

She was running like never before, through the crowds of people, past the stalls of the market, past the blacksmith and right to the steps leading up to the cathedral, all the different sounds were sometimes too much for her, but she had to keep her head clear, she had to focus, so she ran again, this time going under a stone arch, leading away from the cathedral and right to the docks. *Cyantor has the cathedral, Marcellus has the old town, I have the docks, the docks, the docks.* So she ran and ran until she was standing in front of the Flying Keg, a big brute of a ship well known, to the right were Broken Bottle and Lazy Sailor, to the left was Whiskey, all giant ships, but Alliana had little time to gaze and admire the vessels, instead she ran as fast as she could, across the docks, looking left and right, searching for the girl.

“Find her, now, find her or this city will be cleaning the blood from its roads for a year.”

The tone in which the Holy Father said his words convinced Alliana that he meant it, he had a decent amount of men now, with the 63th Infantry off in Redridge the city was vulnerable, Father Bouchard knew that.

*Hope...where are you?* They couldn't yell for her, they couldn't ask about her, they could only run around, they could only look. Such was the search, utter madness and folly, but no one dared to tell him that, so instead they ran and peered and ran some more.

She even looked behind some barrels, she bordered every single ship, but there was no sign, no trace, not a shimmer nor a glimmer of faith, not even a shred of hope for Hope. Hopeless she went back, dragging her feet across the cobbles of the city, shame filling her, fear taking control. *How many would die tonight?* At least she appeared before the cathedral steps once more, she was horrified, soldiers already bared the way into the sacred structure with their shields high. A small crowd was gathering before them, demanding to be let in, the soldiers stood like statues. Their captain behind them, pacing behind them slowly, shaking his head. It took three men to prevent entry, *three to start a war.* Alliana climbed the steps afraid and when she reached the soldiers, their captain looked at the shield-maiden and shook his head once more. He was an old man, his helmet was clipped to his waist, he wore chainmail and a short sword was in its scabbard on his hip. The Captain sighed and let out a sharp whistle, the three men pushed forward and two more came from left and right, joining the line of shields. They made way to let Alliana pass, to her surprise, she was allowed entry. One of the soldiers bashed a man's face when he tried to go into the cathedral, too, but she simply went on, *don't be a fool now...don't be a fool,* she told the man in her mind and prayed he wouldn't be a fool.

The cathedral was full of men she recruited, of men Marcellus recruited, even Cyantor and Gianni, it was crowded and it stank, she noticed the lack of clergy instantly and then she saw him, Father Bouchard, alone, on his knees praying under the altar. She could have sworn, but she didn't, so instead she waited. Alliana tried to spot any of her companions, but if they were in the cathedral, she didn't notice them, it was just too crowded.

*Girl...how could a missing girl start this?*

Then Father Bouchard rose and all the eyes were on him, instantly. Silence replaced the soft murmurs otherwise present and without a word Augustus set off for his office, door closing calmly. She took a deep long breath and went to meet the priest.

"Holy Father?" she called and got no answer, he was brooding over a book, it wasn't quite as thick and when she came closer she noticed he slammed shut a sort of journal. Those deep blue angry eyes of his staring at her silently, she felt terribly uncomfortable and rather pulled away slowly. She left as quickly as she came into the room, outside of his cabinet soldiers were muttering again and she did not know what she was supposed to do.

*I could look again, she must be somewhere, she must be out there...has someone killed her, has someone taken her? What happened...*

She got no answer, nothing. An hour passed and then another, all the while different men were coming and going out of the Holy Father's office, but Father Bouchard did not come out. She was confused, but ready for battle, her gut told her there would be a battle. She felt something brush against her and she heard a scream that made her spine shiver

"Hellooooo!" It was the jester "Go away." She told him and Alliana realized all the eyes were upon the duo. "He's...different." She tried telling the men, but they didn't seem to pay any mind to her or to the jester, instead they went back to their murmuring.

"So!" He yelled again "What's the Holy Father up to? Eh? EHH?!" The way he screamed made her shiver again "Don't be so loud in here Gianni...it's a holy place." He only laughed and jumped before her "Gianni knows! He knows! Yes! Yes! Yes! He knows where the girl is! He saw her, with his two eyes! Gianni knows! Gianni knows many and more, ha! HA!" Again, the eyes were on them, she grabbed the Jester's collar and began dragging him out, all the while he was flailing and screeching and acting as if she's about to slash his throat right there and then.

The shields parted for them again, but the crowd was notably bigger...and angrier. They moved to the side and slipped through, Gianni's screams lost in the crowd. She sat him down on the cobbles and shook him "I'm not going to kill you! Sto-"

He interrupted "Gianni knows, Gianni knows!" Alliana frowned and asked "Then why did you act as if I w-" He interrupted again "Gianni does because he can, why or what or how...interests Gianni little." Her frown got sourer and she sighed "Where is she then?"

The jester replied in a muffled whisper "She is here, she is with us all, she is everywhere, she is nowhere, she is, she isn't. Gianni knows."

Somehow her anger got the best of her and somehow the jester was spitting blood on the floor, and somehow his teeth were before himself and somehow she had struck him. Though where the jester should be crying, he only laughed and laughed and laughed. She pulled back and ran to the docks again, *I have the docks, I have the docks*. But when she got there, she knew there was little chance Hope would be found. Alliana placed herself on the pier and let her feet dangle off the edge, wanting to slip into the waters. She laid down on the pier and went to sleep. Her dreams were about a house on the edge of a forest, of a little girl and her parents, then came the wolves and when she woke, she awoke sweaty...but that was not what surprised her, it was night, stars shimmered brightly...the ships were on fire, battle raged in the streets and the bells were tolling the war that has begun. Alliana grabbed her shield and sword, then ran.

TO BE CONTINUED...