

"Dragon guts!" Ava grumbled as Clara hummed at the stovetop. Clara's cooking experiments were legend, both for the great outcomes and the horrible ones. You never knew which you were going to get.

"Don't curse," Clara gently chided her friend. Ava was usually the quiet one, but when you got to know, Ava could be very talkative. When it was just Clara and Ava, they could talk all day or just enjoy each other's presence silently.

"You have no idea what kind of day it's been and now you're experimenting in the kitchen. It's completely okay to curse. A nice standard meal would be great today instead of playing a game of chance." Ava hung up her bag and duster coat on the coat rack, brushing off stray sand as best she could. She entered the kitchen with a sigh.

"It's not that bad. I think you'll like it." Clara didn't stress over Ava's complaints. It took a lot of failures to make a great recipe, that's how the world worked. No use being upset when people complain about failures. It just helped her figure out what to do the next time. Sometimes she even got it right the first time.

"After dealing with a broken water main, the stuck-up Hunter's guild again, and a slurry of sudden emergencies around town – I just wanted something I could count on when I came home," Ava explained. Her work in the town maintenance was often a game of not only fixing things but juggling the politics of all the other sections of the town between each other.

"What was wrong with the Hunter's this time?" Clara asked as she took the dish out of the oven. It smelled okay, looked right. Ava was worrying over nothing.

“Some kind of big announcement tonight in the town square and they want to be front and center and not happy that we won’t change the normal setup.” Ava collapsed into the dining room chair and rested her head in her hands. “When we said no, they started trying to do the changes themselves and we had to call in the town security to stop them. Then they tried to claim it was their Hunter rights and a big shouting match in the middle of the street occurred. Well, more of a shout down as they did all the shouting and wouldn’t hear anything anyone said, regardless of the volume we spoke.”

Clara set the dish on the table next to the already prepared plates and forks. She nodded in agreement as she scooped up the new casserole onto the plates. “Sounds exhausting.”

Ava accepted the plate and poked at the food dubiously with her fork. “It was. And it seems like everyone else decided that if the Hunter’s could make a big fuss, they should too. I haven’t seen so many work orders arrive in ages.”

Clara patted her on the back in sympathy before sitting in her own chair. “Grace?” Ava sighed but pulled her hands up. They both clapped twice over the food and chanted, “Thanks be to Resparta.”

Excited, Clara took a bite of her new recipe. She froze, then scrambled for her napkin to spit it back out. Ava knew better than trying it first and chuckled at her friend. Clara grasped her drink, gulping it to wash the taste out of her mouth.

“No!” Clara wailed. “It looks great! It smells great! What did I do wrong? Was there not enough salt to offset the sugar? It’s like vomited candy.”

Ava shook her head. “Maybe it’s because chocolate should not be combined with vegetables – ever.”

“But chocolate is awesome! It goes with fruit, and even chicken! Why can’t it go with vegetables?” Clara mourned the loss perfection of the vegetable chocolate casserole.

Ava prodded Clara in the side. “Come on. Let’s see what the tavern has. You can clean this up later.” Clara sighed and made sure the stovetop was turned off before joining Ava at the coat rack. Slinging her own dust jacket on, she followed her friend out into town.

The streets were a bit more crowded than normal, and they slowed down before they could reach the main plaza. “Ah. I forgot about the big announcement tonight. That won’t be for an hour, but it looks like everyone’s already out. It’s going to be a pain to get to the tavern. Let’s go the long route around.”

Clara nodded and skipped along as they turned around to go back a few blocks and then looped around the central plaza. The tavern was packed, but the staff knew them well. It wasn’t the first time Clara’s creation hadn’t worked out, and they needed a meal on the fly. They got their meal to go and headed back towards the plaza.

“Any idea what it’s about?” Clara asked her friend between bites of the cactus chips she snacked on as they approached the crowded part of the street. Everyone was told of the announcement to be made tonight, but it wasn’t mandatory to attend. Clara hadn’t planned to before, but Ava suggested they check it out on their way home.

“No clue. It’s territory level, and they don’t really give out many details,” Ava responded between her own bites of chips.

Clara hummed again as they squeezed through a few groups and found their own place to stand near the edge of the plaza. The two friends didn’t talk much while they ate their dinner and watched everyone else. The town didn’t seem any different than normal. Ethane groups, Ethane stories being told, Ethane little quarrels here and there.

The loudspeaker device flickered on. There were the standard three puffs of air to test it was working and warn people the speech was about to begin. A voice she didn’t recognize started to read an announcement in a very sterilized manner. It was really hard to focus in on until the taboo word came through loud and clear.

“... retiring at the end of the season...” the voice continued to drone on, but Clara wasn’t really paying attention. From the roar of the crowd, not many others were listening until the end. Retiring was not a word anyone used. Even when you stopped working and lived off the younger generations, they never called it retiring. Only the Gods used that term for when they were tired of the constant wars and left the desert land for their own. And the only reason the whole town would be called for a retiring announcement is if their own God of the territory was retiring.

This was bad. When a God retired, the territory was unclaimed. Any God could come in and take over—and many will try. With battles fought until one came out victorious. It didn’t matter who did. The land and the people in the territory were always devastated by the time victory was found. No one ever survived completely. There was always some kind of damage. And if you wanted to leave to preserve your life, you left your home and land behind for anyone to take it as they pleased.

“Clara!” Ava’s voice finally penetrated Clara’s distressed thoughts. Her friend was tugging at her arm to get her attention. The last bit of their dinner was on the ground, dropped when the shock of the announcement hit.

“Clara! Come on. Snap out of it.” Clara focused on Ava’s face and saw the relieved sigh that crossed her friend’s lips. Ava must not have taken it so badly. Ava’s mother had no family and passed away several years ago. Clara was her only real relationship. But Clara had a large family in the territory. They had a family farm in the lands, businesses in the main city, and a lot of lives to be responsible for. Clara worked in the town storehouse to get more experience so she could help her own family in the city later.

“Let’s get home and out of all this chaos,” Ava suggested, pulling Clara along. The people around them were shouting at each other, a few hunched down and crying. Others rushed from the plaza to spread the news or take care of their own affairs. The streets were horrible to navigate through. More and more townsfolk came out of their homes to find out what the fuss was about. Then they joined in and made more chaos as the news of the God’s future retirement hit.

“The storehouse!” Clara yelled at Ava over the babbling crowds. Ava nodded and turned towards the warehouse right next to the plaza. The street entrance was as busy as the rest of the streets, but the employee entrance down the side alley was clear. Clara swiped her gem on the entry door lock, and it allowed them to enter.

The quiet, once the door was closed, was relieving. The two just stood and breathed for a bit. "You okay?" Ava asked.

"Not really. It's been over a hundred years since the last territory war. A lot of people are going to die. Our family!" Clara was getting shrill. Ava wasn't blood-related, but her best friend had been a part of her family for so long they were as good as sisters. All her relatives treated Ava like family. Why was this not affecting Ava the same way?

Ava simply hugged Clara, clutching her back through Clara's dark curls. "It's okay. It's going to be okay."

Clara hugged back as her thoughts whirled. Her family farm had the biggest oasis and controlled a lot of the water used in the territory. It was a prime target for any war. And the businesses in the capital—those were all at risk while other gods came to try and claim the city for their own. Even if they could abandon the city, no one would give up the farm. It was their home.

"What are you doing back here, Thompson? You don't have a shift until tomorrow."

Clara's boss broke their hug up as Clara took a deep breath to help her stay calm.

"Did you hear the news?" Clara asked back.

"I know the whole town's going crazy over it. I'm glad the shutters are down out front. That's a whole lot of noise, and a few have tried to come in, even if they know better. We're never open after supper."

"Resparta's retiring," Ava bluntly stated. Clara's boss jerked back, physically hit by that simple announcement.

“What? No.” Clara’s boss shook his head slowly, not wanting to trust the information.

“Truth. I didn’t catch the details; the crowd went insane. But they said he’s going to leave,” Clara confirmed.

“Crud,” the boss swore. His whole body shook as he straightened up. “That’s going to be a mess. Thanks for coming in, Clara—we’re going to need to be ready for tomorrow. Everyone’s going to panic and want more supplies than they are allotted. And they’ll all get as much as they can, which is going to wipe us out as we’re not used to everyone getting their allotment all at once.”

Her boss started muttering as he walked back towards his office. Clara shook her head. He only thought of work. One of the reasons her family liked him. It was enough to send her to train here during her time away from the family. All her family took apprenticeships outside of the family business to gain experience and independence.

“Thompson! Head out to the hunter’s guild to hire some security. We’ll take whoever can come right now and we’ll work out shifts for them later. Have them bill the storehouse directly,” Clara sighed after hearing her boss’s call.

But the instructions helped. She could focus on her task and not the overwhelming feeling of doom the announcement had given. It was too big for her. She couldn’t think of it.

Ava helped her navigate the streets to the hunter’s guild.

“Back again minion?” a snooty voice called as soon as they entered the building.

“Not on your life, Crawler,” Ava shot back. “Just escorting Clara. It’s crazy out there.”

A snort was the only response as the two made their way to the reception desk. It wasn’t anything fancy, but it was big. The hunters liked to show off how important they were. A young man sneered at them as a greeting.

“Storehouse needs security. Who’s available?” Clara knew to get right to the point with the hunters. They’d do their job, but they were never happy about it. They preferred hunting and only hunting. Being called on to do duties as a warrior were always looked down on.

“How many you need?”

“Standard two should do. Boss wants them as soon as possible to hold down the fort and keep any crazies out, but he wants to work out a standard rotation for the next while.” Clara sighed as she spoke. It was going to be a long night.

“Need some help!” called a voice farther back in the warehouse.

“Coming!” Clara yelled. The night had been long and this day was worse. Ava left her after they got security, reassuring her friend she’d clean up the failed chocolate veggie casserole. Besides a few hours of sleep on the breakroom couch, Clara hasn’t been able to rest since the announcement.

“Over here!” Clara rushed to the voice, watching as the pile of goods in her co-workers hands threatened to topple over.

“I got you,” she called when she grabbed some of the sacks her co-worker was carrying. Her boss was completely right. As soon as the door opened, everyone in town was asking for their full allotment of goods. If Clara and the boss hadn’t gone over the numbers yesterday and calculated exactly how many they could give of each type to all citizens if everyone came in – it would have been horrible.

There was a poster outside and inside showing exactly how much each citizen could take in a single day. Until the restocking later this week occurred, that was all they had. Not everyone believed them. Security from the Hunter’s guild had been needed several times when citizens felt that the limits placed on orders should not apply to them.

The standard two Hunters doubled after the first hour they were open. One pair inside to control anyone getting rowdy. One pair outside to control how many entered the store. Even with limits, every worker was running crazy trying to fulfill allotments as fast as they could. The line was through the whole town. As soon as word of people getting larger orders and the limits was out, everyone got into line.

Clara was struggling to keep up when a young hunter approached her. He had a kind smile and a determined look in his eyes.

“Need a hand?” he asked, reaching for one of the heavy sacks she was carrying.

“Thanks,” Clara replied, grateful for the help. “It’s been a madhouse in here.”

The young hunter nodded. “I can see that. I’m Ethan, by the way.”

“Clara,” she said, smiling back. “Nice to meet you, Ethan.”

As they worked together, Clara found herself appreciating Ethan’s calm and steady presence. He was efficient and strong, making the workload a bit more manageable. They chatted as they worked, sharing stories and laughs. By the end of the day, Clara felt like she had made a new friend.

“Thanks for your help today, Ethan,” Clara said as they finished up.

“Anytime,” Ethan replied with a grin. “I’ll be around if you need me.”

Clara watched him leave, feeling a sense of relief and gratitude. Maybe the day hadn’t been so bad after all.

“Thompson!” Her boss called out. The even-tempered man had been sorely pushed to his limits the past week. Their warehouse had been nearly emptied before the restock arrived. The delivery person warned them the next one might be a little late but couldn’t say how late. That did not make Boss happy at all. He liked plans and was okay with late deliveries, as long as he knew the new shipment arrival date.

Still, he kept everyone’s spirits up and worked through the craziness of the town and overworked employees. Clara always liked her boss, but this made her really respect him. How many could have survived a whole week like this without snapping at anyone?

But now he was calling her name with an edge of anger that hadn’t really tainted his voice even during the worst of the near riots.

“Yes, boss?” Clara answered when she was in the door of his office.

“Get in and shut the door,” he ordered. No please. Clara had no idea if she had done something or yet another crisis was piled onto their plate. Whatever it was, Boss was beyond unhappy.

Closing the door, Clara sat gingerly on the seat near Boss’s desk. Boss ruffled through a few papers before pulling one near the top out and waving it at her.

“Any idea why I just got a prairie dog message from the Flagans, requesting your immediate leave of absence for family business?” At least he sounded less angry and more wry.

Clara wasn’t sure what she was supposed to say. She thought her true last name of Flagan wasn’t ever going to be told to her boss until her training was done. The family

might like him, but it was tradition to hide their connection during the time away from the family. Not only to prevent anyone from trying to use their connections, but to keep those away from the family safer. The territory may have been peaceful the last 100 years or so, but Flagan was a powerful name. A lone Flagan could be targeted by territory folk just as much as foreigners.

“Surprise?” she settled on replying.

Boss snorted and put down the note. “I should have known. You came in and already knew half the stuff I usually need to teach newbies. Picked up on the rest quick as a lick. Flagan. Heh.”

Okay, now Boss was chuckling. The immediate danger was over and Clara relaxed in her seat a little. She really wasn’t sure what she would have done if he was angry.

“I don’t normally get prairie dog messages. Surprised for sure. Had the seal for private information only. I got back here worried the territory was going to lower our town allotments or cut us loose. We wouldn’t be critical for any war efforts, but I didn’t expect notice so soon when Resparta hasn’t even gone yet,” Boss ran a hand through his hair as he rambled.

“Then I get the courage to open it up only to get a short cryptic message that Clara Thompson is needed immediately for family business. Didn’t even know it was from the Flagans until I got to the signature lines, but the whole note was so military-like I wondered if it was sent to the wrong department.”

Boss offered the letter over to Clara to read. He was right about it being cryptic. All it mentioned was she needed to leave right away and report as Clara Thompson to the

main hunter's guild in the capital. A message would be waiting for her there. She was to bring an escort of at least two hunters for her travel and payment would be waiting for them at the main hunter's guild. A token was included in the message for proof of payment.

"Looks like I'll be down my main assistant for a while. Can you at least let me know when you get more details on when you'll be coming back?" Boss didn't even ask her if she wanted to come back. That was a compliment if she ever heard one. Boss wouldn't care if she returned if he didn't value her. Clara stepped out of the office, her mind racing. She needed to find escorts quickly. She spotted Ethan, the young hunter who had helped her earlier, and his mentor, a seasoned but arrogant hunter named Marcus.

"Ethan, Marcus, I need your help," Clara said, approaching them.

"What's up?" Ethan asked, his curiosity piqued.

"I have to leave for the capital immediately. I need two hunters to escort me," Clara explained.

Marcus raised an eyebrow. "And why should we help you?"

Clara held up the token from the message. "Payment will be waiting for you at the main hunter's guild."

Marcus's eyes gleamed with interest. "Alright, we're in."

Just then, Ava appeared, her expression determined. "I'm coming too. You're not going without me."

Clara smiled, grateful for her friend's support. "Alright, let's get ready. We leave at dawn."

With her escorts and Ava by her side, Clara felt a surge of confidence. They were ready to face whatever challenges lay ahead on their journey to the capital.

Their world was a vast expanse of desert, but the types of desert were very different.

Clara had heard tales of places covered in endless sand dunes, with shifting mountains of sand that the wind would blow down and build up again. These deserts were like oceans of sand, constantly changing and moving.

But in Resparta's territory, the deserts were vast plains of cracked earth, dotted with cactus and spiny brush. In the center of this harsh landscape was a large plateau, a vast red monolith of rock that could be seen from everywhere in the territory. The capital city was carved into the side of this plateau. The capital never rested. At sunrise, the light would crest over the plateau and fill the main city with light until noon, when shadows started to take over. Orbs of captured Dragon Fire lit the streets and tunnels, glowing throughout the night.

Clara's town was to the east of the capital. As they traveled, the great plateau cast a shadow over them in the afternoon, giving them relief from the heat of the late day. It took three days by horseback to reach the capital. The whole time, the arrogant hunter continued to rant and rave about how he was doing them a huge favor by taking this quest. He ran the young hunter ragged with chores every time they stopped for the night or packed up for the start of the day. The young hunter didn't seem to mind and carried out his duties with soft smiles and gentle jokes. How the pair of them worked together for so many years seemed to be a testament to the young hunter's personality more than the arrogant one.

Checking into the capital was easy enough. Clara was startled by the amount of outgoing traffic more than anything. Usually, there was a longer line to enter than to exit.

"It's the upcoming war. Those that want to get out before anything even starts are going now," Ava commented when she saw what Clara was watching.

The party of four—Clara, Ava, Ethan, and Marcus—entered the bustling city. The streets were alive with activity, filled with merchants, travelers, and townsfolk going about their day. The towering buildings carved into the side of the plateau loomed above them, casting long shadows as the sun began to set.

As they made their way through the city, Clara couldn't help but notice the mix of excitement and tension in the air. The upcoming war had everyone on edge, and the streets were busier than usual with people preparing for what was to come.

"Stay close," Marcus instructed, his eyes scanning the crowd for any signs of trouble. Ethan walked beside Clara, offering her a reassuring smile.

They finally reached the hunter's guild, a large, imposing building with a grand entrance. The guild's emblem, a fierce dragon, was etched into the stone above the door. Inside, the guild was bustling with activity. Hunters of all ages and ranks were gathered, discussing missions and preparing for their next assignments.

Clara approached the reception desk, where a stern-looking woman greeted them. "How can I help you?" she asked, her eyes flicking over the group.

"We're here to report for a mission," Clara said, handing over the token she had received. "I need to speak with the guild master."

The woman's expression softened slightly as she examined the token. "Follow me," she said, leading them through the busy hallways to a large office at the back of the building.

The guild master, Reginald Flagan, was a tall man with a commanding presence. He looked up from a desk as they entered. "Clara Thompson, I presume?" he said, his voice deep and authoritative.

"Yes, sir," Clara replied, feeling a mix of nerves and determination.

The guild master nodded. "I've been expecting you. We have much to discuss. Please, have a seat."

As Clara and Ava sat, as her hunter companions were sent out of the room. Reginald nodded in much more warmly after the door was closed. "Glad to see you again Clara. This was delivered by prairie dog for you." He handed her a rolled-up note. Clara unrolled the message and read it carefully. Her family was requesting her immediate return for a mission of great importance. She felt a pang of anxiety but knew she had to fulfill her duty.

The next morning, Clara slept in late and was reluctant to face the day. Marcus and Ethan had agreed to continue their protection detail to the Flagan Farm but were not told of why Clara and Ava needed to go there. It was close to the time they needed to meet and while Clara was dressed, she sat despondently on the bed with Ava quietly beside her.

Marcus barged into Clara and Ava's room, his usual arrogance on full display. "What's the hold-up, Thompson? We don't have all day," he sneered.

Before Clara could respond, Reginald responded from the doorway. "Is there a problem here?" he asked, his tone icy.

Marcus, not checking who was there, scoffed. "Just dealing with this incompetent girl. She's holding us up."

Reginald's eyes narrowed. "Incompetent, you say? I happen to know Clara personally. Perhaps you should watch your tongue."

Marcus's turned to face the door, a shout ready on his lips that was quickly choked back when he recognized the Guild Master. His face turned red with anger and embarrassment. "I didn't mean any disrespect, sir."

"Disrespect or not, your behavior is unacceptable," Sir Reginald continued. "Ethan, step forward."

Ethan, who had been quietly observing the exchange, stepped forward with a respectful nod. "I reviewed your record last night. You've already passed your Desert Survival Skills and Message Delivery requirements. This last escort mission meets the final

requirement for an escort mission. Given your dedication and hard work, I believe it's time for your Journeyman test."

A Journeyman hunter had a lot of qualifications. They must demonstrate their ability to navigate the desert using a map and compass and find a hidden water source. They must build shelters using materials found in the desert, such as cactus and brush. And they must know how to perform techniques like collecting dew or extracting water from cactus.

While they are apprentices, they must also do some solo missions to prove they can be trusted and have the skills needed for protection details. Ethan must have already done a sealed message delivery, ensuring the message remained secure and undamaged during transit.

Escorting a VIP to ensure the VIP's safety and handle any potential threats or disturbances was the final test Reginald referred to. Clara hadn't realized she was considered a VIP. This was supposed to just be a standard Escort. With the way Marcus looked, he hadn't realized it would qualify either.

Marcus's expression remained tense, but he held his tongue. Reginald turned back to the hallway, heading towards the main hunter area. "Let's proceed to the training room for your final test."

Ethan nodded, his heart pounding with anticipation. Clara and Ava followed, feeling a mix of relief and determination. Marcus trailed behind, his arrogance still present but grudgingly silent.

Ethan stood in the center of the training grounds, his heart pounding with anticipation. This was the final part of his test to become a journeyman hunter. He had to prove his ability to handle conflicts with diplomacy and negotiation. In the rural areas, with no other authority, Hunters were often called on to handle small disputes.

Reginald, watched from a distance, his eyes sharp and focused. He had arranged for a staged conflict to test Ethan's skills. Two experienced hunters, playing the roles of disputing parties, approached Ethan with angry expressions.

The first hunter, a burly man named Garret, shouted, "This land belongs to me! I've been farming it for years, and I won't let anyone take it from me!"

The second hunter, a slender woman named Lila, retorted, "That's not true! The land was passed down to me by my family. You have no right to it!"

Ethan took a deep breath, stepping between the two hunters. "Let's all take a moment to calm down," he said, his voice steady and reassuring. "We can resolve this without resorting to violence."

Garret glared at him. "And how do you propose we do that?"

Ethan nodded, acknowledging the tension. "First, let's gather all the facts. Garret, you say you've been farming this land for years. Do you have any documents or witnesses to support your claim?"

Garret hesitated, then nodded. "I have some old records and a few neighbors who can vouch for me."

Ethan turned to Lila. "And you, Lila, you mentioned that the land was passed down to you by your family. Do you have any proof of inheritance?"

Lila nodded. "I have the deed and some letters from my parents."

Ethan smiled, sensing a way forward. "Great. Let's bring all the documents and witnesses together. We can review everything and come to a fair decision."

Garret and Lila exchanged wary glances but agreed to Ethan's proposal. They gathered their documents that Reginald provided, which included some witness statements that Ethan had to pretend as if he had spoken to real witnesses. Ethan carefully reviewed the records, listening to both sides and asking clarifying questions.

After a thorough examination, Ethan addressed the two. "Based on the evidence, it appears that there was a misunderstanding. The land was indeed passed down to Lila by her family, but Garret has been farming it with their permission. I suggest we come to a compromise. Garret, you can continue farming the land, but you will pay a small rent to Lila for its use. This way, both parties benefit."

Garret and Lila considered Ethan's proposal. After a moment, they both nodded in agreement. "That sounds fair," Garret said, extending his hand to Lila. "I apologize for the misunderstanding."

Lila shook his hand. "Apology accepted. Let's move forward together."

Ethan felt a surge of relief and pride as he watched the two hunters reconcile. Reginald approached, a satisfied smile on his face. "Well done, Ethan. You've shown that you can handle conflicts with diplomacy and negotiation. You are now a journeyman hunter."

Ethan beamed with pride, knowing that he had passed the final test. He was ready to take on the responsibilities and challenges of his new role. "Thank you, sir. I won't let you down."

Reginald turned back to Clara. "As for you, Clara, you need to leave immediately. Take Ethan with you as your escort."

Clara nodded, feeling a mix of relief and determination. "Thank you, Reginald."

As they prepared to leave, Marcus stood silently, his arrogance deflated. Clara couldn't help but feel a sense of satisfaction.

“Clara!” Her mother’s hugs were still the best. The younger hunter looked confused as Ava chuckled at the duo’s embrace.

“Mom. Glad you’re still doing alright,” Clara muttered into her mom’s shoulder. Backing away for a moment, she gestured to the young hunter. “This is Ethan. He’s been helping at the warehouse and was one of the escorts I had to come to the capitol.”

The young hunter stepped forward and extended his hand for a greeting. Mom grabbed his hand and pulled him in for another hug. The startled expression on his face was perfect. “Don’t worry about Mom. She’s very tactile.”

“That okay. I don’t mind. It just isn’t typical. It’s nice to meet you too, Mrs. Thompson.”

“Oh!” Mom stepped back while keeping her hands on Ethan’ shoulders. “None of that. Besides, it’s Flagan, not Thompson. That’s just one of our pseudonyms for when we’re away from the family. You can call me Lena.”

Clara led the group through the family farm, pointing out various landmarks and explaining their significance. Ethan marveled at the prairie dog messenger division, where trained prairie dogs scurried about, delivering messages with remarkable speed and accuracy. Ava chuckled at Ethan’s wide-eyed wonder, enjoying his enthusiasm.

As they approached the oasis near the south side of the plateau, Clara explained that this was a special place for the Flagan family. The oasis was hidden within a cave that led to an underwater lake. The entrance was guarded by a pair of imposing stone statues, their eyes seeming to follow the group as they entered.

Inside the cave, the air was cool and damp. The sound of running water echoed off the walls, creating a soothing ambiance. Clara led them to a smaller cave off to the side, where a shallow pool of clear water reflected the light from the glowing orbs above.

“This is the Mirror of Truth,” Clara explained. “When a person looks into it, it shows their true potential. It’s used to find spies before they are given higher positions, but it was also used in the beginning of the territory to find people of talent to use.”

Ethan and Ava were not allowed to enter the smaller cave. Clara’s mother, Lena, stayed with them while Clara and the family elder, a wise and weathered man named Elder Thorne, entered the cave. The air inside was cool and damp, and the sound of running water echoed off the walls. The Mirror of Truth, a shallow pool of clear water, reflected the light from the glowing orbs above.

Elder Thorne began to explain the situation. “Resparta has half-human children in the territory, but he never kept records of which of his lovers had children. We only know a few of them and need those who are currently unattached to the family to check on them. If there are any offspring, they need to be brought to the Mirror of Truth so they can be seen if they have dragon potential. Resparta has agreed to unlock their powers to allow them to take over the territory when he retires at the end of the season. If we don’t find one, we are on our own.”

Clara listened intently, understanding the gravity of the mission. “So, we need to find these potential heirs and bring them here to be tested?”

Elder Thorne nodded. “Yes, exactly. It’s a delicate task. We can’t reveal the true purpose to them initially.” Elder Thorne placed a reassuring hand on her shoulder. “You won’t have to force anyone. We need to be persuasive and make it appealing for them to come willingly. Once they’re here, we can explain the situation.”

Clara sighed, feeling the weight of the responsibility. “And if we don’t find any dragon-born heirs?”

Elder Thorne’s expression grew serious. “Then we are on our own. The territory will be unclaimed, and it will be vulnerable to other gods trying to take over. We must do everything we can to prevent that.”

Clara nodded, her determination growing. “I understand. I’ll do my best to find them.”

Elder Thorne smiled, a glimmer of hope in his eyes. “I know you will, Clara. You have the strength and the heart for this mission.”

Clara listened intently, understanding the gravity of the mission. She knew that finding these potential heirs was crucial for the future of the territory. With a determined nod, she agreed to take on the task.

As they left the cave, Clara felt a renewed sense of purpose. She rejoined Ethan and Ava, who were waiting patiently outside. “We have a mission,” she said, her voice filled with resolve. “We need to find Resparta’s children and bring them to the Mirror of Truth.”

Ethan and Ava exchanged glances.

Back at the Hunter's quarter in the city, Clara felt a wave of distress wash over her as she thought about the mission given to her. Ethan and Ava were going with her, but the task seemed so big. How was she supposed to convince kids or young adults to come back with her without being able to tell them why? It sounded more like kidnapping than anything else. She wasn't a kidnapper!

Ava noticed Clara's distress and reassured her, "It's going to be okay. We don't have to take anyone unwilling. We can make something up—like a free vacation at the Flagan Farmland. They're famous for how much they grow, and not everyone gets to see it from inside the border walls."

Ethan chimed in, "To do that, we'd need official papers or at least a flyer."

Clara's eyes lit up as she remembered the printing press her aunt ran. "We can go to the printing press to get everything set up."

They made their way to the printing press but found themselves in the midst of a near riot near the warehouse. The air was thick with tension, and the crowd was agitated, shouting and pushing against each other. The situation was chaotic, with people jostling for space and tempers flaring.

Ethan quickly assessed the situation, his eyes scanning the crowd for a safe path. "Stay close to me," he instructed Clara and Ava, his voice steady and reassuring.

Clara nodded, gripping Ava's hand tightly as they followed Ethan. The crowd surged around them, and Clara could feel the panic rising in her chest. Ethan moved with purpose, using his body to shield them from the worst of the chaos.

As they navigated through the throng, a group of angry townsfolk blocked their path, shouting about the recent announcement of Resparta's retirement. "This is madness!" one man yelled. "What are we supposed to do now?"

Ethan stepped forward, his calm demeanor cutting through the noise. "We understand your concerns, but causing a riot won't solve anything. Let's find a way to address this peacefully."

The man glared at Ethan but seemed to hesitate at the hunter symbol displayed on his coat collar. Clara took the opportunity to speak up. "We're all in this together. Let's work towards a solution instead of tearing each other apart."

The crowd murmured in agreement, and the tension began to ease. There was still grumbling and they didn't disperse, but it didn't look like it would break out into violence anymore.

Ethan led Clara and Ava through the less rowdy crowd, guiding them towards the printing press. As they approached the building, they could see the staff inside, anxiously watching the commotion outside.

Ethan knocked on the door, and a familiar face appeared—a young woman named Eliza, who worked at the press. "Clara! It's good to see you again. Come inside, quickly."

They hurried inside, and Eliza locked the door behind them. The noise from the crowd was muffled, and the relative quiet of the printing press was a welcome relief.

"Thank you, Eliza," Clara said, catching her breath. "We need to speak with my aunt about an urgent matter."

Eliza nodded, leading them through the bustling press to a private office at the back. Clara's aunt, a stern but kind woman named Marjorie, looked up from her desk as they entered. "Clara, what brings you here?"

Clara quickly explained their plan to create official papers and flyers for the contest to bring potential heirs to the Mirror of Truth. Marjorie listened intently, her expression thoughtful.

"I love the idea," Marjorie said, a smile spreading across her face. "It'll take a day to get the printing set up, but we can make it happen. I'll also send a message to the Flagan elders to ensure they respond to any inquiries about this 'official contest.'"

Clara felt a surge of relief. "Thank you, Aunt Marjorie. This means a lot."

Marjorie nodded. "Anything for family. Now, let's get to work."

As they left the office, Ava decided to run some errands, leaving Clara and Ethan alone for the day. They agreed to meet up later for dinner at the inn. Clara felt a bit more at ease, knowing they had a plan in place and the support of her family.

Clara and Ethan found themselves with some free time while waiting for Ava. Clara decided to show Ethan around the capital, hoping to take his mind off the mission and enjoy the day.

"Let's explore the market," Clara suggested, leading the way through the bustling streets. The market was a vibrant place, filled with colorful stalls selling everything from fresh produce to handmade crafts. The air was filled with the scent of spices and the sound of merchants calling out their wares.

Ethan's eyes widened as he took in the sights and sounds. "This place is amazing," he said, a smile spreading across his face.

Clara grinned. "It is. There's always something new to see here."

They wandered through the market, stopping at various stalls to admire the goods. Clara bought a small trinket for Ava, a beautifully carved wooden pendant, and Ethan picked up a bag of roasted nuts for them to share.

As they walked, they came across a street performer juggling flaming torches. A crowd had gathered to watch, and Clara and Ethan joined in, cheering and clapping along with the rest of the audience. The performer's skill and showmanship were impressive, and Ethan couldn't help but be captivated.

After the performance, they continued their exploration, eventually finding themselves at a small park. They sat on a bench, enjoying the shade of a large tree and the sound of a nearby fountain.

"This is nice," Ethan said, leaning back and closing his eyes for a moment. "It's good to take a break from all the chaos."

Clara nodded in agreement. "Yeah, it is. Sometimes it's easy to forget to take a moment for ourselves."

They sat in comfortable silence for a while, enjoying the peaceful atmosphere.

Eventually, Clara turned to Ethan with a thoughtful expression. "You know, I'm really glad you're here. You've been a great help, and I appreciate it."

Ethan smiled warmly. "Thanks, Clara. I'm glad to be here too. And I'm happy to help in any way I can."

As the sun began to set, they made their way back to the inn, feeling more connected and at ease. The evening had been a welcome respite from the challenges ahead, and they both felt ready to face whatever came next.

Clara, Ethan, and Ava set out early in the morning, their hearts filled with determination. The journey to the first town was uneventful, but as they approached, they could see the bustling activity of a small community. The town was a mix of adobe houses and wooden structures, with children playing in the dusty streets and merchants hawking their wares.

As they entered the town, Clara asked around for Emmeline, a name that had come up in their search. They were directed to a modest house on the outskirts of town. When they arrived, they found Emmeline in the front yard, surrounded by a brood of children. The sight was both heartwarming and chaotic, with little ones running around, laughing, and playing.

Clara approached Emmeline with a warm smile. "Hello, Emmeline. My name is Clara, and these are my friends, Ethan and Ava. We're here on behalf of the Flagan family. We've heard wonderful things about you and your children."

Emmeline looked up, a bit surprised but friendly. "Hello, Clara. It's nice to meet you all. What brings you here?"

Clara took a deep breath, ready to use the contest ploy they had devised. "We're hosting a special contest at the Flagan Farmland. You and your children were chosen to participate. It's a chance to see the farm, enjoy some activities, and maybe even win a prize."

Emmeline's eyes lit up with curiosity. "A contest? That sounds interesting."

Clara nodded enthusiastically. "Yes, it's a great opportunity. We have games, food, and a beautiful oasis to explore. It's only a day's travel from here. We've been sent to escort you safely there."

Emmeline glanced at her children, who were already excited at the prospect of an adventure. It took a little more negotiating, but eventually the mother agreed. "Alright, we'll come. The children could use a bit of fun."

The trip back to the Flagan Farmland was short but lively. The children were full of energy, running around and exploring every nook and cranny along the way. Ethan turned out to be a great child wrangler, managing to keep them all in one group and safe from dangers. He even managed to keep an eye on the one child who had a penchant for poking at cracks and crannies where poisonous scorpions and snakes liked to hide.

As they arrived at the oasis, Clara led Emmeline and her children on a "tour" of the area. "Welcome to the Flagan Farmland! We're so excited to have you here for the contest," Clara said with a warm smile. "We'll start with a visit to our special reflection pool. It's a beautiful spot where you can see your true potential."

Emmeline and her children followed Clara, Ethan, and Ava to the Mirror of Truth. The children were excited, chattering and giggling as they walked. Clara explained that the pool was part of the contest and that each child needed to look into it to see their reflection.

"Alright, kids, one at a time," Clara instructed. "Just take a moment to look into the pool and see what you can find."

The children eagerly took turns peering into the clear water, their faces reflecting back at them. Clara watched closely, hoping to see any signs of dragon potential. However, none of the children showed any indication of being dragon-born.

Emmeline smiled, oblivious to the true purpose of the trip. "Thank you for this wonderful opportunity, Clara. The kids are having a great time."

Clara nodded, hiding her disappointment. "I'm glad they're enjoying it. We'll have more fun activities planned for the rest of the day."

Clara and her team went out three more times, each time returning with a new "winner" of the contest. Each family was brought to the oasis, and each time, none of the children turned out to be dragon-born. Despite the setbacks, Clara remained determined to find Resparta's offspring and fulfill her mission.

Ethan and Ava continued to support Clara, helping her navigate the challenges and keeping spirits high. With each trip, they grew closer as a team, ready to face whatever came next in their quest to find the true heirs of Resparta.

Clara, Ethan, and Ava had been searching for Resparta's offspring for weeks, but each lead had turned out to be a dead end. They were growing weary and frustrated, but they pressed on, determined to fulfill their mission.

One day, while going through old records, Clara stumbled upon a name that made her heart skip a beat. It was Ethan's mother. She hesitated for a moment before sharing the information with Ethan.

"Ethan, I think we found someone," Clara said gently. "It's your mother."

Ethan's face fell, and he shook his head. "She's not alive anymore. We don't need to travel."

Clara nodded, understanding the pain in his voice. "I'm sorry, Ethan. But we still need to check the Mirror of Truth."

For the first time, Ethan and Ava were allowed to come back to see the pool. They approached the Mirror of Truth with a mix of curiosity and apprehension. Ethan took a deep breath and looked into the pool. His reflection stared back at him, unchanged. He let out a sigh of relief.

"Not dragon-born," he said with a small smile. "Thank goodness."

Clara couldn't help but tease him a little. "You were worried, weren't you? Imagine you with dragon wings!"

Ethan laughed, shaking his head. "No way. I'm happy just being me."

As they were laughing and joking, Clara accidentally bumped into Ava, who stumbled towards the pool. They quickly caught her before she crashed into the water, but not before she got a face full of her reflection.

Ava's eyes widened in shock as she saw a terrifying dragon staring back at her. The dragon's eyes were fierce, and its scales glistened with an otherworldly light. She gasped, pulling back from the pool.

"What... what was that?" Ava stammered, her voice trembling.

Clara and Ethan exchanged worried glances. "Ava, are you okay?" Clara asked, her voice filled with concern.

Ava nodded slowly, still shaken by what she had seen. "I think so. But that reflection... it was a dragon."

Clara took a deep breath, trying to process what had just happened. "It seems like the Mirror of Truth has revealed something about you, Ava. We need to figure out what it means."

Ethan placed a reassuring hand on Ava's shoulder. "We'll get through this together. You're not alone."

As they stood by the pool, the weight of their mission felt heavier than ever. But with each other's support, they knew they could face whatever challenges lay ahead.

Ava was still reeling from the shock of seeing her reflection as a dragon in the Mirror of Truth. Her heart raced, and her mind was a whirlwind of confusion and fear. She had always heard stories about Resparta, the god of the territory, but she never imagined that she could be connected to him in such a profound way.

The Flagans had explained that Ava needed to meet Resparta to get her powers unlocked. The weight of this revelation was too much for her to bear. Overwhelmed, Ava bolted from the oasis, her footsteps echoing through the cave as she ran.

Clara watched in alarm as Ava disappeared into the distance. She knew she had to find her friend and help her through this. Clara quickly left her family, receiving a subtle “Good Luck” from her mom. She didn’t tell her family that she knew exactly where Ava was headed. Ethan covered for her as she slipped out the door and off the farm.

Clara made her way to their secret meeting spot, an older storage building on the farm close to the hired hands. It was a place they had discovered as kids, a sanctuary where they could escape from the world.

When Clara arrived, she found Ava huddled in a corner, clutching a blanket and trembling. Clara sat down beside her, not saying a word. She simply offered her presence, letting Ava know she wasn’t alone.

After a while, Clara gently asked, “When do you want to go? Ethan’s running cover, we can leave anytime you want.”

Ava screamed into the blanket, her voice muffled but filled with anguish. Clara rubbed her back, offering comfort. Ava leaned into her friend, and Clara hugged her shoulders.

“No go? I thought it might be fun to hide out with you. Ethan can be our runner. Most of my family never paid attention to him, they won’t figure it out. Mom will send us supplies.”

Ava sighed and unburied her head from the crumpled blanket on her lap. She hugged her knees and used the blanket as a pillow to cradle her head on her lap as she just looked at Clara. Her friend knew the look. It was the “I’m so tired of all this, but who else is going to fix things?” look. Ava was always good at organizing chaos. Ava didn’t like talking, but people listened when she did. And Ava hated running away. She would, but she always came back with new vigor and a plan.

Becoming the territory god might kill her friend, though. Clara would rather run away this time. Her family might be in danger. She wouldn’t have done the whole quest without wanting to help her family. But Ava was her family too. And Flagans were tough. They might take some damage, but Clara had a lot of faith that they’d come out on top. Ava was her family, but Ava was alone. Her mom had Ava’s back. Some of the other relatives knew her enough to care. But most of the family didn’t see Ava as family. Why would they help her when she was the new territory god who was supposed to help them?

“War is coming. I don’t fancy being in a hidey hole in the middle of the territory that everyone is going to be aiming at for the next few years.”

Clara nodded. That was a problem. Both girls liked to get in the middle of things when there was trouble. And trouble was very likely to find them during a war.

“This is going to suck,” Ava announced and buried her head in the blanket again.

Clara hummed in agreement and squeezed her friend's shoulder for a moment. "At least you can look really cool and scary now. The hunters won't mess with you the next time the town has an event."

Ava snorted into the blanket. "Clara!"

"I wonder... Would dragon flame make the chocolate veggie casserole any better?"

Ava laughed, a small but genuine sound. Clara smiled, knowing that they would face whatever came next together.