

The Price of Peace

Von chelle76

Kapitel 41: Mending Fences

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Chapter 40: Mending Fences

"Lance-Corporal Stephen Lindsay Rider," General Eagle says as the young man salutes then approaches him. The general hands him a piece of paper and shakes his hand. "You've done well. I know they are proud of you," he says quietly to him.

Stephen flashes a small smile and nods. "I will do my best to not disappoint any of you, sir," he says quietly before saluting and leaving the stage to return to his seat.

After another half hour, the cadets are all gathering in the banquet hall with their families to celebrate the graduation of basic training. A young woman comes up to Stephen and he hugs her and kisses her cheek. "I'm glad you made it, Raisa," he says quietly.

Raisa smiles and nods. "I am glad we made it as well, Stephen. I hope your parents don't mind my family and I came," she replies.

"Of course not. I think father said that my Aunt and Uncle were going to save you seats, but I guess you never found them," he replies.

Raisa shakes her head. "We were late, so we stayed to the back. I did see Moria down below and a bit of a gap, so perhaps that's where they were," she replies. "It would have been hard for us to get to them without bothering several people, so we just found spots near the exit."

"Regardless, I am glad you came. I hope your parents will come and say hello and maybe we can all have dinner," Stephen says as he searches the room for others he knows. After a moment, he spots Eryn and Rory talking to a couple of boys, slowly making their way in his direction. "Ah, at least some of them are here," he mutters. "Rory, Eryn!" he calls over the crowd of people, waving his hand above his head. "Over here!"

Rory spots him first and waves, grinning broadly. "We're coming!" she yells back and starts making her way towards her brother after grabbing the boy's hand that was talking with her. "Come on Lukas, you finally get to meet my older brother."

Eryn laughs as she follows behind the couple, Will following closely behind her. "Come on Rory, it's not like he's going to leave right away if you don't run," she says as she carefully dodges groups of people. Nearly out of breath, the four stop before Stephen.

"Glad you made it," Stephen says while nearly being choked by Rory. Reluctantly she releases him and looks curiously to the young woman beside him. "Raisa, this is Rory, Eryn, and Wil," he says once he can breathe again.

"Hello," Raisa says quietly. "Nice to meet you."

"Who's your other friend, Rory?" Stephen asks looking at Lukas.

"This is Lukas," she says a blush creeping onto her cheeks.

"Hello," Lukas says quietly. "It is nice to finally meet you, Lance-Corporal Rider."

"It is nice to meet you too, Lukas," Stephen replies before turning back to Raisa. "Eryn and Rory are two of my younger sisters, Wil is a family friend," Stephen explains. "Where are the others?" he asks looking to Eryn and Rory.

"They are the far side of the hall. There are so many people that they were more comfortable on the outskirts. I was hoping we could take you to them, instead of the lot of them trying to get through this crowd," Rory says.

"Aye. I do hope father is having a good day, so that at least he could see me graduate," Stephen says quietly.

"He seemed okay," Eryn says. "He was using his walking cane, but I think he could see well enough."

"Shall you lead us on?" Stephen asks amused. "Or are we going to make someone else come hunting for us?"

"Let's go then," Eryn says brightly. Will shakes his head and follows along after them. Rory quickly dodging around the clusters of people.

A short time later, they arrive where the rest of the family has gathered, along with Colt, Robin, April, Fireball, Alex, Sarah, Thomas and Elaine. Amanda spots him first and stands up and comes over to him and salutes him, smiling broadly. "Congratulations, Lance-Corporal Rider," she says and he salutes her and smiles.

"Thank you, Colonel Rider, ma'am," he replies with a smile, saluting her in return. He embraces her and kisses her cheek. "I would like you to meet Raisa, ma'am. She and I

have been courting since junior year of high school," he says leading a nervous Raisa before Amanda.

"Hello, Colonel Rider ma'am. It is nice to finally meet you," Raisa replies trying to force back her nervousness.

Amanda smiles at the girl, "It is nice to meet you too, Raisa. I have heard only good things from Stephen about you. I am sorry that we have not met previously."

Elaine and Thomas approach him next as Amanda and Raisa are talking. Thomas comes up and shakes his hand, and Elaine hugs him tightly, releasing her just as Saber approaches him. He quickly snaps to attention and salutes him.

Saber returns the gesture and smiles. "At ease, Lance-Corporal, you are among family here," he says before firmly shaking his hand. "Your father would be proud of you, Stephen, I know I am," Saber says quietly.

Stephen nods. "I know he would be, and I am glad to know that I have done well by you, sir," he replies. "I owe you everything, and will do my best to continue to make you proud."

"I know you will, Stephen," Saber replies honestly.

"I would like to speak with you and mother privately, if I may," he asks with some hesitation.

"Would this be concerning the young lady presently talking with your mother?" Saber asks quietly, allowing a small smile.

"Yes, sir," Stephen replies. "I know that you've not met her before this, but-"

"If you feel she is the right person for you, I will not stop you, Stephen," Saber interjects. "I would like to meet her family and know a little more about her before anything is official, is that too much to ask?"

"No sir," he replies. "I was hoping for such an answer."

"Good. Now, let's go and rescue the poor girl from your sisters and Elaine," Saber says with a chuckle as he pats the young man's shoulder.

Amanda looks up as they approach and smiles. "She's nice, Stephen," she says casting a glance to Saber, who nods to her unspoken question. The group talks for a while, arranging a family gathering and inviting various friends. It is finally decided that everyone will meet at the vacation property, the house that was built on the land once belonging to Stephen's parents in three days time.

"They're actually coming!" Rory says excitedly. "I finally get to meet Lukas' parents."

"When are they coming, Rory?" Elaine asks curiously.

"This afternoon, Aunt Elaine," she replies. "Lukas seemed to think they might decline. He says they don't tend to leave their home much, other than for his father's business."

"What is it he does?" Elaine asks.

"I dunno. I think he's some sort of diplomat. But from what Lukas has said, he wasn't always one. Just the last couple of years."

"So his mother stays home or does she travel with him?"

"Not sure. I think a little of both. Lukas doesn't seem to like talking about it much. Oh, I hope mother and father won't mind, I told him his younger brother was welcome to come too, especially since his parents are coming."

"I don't think they will have any issue with it, Love," Elaine replies honestly. "How long before they arrive?"

"If the text I got a little while ago is accurate, in about an hour," Rory replies. "Possibly less, I suppose."

"I should go and ask Marianna to make sure the room for Lukas is set up for two boys, I'll see you afterwards, okay?" Elaine says. Rory nods and they both head off in different directions.

April, her father, Fireball and Chihiro arrive and Chihiro immediately runs off in search of Dylan. The adults begin gathering on the back patio as the children are doing various things. Some are sparring with sticks, some are just chatting amongst themselves. Eventually, Colt, Robin, Wil and Jason arrive. Shortly after, Stephen arrives with Raisa and her parents. He leads them into the sitting room and asks Mikhail to announce their arrival to his parents.

A few minutes later, Saber and Amanda enter the house and Stephen quickly stands up in greeting, Raisa beside him.

"Father, mother, these are Raisa's parents, Liam and Ciara Maher," Stephen says.

"It is nice to finally meet you both," Saber says as he offers his hand to Ciara.

She grasps it and they shake. "It is nice to finally meet you as well. Stephen has told us a lot about you. We have heard stories, of course, but it is nice to meet the people behind those stories. You have a lovely young man," she says as they take their seats.

"He has made us proud," Saber replies honestly. Marianna brings out some tea and offers it. Stephen and Raisa excuse themselves and head out in search of his siblings and other guests while their parents talk.

"It is our guess that they have brought us together for a reason," Liam states with a

small smile after talking for a while.

"Aye, such was our thought as well," Amanda replies.

"We know that Stephen is your adopted son, however he's not talked about how you came to adopt him. I am curious, if you don't mind discussing it. We won't let on that we know, if it bothers him so much. We are fond of him and feel that he and Raisa are a good match," Ciara says looking between Amanda and Saber for a reaction.

They cast a glance to each other and Saber nods slightly. "He and his two biological sisters are the great-nephew and nieces of Thomas and Elaine Lindsay. They have been in the service of my family since long before I was born. They were the caretakers of our estate and ran the household in the absence of my parents and eventually myself after my parents deaths, as well as serving as advisors to me on a number of matters. I consider them family, and they are treated as such. Jared Lindsay was Thomas' brother and Stephen's birth father. It was on this very land that his biological parents, as well as four other siblings were killed in cold-blood by a group of Outriders," Saber begins. Ciara gasps, placing her hand over her mouth in shock, but Saber presses on with the story. "I managed to save Stephen, Rory, and Anna and we took them in and formally adopted them, giving them the protection of my family and their best chance in life," Saber says quietly. "It has only been in the past four or five years that the children have been all right with returning here. We had the property razed and rebuilt a larger home to serve as a family vacation home adjacent to our other lands nearby."

"I figured it was bad, but those poor kids. I cannot imagine having to live through something like that. I suppose that is one of the reasons that Stephen joined Cavalry Command?" Liam asks.

Saber nods. "Aye, I believe it was. I'm sure the fact that both Amanda and myself are soldiers had some influence on him as well."

"You weren't always a soldier were you?" Liam asks Amanda.

"No sir, I was not. I sort of happened into the position, for lack of a better explanation," Amanda replies honestly. "I never thought I'd be where I am today, but I have no real regrets."

"So you two were not betrothed as children?" Ciara asks curiously.

"No, we met after I was injured in the war," Saber replies.

"How unusual," Ciara comments. "I thought royal lines depended on betrothals. I am glad to see that you are more in tune with current times. I would not force my daughter into a marriage, no matter how much someone wanted me to."

"You sound as if you have experience in that, Mrs. Maher," Amanda states.

"Aye, unfortunately I do. But thankfully, my parents released me from it when they

found out that the man I was to marry did not treat me well," she replies quietly. "After that, I swore that I would never do that to any child I had."

"So, shall we tell the children that they have our blessings if that is indeed what they desire?" Liam asks.

Saber and Amanda nod. "If that is their desire, I am not against such a match. I only request they wait a year to marry, so that Stephen has a little more time in with Cavalry Command," Saber replies.

The couple both nod in agreement. "If that is what they desire, then I will give them my blessing, with the same stipulation of waiting a year. I do not find that to be an unreasonable request," Liam states.

"Perhaps we can make some sort of announcement before the end of this gathering?" Ciara asks.

Saber nods. "I would not be against making anything official. But I feel that the children should have the final say on when an announcement is to be made," he replies.

"So, how much longer until we get to meet Lukas' parents, Rory?" Moria asks as she Eryn, and Tyler come over to where Rory is checking her phone.

Rory looks up and sighs. "They have been delayed. Lukas said that he had to tell his mother whose place they were going to and that she got a little upset," she replies sullenly.

"That's weird. Why would someone be upset about meeting mom and dad? They're like really nice," Eryn asks aloud.

Rory shrugs. "I dunno. He was going to try and figure out what the deal is. His father said they were coming regardless of his mother's feelings, so they may be a little later," she replies as her phone indicates a text. She looks down and smiles. "They're here! Going out to greet them, bye," she says as she jumps up and rushes through the house just as Ciara and Liam are coming out the door to join the groups of people, followed closely by Saber and Amanda. "Excuse me," she calls as she continues to the door, barely arriving before Mikhail.

"Lady Rory, I am able to get the door. I will usher the guests into you, Miss," Mikhail says, the amusement apparent in his voice. "Now go and wait in the sitting room. I will lead them in to you, and then I will go and inform Lord and Lady Rider of their arrival."

Rory blushes slightly. "Of course, Mikhail," she replies and heads for the sitting room and sits down trying to act casual.

A couple of minutes pass before Mikhail leads Lukas in, followed by his younger brother and his mother and father. "Lady Rory, your young friend is here along with his parents, Lord and Lady Swadjen. I will go and inform Lord and Lady Rider of their

arrival," Mikhail states.

"Thank you, Mikhal," Rory replies, and he heads off towards the back. She turns to her guests and smiles. "Welcome to our home, it is an honor to finally meet you" Rory states as they all take a seat. Shortly after, Marianna comes in with a cart and offers everyone tea.

"So, mother, this is Rory, the young lady I have been talking about from school," Lukas says proudly as his mother is obviously scrutinizing the nervous girl.

"So, you are a Rider?" Sincia says curtly.

"Yes, madam," Rory replies nervously.

"You don't favor him," she states.

"She was adopted, Sincia," Saber states from behind Rory. "Please, for their sakes, let the past remain there. I have no qualms with you and only want the children happy," he says as he and Amanda take seats near to Rory, who is shifting a little uncomfortably.

"You know each other?" Lukas and Rory say at once. Looking between the couples with a confused expression.

"Why don't you kids go and join the others out back so that we may talk here, as adults," Amanda states with a smile.

Not needing any other prodding, the three children quickly head out back, the door closing after them.

Edon walks into the back with his brother. "Hey, why don't you see if you can play with the other kids?" Lukas suggests.

"Ok" Edon says and goes to find someone to play with. He comes across Moria and Eryn dressed in identical dresses talking to Wil. Lukas and Rory head off to find Stephen and Raisa to talk to.

"Do you think it's okay to send him off on his own, Lukas?" Rory asks as she watches Edon walk towards the courtyard looking a bit nervous.

"Yeah. It'll be good for him. Your sisters are closer to his age, Sammy is probably the closest to him. Maybe he will find her and they'll hang out. She seems outgoing enough to maybe bring him out of his shell," he replies as they head towards the last place Rory recalls seeing her brother.

"Now, all I am going to say is that we welcome you here. I will not bring up our past...differences. The only thing I ask in return is that you remain civil, is that fair?" Saber asks calmly. "I do not want the children to carry on this inane feud that has been between us. All of that is over and done with."

Sincia sits quietly for several minutes, taking her time and studying the faces of the couple before her. She goes to speak several times, but each time stops herself. "I am not sure whether I will be able to meet your terms, Richard," she finally says. "I still feel that I was wronged by you and by her," she says nodding to Amanda.

"You can feel that way all you wish, Sincia. It does not change anything. What changes is how you carry yourself now. You have a chance to show that you are no longer petty and living in the past. You have a good husband and two well-adjusted sons. Be grateful that you are all doing well. Things very well could have ended far worse for you," Saber replies, giving a slight emphasis at the end, to try and let on that he knows some of the things she has said away from his presence.

Sven starts to speak, then stops, glancing first to Sincia, then to Saber and finally Amanda, not sure whom to address. After a minute he sighs and just speaks to all of them in general, "He is right. I have done everything you desired, be happy with what we have, Sincia. The children have been a blessing for us both."

She turns and looks at her husband, almost as if she feels betrayed, but finally sighs in resignation. "Fine. It's not as if we are betrothing them anyways," she says coldly.

"I've seen the way Rory and Lukas are around each other, it probably won't be too long before they desire something to that effect," Amanda says matter-of-factly. "And I'm sure they'd get married with your blessing or not."

Sincia looks taken aback by the statement. "What do you mean? They only see each other when they are at school."

"So you are unaware that Lukas has been visiting out home frequently?" Amanda asks.

"I've no knowledge of such activity. I would have forbidden it," she replies.

"To serve what purpose? To punish us or your son?" Amanda says in an accusatory tone.

"You...you have no ri-"

"Please stop this, Sincia," Sven says quietly, placing a hand on her arm. "You would only hurt the children. This is not their fault. Do not drag them into this. Let it go, as you should have years ago."

"You knew about this, didn't you?" Sincia asks. "You let him come here and flirt with... with the help!"

"Yes, I did know, Älsklin," Sven says calmly. "I wasn't aware that the girl he was seeing was adopted, but I don't see how that matters. Lukas is in love with the girl, genuine love, isn't it worth putting aside your own feelings to see our son happy?"

"How did you keep this from me?" she asks obviously trying to not lose her temper.

"I told you that he was taking fencing lessons." Sven replies simply. "You never asked where, so I never offered the information, knowing that you would punish Lukas for something that isn't his fault."

"And Lukas seems to have an natural aptitude for it," Saber says. "I've been teaching him myself, along with our own children, and he's caught up to them too, not a common occurrence."

Sincia looks at Saber, "You knew all along he was our son, didn't you?"

"Of course," Saber says with a nod. "He introduced himself using his full name, I would have had to been a fool not to realize that he was your son, but I didn't let that cloud my judgement of him. Rory liked him, and that was enough for me to give him a chance. He's proven to me that he's a good man, noble in every sense of the word."

"How long has this been going on?" Sincia asks.

"Nearly two years," Saber responds matter-of-factly.

"And they've been dating the entire time?" she asks hesitantly.

Saber nods. "I believe so," he replies. "So as I said, despite knowing already who his parents were, when Rory asked if you could come so that we could meet you, I allowed it, knowing full well that things could go bad. I am able to move on and I want you to do the same. I think you should know some things about us, so that perhaps you will see Amanda the way I do. Just as I hope that we may one day become friends, Sincia," he finishes quietly.

"I will attempt to be civil, Richard, for the sake of my children. I do care for them, even though I doubt that I will ever see things as you do," Sincia replies.

"Thank you. That is all that I ask, aside from not referring to Amanda as the help," he adds with a small smile. "You should know that her mother was from the old French royalty. Not that it matters to me."

"French royalty?" Sincia asks in disbelief.

"Aye," Amanda replies as she pulls out her coat of arms and takes it from her neck to show her.

Sincia takes the necklace and studies it carefully. "I...I thought this family had died out when the princess ran away," she mutters to herself.

"I didn't know until after I had fallen in love with Saber," Amanda says quietly.

"So you really were blinded?" Sincia asks hesitantly, glancing to Saber who nods. "But you can see now?"

"Some days are better than others. I have days that I can barely see, and days that I can barely walk. But I do what I can with the abilities I have. Amanda has taught me that there is more that I can do aside from being a soldier. I know that I can teach and guide the soldiers that are up and coming, that I can still tune my abilities to be as good as they were when I was fully sighted, I honestly thought my life was over when I was told I would most likely never see again, Sincia. Then after you reacted the way you did, I became more depressed. It was because of that that then Commander Eagle hired someone to teach me to adapt," Saber says quietly. "Had he not forced me to agree to having the help and Amanda and I not met, I probably would have ended my life," he adds barely audible.

Sincia looks at him in shock at such an admission. "So it...it wasn't just a ploy?" she asks after finding her voice.

Saber shakes his head. "No, Sincia, it was not a ploy," he replies calmly. "I wake everyday knowing that I could wake up in darkness, unable to see anything. However, I know that even if that does happen, Amanda will be there and she will treat me the same as she always has. Just as I know that if God forbid we have to fight again, she will be at my side, willing to kill to defend our lives if need be. That is why she deserves your respect. Not many would do what as she has already done."

Sincia looks between the two of them as he speaks, trying to get her mind to process what she's heard. Taking a breath to gather her thoughts she looks to Saber to speak, then stops and turns to Amanda, "You have killed?" she asks hesitantly.

Amanda nods, her eyes meeting Sincia's. "I have and would do so again to save those I love," she replies matter-of-factly.

"But you have only killed Outriders?" Sincia asks.

Amanda shakes her head. "No. Although they both had turned to the side of the Outriders when they were killed. It was Saber's life or theirs. I chose to save him," she replies simply.

"How do you know they betrayed our side?" Sincia asks.

"Hey, Rory, Lukas, come here!" Stephen says quietly as he waves the couple over.

What?" Rory asks as they approach him. "What's going on?" she asks quietly.

"Mom and dad are talking with your parents, Lukas. From what I've heard, evidently his mom and our dad have some sort history."

Slowly the kids make their way back to the study where Raisa is sitting and listening.

"Sean betrayed us when he left with the Outriders," Saber replies.

"Sean?" Sincia asks. "McCully?" Saber nods. "You killed Sean McCully?" Sincia asks in disbelief.

"He was about to kill Saber! I was not about to let that happen," Amanda says defensively.

"You...you actually..." Sincia says in shock.

"What would you have done?" Amanda asks honestly.

"I...I don't know," she replies barely a whisper.

"What if he was going to kill your children or your husband and you were the only person in a position to stop him, what would you have done then?" Amanda asks trying to get her to understand the situation.

"I would have tried to reason with him," she replies quietly.

"Then he would have killed all of you. He was out of his mind, Sincia," Amanda says sympathetically. "I still have nightmares about killing him, even after all this time. I have twice killed to save mine and Saber's lives. The second time was a man I was once engaged to. I took that one harder than I did killing Sean," Amanda says barely a whisper.

The kids all gasp involuntarily. "Mom killed two people?" Rory whispers in shock.

"To save dad's life," Stephen says quietly. "The first time, she wasn't even truly a soldier. She was pregnant with Eryn and Moria the second time."

"You knew?" Rory asks her voice a bit louder than she intends.

Lukas quickly covers her mouth and holds a finger to his to quiet her.

"It was talked about in our history classes at Cavalry Command," Stephen states quietly. "Mom and dad weren't even married the first time she had to.."

"Why were you even there?" Sincia asks.

"Because Saber was there. It was right after the sentencing. The Outriders helped Sean escape and we went after him," Amanda replies.

"Had she not gone, I'm not sure we would be here now," Saber states. "She served as my eyes, describing what was on my screens and such. Without her guidance, Sean would have killed us. Feel free to ask General Eagle, or any of the others about it. They will corroborate the story."

"So you really were blinded?"

"Yes. And the odds are high that I will eventually be again permanently," he replies. "So even though you went about things wrong, I am glad for both your sake and mine that you broke off our engagement. I know that you did it in the only way you knew."

Perhaps you felt as I did. That we were and are too different. You deserve to be happy and you have a husband that can support you, and two good children. I have someone that can handle it if I wake up blind, without a second thought. I am grateful for my family, and I would not trade them for anything, including my sight."

The four kids all look at each other, their eyes wide. "Dad was engaged to Lukas' mother?" Stephen says quietly.

"Please tell me you didn't hear what I did?" Lukas says.

"My father was once engaged to your mother," Rory says quietly.

"Aye. And it evidently ended badly," Stephen says barely a whisper. "It sounds to me like father wants to move on and that Lukas' mother is possibly coming around."

"I hope so. I wouldn't want things to be complicated for us," Lukas says quietly as he takes Rory's hand.

Stephen casts a glance to Raisa who smiles slightly and nods.

"Then let's go and talk with them. Tell all of them what we've heard and that we don't want the feud to continue," Rory says.

Stephen holds a hand up to stop her. "No, we need to let them talk this out," he says.

"So, Wil, tell us which one of us you think is prettier," Moira says.

"You're identical twins. No one can tell the two of you apart," Wil says. "You're both very pretty. And I like you both."

"But you can only date one of us," Eryn says teasingly.

"Yes, I know that, but how can I decide between two beautiful ladies?" Wil asks becoming flustered. "Half the time I can't even tell which one I'm talking to unless you tell me, and given the amount of times you've played tricks on me, it's near impossible to tell if you're being truthful."

"We're not completely identical," Moira says with a smirk.

"I see no difference," Wil states, looking between the two with a confused expression.

About that time Jason comes walking over. "What are you guys up to?" he asks curiously.

"We have birthmarks in different places." Eryn says.

Wil looks interested. "Really?" he asks with a smile. "I've never noticed one on either of you and I've seen both of you in swimsuits."

Jason shakes his head. "Wil, would you just give it up already?"

"I'm not really gonna show him, Jason," Eryn says quietly in his ear. "I just like to watch him squirm. Keep watching and catch up to me and we can talk later."

"Maybe you just don't know what you're looking for," Moira says to Wil, pointedly ignoring Jason.

"How about one of you make it simple and tell me." Wil smirks.

"Perhaps we will..." Moria says.

"Yeah, if you can catch one of us," Eryn says as she grabs Moria's hand and they dash off laughing.

"Hey!" Wil exclaims as he takes off after them. The twins see him coming and separate laughing as he struggles to decide which one to chase.

A minute later, Jason decides to follow Eryn, seeing that Wil took off after Moria.

Edon shakes his head, not entirely sure what is going on with them and keeps looking for someone to talk to. He finds Samantha dressed in a pink dress sitting on a bench by the lake reading a book.. "Hello there, Miss," Edon says shyly.

Samantha looks up from her book. "Um, hello," she replies as she sets her book on her lap.

"I'm Edon Swadjen," he states. "And who might you be?" he asks.

"Samantha Rider," she answers. "Are you Lukas' brother?"

Edon nods. "Are you Rory's sister?" he asks. Samantha nods. "What are you doing by yourself?" he asks.

"I'm uncomfortable," she mutters.

"What you mean?" he asks confused.

"I don't like dresses," she says with a hint of annoyance.

"I thought all girls liked dresses," Edon states honestly.

Samantha chuckles. "You must not know too many girls, cause I know I'm not the only one that doesn't like to wear a dress," she replies.

"Only girls I know are my classmates, and I don't think they like me," he says quietly.

"Why?" Samantha asks curiously.

"I think it's cause they can't say my last name."

"Seems like a dumb reason not to like someone," Samantha says shaking her head.

"Well no matter how hard I try they don't ever want to talk to me," he says with a shrug.

Samantha moves over and pats the bench beside her. "Sit down, I'll talk to you. I don't mind," she says.

"I thought you wanted to be alone cause you were uncomfortable in the dress and reading your book?" he asks.

Samantha shrugs, "I'll deal, the book can wait."

Edon sits beside her. "So, what else should I know about girls?" he asks nervously, trying to start a conversation.

Samantha shrugs "I'm not sure what else to tell you. I'm only eight years old," she replies.

"So you've not had any boyfriends yet?" Edon asks hesitantly.

"Um, no. Haven't been interested in any either. Books are far more interesting than the boys around here. They are all into fighting and looking up girl's dresses and such," Samantha replies.

"How about you just tell me about yourself, and I'll tell you about myself and we'll go from there?" Edon asks.

Samantha nods. "Okay. That seems fair enough." She replies as she starts talking about her life.

Some time later, a Girl slightly older comes up to them. "Hey, Sammy," Chihiro says looking at Samantha. "Have you seen Dylan?"

Samantha rolls her eyes at the nickname. "You still haven't found him?" she asks annoyed.

Chihiro shakes her head. "He's hiding from me again," she replies and starts to say something else when she notices Edon. "Edon?" she asks looking pointedly at him. "What are you doing here?"

"You two know each other?" Samantha asks in surprise.

"We're in the same class," Edon says quietly.

"Chihiro, do you and the other girls have something against Edon?" Samantha asks eyeing the older girl with a hint of anger.

Chihiro shrugs. "He's the smartest kid in our class. I think the others are intimidated by him," Chihiro replies. "I suppose that could be it, but I'm not sure."

"Why not?" Edon asks.

"I'm in love with Dylan Rider, he's in the class above us. We grew up together, so I don't really pay attention to what the others in our class do and who they do or do not like," Chihiro answers quietly.

"Aren't you a little young for that?" Samantha asks. "You're not even two years older than I am."

"You'll understand one day, Sammy," Chihiro replies in her most superior sounding voice. "When you're more grown-up like me."

"Ah, I see, I take it Dylan doesn't reciprocate your feelings?" Edon asks trying to stop the girls from fighting.

"Recipro-what?" Chihiro asks confused.

"He doesn't care for you in the way that you care for him?" he asks.

"I'm not sure, but he will one day, you'll see," Chihiro says with a lack of certainty. "Well, I'm off to go search for him more," she says as she heads off in search of Dylan.

"I think I'd like to hear Dylan's side of this story," Edon says amused after Chihiro leaves.

Samantha nods. "Aye, and I know where he is," she says with a mischievous grin.

"What do you mean you know where he is?" Edon asks. "But you just told Chihiro that you didn't."

"No, I told her I haven't seen him. Which is true, I haven't seen him. But I do know where he went."

Edon shakes his head and laughs. "Could you take me to him?" Edon asks.

"I could...but I don't think I should, it's a secret place," she replies hesitantly.

"I won't tell anyone where it is," Edon says. "I swear," he adds, holding up his right hand for emphasis.

Samantha considers his reaction for a minute. "Why do you want me to take you to him?" she asks suspiciously.

"So I can talk to him," Edon replies honestly.

"Do you have a handkerchief?" she asks.

"Of course, every gentleman has one," he responds taking it from his pocket and handing it to her. "What do you need it for?" he asks.

"Close your eyes, I'm going to blindfold you," she replies as she gets up and walks around behind him with the blindfold.

"What? Why?" he asks turning to see her.

"So you don't know where the secret place is, then I don't have to worry about you telling anyone where it is and the older kids getting mad at me," she states.

"Fine" he says with a sigh of resignation, and turns away from her and closes his eyes.

Samantha blindfolds him then comes back around and grabs his hand. "Stand up" Edon does so and she slowly leads them to one of several 'secret' underground rooms scattered across the property .

Tyler and Anna are walking past the study when Anna notices the door opened slightly. She goes to close it and realizes that his siblings are in there. "What is-?"

"Shh! Rory says dragging the pair into the room and pushing the door back to only slightly ajar.

"What is going on?" Anna asks in a whisper as she sits down on a nearby chair.

"Our parents are talking with Lukas' parents," Rory replies quietly.

"So? Why are you eavesdropping? It's rude," Anna replies.

"They started talking about some interesting things. Did you know that father was engaged before?" Rory asks.

"So was mother," Stephen adds. Getting a look of shock from Anna.

"I didn't know that either one of them were with anyone else before each other," Anna says.

"Mother ended up killing her ex-fiance to save dad's life," Stephen says. "At least that's what it sounded like."

About that time the door to the study opens fully and the teens look up to see the four adults looking at them. They all smile nervously. "Um...hello, father?" Anna says sheepishly.

"And just how long have you lot been in here?" Saber asks trying to control his anger.

"Longer than we should have been, sir," Stephen bravely replies.

Saber sighs and looks to the other adults. "Should we just let them ask questions and get it done with?" he says obviously irritated.

"Might as well, Richard. They have probably heard some things that they are going to want clarified," Sincia says looking directly at her son.

"All of you, to the sitting room," Saber says. A couple of the teens start to protest. "Now!" he says firmly halting any further objections.

They quickly get up and file out to the sitting room and cast nervous glances between each other.

"Now, I'm sure at least some of you heard the majority of what was to be a private conversation," Saber says as he looks to each of the members of the guilty party.

"I have a question, sir," Lukas says speaking up.

"All right, go ahead," Saber replies.

"You were once engaged to my mother?" he asks looking between Saber and Sincia.

"Yes," Saber replies.

"What happened?"

"I was injured and lost my memory and was blinded. At the time I didn't know whether I would ever see again. Your mother needed someone that could be more...available to her, so we went our separate ways," Saber replies. "Any other questions?"

"Dylan, are you here?" she calls as they enter.

"Sam?" Dylan asks. "Did Chihiro finally leave?" he asks and then stops when he notices Edon. "You brought someone here? A boy at that?"

"It's not what you think," Samantha says. "He's Chihiro's classmate, and well, he says that he wants to talk to you."

"Fine," Dylan says and notices that Edon is blindfolded. "Go ahead and take the blindfold off."

Edon gratefully removes the blindfold. "I'm Edon Swadjen, nice to meet you."

"Hi, now what is it you want to ask?" Dylan asks suspiciously.

"Why are you hiding from Chihiro?" Edon blurts out before losing his nerve to ask.

"I take it she came looking for me?"

"Yeah, she says she's in love with you," Edon says.

"She probably thinks that she is," Dylan replies with a sigh. He looks to Samantha, "Sam, do you mind, um..."

Samantha rolls her eyes and blushes slightly. "Let me guess, boy talk?" she asks with a hint of annoyance.

Dylan nods. "Something like that," Dylan replies as if it were obvious.

"You know you can talk to me about anything, even if I am a girl," Samantha states.

"I know sis, just not this, not yet, please," Dylan says pleadingly.

"Ok" Samantha says. "I'll be by the lake when you're done," she says looking to Edon. "In case you want someone to talk to again."

"Don't worry, Sam, I'll return your boyfriend to you soon enough," Dylan says with a smirk.

"He isn't..." Samantha starts.

"See you back at the lake, Samantha," Edon says purposely interrupting her and Samantha leaves quietly.

"So I take it you like Sam, huh?" Dylan asks watching for a reaction.

Edon shrugs. "I dunno we just met. Besides, even if I did eventually decide that I liked her, it'd be kind of odd if we started dating."

"Why?" Dylan asks.

"Because my brother and your sister are kind of serious from what Lukas tells me," Edon states.

"Wait, you're Lukas' brother?" Dylan asks, getting a nod from Edon. "That's right, you said your name was Swadjen didn't you? Lukas is the one dating Rory, isn't he?"

"Yeah, that's right," Edon says. "So even if I did like her I don't think could work out."

Dylan smiles. "If you two hit it off and you decide that you care for Samantha just go for it," Dylan says simply.

"But..." Edon starts

"My parents have always told us to make our own happiness our highest priority, and I advise you the same thing. If Lukas and Rory wed you'll not be related to Samantha but by marriage, so it'd be ok, our family is large enough that two marriages to a prestigious family would be no shameful thing. Besides, we are not related by blood.

Father and mother adopted Stephen, Rory and Anna. So I don't see where even that could be an issue."

"I'll think about it," Edon replies. "So, what about you and Chihiro?" he asks trying to draw the attention back to Dylan.

"I care for her, a lot," Dylan says blushing. "I think she's very pretty and smart."

"Then why hide from her?" Edon asks confused.

"I fear that we care for each other too much. That if we spend time alone together we might..." Dylan stops blushing heavily.

"You'll have to figure something out, cause eventually she'll give up on you, thinking that you really don't want her around."

"I don't know what to do," Dylan says frustrated.

"Weren't you just saying something about being raised to make sure your happiness came first?" Edon accuses.

"Well, yeah..." Dylan admits.

"Well, if you want someone to take your advice then you should probably listen to it yourself," Edon says.

"Fine, I'll talk with Chihiro, if you'll talk to Samantha," Dylan says with a chuckle.

"Deal," Edon agrees. "Although at this point I'm not sure what to say to Samantha. I barely know her."

"Just hang out with her and talk about things. She's always reading, do you like to read?" Dylan prods.

Edon nods. "Yeah. It's one of the reasons I don't have many friends," he replies.

"Well, Sam constantly has her nose in a book. Maybe you will find that you've read some of the same ones. Go from that and see what happens," Dylan says.

"Um, okay...I suppose I can do that," Edon replies hesitantly.

Fine, now put the blindfold back on and I'll take you to Sam," Dylan says.

"What? You don't trust me to keep the secret of this place after what you told me?"

"Sorry, but it's a family secret, hopefully someday I can tell you where this place is," Dylan answers with a smirk.

"We'll see," Edon says as he hands Dylan the blindfold and turns around and closes his

eyes, Dylan blindfolds him and takes him back to the lake.

"See Sam," Dylan says as they arrive back at the lake, nudging Edon so he knows it's safe to take off the blindfold. "I brought your boyfriend back in one piece," he says grinning widely.

"He's not my boyfriend," Samantha says defiantly.

"I'd like to get to know you as a friend," Edon says quietly.

Samantha blushes "Ummmm...I suppose there's no harm in being friends. I don't tend to have many around," she replies slowly.

Chihiro bursts in between them before Samantha or Edon has time to say anything else. "Dylan, there you are!" she runs to him and hugs him, and he grabs her and hugs her back. "Dylan?" Chihiro looks astonished, "You're not running away?"

"I've decided to stop hiding how I feel, I want to be your boyfriend Chihiro," Dylan says quietly. "If you'll let me."

Chihiro smiles and kisses him. "It's what I've wanted for awhile," she replies happily.

"What...what did you two talk about?" Samantha asks surprised looking perplexed at the scene before her.

"Maybe someday I'll tell you," Edon says with a chuckle.

"That's not very polite to tease a lady," Samantha pouts.

"Actually, I don't see the harm in it," he states.

Samantha sighs, "I just met you, and you are already teasing me, that doesn't seem very fair," she pouts.

Well, how about I see if your father will give me fencing lessons like he has Lukas, then we can see each other again, and maybe we can become friends?"

Samantha nods "Okay, so friends?" she asks offering her hand.

"Sure," Edon replies as he shakes her hand. "Friends."

"Come on," Chihiro says, holding onto Dylan as if he's going to run away; "Let's head back to the house before they all start to wonder where we are at."

Samantha stands up and nods. "I suppose we should head back too. I don't want to give any one else yet another reason for teasing me," she says looking pointedly at Chihiro.

"All right, lead the way," Edon says, and the four of them start heading back towards

the house.

A couple of days later, everyone has gathered for a large meal. Liam stands up and asks for everyone's attention, and the group slowly becomes silent. "Thank you," Liam says as Ciara, Saber, Amanda, Raisa, and Stephen stand up. "We want to announce to all of you that our daughter Raisa Maher has been officially betrothed to Stephen Lindsay Rider," he says proudly. Several people start clapping and cheering. "Thank you for sharing this time with us."

"We will most likely hold the wedding in one year's time," Saber states. He waits for the talking to die down again before trying to talk again. After it does, he signals for Sincia and Sven to stand up with Lukas and Rory, who are holding hands. "We'd also like everyone to know that Rory and Lukas have stated that they wish to be under a betrothal contract. After some discussion, we have agreed to this. They are not to wed until they have both completed school and are of age, but a ring has been passed between them, making it official." Several people start offering congratulatory remarks and clapping. Dessert is served shortly after and people begin breaking off into groups to talk about the evening's events.

"Well, I suppose it's official for us, isn't it?" Rory asks the others around her.

"Aye," Stephen replies. "Although I was surprised when you told me that our parents and Lukas' parents agreed to allow you to be betrothed."

"It is what we both wanted," Lukas says quietly. "Besides, maybe now mother can let go of her anger. She actually looks happier than I ever remember seeing her."

"Why does she call your father Richard?" Raisa asks. "I've always heard him addressed as General Rider, or occasionally your mother calls him Saber, but she is the only person I've ever heard that calls him Richard."

"His birth name is Richard, although Lady Swadjen seems to be as you said, the only person who addresses him as such. I suppose by now it's a habit," Stephen replies.

"What I thought was interesting was how he explained your mother's and his parting of ways. He didn't actually blame her for it. I thought that was diplomatic of him," Raisa states.

Lukas nods. "Yeah, he could have said what she actually said. I asked her that night before bed. She was not nearly as nice as he tried to make it sound," Lukas says quietly. "Mother started crying when I asked her to tell me what happened. She told me that they had been betrothed as infants. Then, she thought that when she finished school that they would marry, but the Outriders appeared and General Rider went to fight. He would write to her and tell her about their latest skirmishes and such, and how things were going. But the only times he came home was when his mother fell ill, then died, and then once he attempted a vacation, but an attack sent him right back out. She said she became bitter because to her, it seemed that fighting was more important to him than their relationship was. She decided that she no longer wanted to be with him, but didn't want to ruin her family's name by breaking the engagement."

While he was off fighting, she continued going to school and eventually socializing among the other nobility her age. That's how her and my father met. She started having feelings for my father, and then things ..." he gets quiet, not sure he should say more.

Stephen gasps. "She was pregnant with you wasn't she?" he asks quietly, his eyes meeting Lukas'.

"Yeah," he mutters, and looks down. "So as not to shame her family she said that she and General rider were handfasted, but then he returned injured. And she panicked. Things just kinda got worse from there for years."

"But your father married her, didn't he?" Rory asks, taking his hand.

"Yeah, as soon as mother broke the engagement she went to him and confessed to everything. He knew she was carrying his child, so they married straightaway. He was glad that she came back to him. I just wish she had let go of her anger a long time ago. We all would have been much happier. I think in some ways she was bitter because she felt guilty," Lukas says. "I hope she did, she should have," he adds harshly.

"Well, since we're all confessing our family secrets, I guess it's only fair to tell you about mother's too," Rory states.

"You don't have to, Rory," Raisa and Lukas say simultaneously.

"I think you should hear this, it sort of completes the whole story," Rory replies. Stephen starts to protest and Rory holds up her free hand, I'll give the short version, "Mother was indeed engaged a few years before she met our father. The man's name was Derrick. Long story short, she was once engaged, but he met someone else, broke it off with her and married the other woman like two weeks later or something."

"Ouch," Stephen says. "That's just wrong."

"No different than what my mother did, technically," Lukas states.

"A little different, but do you want to hear the rest of this story?" Rory asks, getting several nods in reply. "She cared for her father and eventually he died. Saw a job listed for someone to help a soldier blinded in the war learn to adapt to his new life. Decided to apply and got the job. One of the things she did, was have dad fence with a childhood friend."

"Sean McCully?" Lukas asks.

"Aye. He thought mother was a servant girl and was used to getting what he wanted from them, so when she refused him, it pissed him off and he attempted to rape her. Father heard her scream and grabbed a pistol and fired towards Sean and missed...barely. He had him escorted from the property and thought that was the end of it. A few weeks went by and Sean returned one day while they were out riding, tied up Uncle Thomas and Aunt Elaine, and then when they returned tried to assault

mother again. Father came in and held a sword to him, he had thrown mother into a wall and hurt her shoulder pretty badly. They fought and in the end, father got shot in the stomach and Mr. McCully was cut from father's sword. They had a trial, then he was being sentenced and the Outriders broke him loose. They followed him, father ended up engaging him in a sword fight, and nearly had him when Mr. McCully overpowered him and was about to kill him when mother stabbed him from behind and killed him. The other guy defected to the Outriders and she ended up fighting him. She tried to reason with him, but he was crazy. He was about to kill both her and father when she killed him, she says it sort of just happened, that it's still a blur to her really."

"I don't think my mother could have done that," Raisa says quietly.

"I know mine wouldn't have been able to," Lukas states. "I am glad that she seems willing to finally move on."

"I'm glad that they agreed to allow us to be engaged," Rory says quietly.

"So am I, Rory," Lukas says quietly, squeezing her hand slightly. "I just hope you two didn't mind that we did it the same weekend as you. I guess we should have talked with you before saying anything to our parents," Lukas says to Stephen.

"I thought it was a good thing, Lukas. I think in a way it might allow them to become friends once again, and that's not a bad thing," Stephen replies.