gentlemen return, I may need to act quickly."

Bea went quiet. Lilsa was staring in fascination at the way the lamplight was playing off the armor. "I cannot believe that they would actually mean us harm. Serious harm." But the paladins' words to Reiter had carried through the inn's walls. She had heard their anger. Could she really be sure what they were capable of? "I grew up here. I've seen all sorts of people come and go. Paladins weren't rare. They always seemed so nice when I was a child. In recent years, they seem..." She hesitated. "Do you know what's happened? Why they're so troubled?"

The apprentice gave Anajinn a questioning look. Anajinn was silent for a moment. "Their darkness has come to the surface. That darkness is what drives my crusade," she said.

"You hate paladins?" Bea said.

"Not at all," Anajinn said. "Our faiths share the same roots. I see them as brothers and sisters. Lost, but family." The apprentice handed her a cup of tea. She sipped it before continuing. "Centuries ago, a very wise man noticed that the core of the Zakarum faith had been corrupted. Infected. It was subtle, but elements of evil had crept deep into our foundations. Judging by the news out of Travincal, that evil is no longer creeping but has

been leaping and shouting openly for the past few years. It has literally become the home of Hatred. Whoever destroyed that place did the world a favor."

Travincal had been destroyed? Bea shifted uncomfortably on her feet. She hadn't heard that news, had heard only that something terrible had happened there.

"There are good people among their order. But those inclined toward evil have overwhelmed the righteous, I fear," Anajinn said. "The destruction of their haven might unbalance the rest."

Bea accepted a cup of tea from the apprentice. Her hand trembled only a little. "And your crusade is to eradicate them?"

Anajinn shook her head. "My crusade is to eradicate the evil that corrupts them. To search for something that might cleanse the faith. I thought it was out in that desert a few days ago..." A tired smile appeared. "We cleansed something, to be sure. It wasn't the faith."

"My bowels, maybe," the apprentice mumbled.

Bea was shocked at the language, but the crusader simply laughed. "Seeing a few demons leap from the shadows is an excellent way to cleanse those. We took care of the stronghold, and that's never a waste of time. I'm not sorry we made the trip." Anajinn frowned as though something unpleasant had just occurred to her. "Where is your husband, Bea?"

"Probably sulking upstairs in his study," Bea said in a mischievous whisper. "He does that when he doesn't get his way."

Anajinn did not smile back. "I haven't heard any footsteps upstairs. Or anywhere else in this inn. Can you find him, please?"

"I suppose so," Bea said. Still holding Lilsa, she stepped out of the small room. "Reiter?" she called.

Lilsa's voice joined hers. "Faaaaaather!"

There was no answer. Strange. Bea wandered into the common room and called Reiter's name again. Silence. "Where do you think your father is?" she quietly asked Lilsa. The girl shrugged her shoulders. Bea walked back to the crusader's room. "I guess he left for a moment. Anajinn, why—"

The crusader was already on her feet, gripping her shield and flail. Her apprentice shucked a short sword out of its sheath.

"I fear," Anajinn said, "your husband has made a terrible mistake."

IV

The cord of Light—or whatever it was—around his neck didn't ease a hair when the paladins forced him to stop. Reiter could hear his skin beginning to sizzle from its heat. His hands scrabbled in vain behind his back, bound by the wrists.

His eyes... his eyes. *Akarat, my eyes!* Darkness everywhere. The paladin had crooked a finger at him, and pain had blazed through his head and destroyed his vision.

Reiter was blind. Utterly blind.

"It is good that you came to us with your sin as quickly as you did," the lead paladin whispered in his ear. "We will send you to the judgment of Zakarum without too much pain. At least you have given me extra practice. Your eyes will remain in your head." A hand shoved Reiter to his knees. He wheezed helplessly, only able to suck a tiny thread of air down his throat.

He could hear the three paladins spreading out in the street. Reiter desperately tried to choke out some final plea—*spare my family; take the crusader, but spare my family*—but all that escaped from his mouth were incoherent rasps. He fell onto his side. He strained his ears, hoping to hear a door or a window open anywhere down the street. No, he realized. There would be no help. Not from anyone else in this town. It wouldn't be reasonable to step into this fight.

The lead paladin called out in a clear, strong voice. "*Heretic!*" After a moment, he tried again. "Heretic! The one named Anajinn! I am Master Cennis. In the name of the Zakarum faith that you choose to defile, surrender immediately for judgment."

Heavy footsteps sounded from the inn's wooden balcony. Reiter could see nothing but darkness, but he could clearly hear her. She was stepping out of the door without hesitation.

"Innkeeper, know this," Anajinn said. "I will do what I can to ensure your family's safety." Her voice was filled with pity and sadness, not with the anger and recrimination he expected.

"A waste of time," the lead paladin spat. "Anyone who harbors a heretic—anyone—must face the same fate as the heretic," he added with a leering grin.

Doors and windows slammed shut up and down the road. Other than that, there was no sound anywhere else in Caldeum's Rest. The whole town held its breath.

Anajinn eyed the three paladins. The one in the middle, the one standing above Reiter, seemed to be in charge. The other two stood ready, but she thought she could see hesitation in their eyes. It was to them that she spoke.

"Your leader is speaking of murdering an innkeeper, his wife, and a young girl. And the wife is bearing another child," she said. Contempt dripped from every word. "*Master Cennis* would kill them without a moment of regret. Have you truly fallen so far? Have you *truly* sunk to his level of evil?"

That sparked another torrent from Cennis, angry words about justice and righteousness and heresy, but she didn't listen. She watched the other two. They stole glances at each other.

Indecision.

Guilt.

They knew who Cennis was. They knew what kind of monster he had become. They almost certainly never admitted it to each other or to themselves, but they knew. They knew, deep within their bones, that what was about to happen was *wrong*.

But as she watched, she saw the expression of one harden. The second soon followed. Only hatred remained in their eyes. Anajinn bowed her head. They did not like the idea; they did not relish the idea; but they would obey. They might regret their actions; perhaps this would even be the moment that could one day lead to their redemption. But the price of that redemption would be the lives of innocents.

The paladin continued to rant. Anajinn took in a very, very deep breath, allowing the air and the Light to fill her completely. It did not erase her fatigue. Exhaustion seemed embroidered across every inch of her body.

But the Light gave her strength. As it always did. As it always would, until she reached the end of her journey.

"So be it," she said, and charged.

And the Light whirled around her.

A terrible and wonderful tone rang out. Bea flinched. Lilsa listened in silence, mouth open with awe. New noises arose, the sound of unearthly fury. Of battle.

"Reiter, oh no, Reiter," Bea breathed.

The apprentice led them behind the buildings along the town's single street, taking them away from the confrontation. Her short sword was in her right hand, point up. Her left hand had a firm grip on Bea's. "Keep moving," she whispered. Other residents of the town were fleeing into the desert, in ones and twos and small groups. They looked prepared to take their chances in the barren wilds rather than stay a moment longer.

"My husband, is he...?"

She shook her head. "Anajinn will not let him die as long as she lives." Another deep, echoing noise cascaded over the buildings. "And she still lives."

A tremendous crash cut off any further comment. Something—*someone*—smashed through the back wall of the inn, tumbling through the sand. Bea's breath caught in her throat. Someone had been thrown *through* the entire inn. Pieces of the roof began to collapse. It looked as if the building would soon follow. The figure skidding to a stop in the desert wasn't Reiter, but who—

"Into the alley," the apprentice said. "Quietly, now."

Bea allowed herself to be herded into the tight alley between two adobe walls. "Who was that? Are they dead?"

The apprentice stole a glance back around the corner. "It was one of the paladins, and no, he's not." And reluctantly, she added, "He's heading around the side. Trying to sneak around the fight, to strike Anajinn from behind." She looked down at her sword and then at Bea.

"Do you need to help her?" Bea asked.

The apprentice hesitated. "She told me not to leave you."

"We will stay out of harm's way," Bea said. Still the apprentice didn't move. "Will these men stop at killing your master? At killing my husband?"

"No," the apprentice said softly.

"Then go," Bea said.

Anajinn raised her shield and let the hammer glance off. The impact shook her to her bones. She spared a quick look through the hole in the inn. The paladin she had blasted away was beginning to rise to his feet. Not dead. She was more fatigued than she had realized. The blow should have put him down for good.

The other two paladins advanced relentlessly. The lead paladin, the one called Cennis, spun hammers of the Light at her again and again, while the other sent a continuous barrage of shimmering, bright bolts. She kept her shield high, intercepting each attack. When the second paladin rushed to within three paces, she lowered her shoulder, braced against her shield, and *pushed*.

A solid wall of power, of Light, met the charging paladin. Red mist expanded outward. When the Light faded, crimson hung in the air. Bones, only bones, cracked and fractured and dry, fell to the sand. Even the man's clothes had been scattered like dust.

Anajinn did not exult in his death. She simply turned toward Cennis and swung her flail. With a startled, angry cry, he leaped backward, flinging another hammer, which caught her across the right shoulder. Agony erupted, but she coldly ignored it.

The paladin hissed and squinted at what remained of his brother. "You filthy, interfering *murderer*. Spawn of evil."

"It'll be more pleasant for everyone if you stop talking," Anajinn said.

She suddenly dropped into a crouch and *pushed* against her shield again, but the paladin reacted faster than his brother had. He raised his arms and parted her blast with one of his own. His counterattack rattled her shield, but she was already moving forward, flail whirling over her head. He called another hammer to meet her weapon, but the crusader let her shield lead the way, focusing the Light in front of her as she stormed through his attack and bowled him over into the sand. Then she lashed out with her flail, and pure, bright power leapt forth like lightning.

The paladin snarled and lifted his hands. *Caught* the lightning. Sent it back at her.

She didn't even bother dodging. She let the Light skip across her head and armor without flinching.

"Devil." The paladin cursed. "Demon. Damned."

"The Light does not harm the righteous," Anajinn said, a cold smile touching her lips. "Can you say the same for the power you use?"

Enraged, he scrambled to his feet and flung himself toward her. Her flail and his hammer collided. The shock of the impact shattered glass windows along the town's main road.

Anajinn stepped forward, ignoring her growing tiredness and—

—*pain*—

—she was in the dirt, face down. Gasping. Her shield was no longer in her grip. Rolling onto her back, she swung her weapon, sensing rather than seeing the follow-up blow coming. The spiked weight of her flail landed solidly on Cennis's right leg, in the gap between his armor. His hammer vanished only inches above her head, and he stumbled backward, bleeding and screaming.

Who had blindsided her? And with what? She tried to push herself to her feet, but her arms and legs trembled and gave way, and she flopped back into the sand. *This is bad*, she thought. Scorch marks crawled up her left side, and every breath scraped her throat. Burned on the inside. Burned *from* the inside. She swore she could actually feel her guts turning crispy.

Well, she thought. *That's new*.

Gritting her teeth, she strained to stand upright, ignoring the pain, the fatigue, the weakness. "You chose this life," she reminded herself out loud. Her voice sounded guttural to her own ears. "Embrace it. Curse it. Just don't regret it." Her master had told her that, long ago. *Keep moving*. She hefted her shield again and squinted down the road.

Bright lights clashed and sparked about a hundred paces away. The wounded paladin, Cennis, was gesturing wildly. The other surviving paladin, the one Anajinn had hurled through the building, was there. *So that's who blindsided me.* He was flinging power at someone else now, someone without armor and carrying a sword...

"Oh, you fool girl," Anajinn muttered. Her apprentice had a tendency to disobey orders. *Just like I did,* she thought wryly. But the teenager wasn't stupid. Inexperienced, but not stupid. If she hadn't joined the fight, Anajinn likely would be dead. The second paladin would have finished her off.

Anajinn saw the innkeeper, lying helplessly on the ground, bound by the paladin's power, and very near to suffocating, judging by the purple hue of his face. She knelt down and dispelled the bindings with a casual gesture.

Deep, hoarse gasps erupted from Reiter's throat, and he opened his eyes.

Anajinn flinched. His eyes had gone pure white. Blinded. Smoke rose from much farther down the street—the smithy, she guessed, shaking her head. She could only imagine what Cennis had wrought there. It was a problem for later.

"You're fine," Anajinn told Reiter. *I wish I could say the same for myself.* "If you can, stand up. You need to get out of the street." She looked up. Her apprentice was still holding her ground. Cennis was injured, and the other paladin was probably rattled from his trip through a building. They both fought unsteadily. Her apprentice was nearly dancing circles around them.

A smile tweaked Anajinn's lips. "Hurry, please." The innkeeper tried to speak, but the words emerged as frightened huffs. *I'm sorry*, he was trying to say. Anajinn patted him on the shoulder. She could see his guilt written on his face, even in his blank eyes. "They will not be kind if they find you. Hide well," she said. Finally, he was able to push himself into a lurching, unbalanced run, his hands splayed out before him.

"Hide well," Anajinn whispered. She had not told him to flee the town. She knew as well as any that most sane people wouldn't dare try to walk across the Kehjistani desert without a fully supplied caravan. A blind man, a *newly* blind man at that, wouldn't have a chance.

To keep Reiter and the rest of the town safe, the paladins had to die.

She could see Cennis limping as he bore down on the apprentice. The girl was darting in and out of the paladins' range. She had no armor, and she used her nimbleness to her advantage, scoring a small wound on the second paladin's arm while throwing up a wall of power to stop his attack.

Anajinn staggered into the fray, smiling grimly. What kind of master would she be if she let her apprentice have all the fun?

"This way, Lilsa," Bea said. It was an effort to keep her voice calm, but she managed. They slid along the side wall of the trade house, edging toward the road. "Just a little farther."

Lilsa clung to her hand and looked scared, but she wasn't crying or shouting. "Is the crusader going to beat the bad men?"

"Absolutely," she said with more confidence than she felt. "Let's go find your father." She had seen Reiter stumbling toward the other side of the street. Fear boiled in the pit of her stomach; he had looked badly hurt and incoherent.

A thundering roar overwhelmed everything, and a long, drawn-out crash, filled with the sounds of snapping wood slats and crumbling walls. Bea froze until the din subsided, leaving only the fury of battle in the air.

She peeked around the corner, and her breath caught in her throat.

The Oasis Inn, her home, as well as the new apothecary next door, lay in ruins. A massive blow had taken them both off their foundations. Bea whispered a prayer. She thought she had seen the doctor and his wife flee the apothecary earlier. She hoped they had.

Across the street, through an alley, Bea saw someone stumbling around, feeling his way along the walls. *Reiter*. To get to him, Bea and Lilsa would need to cross the street in full view of the combatants.

They're going to wreck Caldeum's Rest if this goes on for much longer, Bea told herself. It seemed hiding behind a building would be no protection at all, judging by the power they were slinging around. Going was likely not much more dangerous than staying put.

She took a deep breath and scooped Lilsa into her arms. "Ready to go meet your father?" she asked. Lilsa nodded.

"Then let's go," she said, sprinting into the road.

Snarling, Cennis continued to throw hammer after hammer at the two heretics. Again and again, the armored one blocked his blows and the younger one danced out of the way.

The girl suddenly stepped in and slashed. Her sword clanged off the plate on his forearm. Only by sheer luck did she miss taking his arm off at his exposed elbow. He let her jump back out of his range and formed another hammer. Behind her, this time.

The apprentice spun and raised her hands to ward off the attack, but Cennis let it fizzle and threw another hammer straight from his chest. She twisted her sword, and the hammer struck steel instead of flesh, but the impact launched her dozens of paces back. With a smile, Cennis turned his full attention on the crusader. Anajinn. She still fought hard, staring at both paladins with cold determination, but the power of her blows was weakening. As it should. As all enemies of the Hand of Zakarum inevitably did when confronted by righteousness. She swung her flail once, twice, three times, missing by a couple paces.

"Time to die," he said.

"As you say," she replied. And suddenly there were two crusaders... three... four...
charging...

With a yell, Cennis lashed out wildly as two misty, translucent figures converged on him, each swinging a flail that whistled through the air. His attacks found both, and they disappeared like smoke in a breeze.

The other paladin wasn't so quick. Two more Anajinns swung their flails, and pieces of the man went in different directions. The mist vanished, and there was just one Anajinn again. She leaned on her shield, exhausted but flashing Cennis a small, savage grin.

"Tell me, paladin," she said. "Did your elders have to drag you into the clutches of evil, or did you go willingly?"

Cennis stared at her with wild eyes. The apprentice was returning to the fight, slowly, in pain, but surely. For a few moments, he simply stood. Then he turned and fled, limping, bleeding.

He heard Anajinn groan. "Don't make me chase you," she called. He bared his teeth, fury and fear battling within his mind. *Got to get away. Got to kill her. Got to... got to...*

Down the street, a shape moved into an alley. Cennis followed it.

Anajinn waited for the apprentice to catch up. "That could have gone worse," the crusader remarked with a pained smile.

The apprentice was out of breath. "The paladin... innkeeper's wife..."

Anajinn's smile disappeared. "Where?" The apprentice pointed toward an alley up ahead.

Cennis vanished into it.

Somehow, they found the strength to run after him.

"Reiter," Bea said, her hands clasped on his cheeks. "What did they do to you?"

His white eyes rolled around in his head. "I can't see," he said. His voice was strained. He gripped her wrists as though terrified she would let him go. "He took... I can't see. Are you hurt? Lilsa? Is she here?"

"I'm here," Lilsa said. The child's eyes were wide and shiny with tears.

Reiter crouched down, not quite looking in the right direction, reaching blindly. "Lilsa?"

Finally his hands found her, and he pulled her close. He rocked back and forth, eyes turned upward as though trying to meet Bea's gaze. "I'm sorry," he croaked. "I'm so sorry."

"Doesn't matter now," Bea said as firmly as she could. "I think..." She listened for a moment.

The sounds of battle had ceased. "I think the fight is over."

"Who won?" Reiter whispered.

Bea opened her mouth to say, *I don't know*, but another voice cut her off. "The Hand of Zakarum always wins, filth."

Lilsa screamed.

The scream was unmistakable. A child. "Go around the side," Anajinn said softly.

The apprentice shook her head. "I'm not leaving you."

"And I'm not asking. Go around the side." The crusader's voice was no longer soft. The apprentice reluctantly nodded and limped around the building, a cooper's shop, by the looks of it.

Anajinn hoped the innkeeper and his family had already fled the area. But she never relied on hope. "Paladin!" Anajinn called out. "Are you truly planning to bring innocents into our fight?"

A shadow appeared at the edge of the alley. "In this town, there are no innocents," a furious voice said. "Not when it shelters the likes of you."

Anajinn set her jaw and raised her shield. She suspected appealing to his mercy would be less than useless. Stoking his pride, however...

"Do you hide in the darkness, then?" She needed to draw him out, needed to give her apprentice a chance to flank him. "Is that how the *servants of the faith* fight?"

With a feral snarl, he stepped out. Anajinn's heart sank. His left arm was around Bea's throat. His right fist hovered an inch away from her ear. Worse, Lilsa was in Bea's arms. The girl clutched her mother's abdomen, staring at the man holding them both hostage.

Sparks flew from the paladin's right fist. Bea didn't flinch, even when the sparks found her flesh. *Good*, Anajinn thought. *Show him nothing. Show your daughter nothing.*

"How proud would the elders be to see you now?" Anajinn asked. "How proud would the congregation in the Travincal temples be to see a champion of their faith cowering behind a pregnant woman and a child?"

Cennis laughed, a desperate sound. "There is no congregation. Not anymore. Travincal... I don't believe I have any elders, either. But I will do the task they assigned me."

"And what task is that?"

"Heretics. There's always so many heretics. I know what you are." His half-mad laughter echoed through the street. "Few in my order do. But I know. You think we are corrupt. Damned. But you are the ones who left, crusader. You and your kind, you ran. You faced nothing. You scuttled away into the swamplands to hide. We stayed behind to deal with the problem."

"Is that what your elders told you? They lied."

It was as though he didn't hear her. His expression twisted from anger into horror in mere heartbeats. He was staring a thousand miles and twenty years away. "Why did you run? Why did you leave me?" Tears fell from his eyes. His voice seemed to turn childlike. "The things they did to me... the things they made me do... Why didn't you help? Did you know? Did you know what was waiting for me? They made me hate. They filled me with hate." His fist trembled but didn't move away from Bea's head.

"We knew enough," Anajinn said softly. "Evil had already claimed the foundation of Zakarum. We couldn't save it. Not on our own. So we looked for something that could."

"Did you find it?" That child's voice again. Hopeful.

"Not yet," Anajinn said.

"Then it was for nothing. All for nothing." Cennis seemed close to weeping for a moment. Then, the child vanished, and the paladin returned. His gaze hardened. "Put your weapon down, crusader. Put your shield down. Cast your armor aside. Or I will kill them." His arm tightened around Bea's throat. Her eyes met Anajinn's, silently pleading, not for her life but for Lilsa's.

Reiter crawled out of the alley, head swiveling, staring at nothing. "No," he cried. "My family. Mercy. Please. *Mercy!*"

"Do it, crusader!"

Anajinn could see her apprentice peeking around the corner of the cooper's building, behind Cennis. She could also see the apprentice shake her head slowly. Anajinn exhaled. Her apprentice could do nothing, not with the paladin in full armor and clutching hostages. Any attack strong enough to eliminate him would eliminate them all.

A sense of peace fell upon her. She let the shaft of her flail slip from her fingers. It tumbled to the ground.

"I want you to know something, Cennis." She firmly stuck her shield into the sand. It stood upright on its own. "I want you to have hope." Her gauntlets hit the sand next. Then her chestplate. The simple woven shirt she wore underneath was still stained with blood and sweat. "I did not find what I was looking for. Neither did my master, or her master before her." Her shoulder plates fell. Then her leg guards. "But despite that, I have no regrets. Someone will find what we need. The faith will be cleansed. And no matter what you do to me"—her boots she kicked off carelessly—"I have not yet reached the end of my journey. My crusade will continue."

Anajinn saw a child's hope flash across Cennis's face. The moment passed quickly. Only cold murder remained. The paladin extended his right arm, and a glowing hammer leaped toward her.

She kept her eyes open and smiled to the last.

Bea shut her eyes tight. A moment later, the sound died away. The man's arm slipped from her throat.

"Don't you dare move, woman," the paladin growled into her ear. She nodded, but he had already stepped away toward Anajinn.

Toward what remained of her, anyway. Bea held Lilsa close, keeping her from turning her head and seeing. Tears leapt to her eyes.

"Looks like the end of your journey to me," the paladin sneered. He kicked the crusader's chestplate. "Looks like your search is over."

"It's not."

Bea and the paladin turned together toward the voice. The apprentice stood with her sword in hand. With a roar, the paladin flung a hammer at her.

There was a tremendous crash of sound and fury, and a great, billowing cloud of fire flared where the girl was standing an instant ago. Of the crusader's apprentice, there was no sign.

For the briefest moment.

Light crashed down from above. The apprentice crashed down with it. The paladin saw it coming. And a childlike look of relief passed over his face.

And then it was over.

The apprentice knelt down next to her master and whispered something Bea couldn't hear.

But there was no mistaking the glints of light falling to the sand. Tears.

The teenager stood up. Picked up Anajinn's shield.

"Bea?" Reiter croaked. "Bea? Are you hurt?"

Bea ran over to him. "I'm fine. Lilsa's fine."

"Anajinn?" His voice trembled. "Is she—?"

"I'm here," the apprentice said. Bea looked at her with confusion.

Reiter cocked his head. "A-Anajinn? Is that you?"

"Yes," the apprentice said. She strapped on the last of the crusader's armor and stepped over to the blinded man. Carefully, she laid a hand on his forehead and opened Anajinn's book of laws. She softly began to recite a different passage. Reiter blinked repeatedly. His head swiveled back and forth. His eyes were no longer pure white. His restored pupils darted around. The apprentice sighed. "That is all I can do. Are you well?"

Reiter looked directly at Bea. "I can... It's not... It's blurry," he said, squinting. He looked at the girl. "Thank you, Anajinn." There was still uncertainty in his voice. Bea realized he could see the shape of her armor and not much else. "You sound different."

"I suppose so," she said.

V

"That is what the oath entails," Anajinn said. "It's about the dedication to the search. About the commitment to saving the faith, even if you are not the one who will save it."

Reiter listened in closely, hunched over, back sore. The crusader's words were muffled but audible from the library, even with the door closed. When the inn had been rebuilt nearly twenty years ago, he'd had to settle for thinner walls. He'd sold half the land to pay for it. Sacrifices were made. Still, the inn would never be restored to its former glory.

"I think I understand," Lilsa said. She had been overjoyed to meet Anajinn again for the first time since she was a little girl. For days, she had sat and talked with the crusader for hours on end. "It's not hope; it's purpose. That's why you pass down the original crusader's name. You're trying to live up to their sacrifice."

"That's one of the reasons," Anajinn said.

Reiter felt a pain in his stomach. He quietly sat down on the stairs, joints creaking. He didn't want them to know he was eavesdropping on them. His hands, long since gnarled with age, reflexively opened and closed. His heart pounded and sweat dripped from his brow.

"Is this something you're truly ready to commit to, Lilsa? My master once told me, if you choose this life, you can embrace it; you can curse it; but you must never regret it. Our kind rarely lives long, and the years we're lucky enough to experience are filled with hardships."

"Yes," Lilsa said firmly. Reiter squeezed his eyes shut, suppressing a groan. "I want to go with you on your search, to..." She paused. "Where would we go first?"

"Truth be told, I've changed my plans in recent days," Anajinn said. "I've heard that a star has fallen over New Tristram. Nightmares walk the land. I suspect I won't be the first crusader to arrive, but perhaps we'll manage to make ourselves useful."

Lilsa clapped her hands with excitement. The door to the library burst open, and Reiter quickly stood up and pretended to shuffle down the stairs, as though he were simply heading back to the common room. He tried to keep his dread from his expression. A thousand words fluttered through his thoughts, forming admonitions, warnings, refusals, ultimatums. Anything that would make Lilsa change her mind, make her see reason.

None of which, he knew, he would ever have the courage to say.

"Father," Lilsa said. "I have something important to tell you."

"I suppose you do," he said.