

**“Disconnected”**

**By Lauren Rivers**

Preparations for their latest campsite were comparatively subdued since the loss of Diana's treasured necklace. Ever since the White Order had made off with it for some purpose only they knew, Diana had become despondent and isolated. The strong canine woman he loved had become a shell. She spoke rarely and when she did it was only to answer with the simplest of responses. At times Ethan wondered if she would ever recover from her present state.

Her necklace had been her lifeline to Aldris and her connection to her homeland. Even if she did not intend to return home for a while it reassured her in this strange world for her to have it. At times Ethan forgot that she was from the exotic land of Aldris. Legends spoke of weapons of crystal and a magnificent city with treasures unmatched by the world outside and yet to her it was just her home. It was the place she had always known as her world. To her, this world was a strange place and no doubt had now come to appear far more cold and savage.

He knew well the sensation of being among those that did not truly understand you. Ethan wished he could do something to alleviate her pain though he was not sure anything could. The loss of the necklace was just so sudden and unexpected to all of them. Few in this world knew it was more than just a simple bauble and yet they had come across the few that did and moreover had the capability to get their paws on it. Indeed, both Mei Xiang and Lisa Hamilton had proved exceptionally capable in combat if Lydia's account was accurate. It was an improbable occurrence and yet it had happened. Now they had to deal with it.

They had been on their trail for some time. They could not move too quickly for they did not wish to alert their enemies they were in pursuit. At the same time they were only guessing at their probable direction of travel. Most did not know of the White Order and those that did rarely discussed it. Details about the group were sparse. Aside from the occasional mention here or there, there was little to go on. From personal experience they knew they were able warriors and had significant resources upon which to draw.

Tonight Rhodes had prepared some meat that Lydia had enhanced with some of her considerable supply of spices. A few of them she had already carried with her while the rest they had purchased in the last town. The horse and crocodile tended to the fire while Diana sat against a tree away from the group. Ethan laid out their bedrolls close together and walked back over to his companions. "Has she said anything?"

"Not since we set up camp," Rhodes said.

"Do you think she's all right?" he asked.

Lydia shook her head. "Her scars run deep. When they took her necklace they wounded her deeper than if they had stabbed her through the heart. Her connection to us is the only thing that keeps her functioning at the moment."

"If you can call that functional. She hardly eats. She doesn't speak to us except for the occasional grunt of acknowledgement. She hasn't looked at me since it happened. I don't know what to think." He glanced over in her direction, but other than her touching a flower with one of her paws she did not seem to be interested in much of anything. She reminded him of how helpless she had seemed when they first met. After Ethan had promised to help her return home she had seemed to regain what he now knew was the spark she held when she was her normal self. He did not know how long she had been trapped in their world but it must have been long enough that she had started to lose hope. Despair and depression changed a person. He could see that in her now.

Rhodes flipped the meat as it slowly cooked over the fire. “She just needs time, Ethan. She suffered a rather big loss.” He sprinkled a small amount of Lydia’s favorite spice blend on the meat’s other side. The gypsy vanner stallion returned his attention to the fire.

“We’ll get it back,” Ethan said. “She knows I’ll help her do that.”

Rhodes snorted. “She may know that up here, Ethan, but it doesn’t change the fact that a part of her is gone. You remember how you were when I fell into the Red Guard’s hands?”

Ethan recalled that shortly after they had first met Diana they had attempted to escape into Aldris only to lose Rhodes at the last moment. He and Diana had gone to rescue him but it had brought out a part of Ethan that he had thought long buried. “I do.”

“It’s no different for her. She feels its loss as deeply as you felt mine. To her it’s not a trinket, it’s her way home and her connection to everyone she loves that isn’t right here beside her. She knows that she can count on us but right now she’s not able to process everything, and I can’t say I blame her.” Rhodes let the meat simmer for a short while as he observed it from where he sat on a thick fallen log.

The hawk looked down, suitably chastised. Rhodes was right. He was expecting too much from Diana right now. He only wanted to help, but at the moment she did not seem to want what he could offer. Ethan fought the desire to walk over to her and attempt to engage her in conversation. He took a step in her direction when Lydia’s scaled hand touched his own.

“Ethan, have a seat.” She gestured to the spot directly next to her. She sat on her side with her legs together. Somehow she always managed to look graceful even in an open field beside a river. He suspected that he was about to get a lesson from their resident Oracle.

Ethan fidgeted as he attempted to find a comfortable sitting position on the ground. His tail made things a bit complicated. It was moments like this that made him envy Rhodes, Diana, and Lydia. Their tails weren’t as delicate and as fancy as his. After a moment he settled into a comfortable pose. “I know what you’re going to say.”

“Do you know why Diana doesn’t want to look at you right now, Ethan?” she asked.

Ethan was somewhat stunned. He had not expected her to ask him a question. “I don’t know.”

“You represent everything she loves in this world. Right now I’m certain it’s far too painful for her to be reminded of how far she is away from home. As much as you want to be by her side and wish she would take comfort from you the wound is too raw for her. She sees you and she remembers everything about how you made her feel when you first kissed her. She thinks that she may never see her family again. For the moment her strongest connections are doing her the greatest injury.” Lydia packaged up the spices Rhodes had been using and started to prepare some tea to go with their dinner. Sensing his confused expression she continued. “Normally in times of pain and suffering we draw on these connections for power. They help sustain us in our darkest hours.”

Ethan nodded. “That’s what I want to do for Diana.”

“What can heal can also harm. Like many things it’s a matter of balance. The loss of the necklace has thrown her world upside down. What she should feel closest to she draws away from as for the moment it is the only way she can protect herself. I

suspect that the reason she did not involve you boys when she first lost it was because she did not want to face the possibility she now cannot ignore.” Lydia dipped a spoon into the tea to test it. She shook her head and allowed it continue heating.

“So you’re saying that I should just give her some space,” Ethan said. When the crocodile nodded he felt his shoulders sink. He knew she was right and part of him understood why that was the case. It did not make it any easier to accept. He watched her sitting there motionless and almost catatonic. It seemed a far cry from the woman he loved. Even though she did not seem to show any sort of emotion he knew that she was just barely keeping it under control.

Ethan accepted a plate from Rhodes who in turn handed one to Lydia. He fixed a fourth plate for Diana, which Ethan immediately reached for. “I’ll take it over.” The meat smelled delicious to him. Between Rhodes’ cooking and Lydia’s spices the food was practically a banquet even out here. He waited until the horse had finished loading up the plate with meat and placed a small roll on it that he allowed Ethan to stand while he finished up with the rest of the group’s food.

Lydia looked up at him. “Don’t push, Ethan.”

“I won’t,” he said. He walked as casually as he could towards Diana and stood above her for a moment hoping she would acknowledge his presence. When she did not, he laid the plate in front of her and kept his distance. “Dinner is ready, please try to eat something. Rhodes has worked quite hard on this meal and I think you’d enjoy it.” She gave him a nod, which was something at least. He bowed and turned away from her, rejoining the others by the fire. He shrugged as he resumed his seat.

Lydia sliced a small cube of the meat and savored it in her mouth. Once she swallowed she gave Ethan an approving nod. “You did well.”

“She’s not eating.” Ethan kept watching her.

“Give it time. She’s working up to it. It might help if you stopped watching her and started eating your own meal.” Lydia gestured towards his untouched plate of food. Ethan sliced his own meat into rather small chunks and popped each one into his mouth. The meat was juicy and flavorful. It reminded him of some of the meals he used to enjoy before he had met Rhodes. There had been things about those days he had not enjoyed, but the food was definitely not one of them. He had to admit that the best part of meals these days was that he got to enjoy them with friends.

Ethan had eaten more than a few small chunks of meat when Lydia touched his arm and gestured behind her. Diana had started eating, though she still did not make eye contact with any of them. The hawk considered that victory enough for now and the corner of his mouth turned upwards into a smile.

“See?” Lydia asked.

Ethan gave her a small smile as he ate another tiny chunk of meat. As much as he sometimes wished he could hide his emotions from Lydia he was simultaneously grateful for her insights. She had kept him from making an emotionally driven blunder and for that he was grateful. As much as he desired to help Diana he knew that what she needed right now was time. With the toll recent events had taken on her emotions she could not at present process much more than the bare minimum to keep herself going. Perhaps when and if they got a lead on the White Order she would perk up but until then she was lost.

“Isn’t there anything at all we can do for her?” he asked.

“Such as?” Lydia asked in return.

Ethan’s neck feathers ruffled. “I don’t know, maybe find another way back to Aldris? There has to be other methods of getting there.”

Rhodes shook his head. “Ethan, people have been trying to find another way for a thousand years. One isn’t going to appear just because you want there to be one. The only way to Aldris right now is those necklaces and they aren’t too common. The only people that might have another one are either too rich or too dangerous for us to try to get it from them.” He looked at Ethan as he set his plate down. “Goodness knows we have enough on our hands with the White Order. We don’t need any other enemies right now.”

Ethan took a bite of the roll. It was still warm and practically melted in his mouth. He gave his partner a look. “We’re going after the White Order.”

“We are, but that doesn’t mean we start doing it by kicking down doors. The White Order made an enemy of us first; we don’t need to alert them by tipping our hand too quickly. They can’t know we’re following them, not until we’re ready.” Rhodes took another bite of his roll and set it back down on his plate.

Lydia nodded. “I may be able to find some information on the White Order from some of my fellow Oracles. However, right now we don’t know anything about them. They could annihilate us if they wanted. They hold all the cards and the only thing saving us at this moment is that we are not what they are interested in. We have the time, we must use it wisely.”

Ethan stood up. “Fine, but the sooner we do that, the better. The next chance get we should start buying some weapons. A few quiver of arrows and a few hunting knives aren’t going to cut it.” He knew that they were prepared for the average bandit on the road but for a serious engagement they were not well armed.

“What do you have in mind?” Rhodes asked.

“I need a sword,” Ethan said.

“Since when do you know how to use a sword?” he asked.

Ethan turned away from Rhodes without answering the question. He climbed into the cart and closed the fabric to give himself some privacy. Ethan picked up the diary that Diana had written in since the day he had met her and opened it to the last page with anything on it. As he looked at the date in black ink on the top of the page his heart sank. She had not written a word since the day they had arrived at that last town. She had not used it since her choker had disappeared.

He closed it and replaced it among her possessions. Just as he withdrew his hand the fabric opened to reveal Rhodes.

“Did I say something wrong?” he asked.

“It’s nothing. I just need a minute alone.” He did not look at his friend, who simply sighed.

“Seems like that’s going around.” He closed the fabric and was gone. Ethan took a few deep breaths and closed his eyes. He had to be strong for Diana. Even if he could not help her he would not let her down. The White Order had the advantage for now, but Ethan would get Diana’s necklace back for her if he had to go through every agent they had. He climbed out of the cart and sat back down beside the fire to finish his meal.

Ethan waltzed into the next town with a deliberate stride. A money pouch bounced at his side as he walked ahead through the main road on his way to a particular building. Rhodes followed behind him, his hooves making soft thumps on the dirt as he kept up with Ethan. "You don't have to come with me, Rhodes."

"I'm not leaving you alone right now, not with the vibe you're giving off." Rhodes looked at him with a mixture of concern and friendliness.

"What 'vibe' would that be?" he asked his equine friend.

"You look like you're angry," Rhodes said.

Ethan turned away from him for a moment and pulled him aside. "You're damn right I'm angry. The White Order took Diana's necklace and I can't do anything about it. She won't talk to me and I can't stand waiting and doing nothing. So you're right, I'm angry. I've got a right to be." The hawk gripped his hands into fists.

Rhodes nodded in agreement. "I'm not saying you don't, but there is a time and a place for everything and this is not helpful right now. For now, you need to be in control. There'll be a time to let loose and get angry but now isn't that time. You hear me?" he asked.

Ethan knew that Rhodes was right. Being angry now would just end up getting him into trouble. As difficult as it was to control he breathed deeply and closed his eyes until he calmed himself. He opened them to see his friend's face with a gentle supportive expression. "I'm okay."

"Good." He motioned towards the building Ethan had been headed towards, the local weapons shop. "You want to explain to me why you're in so much of a hurry to get a sword?"

In truth Ethan did not. He could not blame Rhodes for wanting to know especially given that he still was not ready to reveal to the horse his past or its assorted details. He knew he at least owed the horse an explanation for this particular action. "I need to be ready."

"For what?" Rhodes asked.

"For the next time. Mei Xiang took us by surprise and I'm not going to let that happen a second time. The next time we get attacked by anything, I want to be prepared for it. I let my guard down and it was a mistake." Ethan resumed his walk towards the weapon shop.

"You couldn't have seen that coming." Rhodes had a point. Knowing it and believing it in his heart were two different things. Ethan had this feeling like he should be able to protect Diana even though she was one of the finest warriors he had ever seen. She was a phenomenal archer and brave in the face of danger. Still, they were a team and he should have been at her back. A part of him was still hurt that Diana had not come to he and Rhodes when the necklace had gone missing although he could not say he would not have done the same in her position.

Ethan sighed as he pulled the door open and entered the space inside. The weapons shop was well lit and spacious. Displays of spears and shields lined the walls while the center of the store was reserved for different forms of armor. A counter that ran the length of two full walls of the building had swords mounted on the wall. The glass displays were full of countless daggers, knives, and other small weapons. Ethan picked up a pair of bracers and tried them on.

They felt good on his arms. He knew that most birds could only wear so much armor especially if they wished to preserve their ability of flight. Ethan kept them on as he looked around to observe the other customers. They consisted of more than a few folks of various races and job descriptions. A couple of them appeared to be from the local militia. He recognized a few of them as the casual type that liked to swing a sword around and pretend they were a lot more skilled than they were in reality. He recognized the shopkeeper behind the counter talking to a fox.

The owner of the establishment was a muscular badger that appeared to be the person that forged most of his own stock as well. He wore a heavy apron that protected him from sparks when he was working in the forge. Evidently it had built up enough muscles that he did not feel the need to remove it when conducting casual business. The fox looked up as the two of them approached and pointed nonchalantly at Ethan.

"I recognize you, from the last town." The fox smiled at Ethan.

"I don't recall you, friend," Ethan said.

The fox shrugged. "Didn't expect you would. I just saw you in the marketplace. Saw you selling your jewelry. Don't have much use for it myself. I prefer a fine weapon." He slid the dagger he had been looking at back to the badger. "Thanks for the look see, Milo, but I'm just not in the mood. Maybe another time." The fox walked away from the front counter but he seemed to watch them from the corner of the store. He pretended to occupy himself with some armor pieces but Ethan knew he was simply watching them.

Milo looked at Ethan and Rhodes with a discriminating eye. "Let me guess, you're looking for something one handed, without too much weight, but well balanced." He turned to the gypsy vanner horse. "If I had to guess, I'd say you prefer a lighter sword. Maybe a rapier or something."

"Good guess," Ethan said, somewhat surprised by how accurate the badger had been.

Rhodes raised an eyebrow. "What makes you say that?"

"It's a talent of mine. If you make weapons long enough to start to see the same types of people. Eventually you get to learning how to read each customer and tell what they want before they even know themselves. Take you for example. I see your clothes, I know you come from money, but you've got no jewelry. Means either you don't like to show it off or that you prefer to win arguments with class rather than strength. People like you often prefer the rapier. It's a lighter more classy sword for the stallion that may not want to flaunt his upbringing, but he understands a little thing called pride." Milo handed Rhodes a rapier.

The gypsy vanner stallion gave it a few test swings, being careful not to do it near anything. He nodded in approval at the weapon's performance and examined the fine detail work with a careful glance.

"See that? That's how you know the type. They examine their weapons like it's a piece of fine jewelry." Milo smiled, proud at the correctness of his guesses, Ethan assumed. The black furred badger handed Ethan a broadsword. "You'll like this one. She's strong, sturdy, and has a lot of power in her even with one arm."

Ethan folded his wings back and gave it some rather impressive swings as he spun the sword around in his hand, the blade whirling past either side of him in a rather advanced maneuver. "This will do."

“Never seen anyone do that before. You’ve got some experience,” Milo said.

“I’ve got a little.” Ethan took the scabbard and removed his belt to slip it on.

“No, that’s more than a little.” The badger gave him an exaggerated nod to show he was impressed.

Rhodes picked up the scabbard for his own blade and slipped the sword inside.

“How much?”

“For the two of you fine gentlemen, let’s say fifty gold pieces,” Milo said.

“Done,” Ethan said. He slid the coin purse across towards him and waited until he counted out the money. The badger counted out the appropriate amount of coins and returned the purse back to the two. “The bracers, too.” Ethan held up his arms. “I forgot I was wearing them for a moment.”

“Ten silver.” The badger waited for Ethan’s nod and removed the coins from the purse before giving an exaggerated bow. “A pleasure doing business with you two.”

Rhodes slipped the scabbard onto his own belt and nodded as he took the coin purse. “Thanks.”

Ethan leaned into the counter. “Have you seen a panda or a German Shepherd pass through here?”

Milo rubbed his chin for a moment and shook his head. “Can’t say that I have. They friends of yours?”

“Not exactly,” Ethan said.

“I see a lot of people, but I don’t remember that specific combination.” He shrugged.

Ethan looked towards the door and noticed that the fox was gone. “Thanks anyway.”

Rhodes shook his head at Ethan. “Did you really think they’d just waltz through town like that?”

“No, but they had to come this way if they’re headed in the same direction at least for now. It’s the only major settlement for miles and Diana didn’t say anything about them having a huge amount of supplies when they left.” Ethan started towards the front of the shop.

“That doesn’t mean they’re going to stay headed in the same direction,” Rhodes said.

“True, though given that they appeared to be in a hurry I don’t think they’d take the time to leave the main roads when that would only slow them down.” Ethan pushed open the door and started to walk towards the edge of town where they had come. “I know it was a slim chance that anyone would have seen them but I had to ask.”

Rhodes and Ethan had left the girls and the cart at the split in the road. The nearest town was not far from that point and the girls did not want to come with them. Ethan insisted on purchasing the weapons as soon as possible so the most agreeable compromise was for the women to wait while the men hurried into town and made their purchase. Diana agreed to remain with the cart and Lydia did not want to leave her alone.

They had just exited the boundaries of the town when the same fox from the weapons shop stepped out from the tree line. “You again,” Ethan said. “Are you following us?”

“I was here first, hawk. Maybe a better term would be waiting for you.” He removed a long knife from his belt and flipped it up in the air, catching it in his black paw.

“If I were you, I’d get out of our way,” Ethan said.

“Afraid I can’t do that. Mei Xiang wanted to make sure you didn’t catch up to her too quickly, and after your girl caused such a ruckus at her restaurant she wanted me to thank you personally.” Ethan recalled Diana mentioning a fox that had been involved in the fight that had cost her the necklace. The hawk reasoned that this was that same fox. “I haven’t decided if I should kill you both yet, or if I should torture you for a while. Mei Xiang was not specific in my instructions.”

Rhodes drew his rapier. “That’s going to be a little hard with just you.”

“Whoever said I was alone?” he asked. A group of canines emerged from the woods and drew their swords. “Time to inflict some pain.”

Rhodes and Ethan stood back to back. The gypsy vanner horse thrust his sword into the underarm of the first canine and sent the Great Dane whimpering as he fell to his side. Rhodes thrust at another but he avoided the attack and swung at him. He dodged out of the path of the sword as the two kept their eyes on their opponents.

Ethan swung his sword into the side of a lightly armored husky. The sword cut into his side and sent him bleeding onto the ground. Ethan stabbed another one in the chest and kicked a third onto the ground. He turned to see Rhodes stab another in a vulnerable spot and wondered where his partner had gotten his own training. Clearly it was not his first time handling a blade but Ethan could not ask his friend without discussing his own history. Regardless, now was not the time. He ducked under the fox’s sword and kicked him in the chest before backhanding him across the face. The fox fell backwards and rolled to his feet.

He and Rhodes had already taken out four of the men, and there was only one more left besides the fox. Ethan stabbed the next one in the back as he rushed towards his friend, and both turned to face the fox with their weapons drawn. “You might want to send Mei Xiang our regrets.” He pointed his sword at the fox’s neck. “It wouldn’t be a bad idea to hire better men.”

“They were local talent recruited in a hurry. You can’t expect top quality soldiers of fortune when you’ve got a limited timetable.” The fox seemed unconcerned and took a step back. “Still, impressive for a couple of traveling merchants. I didn’t think you had it in you.”

Ethan held his sword aggressively. “You have no idea what I’m capable of.” The hawk gave a screech that was loud enough to force the fox to cover his ears. He pointed at Ethan as soon as he could lower his paws.

“If I were you, I’d forget all about this and move on.” The fox turned away and headed towards the town.

“I suggest we not be here when someone comes to see what happened,” Rhodes said.

Ethan nodded in agreement and turned to move back towards where they had left the cart. He pulled out a cloth to clean the blood from his blade as he walked. He was certain he would never return to his old life but now it seemed as if he could not escape it. Neither he nor Rhodes said anything on the walk back.

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An arrow pierced the trunk of a nearby tree several inches below and to the right of a chalk mark that had been hastily drawn on its side. The arrow joined half a dozen others in a chaotic arrangement around the target as the archer that fired them growled. "I missed. I never miss."

Lydia knew that this was an exaggeration of course, but she could not argue that Diana's aim was off. The Doberman pinscher usually had better rates of accuracy than the tree indicated. "It's probably because you're trying to make it happen. When you try to force things, sometimes it just makes it more impossible. You're still upset, even if you don't realize it. Anything that you try to do to make that go away won't work until we address the core issue."

The canine looked over at the Oracle. "So you're saying that there's nothing I can do until we get my necklace back?"

"No, but it is affecting your aim and probably other things too. Oracles sense connections, remember? Not just the ones between people but between people and other things. That choker right now is tied to you so tight you can't function. You have to let it go." Diana gave her an almost hysterical look. "I don't mean give up on getting it back. I just mean you can't let its loss control you until you do. Do you think that if you went up against Mei Xiang right now that you'd win?" The fact that Diana did not offer an immediate answer told her that she was on the right track. "You've suffered a loss, that's plain to see. However, in order to get it back you have to find your way back to the person you were before you lost it. That woman was fierce. I saw how she fought when we were in that restaurant. You need to recapture that."

Diana lowered her bow and the arrow she held in her hand. "I don't know how." She shrugged. "Maybe I just need more practice. Stand over there and put an apple on your head."

Lydia's eyes went wide. "Normally I'd be happy to, but the way your aim is right now I'll have to decline." She pulled several arrows free from the tree and returned them to Diana to be reused. "This isn't about practice, Diana, it's about your balance being way off."

"So then what do you suggest I do?" she asked.

Lydia considered the question for a moment as she stood there with Diana. "First of all, leave the poor tree alone. It's suffered enough. Second, come sit down and relax while we wait for the boys to come back. When they do, we'll get a good night's sleep and pick this up in the morning."

"Every second we delay Mei Xiang gets further and further away," Diana said.

"That's exactly what I'm talking about. You're letting her control the hunt. Don't do that. We'll catch up with her and we will get your necklace back, but right now you're so concerned with it that you can't see the forest for the trees. She could very well be closer than you think." When Diana tensed up she placed her hand on the Doberman's arm. "I don't mean that you should be jumping at shadows. All I meant was that Mei Xiang is a woman with a purpose. She's not just going to run as far as she can and as fast as she can with an Aldrisian necklace. She knows what it is and she's taking it somewhere. Wherever that is, it might be where we can catch up with her."

Diana seemed to calm a bit at this. Though Lydia could not see it from this angle she knew the canine's docked tail was likely still waving in agitation. She thought of one possible way that she could help Diana but it would require the group to go two separate ways. Ethan and Rhodes needed to keep the business running and the destination she had in mind was likely not a great source of business for them. She also had the feeling that Diana needed some distance from Ethan right now. As much as he loved her it was that love that at this moment was too painful for Diana to absorb.

Love was an ironic emotion. At times it could be the source of great strength allowing a person to accomplish things they thought impossible. Other times it could be the seed of great rage. Though ostensibly a positive emotion it had caused wars and misery to a great many people. It was wonderful when it worked, but there were times when it was the last thing one wanted to receive. Until Diana could let go of her obsessive connection to her necklace, she could not benefit from Ethan's boundless love for her. Lydia knew this was no easy task, for the necklace was not just a trinket but represented her mother and her friends back in her homeland of Aldris. No doubt on a subconscious level she saw the red stone as a connection to them. By allowing herself to feel all right without it, it felt like a bit of a betrayal to them. As such she allowed herself to feel the pain and misery of its loss because in an ironic way it made her feel better, though it did not help her aim. Lydia had studied connections long enough to know and she had known Diana enough to understand her as well.

"All this waiting is driving you nuts. Would you be willing to travel with me for a short while, away from the boys? We wouldn't be gone long, a few days at most, but they need to keep going to the next market town and they'd have little to do there." Lydia hoped that distracting Diana with a task that was both useful and away from Ethan would help restore her inner balance.

The doberman nodded in agreement. "Where would we be going?" she asked.

"The North Temple. One of my fellow Oracles, Leah, has studied the myths and legends about the White Order, and she may know more than just about anyone in the area. If anyone knows anything about them it would be her." Lydia touched Diana's paw with her scaled hands. "I can't guarantee she'll have any useful information."

"I know, but it's something to do and many legends do have basis in fact. Perhaps it would be worth visiting this temple as you suggest." Diana's smile seemed to come back as the edges of her mouth curled upwards and her eyes seemed to lose that pained look she'd held for days. It was the first sign of the old Diana she had seen since they'd left the restaurant and lost sight of Mei Xiang. This told her more than anything that she had the right idea.

Ethan would not like it, of course. She knew she would have to convince him of its usefulness as well, but it would do both of them good to be apart for a short while. The way to the North Temple was not difficult. It would take them a day or two to walk there at most.

It would be good to see Leah again. She had not seen the mare for some time, not since she had assumed leadership of the North Temple. She and Lydia had traveled together for a time until the mare became tired of moving around all the time and decided she would like to seek a more permanent post in their group. Lydia could not blame her. A life on the road did get weary at times. Nevertheless, what had always attracted Lydia to it was that there were always surprises. She never knew who or what she would

encounter from one day to the next, and that held true when she met a pair of merchants and their cart in the Winding Forest.

She had come across them by chance in her own travels in the opposite direction. Rather than spend the night alone she had offered them her company and a nearby spot to set up camp. She sensed that the trio had already developed some powerful connections even though they had known each other only a short time. At first she thought her own connections to them would be fleeting but when she saw them a second time and they had needed her help, there was no other choice but to provide them aid. Afterwards, she had been welcomed into the group as one of their own and since then had felt her own connections to the others grow stronger. As she had predicted when they first met, Ethan and Diana had a strong bond. She wished that at the moment it were not the thing that caused them both so much distress. That's what love was, she supposed.

"It should only be a couple of days journey to the temple. We'll need our bedrolls and some supplies," Lydia said.

"Are you certain that we'll be welcome?" Diana asked.

"All are welcome in the temples of the Oracles. We will not be staying long. Most of them have a few rooms available to accommodate travelers. You and I can share one." She seemed to notice that Diana's mood had brightened considerably since earlier that day. "Once we get there we should pay our respects to Oracle Leah before we ask her any questions."

Diana gave an appreciative nod. "Of course. I only hope that she can help us." The doberman reached for the spot on her neck where her choker would belong.

"If she can, she will. I guarantee you that." Lydia looked up as the hawk and horse returned with new weapons on their sides. "Welcome back."

Rhodes was the first to speak. "The White Order was waiting for us. Apparently they left a fox to ensure we didn't catch up too quickly. I'd say it's a safe bet they know we're after them now."

Diana stood up quickly. "Were either of you injured?"

"No, the fox allowed the men he hired to do most of the fighting. They weren't skilled but I tend to think that the first encounter was just a warning. The next time we encounter the White Order they will not fold so quickly." Ethan touched both sides of Diana's face and pulled her in for a kiss.

When he released her she touched his cheek with her right paw. "Ethan, you and Rhodes need to continue on your route. Lydia and I have to go somewhere for a while."

Ethan puffed up his neck feathers in alarm. "We should stick together, especially now." He took her paw in his hands.

"No, Ethan, you need to keep your business running. Besides, at least for the short term it may benefit us to be a little less findable traveling in a group like this. Lydia has a lead on a source of potential information on the White Order, and I need to follow up on it. We won't be long. We'll meet up with you after your next stop." Diana held up a paw. "We're not going anywhere until the morning, so for now let's just get some rest."

Rhodes nodded. "I'll feed the animal while one of you builds a fire." He patted their cart horse with a hand and fetched it's feed.

As Lydia watched Ethan she suspected their separation would be much harder on him than on Diana.

\* \* \*

Sunset had arrived when Ethan returned with an armful of firewood. On of the benefits to life on the road was that there were plenty of natural resources one could draw upon. He set the bundle of wood down on the ground and started to build a fire under the rectangular metal stand on which they cooked meat and vegetables. Rhodes had folded out the legs already and dug a hole to allow the air to circulate.

Ethan laid some of the sticks across the small pit to give it a suitable structure. He did not notice that Diana sat beside him for the first time since her necklace had disappeared. Rhodes and Lydia were over by their cart sitting on the open back as they reviewed their food stores. No doubt they were both determining what the ladies should take as well as selecting a meal for tonight that would satisfy the four of them. Ethan looked up at Diana but then lowered his beak again as he continued building the fire.

The hawk found it amusing in some odd way that he had wanted this to happen for days and yet when it finally did he could not find the words. He hoped that the doberman did not think him rude as he went about his task. Ethan finished arranging the wood and sat on one of the logs they had been using as seating.

“Ethan,” Diana said.

“Yes?” he asked. He wanted to say more, but at least she had removed the burden of breaking the ice.

Diana reached out a paw to him. He took it in his hand and smiled. “I apologize that I have not been more social in the past few days. It’s been hard for me to accept the loss of my connection to Aldris.”

“I understand,” Ethan said. “I know how much it means to you.” He made certain not to refer to it in the past tense, as he knew that Diana needed to believe they would retrieve it in the future. Though he had chosen to leave his own past behind he knew that Diana held hers as part of her identity. “Though you haven’t lost your connection to Aldris.” He touched her chest, directly above her heart. “That’s always going to be right here.”

Diana blushed at the sentiment. “I feel naked without my necklace, Ethan. I keep reaching for it knowing it isn’t there. I sense the weight of it though it is miles away from me. I’ve worn it every day since I was a pup.” She pressed her paw against the palm of his avian hand. “I don’t know what the White Order plans to do with my necklace, but I cannot allow them to keep it.”

Ethan nodded. “We’ll find it, I promise you that. If I have to go through every agent they have I’ll make certain you get it back.”

Diana smiled and rested against him. “I knew I chose wisely that day in the marketplace when I saw you.”

Ethan recalled the first moment he had made eye contact with her. Diana had worn a simple brown dress and had no weapons. She had hidden behind a booth and pleaded with her eyes for him to help her. Trusting in his instincts he gestured for her to hide in the back of their cart and a moment later the stag that had followed her this far had approached them. He held up a wanted poster with her image on it and he did not hesitate in knowing that he had done the right thing. At the time he had feigned ignorance. Rhodes, who did not yet know what he had done, had been genuine in his

answer. Perhaps it was that genuine honesty that convinced Captain Weathers to move on and keep searching for her.

"I'm glad you were there that day. It may have been a rough day for Rhodes, but it was a wonderful day for me," he said.

Rhodes came over with some pieces of meat. "Yeah, I got an arrow in the shoulder. It was an experience I'd prefer not to repeat." The gypsy vanner horse started the fire with a little flint rock and waited for the fire to catch. "Though it did pay dividends," he said with a smile. Since Diana had joined their party they had noticed a considerable drop in incidents on the road. Far fewer groups of bandits and other rogues attempted to assault their cart these days now that they had a skilled archer in red in the back of their cart. Of course like any problem of road life it would never go away completely. Regardless, Ethan knew he felt much safer knowing that he had Diana at his back.

"I do apologize for not being able to prevent your injuries, though I am glad they were minor." Diana gave him a smile while the fire started to grow large enough to cook the meat. Rhodes set two large pieces on the metal lattice and kept watch on it with a metal fork.

"I've had worse," Rhodes said. "No, you may not ask, Ethan, so don't."

Ethan held up a hand, knowing that he tended to be the curious one though on the subject of pasts he was more than willing to let the matter rest. He gave the stallion a pat on the shoulder as Lydia joined the group with an array of spices. She sprinkled a few at a time on each piece of meat. Ethan noticed that Diana's mouth had started to water as the smells of it wafted up into the air.

"That looks so appetizing," she said.

"It's one of the nicer cuts of meat we got from the last town. One of the plus sides to a larger group is we can get nicer food, but at the same time it won't last forever so we need to eat it while it's good." Rhodes managed all of the money matters in their group and Lydia kept track of the food stores, so between the two of them they did not need to concern themselves much about their resources since one or the other would keep pretty close tabs on their essentials.

Diana nodded. "Perhaps tomorrow before I leave I can hunt something for you boys to enjoy while we take our brief sojourn to the North Temple. After all, we'll be taking a good amount of the supplies, it would only be fair of me to make sure you're well taken care of while we're gone."

"I can hunt myself, you know," Ethan said. He gave her a playful tap on the leg.

"I'm better at doing it from a distance," she said by way of response. "I'll be up early anyway. You can rest and I'll take care of the food."

Rhodes flipped the meat. While Lydia put some spices on the other side, the gypsy vanner horse turned to Ethan. "I wouldn't argue with the lady, Ethan. She's rather good with that bow and arrow."

Ethan held up his hands and took the hint. He was certain that Diana could do it faster and more efficiently though he did still enjoy the occasional hunt for his meal. He got up for a moment and walked towards the cart. Once inside he opened the locked chest that was their inventory and removed a rather plain piece that resembled Diana's necklace except the stone was clear instead of red. He took it in his hands and returned to the group.

As he walked up he saw Diana smile, something she had not done since the White Order had stolen her choker. It was good to see a bit of the old Diana showing herself. Ethan returned to the cart to remove the set of plates and flatware for the four of them from its compartment and handed them to Lydia. He took his seat beside Diana and placed his hand on her paw, almost as if he feared she might disappear on him at any moment. He leaned in for a kiss and found that she did not turn away.

The two embraced for a moment until Ethan felt it was the right opportunity to lean back and look into her eyes. “Diana, I know that at least for now I can’t give you your necklace back, but I want you to wear this in the meantime.” He opened up his other hand and showed her the necklace he had taken from the cart. Rhodes raised an eyebrow but said nothing as he fixed it around her neck. “It isn’t the same, and it won’t get you home some day, but it’s just so you have something to wear to make you feel a little bit closer to home. It’s a loan, so we’ll be expecting you back before too long. I know you’ll take good care of it.”

“Thank you, Ethan,” she said. “Thank you, Mister Rhodes.”

Rhodes gave a gracious wave of his hand indicating that he approved, at least for now. The horse finished cooking the meat and started to portion it out on the plates, setting out four equal shares. When he handed it to Ethan the bird cut it into smaller portions still so he could enjoy the meat. He sliced some of it into thin strips imagining them as struggling small beasts becoming the prey of the mighty hunter. Perhaps it was silly, but he knew that there were certain instincts one never outgrew, at least, not all the way.

Ethan looked at the new swords that he and Rhodes had acquired in town today. They had not owned them for an hour before they had needed to use them. He suspected that before they had returned Diana’s necklace to its rightful place that the White Order would task them with a great deal more to do. He was ready, at least in his mind. He knew that he had not wielded a blade like that in some time but like the food game he played some of it was instinct. There were certain actions that once you learned them you were always capable of pulling them off. Once he started to practice more and more he would remember more of his skills and the rust would fall off of them.

He wondered if perhaps he should just tell Rhodes of where he came from or whether he could hide it forever. No doubt the horse had not given his skills that much scrutiny the one time he had seen him in action, but if he advanced too quickly in skill he might start to ask questions. Ethan was caught in between two desires. He wanted to help Diana as much as possible in her fight against the White Order, but if he advanced his skills faster than normal training would allow then Rhodes might ask him about his past. If it became important enough, Rhodes might insist he tell him rather than allowing him to keep his secrets.

He sighed as he looked at Diana and then Rhodes. He supposed that perhaps he was living on borrowed time and that at one point, either his past or his dedication to Diana would be tested beyond his ability to keep them both on an even footing. Lydia watched him as he ate and he wondered if the Oracle hadn’t already pegged him with her unerring ability to see into the truth of things. Some people called them readers. She said nothing, but a mild smile at him made him wonder if she knew. He popped a piece of meat in his mouth and turned away.

\* \* \*

A German Shepherd sat in a tree as she waited for the red fox to arrive. She leaned back against the trunk looking down below at the road. After a few moments the vulpine walked up to the tree and stopped. He wagged a finger at her and then smiled. "Lindsey," he said.

The canine returned the expression. "I assume you carried out your instructions?" she asked.

"I did, though I really wish that Mei Xiang had given me more time," he said with some mild amusement.

"Considering that all you really had to do was delay them a short while I should think that you had more than enough to do the job." The female canine swung her legs over the branch and dropped down to his level.

The red fox gave her a bow of acknowledgement. "I did, I just prefer more time to put a little finesse into my work. This was barely enough to put the men together. I managed to find a couple on short notice that would do the job."

Lindsey touched her paws together. "What did you learn about our travelers?" she asked.

The red fox leaned against the tree as he pulled out a nail file and started to sharpen his claws. "The two merchants went into the town to buy swords. Based on what I observed they both had training," he said.

"Interesting. An unexpected development, to be sure." She placed one paw against the tree. "The women were not with them?"

"Not in the town, no. I didn't see them when I was conducting my observations, but the hawk and stallion were on foot," he said.

Lindsey nodded. "Meaning they more than likely had the women with the wagon."

"A reasonable assumption," he said. "What do you want me to do now?"

"For the moment, nothing," she said. "We'll keep them under observation. Mei Xiang believes there is more to be learned and would prefer to see what the Doberman reveals to us. She'll kill her if she has to, but their course in pursuit has been somewhat unexpected. Find out where they're going next."

The red fox nodded in agreement. "As you wish." A moment later she was alone once more. She stepped deeper into the forest and away from the road to consider the situation without being disturbed. While the White Order had expected Diana's fighting skills they had paid little attention to the other three members of her party. Lindsey now wondered if perhaps that wasn't an oversight. Neither of the merchants had appeared to warrant more than a casual glance at first, though their combat skills suggested that there was more to each of them than they had initially thought.

They had also discounted the Oracle as she had not become a member of their group until after the Red Guard's failed attempt to acquire the Doberman woman. Had the Oracle been with them when they had first become aware of an Aldrisian necklace in play then she and the others might have taken action sooner.

Oracles were known for sensing connections. She knew that at some point this would need to be addressed. If one of them realized what the White Order was after it may accelerate their timetable far faster than they had expected. Already things had been

hastened by the appropriation of the necklace by Mei Xiang. She had not anticipated the canine's arrival but since she was the first to encounter her she chose to acquire it while the opportunity was available.

Lindsey could not deny that it was most likely the correct move. Such items were hard to come by considering both their intrinsic rareness and the relative obscurity of the objects. Few knew what they could do and most assumed they were little more than colorful red stones. However, those that sought them knew of their true value and it would not be the first time that someone had died to possess it.

Mei Xiang would take the stone to the others and they would attempt to use it to bring their ultimate goal one step closer. It would take time to experiment and determine what they needed in order to replicate its function. For now they just had to keep it out of the Doberman's paws. The panda appeared confident that Isaac would be able to analyze it given enough time. While for the moment the Doberman's path did seem to loosely follow Mei Xiang it did not appear that they were aware of her ultimate destination. If they knew they gave no such indication.

Lindsey partly wished she had been given the opportunity to test Diana in battle. Mei Xiang had insisted she avoid contact at least for now. The German Shepherd had heard legends and stories about Aldris since she was a young pup. Many knew about their crystal technology and advanced weapons. Tales of the wealth of Aldris could be found in most bars and taverns. Anyone interested in treasure or adventure knew about the mysterious ancient city. More than a few had wasted their entire lives trying to find a way to get access to it and plunder its resources. Lindsey and the others had a different motivation.

The White Order had lasted for millennia waiting for their opportunity to bring the shadow walkers back into the world. Long forgotten by most, they were the reason why one felt uneasy when one was alone at night in an unfamiliar place. They were creatures of nightmares whose screams could pierce the night for miles. Seemingly having no solid form they appeared to have no eyes that one could identify. Deadly claws appeared at the end of each of its digits that left more than a few mysterious deaths unexplained. They appeared as shadows with arcs of electricity passing through their forms as if they were constantly charged from some unseen force.

No one knew where they came from originally. They had risen from the black of night and their numbers only grew as more and more began to fear them. Armies and whole kingdoms rose to fight their advance but nothing could seem to harm these creatures. Locked between tangibility and immaterial mist they seemed invulnerable and at the same time capable of destroying anything they saw fit.

Desperate to determine any sort of counter defense many cities attempted to protect their citizens with magic and other similar techniques. While many of these were more effective there was only one thing that could damage them in any noticeable way. The crystal weapons of Aldris could not only harm the shadow walkers, but they had the capability to kill them.

As they came close to controlling the entire continent the Aldrisian forces fought the shadow walkers and pushed them back from where they came. As their borders shrank, in time they were hunted to the point where they almost fell prey to extinction. The last shadow walkers were forced out of this reality by Aldris and since then had begun to rebuild their forces using the White Order as their instrument in this world.

Their numbers were often kept small to avoid detection but large enough that they could build up their strength in secret. Entrance was often through family lines though a few newcomers had joined in the intervening years if their talents were useful enough. A handful had even been recruited.

The White Order kept its movements quiet and its actions surreptitious. It enjoyed an oddly unique status in that many did not know of them but those that did knew that they were dangerous. Despite their best efforts to avoid it Lindsey knew that the White Order was noted in several historical texts and other accounts but most of these were relatively obscure.

She knew that the shadow walkers held a deep animosity towards anything Aldrisian. While the members of the White Order sought to gain control of Aldris's many treasures, the shadow walkers wanted to strike back at the city that had cost them so much.

It was with some irony that after the shadow walkers had been driven back by the Aldrisians, other nations had started to fear and envy the Aldrisian technology and weapons. In turn they marched on the nation of Aldris and pushed them back into their own territory until finally Aldris removed itself from this world much like the shadow walkers had, leaving it with only legends of its existence. The White Order had its paw in those events as the first of its members placed misinformation and led more than a few attacks on the city.

Isolation was their primary defense and both the shadow walkers and Aldris remained separated from the world. From time to time there would be stories of someone that had claimed to have found Aldris or someone claiming to be from there. Most times these statements were later proven to be false. While the shadow walkers could not influence events in this world they still were able from time to time to appear in the darkness when their power would surge strongly enough. It never seemed to be sufficient for them to manifest for more than a few minutes but it was enough to keep the legends of their existence alive.

The White Order had found methods of contact to speak to them though they allowed only communication, but something had changed when rumors of a genuine Aldrisian citizen had reached their ears. For the first time since anyone could recall it turned out that someone had left the safety of their beautiful city and returned here to Akaeria. Later they had discovered that the Red Guard had already been sent after the woman, though they failed to retrieve her.

Though Mei Xiang had no proof, she had posited that it was the Doberman's arrival that had caused a shift in the balance of power. The shadow walkers had started to appear more frequently and more of them at a time. While Lindsey did not believe this was a coincidence she was not yet ready to subscribe to Mei Xiang's assumption. Nevertheless, it may have played a part in the surge in frequency at which the shadow walkers had begun to appear.

For now, they were to wait and bide their time. The sun had begun to set making the shadows start to grow longer. As she watched the trees she almost thought she saw a shape moving among them, but when she looked there was nothing. Lindsey placed her hand on the nearby tree and listened but heard only the rustling of the leaves.