

The Long Shadow Cast

As dusk drew in closer on a cold, crisp eve, Alaina went through her things and pulled out a dusty book. It was made of ragged, dark leather and parchment smelling faintly of the sort of smoke you'd maybe want to forget. The emblem of a burning sword had been painted on top. This was her Tome of Silver and Ash, given to all members of her Order to swear themselves against the dark. Its pages contained secrets wrought a millenia ago, won through blood and battle. Steps for disrupting rituals, how to brew incendiary weapon oils, where best to strike against a foe with no heart or no body. Her people didn't have the luck of the Light, nor the time for magic. They had to be cunning, and smart.

Alaina flipped idly through pages awash with memories on the anniversary of the Coven's defeat, until a falcon knocked at her window.

"Hello Alaina,

*There is no emergency, in case you were worried just by receiving this.
I would like to discuss with you a matter of the Order whenever you have the time.
Please do not rush. I understand you have more responsibilities nowadays.*

Joan"

Alaina smiled softly, and in the morning whistled for Rook to bring her to Arom's Stand.

As always, the Marshal lived a quietly hectic life. Too important to be sent out into the field her valour and courage had won all but an administrative job for her as she slowly drowned in paperwork. Alaina wondered that maybe this matter to discuss was called in more for reprieve from work than by any sort of necessity. From organising security detachments to requesting quartermaster shipments, Marshal Joan Cleardawn of the Order of Embers truly was living the life few bothered to dream of.

Alaina entered and bowed to her with a smile, and took her seat down on the other end of the table. "Marshal. It's an honour."

"You really didn't need to come the very next morning. I hope you weren't busy?" Joan moved her things away, eager to at least make some measure of space so she could look Alaina in the eye, a passage of empty room soon being created between valleys of filing.

"But I wanted to." Alaina looked at Joan through the crack in the paperwork. She was a tall woman, broad and strong, after her own heart truly. But her clothes made of comfortable fabrics and furs fit for life in that mountain pass seemed to weigh heavy on her. She was tired. Alaina continued. "No matter my other responsibilities, mine here are just as important, if not more. So. How can I help?"

Joan chuckled as she, too, peered past the paper piles at Alaina. She had come in her brightest golden armour, decorated and yet durable. On any one else it might look gaudy but

Alaina made it work. Joan remembered seeing Alaina across this table some eight years ago in her teens. She was bright. Unstoppable. And then broken. But all those promises, those dreams Alaina shared of wanting to be a real Hero had come true. She was a woman who fully came into her own. And at her waist was no longer Briarbane. The sword she held was forged to fit her own hand.

"You wouldn't believe it," Joan sighed. "But each and every year more young recruits sign on. The threat is largely over but there is something to aspire to for them now. Not to tackle endless horrors but to become part of the legacy we uphold, and maybe to find themselves in it too."

"That's good." Alaina nodded. "The Embers can be more than it was born as. Maybe one day someone from outside of Kul Tiras will have heard of our exploits without it being related to witches?"

"To do that" Joan considered, "we'll need to train these prospective recruits. As always we are lacking resources, time, manpower..." Joan looked at Alaina, and spoke bluntly. "I'd like you to help."

Alaina sat stunned for a second. "Me? Marshal, if I may.."

"I brought you here because I trust you, Alaina, not so you can lick my boot. Speak openly, please!"

Alaina smiled and did just that.

"It's an honour to be offered, honestly, I just don't know if I'm right for it. What of the other First Inquisitors? Mace, Notley, Sterntide? Are none of them available?"

"I'm sure they could be if we asked, but that's not the point. I want someone these young people can relate to. Someone who knows first hand what experiences like these do before they are ready."

Alaina nodded somberly, as Joan continued. "And don't diminish your own skills. You were in the Order from the start, same as any of us, whether we called it that or not. You've destroyed wicker beasts and stitched horrors, you stopped the haunting of Barrowknoll Cemetery, you single handedly slew a hexed bear in your first week! And remind me whatever that bloody thing in Mount Cortis was?"

"A portal to Thros...?"

"Damnit, see? Don't you dare make me mention the Order of Ashes. Where is that unshakeable courage of yours, the willingness to help?"

"Honestly, those were all things that Lula did. For much of it, I was merely there to support. I didn't solve the problem." Alaina wrung her hands. "I would like to help, honestly. And I will try my best. But it just feels too good to be true? What started this, was it just that you couldn't find anyone else? I don't even have any experience in training."

The Marshal slid forwards a letter.

"You might not, but one of the old trainers of the guard did. He recommended you personally. He thinks you'll do a great job, and honestly I believe him. I worked with him a few times, years ago, back when I was posted in Corlain. Virtus was a good man."

The Marshal probably kept on talking but by now Alaina had refused to listen. Her tunnel vision drew her sight down towards the letter in front of her as her skin turned red and her

heart pumped furiously. It was sealed with a wax stamp of a winter rose on expensive parchment and as she looked at it she hated it and never wanted to look closer, and she could feel herself rise out of her chair all while Joan's worry grew in spades for stepping past a line she never knew existed.

Alaina picked up the letter.
"This is from my Father?"

Joan nodded.

Alaina turned around and threw the letter into the lit brazier in the corner of the room.

"He is not a good man. He is pitiable, a coward and a fool with not one shred of spine. He is a mercenary and a warmonger and I SPIT on the wretched honour and oaths he clings to with no care for the people in his life who need him." Anger formed tears in her eyes, and she refused to hide them like he might have wanted.

"I am sorry to bring you into more family matters, Joan, but if you will have me in this you must have me by MY deeds, MY worthiness. Whatever that snake tells you isn't worth the ink it's written in."

"I'm sorry, Alaina. I didn't know..." That outburst had startled Joan. She'd always seen Alaina close herself off when frustrated or upset. Something so explosive was new to her. Maybe she still was that young teenager freshly Knighted before her time, deep down. "Last I heard, you hadn't seen him in years, were excited to find him..."

Alaina shook her head. " 'Tis no matter. I do my best to forget it. I'm sorry..."

The Marshal took her hand and pulled her into a hug she should have given her years ago.
"It's okay. You are enough by your own."

From A Burning Letter

*In a crackling brazier, the letter handed to Alaina turns to ashes.
If she wanted, she could pluck it out and read these remaining words.
But she lets it burn, and the words are forever lost.*

“To Marshal Cleardawn

I do not believe we have spoken in some time. I hope you are well, and I congratulate you on your new position as Marshal of the Embers and Waycrest Guard.

I'm sure the young Lady will find no better person protecting her legacy.

Just as you did with mine.

I appreciate beyond bounds how you have looked after Alaina in [...] she is a fine woman, and I have not seen [...] perhaps you might pass on a message for me?

I understand you are always in need of new [...] and I have no doubt she would take that mantle boldly.

Alaina,

If you are reading this, please know that [...]

I hear much of you in many lands I visit, even far north.

You have [...] and I could not be prouder of [...] the strength of Arom Waycrest, the [...]. I see in you even the heroes from your storybooks. And [...] Oathbound Knight's name? [...]

Brightblade? Nevertheless, you have [...].

In recent months, I have [...] and perhaps we can [...]?

I only hope I can [...] make things better for you.

For now, farewell.

I [...] you.”