

“Intervention”

By Lauren Rivers

Sounds of commerce filled the marketplace as Ethan stood beside the cart where he and Rhodes sold their jewelry and other goods. He was usually there to back up his friend, who was the real salesman. Ethan observed his well-dressed friend make another deal. He sold a rather attractive green stoned necklace to a young feline girl who grinned as she tried on her new purchase.

“Thank you, we appreciate your business!” Rhodes was always good at talking to people. He dressed in a simple green vest and light colored shirt underneath. Brown shorts completed his outfit. He brushed the dark hair of his forward mane out of his face as he turned towards Ethan. “It’s been a good morning.”

“Yes, it has.” Ethan smiled but his attention was not so much on business but more on their female companions. It had been a little over two weeks since he had met Diana Lynwood and the Oracle Lydia. Both women had joined their party at about the same time. Ethan had seen Diana in the marketplace hiding among the stalls. When she had caught his eyes she silently begged for his help. Unable to turn her away he ushered her inside their cart and afterwards learned she was from the legendary city of Aldris. Rumored to have once been part of this world, it and its inhabitants had disappeared ages ago. The only way in or out was a portal that could only be found via the red jewel Diana wore on a choker around her neck.

When they had first met he had promised to help return her home, but events had kept them from staying there. Afterwards she had decided that she wanted to travel with them for a while. It would take some time to find the entrance to Aldris again and as Rhodes and Lydia had both predicted, he had grown attached to her. Until then she had joined their traveling group as a full member, as had Lydia.

“I suppose we should get going,” the female crocodile said. An Oracle, Lydia was dressed in a simple breezy gown with gold spirals on each arm. Most believed the Oracles could see the future though Lydia refuted such claims as being inaccurate. Nevertheless there was something about them that was more than what they appeared to be on the surface. “We’ve got to get the supplies while the boys hold down the fort.”

Rhodes handed her a small pouch of money. “Thank you kindly, ma’am.” In previous days they would need to procure their supplies after the market closed to the public or one of them would need to get provisions while the other minded the cart. With a larger group it was easier to get everything done.

“We won’t be gone long,” Diana said as she climbed out of the cart. She gave Ethan a kiss on the beak and smiled. As always, the blonde doberman looked lovely in her red two-piece outfit.

“We’ll pick up the supplies and drop them off with you two. Afterwards Diana and I might do some shopping of our own.” Lydia gestured to Diana to follow her. “Don’t worry, Ethan, I’ll take good care of her.”

Ethan gave the girls one more look before the two women disappeared among the countless carts and booths that filled the town’s marketplace. He watched them go and then let out a pleasant sigh. The hawk turned towards the cart and Diana’s personal belongings that sat in a neat pile in the corner. Her crystal tipped arrows rested underneath her bedroll, hidden from public view. She carried regular steel tipped arrows for walking around, as the former were an artifact from her homeland. Considered both rare and valuable she did not wish to attract attention to her Aldrisian heritage. The journal that she had carried since the day he met her sat on top. It was a log of her entire

life as far as he could tell. She always kept it beside her and added new entries as they traveled.

Often she would stare at the drawings of Aldris in the pages of her journal. Ethan had seen its beauty firsthand and understood why so many had wanted its treasures. To him at least, the most valuable thing Aldris had was not in its resources or its natural beauty, but in its inhabitants. His interest was in one member in particular.

He knew her home meant a great deal to her. Though he had not known her for long he could no longer imagine his life without her. One day she would want to return to Aldris, and then he would need to make a decision. "Where are we going?" he asked Rhodes.

"I suppose after we're done here we'll head to Arkanis and then on to Ixion," the gypsy vanner horse said.

"That's not what I meant." Ethan shook his head.

"You're not getting metaphysical on me, are you, Ethan?" he asked.

Ethan held up a hand. "I mean, where are we going with all this?" He gestured at the cart and their belongings.

Rhodes scratched the back of his neck. "Are you changing your mind about opening a shop with me some day?"

"No, nothing like that. I'm just wondering how long the girls are going to travel with us." He fiddled with some of the jewelry, trying to rearrange it on one of the velvet cloths they used to make them more attractive to interested customers.

"You're not getting tired of them already, are you?" Rhodes asked. "I thought you enjoyed having them along."

Ethan thought for a moment how to verbalize what he was feeling. He let out a deep breath. "I do. I just wonder what will happen when Diana decides to return home."

"Oh, so that's what this is about," Rhodes said in understanding. "Has she said anything about it to you?"

"No, not really, but I just don't know if I'll be able to handle the day that she tells me she's leaving for good." He returned his glance to her belongings.

Rhodes shook his head. "She's crazy about you, Ethan. I can tell. You don't become a traveling merchant without learning a little something about people. She came here because she was curious, but she stays here because she feels something for you. It's the same way you feel for her."

"What if she decides to go back to Aldris?" he asked.

Rhodes shook his head. "Why are you worrying about that? It's not like she's going to leave forever even if she does return. Besides, you could always go with her."

Ethan had never considered that possibility. He did not know whether or not he would be welcome there as an outsider, but if Diana asked him to come with her would he be able to leave everything behind?

"I couldn't leave you, Rhodes," Ethan said.

"Don't worry about me. If we parted ways I'd be fine. I've been traveling alone long before I met you, I could do it again." Rhodes turned his attention to an attractive young feline who he sold a rather plain silver bracelet. After he finished he returned his attention to the hawk. "Not that I don't appreciate the company." He walked to Ethan's side of the cart and put his arm around him. "Besides, there's no point in worrying about things that haven't happened yet."

"I suppose you're right," Ethan said.

"I know I am." He returned to his side of the cart. "For now, you and I just need to worry about selling this jewelry. We're going to need to make a good profit if we want to own that shop someday."

Ethan nodded and after making a handful of sales he climbed into the cart and pulled out some additional stock from the locked chest where they stored their goods. He picked out a few choice pieces and laid them out on the velvet fabric. He fidgeted with the pieces until they looked good enough for his eyes and nodded in approval.

"Rhodes, how come you didn't have a partner when I met you? It's a lot easier traveling the roads with someone else." Ethan leaned against the cart.

The gypsy vanner horse turned towards Ethan and shrugged. "I just never found the right one. I've had a few partners before you. Some of them just didn't work out. My first partner was only interested in making enough money so that he could travel so once he'd made enough he took his share and left. My second partner only lasted a month. The guy was drinking so much we barely made any money when the day was through. I decided it was best we end our relationship while I still had enough money to recover." He folded his arms and leaned against the cart. "A partnership is a lot like a marriage, Ethan. You need someone that you can trust. Your partner has to be someone you can rely on and who's interested in the good of the group, not just his own self-interest. You and I fit together pretty well. I'm not going to say I'd be happy if you left, but I don't want to stand in the way of your happiness."

Ethan smiled. "I'd miss you too. You know, you're going to make me want to hug you."

Rhodes laughed. "Later."

"Fair enough." Ethan held up his hands.

"So are we done talking about this?" Rhodes asked.

"Yes."

"Good."

"So would you really be okay if I left?" Ethan asked.

"Ethan!" Rhodes snorted and stomped a hoof in the dirt.

Ethan's neck feathers puffed out a bit in surprise. After a moment Rhodes shook his head and returned his attention to the marketplace. Ethan could not see Diana from here but he hoped the ladies were getting along well enough. The area was sufficiently large that one could spend quite a bit of time looking at all of the various wares for sale.

After selling a few pieces of jewelry Ethan climbed into the cart and picked up Diana's journal. He flipped through the pages until he found the entry where they had first met. She had drawn a picture of them together sitting by the fire that first night. He marveled at the detail she had captured picturing the moment in his mind as if he were still there.

He was not certain at the time but he somehow knew that in that exact moment he had fallen in love with her. He touched the picture and wondered if she could feel him when he wasn't by her side. Ethan closed the book and climbed back out before Rhodes started to wonder where he had gone.

Ethan gave the horse a smile, but his friend simply shook his head at him and smirked.

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Aromas of countless varieties wafted through the air as they entered the spice and food section of the marketplace. Diana found the smells a bit overwhelming to her sensitive canine nose. The scents made it hard to identify anything else in the area other than the many spice dealers that pleaded for them to come closer. Lydia led the way with the basket in paw and the money in a pouch at her belt. Diana stayed behind a few steps with her bow and arrow and a knife for close quarters fighting in case anything happened. Of course she was not expecting trouble, but in any marketplace of this size there was always the possibility of thieves.

The canine wrinkled her nose at the particularly pungent spice sample a badger placed in front of her. Lydia simply held up a hand in front of him.

"No, thanks, we don't want any of that. We'll take some salt and rosemary if you have any. An ounce of each."

"Certainly." The badger prepared the appropriate measure and handed her two bags. She placed both in their basket and moved on. Several stands down she purchased a reasonable supply of meat and bread. They would not last long, but it was always nice to have them when they stopped in a town.

Diana found herself drawn to a cart full of baskets of assorted fruits. She examined a particularly shiny red apple and inhaled the scent into her nose. Far gentler than the harsh spices she savored the aroma for a few moments. Fresh fruit was also a well-valued commodity and always nice to have between settlements. When the female crocodile joined her she picked one up herself and smelled it. "These are gorgeous," Diana said.

"You won't find a finer apple for miles." The owl that owned the cart smiled a uniquely avian smile as he held out a third. "Can I interest you in a few?"

"Half a dozen," Lydia said after a moment's consideration.

"A wise choice." He put the apples into her basket and bowed appreciatively with a flourish. Diana found it amusing how the merchants would do little things like that to encourage business, especially when it was herself and Lydia doing the shopping. Her companion dropped a pair of bronze coins into his hand and thanked him politely. She motioned for Diana to follow her and resumed her walk through the marketplace. They turned a corner and moved into the next section of the market.

Relieved to be away from the spice section Diana took a deep breath of the fresh air. Once the smell had faded she let out a pleasant sigh. One spice at a time could be enjoyable, but in the presence of so many it was difficult to tell what she smelled at any given moment.

The sheer variety of goods in the market reminded her of how much was different from her home of Aldris. She had grown up in the self-sufficient city where all that they had was what they made themselves. It was difficult for her to remember at times that this was not a city in a bottle but a living, breathing world that was constantly interacting with itself.

While there was much she was still learning about the places outside of Aldris a small smile crossed her muzzle as she noticed they had entered the area reserved for weapon merchants. While it was modest in size there was more than an adequate

selection to choose from. She stepped up to one of the carts to examine their wares more closely.

“Can I help you find something? I’m certain a fine lady such as yourself knows the value of a good weapon.” The weapon merchant was an elephant with short black hair. He gave a slight bow to Diana before gliding his hand over the closest swords. “We’ve got everything to keep a pair of ladies like yourself safe and well armed. While this region isn’t particularly dangerous I’d hate for anything to happen to someone simply because she didn’t have a good weapon.”

“I can handle myself,” Diana said, indicating her bow and arrows.

“I’m certain you can, but there are times when nothing will do but a good sword.” He hefted one in his hand. “Would you like to try it?”

Diana accepted the weapon and felt the weight of it in her paw. It was significantly heavier than an Aldrisian equivalent but the metal appeared strong and well tempered. She gave it a few gentle swings to test the weight and balance and found them reasonable. “Thank you, but I think I’ll stick with what I have.”

Lydia stepped up next to Diana. “Find anything interesting?”

“An Oracle.” The elephant raised his head in surprise. “I haven’t seen one of you in some time.”

“We move around quite a bit when we’re not in the temples.” She gave him a gentle bow. “The outfit usually gives it away.” She gestured to the breezy dress she wore which covered just enough to expose her shoulders, arms, and legs.

The elephant gestured to her arms. “You should consider getting yourself a pair of bracers. A lady like yourself could get into trouble without something to protect her arms.”

“These provide me all the protection I need.” She indicated the golden spirals that were a signature adornment of all of the Oracles.

“That won’t protect you from a sword,” the elephant pointed out.

“Perhaps not, but she will.” Lydia gestured to Diana with a bit of a smile.

“What’s your name? I’m Lydia and this is Diana.”

“Finn Allen. That over there is my partner, Daniel White.” He gestured to a dark haired rhino that stood beside their bows and a few pieces of light armor. “He doesn’t talk much, but he’s good to have by your side.” The rhino offered a nod to the two ladies but otherwise remained where he stood. “He and I just came back from out east with a brand new shipment of weapons.” The elephant took the sword back from Diana and returned it to its place on the display. “Are you two traveling by yourselves?”

Diana shook her head. “No, we’re traveling with a group. We’re picking up supplies for the next leg of our journey.”

“Ah, I see. Where are you headed?” he asked.

Lydia held up her hands in a noncommittal gesture. “That’s up to them. We’re really just along for the ride, she and I.”

“Well, I do hope you have a safe journey. Once the midday break is here Daniel and I will probably head over to the local tavern for something to drink. If you’ve got nothing better to do we’d be more than happy to save you a table.” He gave a gentle bow to the ladies.

“Thank you for the invitation. Perhaps we’ll see you there.” Lydia was about to walk away when a drunken fox tripped and pushed a large lion into a display of armor.

The female crocodile attempted to move out of the way when the lion's arm reached out and tripped her. She fell backwards and the next thing Diana knew she herself was on the ground.

The doberman stood up just as chaos broke loose. The lion growled and attacked the fox, shoving him into a pair of raccoons. Both of them fell to the ground in a heap. Diana wondered at that particular moment whether it had been a good idea by the townspeople to put the tavern so close to the weapons section of the marketplace. She reached down to help Lydia up, but one of the raccoons landed on top of her and pushed her to the ground. Diana struggled under his weight and felt a paw grab at her hair. The doberman kicked outwards at whatever she could and felt it make a solid hit. A groan sounding like it came from a male was followed by another punch being thrown.

They had to get out of there. Diana picked up Lydia and started to drag her away but the crocodile pulled in the opposite direction. "Not without the supplies!"

Diana hurried after her as the Oracle grabbed the basket and dodged another flying raccoon as he crashed into the armor display next to an annoyed looking Daniel. The rhino picked up the raccoon with both hands and glared at him. It seemed to take the fight out of him and he slinked away.

The two hurried to get some distance away from the fight. Once they were some distance away Diana grabbed Lydia with both paws. "Are you all right?"

"I think so." Lydia took stock of her clothes and their supplies before nodding. "Everything's here."

"That was foolish," Diana said.

"I wasn't going to leave our supplies there for anyone to take," Lydia said. She dusted herself off when she froze in shock.

"What?" the doberman asked.

Lydia pointed to her neck. "Diana, your choker. It's gone."

Diana had no sooner heard the words than her paw flew to her neck. When she felt nothing but fur her heart skipped a beat and she found it hard to breathe. Her chest tightened and she fell to her knees at the realization that her most personal possession and her only way home were gone. It had to be somewhere in the marketplace. It must have been knocked off during the drunken fight. She hurried back towards the scene and sniffed the air for her own scent.

The aroma was hard to pick out but she managed to narrow in on it. She continued sampling the air as her crocodile companion followed without comment. Diana followed the trail until she was halted by the cacophony of smells that was the spice section. As hard as she tried she was not able to pick up her scent among the countless aromas that filled the air. Her nose wrinkled as she turned away from it, defeated.

One thing was for certain; the choker with her red jewel had not simply fallen off during the fight. Someone had taken it and walked off with it in this direction. It was possible that they did not know what they had but even if that were the case she knew she had a limited window before it would be impossible to find. She fell to the ground once more and simply rested her head against Lydia's scaled hand for what seemed like forever.

“We’ll find it, I promise. I’ll drop our supplies off with the boys and then you and I will get started.” Lydia kissed her forehead and hurried off. Diana did not move the entire time she was gone.

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Midday break at the market was a welcome interruption to the routine. The marketplaces usually closed for an hour after the rest of the town had their midday break so the merchants could take some time to relax and take stock of their inventory, as well as enjoy a leisurely meal. Ethan looked at the displays they had set out and about half seemed to need some form of replenishment. Business had been good today it seemed. He credited their strong sales to Rhodes and his innate talent to talk ladies into buying jewelry. Not to mention his fine clothes and well kept appearance enticed more than a few folks to visit their cart.

Ethan was good at sales, but not as skilled as Rhodes. He managed about half of his equine friend’s rate of sales in comparison. The bird climbed up into the cart and sat down on one side. Rhodes wrapped up one last sale before the break and climbed in after his friend. He took a seat on the opposite side where Diana’s belongings rested.

Rhodes reached into the chest where they stored their weapons and food supplies and handed a wrapped package to Ethan. “Eat hearty, my avian friend. We’ve got a long day ahead of us still.”

Ethan took the prepared lunch in both hands and inhaled the aroma. Even through the paper it smelled delicious. Lydia had returned briefly to drop off their supplies but the crocodile did not stay for lunch, nor did she mention where Diana was at that particular moment. Ethan did not ask though he could not deny his curiosity. She simply said that they had decided to find lunch on their own and departed again. He assumed they probably wanted some girl time together. As much as he enjoyed the ladies and their company he could understand the need to be with others of your own gender. He opened the package and looked inside to find a sandwich and an apple. It would be more than sufficient for a midday meal. Lydia had been kind enough to purchase some ready-made food so the boys would not need to cook their meal and could remain with the cart.

Rhodes wasted no time biting into his sandwich. A pleasant moan escaped his muzzle after the first swallow. “Oh man, that’s delicious. I don’t know if this sandwich is just really good or if I’m just so used to whatever we can scrounge up that normal food tastes fantastic. Either way, I could get used to this.” The horse and hawk had often needed to purchase food that they could travel with since towns were days apart. Some of the options they were used to were barely palatable. Neither one was much of a cook though Rhodes managed better than Ethan. Lydia, however, seemed to enjoy preparing food and cooking for the group so she took it upon herself most days to make it her job. Her mastery of spices had elevated their average meal on the road to fine dining. It was a benefit that both men were certain to appreciate.

“It is good.” Ethan took his hunting knife and sliced up his apple into small pieces that he could pop into his beak. He savored the flavor on his tongue for a moment before swallowing. “So did you find it strange that the girls didn’t come back to have lunch with us?”

“They’ve been with us almost constantly for the last few days. I suppose they just needed a break,” Rhodes said.

“I guess so. They did say they wanted to do some personal shopping. Maybe they decided to get right to it.” Ethan popped another apple cube into his mouth and shrugged.

“It’s possible. I can certainly understand needing some time apart. As much as I enjoy your company, Ethan, living on the move as we do sometimes gets a little compressed. A little time apart is never a bad thing.” Rhodes chuckled to himself. “You just miss Diana. You’re in the phase of the relationship where any moment apart is an eternity. Trust me, it doesn’t last.” Ethan raised his head from his apple cubes. “I don’t mean the relationship. I just mean the part when you can’t keep your hands off each other.”

“I don’t think so, Rhodes. The way I feel about Diana, I’ve never felt this way about anyone before.” Ethan touched her journal with his hand. Though it was not the same as having her beside him the journal was the closest thing to a piece of her that he had when she was away from the cart. He gently slid his talons over it and smiled warmly as he flipped through the pages. Her handwriting was elegant and graceful. Every letter was formed with a formal style that indicated many years of fine practice. He knew that the doberman came from what in her society was an extremely well regarded family. Her mother Valerie was the matriarch of her people so it was not surprising that she would be trained in many different arts of Aldrisian high society.

It was all the more remarkable that a woman of Diana’s station should fall in love with a traveling merchant from another world. One quality of hers that he admired was her genuine curiosity. Her frequent trips outside of Aldris had been a symptom of her desire to know what the world was like outside of her massive city. While he could vouch for the fact that Aldris was a wonderful place with more than enough space for her population he could not deny that if he were in her place he would wonder what lay beyond their borders as well.

Perhaps it was the simple fact that people did not like being contained, even if it was for their own good. Many would rather take the risk than live their life in a gilded cage. For some, a life of freedom was worth any consequences even if the alternative was guaranteed safety and prosperity.

He knew that her life there was good. From what brief glimpse he had seen her mother was kind and a strong leader, though he could detect hints of Diana’s spirit in her. She had friends there, he knew. Ironically the same thing Aldris had removed itself from the world to obtain was the thing that had driven Diana to her curiosity. Safety. Aldris had no enemies there and nothing ever changed. By removing itself from the world the city had entered into a sort of stasis. Other than minor changes Aldris was the same place he had heard of in legends.

The mind craves new stimulus and so it was that Diana sought to enter the Crossing and see what was on the other side. She kept her trips short at first, but the more she saw the more she wanted to see. Then one day she found herself stranded like a sailor after a storm. That day, both of their lives had changed forever.

“Yeah, sure, Ethan. Trust me, that’s how I thought about more than a few mares,” he said.

“There’s someone out there for you, Rhodes, I’m sure of it. You’re too classy a guy to not find someone special sometime.” Ethan patted his friend on the shoulder and closed Diana’s journal.

“Are you becoming a matchmaker now?” he asked.

“Oh no. That’s one thing I don’t do,” Ethan said with his hands up. He ate another apple cube and smiled.

“How come you never talk about your past?” Rhodes asked.

The question threw Ethan off guard. He choked on his apple cube until he rapped his chest and the piece of fruit popped out onto the floor of the cart. “What?” He coughed a couple of times until he could breathe again and discarded the half eaten apple cube outside of the cart.

“You never talk about where you come from or what you did before you met me. I figure since you asked me about my old partners it’s only fair that I ask you.” Rhodes looked at his friend with innocent curiosity.

Ethan had always avoided talking about his past with Rhodes. Generally whenever the conversation headed in that direction he would find some excuse to be elsewhere or change the subject. It was the one thing he never really discussed. Now that it had been brought up he was certain it would not just go away especially if he failed to provide a satisfactory answer. His past was not something he was intentionally trying to hide but it was something he had worked hard to put behind him.

He held up a hand. “I talk about my past.”

“No, you don’t. You just talk about the recent past and a lot about the future, but not so much with the personal history.” Rhodes ate another few bites of his sandwich.

Ethan turned away. “I try not to think about it.”

“Bad memories?” he asked.

“Things that I just think are better left alone. I came from a vastly different world that I was glad to escape and I don’t ever want to go back there. Not if I can help it. I’m not the same person I was back then and I just want to make a clean break with my old self, if you can understand that.”

“Fair enough. I think a man’s past is his own business, but I thought we were the kind of partners that could talk about anything.” He picked up his apple and shined it against the green vest he wore with a smile. “I can’t say I blame you though. There are parts of my past I wouldn’t want anyone knowing about.”

Ethan sighed and looked at Diana’s journal again. It was not just a piece of her but a record of her past. He knew it began the first time she had stepped through the Crossing. Likely she had others in her home in Aldris, but Ethan could not help but think that while Diana did not feel a disconnection with her past he was not sure if he could say the same.

While he had no desire to hide anything from his companions he was not yet ready to share his personal history with them. Perhaps in time he would tell the others where he came from, but for now he just attempted to finish his lunch in silence and put the memories of his past behind him.

He wondered what Diana would think if she knew where he had come from before he had met any of them. Ethan hoped it was a question she would not ask, as he did not know what he would say when he finally needed to lay down the burden.

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Diana's footsteps were leaden as she walked. Since she had realized her choker was gone she felt as if a part of her had been stolen with it. The doberman stayed close to Lydia and protecting her and searching for her lost property was the only thing that was keeping her from falling apart completely at that moment. She remained a few steps behind her as they walked through the spice section and towards the tavern where Daniel and Finn had invited them to meet.

"I don't understand how this will aid our search," Diana said.

Lydia nodded. "You will. Not every lead is obvious. Since you can't tell where the thief went after they made off with your necklace then we need to get some information. I have a feeling that Daniel and Finn may have an idea of where we can start looking."

"Do you suspect them of having a part in it? The fight did break out right after we spoke to them." Diana's paws tensed into fists.

"No, I don't think so. I didn't sense any sort of connection like that between you two and anyway I think that was just a coincidence. Please promise me you aren't going to start a fight in here?" Lydia touched her arm with a pleading look. "I think they can help us but they won't do it if you think they're the ones that took your necklace. I need you to let me take the lead on this one."

Diana loosened her paws. "Proceed."

"Thank you. Daniel and Finn are many things but they are not dishonest men. I'm pretty good at sensing that sort of personality. It has an odd feel to it, like when you taste something that's just slightly bitter." Lydia led the way into the tavern. The occupants looked over in her direction for a moment. Oracles tended to attract attention more so than Diana it seemed.

The doberman suspected it was due to the misconception many had about the Oracles. Some believed them to have powers of precognition but the reality was that Lydia and those of her order were simply able to read people better than most. They kept their minds and hearts open and could sense something of the energy that passed between people as they moved through the world. Lydia had sensed her connection with Ethan before she had even realized it herself. To some, they desired to believe in the legend more than the reality. Of course, given her own background she could hardly hold it against them.

The tavern was well lit and it was not hard for Lydia to find the two men they were looking for. The elephant and the rhino sat on one side of the booth in the back of the establishment. Lydia held up a hand to get their attention, and the elephant gallantly gestured to the other side of the booth with a flourish. He raised a glass with his trunk and drank some of his beverage. From the smell of it Diana knew he had a glass of ale.

"Why don't you use your hands like everyone else around here?" Daniel asked.

"You're just jealous you don't have a nose that can do that. Besides, it keeps my hands free for other things." Finn gave him a smirk.

Lydia slid into the booth first. Diana joined her a moment later but said nothing. "Not in public, boys, save that stuff for later."

"Is that an offer?" Finn asked.

"I usually prefer to be wined and dined first. My friend and I need some help and we were hoping that you might be able to provide it." Lydia leaned forward on the table with both hands resting on its surface. The table was a beautiful oak wood with a smooth finish. A moment later a bar maid came over and took their orders. Diana requested water while Lydia had asked for tea.

"You really should try the ale, this place has the best for miles," Finn said.

Lydia held up a hand. "Another time. I need to ask you if you've heard of anyone in this town that would be interested in Aldrisian artifacts."

"Aldrisian? You know most people think that place is a fairy tale." Daniel took a large drink from his own mug and set it down with a clack. "You'd be better off looking for something a little more realistic."

Lydia placed her hand over the top of his mug. "I happen to know it's not a myth. Now I know that there are people in this world that have a significant interest in anything from Aldris. There are countless stories of people claiming to have found it or something from it not to mention the tales of the forgeries." She removed her hand and allowed him to drink another sip.

Daniel shrugged. "Yeah, there's a market for it. Personally I think it's just to give the treasure hunting crowd something to chase. If you want to waste your time looking for relics from Aldris that's your business."

"So you do know something." Lydia looked to Finn and met the elephants glance as he set his drink down with his trunk.

"We might," Finn admitted.

"Talk to me, Finn." Lydia leaned forward.

"Please," Diana said.

Finn leaned back and folded his arms as he regarded Diana. "At last she speaks. I could tell you what rumors we've heard but I don't think you're going to like it."

"Finn," Daniel gave him a hard stare.

"Daniel, let me handle this." The elephant waited until the rhino had leaned back before he continued. "There is one group in town that would be after anything like that. They don't just collect things from Aldris, they're after artifacts from all over. Anything rare and unique they want to get their hands on. They're called the White Order."

Diana visibly reacted. She tensed and her claws dug grooves into the surface of the wooden table.

Lydia leaned closer to her. "What is it?"

"I've heard of them. They existed even before Aldris left this world." She shook her head. Though she knew it could not be the same people the group obviously survived the intervening years.

Finn took another drink before he continued. "They're dangerous."

"You've encountered them?" Lydia asked.

"No, I've encountered their reputation. The White Order is known to be deadly efficient in what they do. If they turn their attention to you then you had best run in the other direction." The elephant gestured to the barmaid for a refill. "If you're thinking about going after them then I'd advise you to reconsider."

"We can't do that," Diana said. "They took something from me and I need to get it back."

Finn looked into her eyes and let out a deep breath. "All right, fine. I'll tell you where you can find them, but don't say I didn't warn you against it." The elephant thanked the barmaid for the fresh beverage and held it in both of his hands for a long moment before he continued. "They hang out in an eastern restaurant out towards the other side of town. Don't let the façade fool you. Their primary focus has nothing to do with oriental noodles and shrimp rolls."

"Thanks." Lydia said.

"From what I hear the woman that runs the place is a panda named Mei Xiang. She's pretty good with a sword."

"I appreciate the warning." The crocodile took one last sip of her tea as Diana stood.

"A word of advice, watch yourselves. If you're going in there you better be well armed."

Diana placed a paw on her knife. "We can handle ourselves." The doberman gave both men a gracious bow before she turned to walk out of the tavern. Lydia followed her as they walked down the street.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Lydia asked.

"I don't have a choice." The two women walked side by side with a force of purpose that seemed to cause passersby to step out of their way.

Lydia kept her eyes forward as she asked her next question. "Do you want to go back and get Ethan and Rhodes?"

"No, I don't want them to know about this." She paused in her steps. "Not yet, anyway."

"So what do you know about this White Order?" Lydia asked.

Diana looked away from the crocodile for a moment. "We'd only heard of them in myths and legends by the time I was born. From what the history books say they were one of the primary reasons Aldris was forced to leave the world, as you know it. Even back then they were known to be skilled warriors with an interest in anything that could bring them power and influence. We don't know where they came from but we do know that they sought our treasures and our weapons and had no interest in trade. They wanted to annihilate us."

"I've never heard of them before, how come they aren't in our history books?" she asked.

"Probably because they never did anything directly. Not on a significant scale. They had others do their work for them. They would influence events from the shadows and let armies and whole nations do what they desired. All they had to do was know who to manipulate and when," Diana said.

Lydia's long brown hair fell over her shoulders as she lowered her muzzle in contemplation. "The most dangerous adversary is the one you never see coming."

Diana reached behind her to remove her bow and carry it in her paw. "The White Order made a rather significant error when they took my choker. That is an error I intend to rectify." She bared her teeth in a silent growl as the two walked in the direction of the restaurant. They would be across town in a few minutes, and then Diana would unleash the fury of the archer upon them. She only wished that it would be an Aldrisian arrow that would pierce the heart of this Mei Xiang, but a steel tipped one would have to do.

* * *

No one met the glance of the clouded leopard as she approached the dark red wooden doors that greeted her. The doors were circular with each door being half of the circle. A round hole about a foot across was cut into each one at eye level. These doors were always left open to allow entry for the business that purported itself to be this building's primary function.

Lisa Hamilton passed through them into the oriental style garden that was the atrium of the restaurant. Intended to represent the Far East it was designed with plants and materials from Mei Xiang's distant homeland. Smooth stones lined a winding path through the garden until they met a small footbridge that spanned a koi pond where a pair of children sat and watched the fish swim about the water. She nodded to each though neither spoke to her. Their giggling stopped until she had walked past them and then resumed as if it had not been interrupted.

A young Siamese cat girl nodded to her as she approached. Her only duty was to care for the garden and make sure that everything in it was in perfect order. She dressed in a plain olive kimono that was well suited for working on the garden's plants. Flowers lined the walls interspersed with bushes that were all neatly trimmed. On either side of the garden was a bush in the shape of a female panda. Before the doors to the building proper were a pair of statues of pandas in armor. They cut an imposing figure and were angled as such that they were watching anyone that entered.

Lisa ignored their gaze knowing that they were intended only to entrance the locals with the culture and help present the image the White Order wanted to the locals. She entered the building and nodded to the woman at the reception desk. She was a meek looking female panda that demurely acknowledged her arrival and gestured up to the stairs behind her.

The room was hexagon shaped with the stairs wrapping around the far wall starting halfway up the lower right section. She stepped behind the rice paper folding wall behind the desk and began to ascend the stairs. At the top of the balcony she walked to the center hall where the passage led back to the rest of the building. Most of the regular patrons did not know what lay beyond and never saw anything other than the first floor.

She proceeded down the hallway past each rice paper door. All of them were unadorned so any attacker would not know which door was their intended target. She counted the doors as she remembered until she reached the third on the right. She stopped and waited a moment before she gently slid the door open with her claw. The room was silent and she almost thought it empty until her gaze settled upon the lone figure kneeling at the short table on the other end of the room.

Mei Xiang said nothing as the other woman entered though she was certain that the panda was aware of her presence. She entered with a silent step and approached with the choker in her paw. Lisa halted two feet behind the woman until she extended her paw behind her expectantly. The clouded leopard dropped the jewel into her hand, still attached to the strap that had held it around its owner's neck.

"Did you have any problems?" she asked.

"No, it was a clean lift. She did not even notice I had removed it until after I'd made my escape."

“Good.” Mei Xiang studied a Go board on the table for a moment longer before she brought the stone into her view. “Remarkable.” She rose from the table and turned around. “You did well.”

“Thank you,” Lisa said.

Mei Xiang nodded and examined it. “It’s somewhat difficult to believe that this unobtrusive stone is the only way to locate the portal that connects Aldris to our world.” She dangled it in front of her view before clasping her hand tight around it. “I suppose it’s a reminder that something’s size is not indicative of the power it wields.”

Lisa nodded, though she did not know what the panda expected her to say. She remained silent and kept her paws at her sides. She watched the female ursine walk to the corner of the room and pull a cloth rope. A bell rang and a moment later a servant in a kimono entered the room with a wooden box in his paws. The Siamese cat nodded to both women as he presented the box to his mistress. Mei Xiang placed the stone inside it and closed it with her right paw. She kept it there for a moment as he met her glance.

“You know what to do with this. Do not fail.” Mei Xiang gave him a nod and he left as quickly as he had arrived.

Lisa turned to her in confusion. “Why are you sending it away?”

“Although I am certain that you escaped without detection she will regardless trace the necklace to me before long. After today this building will be unusable by the White Order for some time. We must delay the pursuit long enough to ensure that the stone reaches the others.” Mei Xiang turned away from her and undid the buttons on her kimono. She hung it on a dummy nearby and exchanged her clothes with the one on the dummy. A pair of black functional pants and a red oriental top similar to the kimono she had worn completed the outfit. She slipped her feet paws into small black shoes and removed a sword from the wall.

The blade was long and thin with a tassel that dangled from the handle by a few inches. She gave the place a few test swings before giving a satisfied nod and placing the blade at her hip.

“You think she will find her way here?” she asked.

“I’m certain of it. The woman you took this from no doubt will prize it as much as I prize you. To remove it will only drive her to seek it all the more strongly.” She walked forward and kissed the clouded leopard on the muzzle. Mei held the kiss for a long moment until she pulled back to meet her eyes.

Lisa tilted her head to one side with a curious expression. “Where are you sending it?”

“The others will receive the stone and begin experimenting with it to find the information we need. Where is not important.” She turned away from the clouded leopard and walked to the back of the room. Mei Xiang reached a paw up to chest level and slid one of the rice paper wall panels aside to reveal a large metal door that she had not even known was there.

Mei Xiang turned the dial on the safe and pulled the handle to open the thick metal door. She entered the safe and beckoned for the feline to follow her. Curiosity overtook her and she entered after her mistress.

She found herself inside a mostly empty room save for four pedestals equidistant from the edges of the room arranged in a square. Each pedestal had an object on it. The

closest to her contained a scroll and a glowing bottle. The two beside Mei Xiang contained a crystal dagger and a glowing stone.

“Do you know what these objects are?” Mei Xiang asked.

“The dagger is Aldrisian,” Lisa said.

Mei Xiang gave her an impressed nod and picked it up. “It is. One of the White Order’s standing directives is to collect items of rare and unique interest to its members. One of the most recognizable features of the people of Aldris were crystal weapons made from the same sources that powered their cities and provided many of the technological wonders told of in legends and mythology. We were fortunate enough to acquire this piece when a local thief attempted to build a reputation by bragging about it in every tavern that he could find.”

“A mistake,” Lisa said.

“A fatal one. This is why the White Order is the invisible hand. Information is power and this weapon’s previous owner did not know enough to control the flow of information to his advantage. It was a foolish error and one he did not live to learn from.” She handed the weapon to Lisa. “I am placing it in your custody. I trust you’ll make good use of it.”

“Thank you,” she said.

Mei Xiang picked up the scroll and the glowing bottle and placed them both in a bag she had slung over her shoulder. “This last item was something I’ve been saving for a while. On a visit to one of the coastal cities I found this in a shipment of items from a foreign land. It was described simply as a red stone. I knew it was more than a simple trinket when it began to glow and purchased it before the merchant knew what he had. Once I had gotten it to the forest I discovered it had a unique property even the crystals of Aldris do not possess.” She held the glowing red stone in her paw and snapped her fingers. A flame burst into existence above her hand. It remained suspended in the air by a couple of inches seeming to hover above her paw. There was no obvious fuel source nor did it seem to burn Mei Xiang but it continued to flicker until she closed her paw around it and extinguished it.

The lack of smoke intrigued the clouded leopard as she watched Mei Xiang step closer. “Fire from thin air. I do not know what gives it this ability but it is renewable. As long as this crystal can see the sun it glows with an energy that can create fire that I can manipulate.”

“Fascinating.” Lisa turned to follow the panda as she exited the vault.

“I have learned that its power is limited. It can only generate flame for a certain amount of time before it needs to be recharged. Nevertheless, its usefulness should be obvious.”

Lisa nodded. “I can imagine.”

Mei Xiang stepped to the doorway of her office when she heard the sounds of combat. She turned towards the front where the clang of metal against metal rang out. “It appears I was correct.”

“What is your command?” Lisa asked.

“No doubt the young lady you removed that stone from would like to meet me. Why don’t you and I say hello?” she asked. Mei Xiang walked with purpose towards the front of the restaurant.

* * *

Pedestrians parted as the doberman slipped an arrow into her bow on her way through the picturesque garden. She ignored it as she entered the main room of the restaurant and walked up to the reception desk where the meek panda stood waiting. "Where is Mei Xiang?" she asked.

"Mei Xiang is up on the second floor. She is not accepting visitors at the moment. Now I must ask you to lower your weapons and exit the premises immediately before I must remove you by force." The panda looked at each of them.

Diana barked her question again. "Where is Mei Xiang?!" This time her forceful question drove the panda girl back a step. She regained her composure and approached the desk.

"This is your last warning. Do not force me to attack you." She reached under the counter and removed a dagger.

Before either woman could react, the panda jumped up onto the desk and kicked Lydia in the muzzle. She fell backwards and her knife clattered on the hardwood floor. She rolled to grab it while Diana fired an arrow at her but missed. She struck her with the back of her arm, but the panda kicked her in the stomach and sent her sliding along the smooth floor.

"She's fast," Diana said.

"Not to mention she's a kicker," Lydia said as she rubbed her jaw. The crocodile rolled over to one side and grabbed the knife. She jumped to her feet and attacked the panda girl again. She backed away as the reptile's blade cut her clothes at the chest but did not draw blood. Lydia swept her feet out from under her and as the panda girl jumped back to her feet she kicked her hard enough to send the girl crashing backwards into the rice paper wall behind her desk.

Diana was suddenly aware of being watched by a pair of individuals on the second floor. She drew another arrow and aimed it upwards at the female panda. "You have something of mine."

"I do. I'm afraid I'm going to need to keep it for a while longer. Sadly you'll be leaving empty handed as I cannot allow you to recover it." She drew her sword and stood in a battle stance. "Lisa, take the reptile." She looked down at the other panda girl. "Leave us."

The woman nodded and hurried off into the restaurant without further comment. Mei Xiang pointed her sword at Diana. "I must admit your arrival was fortunate timing. We've been looking for a necklace like yours for some time."

"I will get it back," Diana said.

"Perhaps eventually you might, but not today." Mei Xiang leapt onto the railing as Diana let another arrow fly. The arrow embedded itself in the wood where Mei Xiang had stood a moment before. The female panda landed in front of Diana with her sword between them as she slashed into the air with several swift strikes.

Diana retreated, having no other immediate option. She kicked the woman backwards and drew another arrow, firing a shot at Lisa who had taken the stairs down rather than simply jumped as Mei Xiang had done. The first shot missed, but the second barely touched her arm leaving a small wound. Lisa jumped the last set of stairs and attacked Lydia with a snarl.

Mei Xiang held the blade with a flourish in her right paw. “You’re rather skilled with that bow and arrow.”

“I’ve trained with it since I was a pup.” Diana slung her bow into its space behind her back and removed her knife. “Though I am well trained in the use of this as well.” Diana knew that the bow and arrow was of limited utility in a close quarters engagement. Mei Xiang already had the advantage by knowing the building intimately but if she were able to defeat her she could find out where her necklace had gone.

Mei Xiang slashed her blade at Diana who again had to back up and readjust. She slid in low and kicked the panda’s legs out from under her. When Mei Xiang hit the ground Diana rolled on top of her. The two women struggled on the floor for dominance with each one gaining the upper hand for a moment before the other would end up on top.

Lydia ducked a strike from Lisa as the clouded leopardess swung her fist at her head. She kicked upwards at her chin and sent her backwards into one of the vertical posts. The clouded leopard growled and bounced off of the pillar to make a hard kick at the crocodile’s chest. The blow connected and sent Lydia against the desk in pain. The crocodile ran towards the opposite side of the room ducking several thrown knives from her feline opponent.

Diana flew backwards as the panda pressed her foot paw against her chest. She scrambled to her feet and faced off against the panda. Mei Xiang’s sword had become embedded in the wood post. Each of them looked at the handle of the blade. Diana knew that if either of them attempted to get it the attempt would expose them to attack. It was deep enough that it would require both paws to remove.

The doberman growled at the panda as she threw another punch at her. Diana caught the punch in both paws. She bared her teeth and twisted her arm. A swift kick to her chest sent the panda against the wall. She performed a roundhouse kick to the panda’s chest.

Lydia pressed up against the pillar making sure not to expose her body on either side though it appeared her tail was a problem. She waited until the clouded leopard came close enough and threw her over her body onto the ground. She dropped her foot down but the cat had slid out of the way before the attack landed. Lydia rolled to one side to get some distance and she found herself back to back with Diana.

“They’re good,” Diana said.

Lydia nodded. “Got a plan?”

“Not at the moment. Duck!” Diana and Lydia dropped at the same time as a knife flew through the space they had just occupied. With an adversary on either side Diana knew they were in a weak tactical position. The panda and clouded leopard were clearly skilled.

As the panda woman removed her sword from the wall with her clouded leopard protector moving to guard her, she turned to face the doberman. “As much of a delight as this has been, I’m afraid that this little diversion is over.”

“You call this a diversion?” Lydia asked.

“For us both. Though you’re more than welcome to attempt to follow us I advise against it. We’ll see you again, of that I’m certain.” She turned to leave. Lisa threw several knives into the ground before the women in a row.

“A parting gift for you,” Mei Xiang said as she threw a ball of fire at the two women. Diana pushed Lydia out of the way and onto the stone path outside as the

fireball burst harmlessly against the stone walls of the garden. The doberman jumped to her feet and rushed back inside the restaurant, but the place appeared empty other than a confused waiter who stood at the entrance to the restaurant itself. Diana cursed to herself as she scanned the restaurant for any signs of where Mei Xiang had disappeared. Despite her best efforts, she returned empty handed a moment later.

Lydia shrugged. "I've searched the entire perimeter. Wherever they are, they're long gone by now."

"Along with my only way home." Diana removed one of the throwing knives from the floor and the two walked out of the garden together. "For now."

The brown haired crocodile place a hand on her arm. "Maybe we should head back to the cart and fill the boys in."

Diana moved out of Lydia's grip and walked a few steps away. "I don't know if I can involve them in this."

"You know that they'd want to help. Try and stop Ethan from doing anything he can to get you home if that's what you really want," Lydia said. She stepped in front of her. "Please, come back to the cart."

Diana's view lingered towards the restaurant as she stood in the oriental garden. Were circumstances different she might have felt extremely calm here. Now her emotions merely boiled under the surface. Her paws clasped into fists as she made every effort not to growl at Lydia. She knew that it was no one's fault on some level but at the moment she needed a target.

She envisioned Mei Xiang's face and drew an arrow. She aimed it at one of the two panda statues until Lydia's gentle hand rested on her shoulder.

"We should go." Lydia gave her a pleading look.

Diana fired into the wood above the door. She turned away not making eye contact with Lydia. "Now we can go."

The arrow embedded in the wood above the door was a message from Diana to Mei Xiang. Though she doubted the panda herself would see it one of her people would relay what had happened after she left, she was certain. They would tell her that the doberman archer left an arrow in her place of business. She would know that Diana was coming for her.

The walk back to the cart was mostly silent. Diana had never felt this alone before in her life. While she had been separated from Aldris before, she had always had her necklace. It had been a lifeline and reminded her always that she had a way home. When she had met Ethan and Rhodes, they had made it easier to bear the burden of being away. She had even come to like the world outside of Aldris.

Now everything felt cold and harsh. She wondered if it was simply sunset or if the world around her truly felt dark and desolate. Diana could feel a part of her hardening to protect her against the pain. Her initial growl faded into a cold expressionless mask through which her emotions did not show. She said nothing other than the occasional response to Lydia's queries.

The rhythm of her walk almost became a mechanical process with one foot paw in front of the other. Lydia had needed to correct her route several times as they made their way back to where Ethan and Rhodes waited. The two looked up with smiles that quickly faded as Diana wordlessly climbed into the cart.

* * *

Rhodes snorted and stomped a hoof. “Why didn’t you come and get us?” he asked.

“Diana wanted to handle it ourselves. I suppose she didn’t want you boys to see her like this.”

Ethan shook his head. “She knows we would have helped you get the necklace back.”

Lydia nodded. “I believe she does know. I also think that’s why she didn’t want to get you boys involved in this if there was a chance we could get the necklace back on our own. The White Order took it before we knew they were there and had it out of the city before we even realized who had taken it. They’ve planned this for a long time. I get the feeling like this would have happened even if all four of us had been together.” She paced a couple of steps. “They were waiting either for us or perhaps anyone that walked through this town with one of those necklaces.”

“Half of the world isn’t sure Aldris ever even existed,” Ethan said.

“Yes, but then there’s the half that does, and a good number of them like to flaunt their acquisitions to their friends.” Lydia motioned to the rest of the now closed down marketplace. “This is not the only marketplace here and Diana’s is not the only necklace. We just walked into town and right into their hands.” Lydia was well aware that there was a strong black market for Aldrisian and other rare artifacts. Most of them were not sold openly for those that did believe in the legends were more than willing to kill to increase their collection. For some, it was a matter of power. For others, Aldrisian artifacts were a status symbol. Many of them did not understand the significance of their treasures. All they knew was the things they had were rare and valuable and they gave you power, either literally or figuratively.

In the larger cities there were whole underground marketplaces where such things were traded outside of the eyes of the public. It was to their interests to make sure that only the right people learned of an Aldrisian artifact for sale. It usually meant that those that found out were either wealthy or dangerous. Often times they were both.

Ethan cursed. “So we go after this Mei Xiang.”

“I have a feeling that if I hadn’t been there Diana would already be after her at this very moment,” Lydia said. She turned a view towards Diana who sat in the cart with a morose expression on her face. She looked at her journal but did not contribute anything to the conversation. The crocodile half doubted that she was even listening. She could sense her connection to the group had weakened slightly. Even her bond to Ethan was less firm to her than it had seemed only that morning. “Something changed when we fought those two women. I think up until that point Diana was certain we would get her necklace back.”

“We will,” Ethan said.

Lydia shook her head. “The White Order is dangerous, Ethan, and I don’t think they’ll be intimidated by two traveling merchants and an Oracle.”

“I’m more than just a traveling merchant,” he said.

Lydia held up her hand. “Ethan, unless you’ve got years of sword training under your belt I wouldn’t recommend it. Even if you did, do you have any idea who the White Order is?”

Ethan lowered his head. "I can't just sit here."

Rhodes rubbed his chin. "We also can't rush in against something we don't understand. I've never heard the term White Order before. What are they?"

"I don't know much. Diana said they were one of the reasons they originally left this plane of existence. Apparently they're pretty bad ass and they've survived the centuries in one form or another. I don't know what their story is but they know how to fight. I have a feeling that the only reason we emerged in as good of a shape as we did is that Mei Xiang was not looking to kill us. Next time she will be." Lydia allowed her last statement to hang in the air for a moment.

Ethan's feathers around his neck puffed up in frustration. "We have to help Diana get her necklace back."

Rhodes held up a hand to placate his friend. "We will. I promise you that." The gypsy vanner horse took a few steps away from the cart. "We have to expect that they've taken steps to ensure we don't catch their scent too quickly. Even if they haven't, right now they have the advantage. They hold all the cards right now and we can't let them control the game."

"I don't understand, Rhodes." Ethan placed one hand on his knife.

Rhodes held up both hands with only his thumb and forefinger extended. "Then let me fill you in. We go straight at them and they will destroy us. As Lydia said, we are no match for them. We have no idea of the extent of their influence or what sort of forces they control. Given that, I think it's obvious that a direct pursuit is suicide." The gypsy vanner horse looked at Ethan.

"So what do you suggest we do?" Ethan asked.

Lydia gestured at the ground. "For now, nothing."

"I can't," Ethan said.

Lydia stepped in front of him. "Listen, Ethan, I know you're in tune to Diana's pain but let me tell you something. Even if she had that necklace right now she would not be using it to go home. Whether it is with them or us for now makes no difference to what we have to do for the foreseeable future. They have the advantage. They know everything about what's going on and they saw us coming. We need to take that away from them."

Rhodes nodded in agreement. "I agree. For now we need to research who they are and what they're planning. There has to be people that know about them."

Lydia held up a hand before Rhodes. "The Oracles may have access to some information regarding their history. I don't personally know of them but there are numerous Oracle temples and they each maintain their own libraries." She turned back to Ethan. "We'll go after them, but indirectly. They will not come to us. We need to find a way to control where they go. When we're ready we'll pursue them in a time and manner of our choosing. That is the only way we come out of this in one piece. Do you understand me?"

Ethan gave a frustrated nod. "So what now?"

"The plan is the same. We go to Arkanis and on to Ixion. We sell our stock and ask questions, but discreetly," Rhodes said. "Even the most invisible hand leaves traces behind."

The hawk gave a nod to Rhodes. "All right. We'll play it your way, for now."

Rhodes moved close to Ethan and clasped him on the shoulder. "We will get Diana's necklace back, Ethan. Of that you have my word." The gypsy vanner horse gave him a confident nod before he and Lydia took a few steps away to talk privately. "I'm not sure which one I'm more worried about, Ethan or Diana."

Lydia nodded in agreement. Diana had still not spoken since they had returned. She had simply climbed into the cart and started thumbing through the pages of her journal. Even with Ethan sitting beside her she seemed to not notice his presence. The crocodile shook her head. "Right now she's in a state of grief and shock."

"I hope she comes out of it soon," Rhodes said.

"She'll come out of it. The question is, who will she be when she does?" Lydia asked. "Rhodes, you didn't see her after we left that restaurant. She was half ready to tear that place apart with her bare paws. When she comes out of that state she's in she'll be looking to tear the world apart looking for that necklace and I hope that I'm not in her way when she does." She rubbed the gold spirals on each of her arms in slow gentle patterns. "The worst part about it is that there's nothing I can do to help her."

"I half expected Ethan to run off on his own on some damned fool's errand. He lets his heart rule him instead of his head half the time. I love him for it but at the same time he just gets into trouble sometimes as a result. I don't know how long we'll be able to hold our group together." Rhodes looked to the brown haired crocodile. "I'm glad to have someone else to talk to about all this. Are you sure you want to stick with us? It may be safer somewhere else."

Lydia touched his arm. "I know that for the time being, my place is with you boys. There's nowhere else in the world where I am needed more than with you two and Diana. We will survive this, if we want to."

"That's awfully cryptic."

The crocodile gave a mild half smile. "I mean that connections are always changing, always evolving. If we want to survive this together, we can. If we choose to separate, we can. Being apart doesn't change the fact that we are connected, if we wish to be. Distance is irrelevant to an Oracle. It's why we travel. We are always connected to each other and to the world. We want to be part of something and so we are." She placed a hand on his shoulder. "Take Ethan and Diana. If they were worlds apart would it change how they feel about each other?"

"No."

"If you and I were right next to each other, would you consider me any more of a friend?" she asked.

"No."

"You see?" she asked. "All you need to know is that if we desire to stay connected to each other, we'll be together no matter how far apart we go. The only thing that can destroy this group is us." She smiled. "Our physical bodies, that's another matter. The White Order is a threat. To whom and how soon is negotiable at present. All we need to do is figure out how they operate."

Rhodes laughed. "Oh, is that all?"

"Perhaps two merchants, an Oracle, and an archer really is all that we'll need to take down the White Order." Lydia gestured towards the cart. "There's nothing we can do until the morning. How about you and I prepare a meal for the others and then we get some sleep?"

“That’s the best suggestion I’ve heard all day.”