

Prologue

The sun shone bright in the sky over the city of Mirith and the smells from the castle kitchen drifted out over the training grounds. The men had left the training grounds to drill in the countryside surrounding Mirith's high walls and it was left to whoever wanted to hone their skill with sword, bow or lance in the searing heat.

Three boys stood barefooted on the dirty ground between the archery range and the jousting quintain. Regan and Griff were dueling with the short practice swords they had been allowed to carry while Alyn stood opposite the stuffed target butts with his shortbow that his father had given him for his tenth name day. The three boys had known each other for as long as they could remember, and they'd been coming to the same spot to practice since their mother's had finally given them permission.

Griff and Regan's short swords were clattering against each other as the two boys moved backwards and forwards in an almost constant flow of attack and counter attack with hardly space to catch your breath.

"Can you smell that?" Griff questioned as he sniffed the air with his nostrils flaring and he backed away from Regan.

"All I can smell is sweat...and more sweat," Regan

said as he laughed and backed away from Griff. "Curse this heat, it's just silly. Father Silas says he hasn't seen it this hot in Mirith since he was a boy...and he's very old."

"Ah, there's nothing like the smell of fresh pastry is there Alyn?" asked Griff as he pulled his shirt over his head and sat on a crudely made bench, almost oblivious to Regan's comment on the sweltering heat.

"I suppose not," replied Alyn, almost as depressingly as his face.

He'd had been acting strange ever since news of his Father reached them a fortnight ago. Then again, Griff could hardly blame him, he didn't know how he would cope if his Father was reported missing, presumed dead. Alyn's father had been escorting a noble woman, Lynette, and her family up from Port Welif on their way to Mirith when, according to Lynette, they had been set upon by a pack of Blink Hounds. Alyn's father had been lost as he lured the pack away from those he was escorting.

Alyn had refused to accept that his Father was dead but not many men could stand up against a pack of Hell Hounds and live to tell the tale. In fact, when Griff thought about it, he couldn't imagine anyone being able to stand up to them. According to Alyn however, Hell Hounds never hunted in packs and therefore the Lady Lynette must have been lying.

Regan sat down next to Griff on the bench and he emptied a skin of water over his head before the bench collapsed under the weight and both the boys crashing to the ground with a thump. Alyn didn't even smile.

"Come on, I'm going to something to eat from the kitchen, who's with me?"

"I'm starving, I could do with a strip of bacon or two," replied Griff as he stood and dusted off his trousers.

"I'm not finished yet," stated Alyn.

"I'd be surprised if you ever get hungry, all you ever do is stand there and pull back that bow a few times. Why don't you practice swords with us for a change?"

Alyn didn't reply, he simply pulled an arrow from the quiver at his feet and loosed a shaft through the air which landed smack bang in the middle of the target butt.

"I could kill you from 100 paces with this bow, 300 when I'm a man grown." Alyn turned to look at Griff and Regan. "What use is a sword?"

"What use is a bow in a crowded area when men are swinging swords at you?" replied Regan before Griff could even open his mouth. Regan had always been quicker than Griff, and not just with the sword. Alyn simply turned towards the target butts once more and loosed another arrow which landed not a whisker away from the last. Whatever Alyn was, he was devilishly good with that bow, especially since he'd spent almost every hour, of every day practicing since he lost his Father.

"Come on Alyn, the Master at Arms said we had to be out of the training grounds by lunch," said Griff. "The men will be coming back from their drills soon." he added.

Alyn loosed another shaft at the target butt. "Fine, I'll come to the kitchens with you," conceded Alyn.

Griff and Regan proudly strapped their practice swords to their belts as Alyn slung his bow over his shoulder. The three boys set off out of the training grounds and through the Solar on their way to the kitchens. Despite the searing heat the walls remained somewhat cool. Regan could never understand why. As the three boys strolled quietly through the Solar, Regan spotted the Lady Sofia talking to one of her maids up ahead.

"We should go this way, it's...er...quicker," mumbled

Regan anxiously.

“What’s wrong Regan? Got butterflies again?” chuckled Griff as he placed a firm hand on Regan’s back and pushed him in front of himself.

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The Lady Sofia turned her attention towards the three boys who were scuffling with each other not too far in front of herself. Well, two of the boys were scuffling, the other boy just stood there, slightly distanced from the other two. She picked up her skirt slightly and began to walk towards the three boys. Griff was somewhat pretty, but she’d never liked pretty boys much. Alyn was, well Alyn. They had been friends since they were little and she had never really looked at him that closely, the more she did it became obvious that he was rather plain looking. Regan was much more her type, slightly wonky nose, ears that stuck out a bit and curly brown hair which clung to his head. In fact her mother had once called him gormless, but she didn’t care what her Mother thought, it wasn’t as if her Father, the King of Mirith was a very pretty man. Well, not since age had caught up with him but she could never have imagined him being pretty even before that.

“Good afternoon boys,” said Sofia, she did like to tease the boys sometimes and reminding them they were boys. It made her chuckle to herself because she was only a year older, and still a child herself, but she was allowed to use the title of Lady.

“Good afternoon Lady Sofia,” replied Griff, calmly with a full bow.

“Good afternoon La-ady Sofia,” answered Regan as he almost forgot to stand back up after he’d bowed to the

Lady.

“Good afternoon Lady,” said Alyn in a cold, hard voice. He hadn’t really talked with her since his Father was reported missing. She presumed that he blamed her Father for sending the Commander of the Mirith Army on a silly escort mission down in Port Welif. When she thought of it like that, it was rather strange, but her Father must have had his reasons and he had kept Mirith safe for years.

“Now, where might you boys be headed?” asked Lady Sofia.

“The Kitchens,” replied the three boys almost in unison.

“Wonderful! You won’t mind if I join you then? I am awfully hungry.”

“We’d be delighted if you’d join us Lady,” replied Griff with a chuckle.

The Lady slipped her arm through Regan’s before he could try to worm his way out of visiting the kitchens as his cheeks went a bright red. Griff let out a raucous laugh at the sight of that and the Lady Sofia slapped him round the back of his head. For the first time in two weeks, Alyn let out a brief smile.

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In front of the King sat a short man, with a large beak of a nose and black hair greased back from his temples. The King of Mirith looked deep into the eyes of his advisor. He didn’t like the look of the man for one moment, but he had helped him keep Mirith safe for the past 23 years. In fact the only other man he felt he could trust was missing, presumed dead. Alyn was devastated when he had broke the bad news to him but he felt he owed it to his friend to

tell his son personally.

“Very well,” answered King Elbert as he sighed. He had to appoint a new Commander sooner or later.

“Thank you m’Lord. I’ll make the necessary arrangements as soon as possible,” replied Alester Fabian.

The King waved his hand and dismissed the man. He was growing weary of rule, it had seemed like a good idea all those years ago but as the years dragged on so did his patience. He was growing weak, he knew that but he couldn’t allow Mirith’s enemies to gain any advantage. That was one of the reasons why he had allowed Alester to persuade him to employ these so called ‘Dark Wizards’ to help maintain Mirith’s hold over her enemies. The King sat back in his chair and closed his eyes and let the sounds of the men coming back from drill practice fill his ears as he heard General Fenwick, the new Commander of the Mirith army, shouting commands at his men.

Alester Fabian scuttled away from the King private rooms and let out a deep breath. He couldn’t bear this any longer, he had been the Kings friend and advisor for almost as long as he could remember and hit hurt him to have to do this to him. It was clear the King was growing tired, his shoulder length blonde hair was a pale comparison of its former self and there were bags under his dark green eyes. The King had a scar that stretched from across from the left side of his jaw and across his cheek, that much hadn’t changed at least.

‘My family are more important, the King will understand,’ he thought to himself.

He straightened himself up and strode down the hallway with all the purpose he could amount. He made his way down out of the Kings private wing of the Castle and out into the main Hall and postern gate and across the

drawbridge which led to the City. The city was fairly busy at this time of day, men shouted across the street to get his attention. They would do anything to sell their wares to him at a highly extortionate rate but he wasn't stupid, he would never buy anything in town wearing his finest coat like he currently was.

'Am I stupid?' He thought to himself as he let out a sigh. Perhaps he was. No, he wasn't, he definitely wasn't, there was no other way.

He made his way down past the Inn and across the front of the new bank towards the tavern ignoring the beggars and pickpockets that hugged the shadows. It was scorching hot today, he undid a couple of buttons on his coat and began to look more relaxed as he walked. The last thing he wanted to do was draw attention and for once he wasn't talking about the pick pockets. He pulled on his robe and tugged his hood up over his head before he pushed the door open. He kept his head low and moved towards the table that he had arranged to meet him at. As he sat down a serving girl came to him carrying some empty mugs.

"Can I get ya anyfing mister?" She said as she let out a smile and Alester almost winced at the state of her teeth.

"I'll just have a mug of ale please," he replied in much lower voice than usual. He really did hope for his families sake that he wasn't recognised. What was he saying? No-one would recognise him here, they were just common people with nothing better to do with their time that to drink away their problems. He almost grinned at the thought of that, perhaps he should try drinking away his problem as well.

The serving girl returned with his ale and let out another wide smile and he winced again. He would never

get used to seeing teeth like that. As he looked up from his mug, a man was sat opposite him.

“I take it that all went as planned? General Fenwick is the new Commander of the Mirith Army?”

“He is, or at least he will be by this evening after I’ve drawn up the necessary documentation,” replied Alester with recognisable scorn in his voice.

“Wonderful. Your family is safe from harm for now. The threat remains though, in case you wish to go squealing to the King. Understood?”

“I understand very well,” he replied. At least they are safe for now he thought to himself. As he lifted the mug once again he noticed the tattoo on the mans hand. It was round in shape with sharp spikes pointing outwards and a snake coiled around the circular shape. It was an emblem he had become far too accustomed to of late.