

# **The Founding of Gazo's and Gracie's Academy (Part 1):**

## **Prayer and Justice**

**Year: 25 BGW (Before Great War)**

Grace combed her daughter's hair picking out snags, trying to straighten the brown tangle. Her daughter Gracie was only seven but, even so, she was as thin as a needle and as comely as a sword. Grace found that her daughter's sharp features always got her noticed. Usually this would be by boys twice her age that had not gone off to war on the Long Pass. Without her husband around Grace had become very good at protecting her daughter.

“Mother.”

“Yes, honey.” Grace picked out the final knot.

“Where is father?”

She turned her daughter around on the wooden stool next to her feather bed. Gracie sighed. Even she did not know exactly where Gazo was. The last bird to fly to her house had been months past and carried a note which mentioned the signing of treaties at Pelopon, the capital of the continent Ka'Che. Empor Rydel's faction had been crushed and her husband, Gazo, had been the tactical and fighting genius during the war. Many said even the Ancients, the very creators of the universe themselves, weren't as gifted with a blade as he.

The flooring outside her daughter's room creaked. Grace's ears perked to the sound, but she never turned around. Her daughter needed reassuring, and Grace had vowed always to be there for her, no matter how little the problem.

She leaned her forehead against her daughter's and held her cheeks. “He is coming home. I promise.”

“You have promised for months now.” Her daughter pouted, turned around and tore away from her hands.

“And now...” Grace curled her arms around her daughter, locking fingers with her. “I really mean it.”

Arms, hairy and thick with scars, snaked their way around them both. Hands large as melons eclipsed theirs. Lips touched Grace’s hair and pressed their love.

“And now she really means it.”

“Father?”

“Gazo!” Grace spun around, daughter on her lap, to stare into his eyes as deep and green as the fields he warred on. “Ancients be good. Is it really you?” Her hands reached out for the leather padding strapped to his chest. It felt real.

The man in front of her took a knee and her soft hands fell into his, full of roughness and battle and...love. His lips, scarred but as beautiful as before, graced her hand. “Yes, it really is.”

Gracie jumped out of her lap and wrapped her arms around Gazo’s thick neck, hanging from it. “Father. Father. Father.”

As Gazo stood up he hugged and held his daughter gingerly. He squeezed her and kissed her and Gracie envied her daughter. She wanted to be in his arms, she wanted his lips. She could only smile, though, despite it all. Her turn would come soon enough, and now that the war was over he would be her’s forever.

Gazo let her down and looked at her. “You have grown.” He reached behind his back and retrieved the longsword from its scabbard. “Why you’re as tall as *Justice* now.” He let the tip, stab into the floor and held it to Gracie’s side. Her daughter stood to the ruby-encrusted pommel as red as the blood he drew during war.

Grace couldn't believe what he said. *Justice, was that the sword's name?* Had he named it like a child? Was it now the son that she never had given him? Grace swallowed her sorrow, Gazo was home. She would have many nights to bless him with a real boy, one that could grow to be as stocky and handsome as he was. One that could have a face as square and lean and would have thick hair like a bear of black like her husband had. One that she was allowed to hold, too.

"Can I hold the sword father?"

"No, Gracie. This is my toy just as pots and pans will be yours."

"But I don't want to play with pots and pans.

"But you must little one." Gazo crouched on the balls of his feet. "That's how it has always been and that's how it shall always be."

"But why?" Gracie pleaded.

"You ask too many questions. Go to sleep now and dream of sweet innocent things like the bed and home." He leaned and kissed her on the forehead, picked her up and laid her gently in bed.

And there was his sensitive side. The side she loved the side that loved her and had given her one daughter. It was the side that took her maidenhood underneath the moons of Toivia and Hoffnung. The side that held her and kissed her.

Grace smiled. Her husband departed from the room, leaving the females alone. Grace pulled back the covers and fluffed her pillow before pulling them back over. A twinkle of amber lay in her daughter's innocent green eyes.

"Mother, how come Father won't let me fight?"

She tapped her daughter's petite nose and said, "Because Cie you can't."

She felt guilty denying her daughter of a privilege she indulged in herself. Before the words of war even reached the air, she had watched and learned from him secretly while preparing food in the kitchen. He practiced in heat and rain, and his only reward was sweat and the meal she cooked. When he left their hometown of Stel for Pelopon, she practiced in the same pits outside the house with only the stars of night and omnipresent Ancients as her audience. Sometimes she practiced at early dawn before Freyr and Lugh rose.

“But I want to...” her daughter argued.

She bent down and kissed her daughter’s forehead. She leaned into her ear and whispered hot and true. “Then I will teach you.”

“Truly?” Her daughter bolted upright.

“Hush. Hush. Go to sleep Cie. Yes, truly. You are my star and you should fight as the light fights darkness.” Grace cleared her throat. “Now what do we do before we go to bed?”

“Pray,” she shouted.

Gracie sounded enthused that night to say her prayers. Other nights she sounded distant. Was it her father’s return, or was it the forbidden promise she whispered?

“Alright,” Grace started and in a rhythmic chant her daughter followed her every word. “Ancients. Creators of Gladonus, hear my prayer. My mind is yours; free to think as you thought.” Grace placed the palm of her left hand to her forehead. She waited for Gracie to do the repeat the words and motion. “My body is pure, free to fight even the darkness of night.” Her right hand she clenched into a fist and put that over her heart. “Take my soul, uncovered and untainted, free to bind to your will.” She then combined her two hands at her lips and kissed them. She smiled when her daughter completed the prayer with her. Grace took her daughter’s hands in her own. “Never let the air we breathe grow stale, drench us in the flames we use, make

solid the water which helps us stand, and liquefy the earth to produce our grains. Ancients, to this we pray.”

With the end of the prayer, she leaned over and kissed her daughter’s forehead one last time before exiting the room, blowing out the candle enclosed in a glass that hung on the wall. “Goodnight, little one.”

The second level hallway of their two story house stood as silent as the wood that made it. Her room, which had been vacant of anyone but her for two years, was at the opposite end of her daughter’s room. She stalked the empty hallway as quiet as the night. *He is here. My husband, my lover is actually here.*

The thought of him made her wet. Too many nights she had been left yearning for him. She tingled all over. Underneath her transparent, violet nightgown she was as naked as her birthing day—a piece of land ready for her husband to claim.

She slid through the oaken door. The room was vacant except for him. He sat on the bed, shirt off and chest fully exposed to star and moonlight alike. It was ravaged with scars and experience. His steel, his *Justice*, his son, sat across his lap basking the night’s glory. It had saved him his life during war and had won him much love across the land, now it only stole her attention. Her heart sank as he continued to polish his blade with cloth, not noticing her. Had battle grown to be his love?

She closed the door. The click gained his attention. “What happened at Pelopon? With Swander and the battalion you commanded?” She studied him, while massaging her naked self hidden by the threaded silk of her nightgown.

“Swander offered me to be Head of his Royal Guard.”

*Battle has taken him from me.* She was about to cry when he spoke again.

“But, I have seen war and violence. Too many die, too many inexperienced swords. Too many green boys in battle. I don’t think I could see it again. I said no.”

Her heart jumped. “So you’ll stay.”

“I plan on teaching young boys the way of the sword. *Justice* here will help.”

There is was the sword’s name again. *Does he love it more than me?* She needed to know. “You named your sword like you would name a child. Do I get to experience the same love you show this *Justice* or have I been replaced?”

Gazo smirked. “A kiss of steel is nothing compared to a kiss from a fair maiden like you.” He sheathed his sword and laid it on the ground, rushing to her afterwards.

“I am not a maiden anymore.” She looked at him hotly. She grew wetter with him so close. “You made sure of that many years and many moons ago.”

“And allow me to make sure again.” He took his hands and shed her of her robes.

Grace stood as naked as night. She didn’t care. Her husband was before her. And she hoped he would take her as many times as the stars in the sky. He kissed her neck and his rough hand, hard from war, slid down her elegant skin. He stole her in the night like he robbed Rydel’s troops of life. And she liked it. Before long they finished. And then they made it to the bed and he finished there as well. Her skin was as ravishing as their love had been before war, and his was as hard as the years away from her had been. It did not take long to regain sense of it all. Fingers worked deftly, whispers and praises and moans acted out of instinct, and love long missed and forgotten was reclaimed that night.

Days soon became months. And soon her daughter experienced the passing of a new year. On that night of her eighth day of birth she remembered the promise Grace hoped had been forgotten. On that night the finest meat had been bought from the butcher, and the finest pastries

and bread from the baker in town to celebrate her day. It made bellies full and eyes tired. Except for Gracie.

Grace wrestled her rambunctious daughter into her night clothes and laid with her, hand over hers, on the bed. “Mommy.”

“Yes, sweetie?” Grace yawned.

“Why haven’t you taught me yet?”

The door slid open and Gazo entered. “What is mommy going to teach you, Cie?”

Grace tensed her neck as she came closer. “Planting,” she said at the same time her daughter said “swordfighting.”

“Swordfighting? She can’t teach you that, honey; she doesn’t know how to use one.”

Gazo crouched beside the bed, giving Grace a steady glare.

“She means spade. Not sword. Don’t you sweetie...”

“You told me sword, Mother.”

“And that is something mommy can’t teach, because mommy doesn’t know how.” He leaned over and kissed Gracie on the forehead. “Go to sleep and dream of the easiness of womanhood, not the gruesomeness of war little one.”

“He’s right, Cie. Now let’s pray. Will you join us tonight Gazo?”

“No. I don’t pray your prayer. See her to sleep and then see me.”

Grace nodded. She could tell he was a little angry. This was not how his daughter was supposed to act. She should grow up wanting to use pots and spades and make fires, not swords or shields. Grace led in prayer.

“Ancients. Creators of Gladonus, hear my prayer...” The words flowed ceaselessly from her lips. She moved her hands in practiced motions and watched her daughter do the same. She

saw Gracie's lips moving, but couldn't exactly tell if she was saying the words. She finished, "Never let the air we breathe grow stale, drench us in the flames we use, make solid the water which helps us stand, and liquefy the earth to produce our grains. Ancients, to this we pray..." She maneuvered her head to look her daughter in the eye. "Cie, what's wrong? I could hardly hear you."

"You lied to me," she complained.

"No. No sweetie. I will teach you but you can't let daddy know. Alright? It will be our little secret," she whispered.

"Do you really promise this time?"

"Yes, I really do. Now goodnight." She kissed her daughter and got up.

"Goodnight, Mother. I love you."

"I love you too, Cie."

She walked to her room. Even after the hard day of training she knew her husband wouldn't be in bed. War made him not prone to the fatigue of minor squabbles. And besides, there was ire in his eyes when Gracie loosened her tongue. He had beaten the trainees under him with wooden swords that day and the days before; she had always seen it from upstairs or the kitchen. The leather padding they had worn didn't stop the bruising; no man could stop her husband's wrath, that's why Empor Rydel and the generals underneath him fell. But, she wasn't a man. She hoped her warm touch and her calm voice would cool his rage.

Her husband lay on the bed ready for her. His tongue would do the work tonight, not his hands or body. She could tell from the worried look on his face, deep in concentration like he was planning a flank, that the talk would be long.

"Grace, I'm worried for our daughter."

She lay by him and stroked his long black hair that needed cutting. “Why do you say that?”

“This talk about wanting to wield blades. It’s disturbing and not natural.”

She hesitated and looked at the moons outside. They were low this night. Tonight the ring around the planet shined brilliance and beckoned her to the heavens of Axiumé above with its star white carpet floating almost low enough to touch. She gulped before continuing. “Would it be so bad if she did learn?”

With a warrior’s reflex, Gazo said, “Yes. A woman’s place is in the home and bed. In my years at war never have I seen a girl wield a sword and never shall they. Swords are a man’s toy just as a spade, cup, and dish a woman’s.” That settled her argument. Grace could tell he still fumed. Even after a minute’s warmth of silence he asked, “And why do you teach her that prayer?”

“Because it’s the prayer of the Ancients.”

“Yes. The one they gave to the blessed. To the ones with the ability to use power.”

“And what is wrong with her saying it? A woman has their own power.”

“And what power is that?”

“Power to bring life into this world. Power of prayer.”

“And what has that ever given you?”

“Prayer has given you back to me.”

Gazo contested, “My steel has given me back to you. Just as you have the ability to bring life, I had the ability to deal death. In battle I broke men like I broke the steel of their blades. My *Justice* has its own power.”

“Why pray to a deathly power then?”

“It will keep me safe. Keep us safe and the ones I care about. No Ancients of Gladima.”

“Your supplication to your false idols is heard. Even now.”

“And jealousy rises in them all the same. I hear the wind’s lip.”

“And if the wind goes stale?”

“Then fire will roar my name from the blades I will forge in these men I train.”

“And if the fires became drenched?”

“Then water will hit the ground and make us train harder and become fiercer with the blades already had.”

“And if you cannot stand on top of water?”

“Then I will stand on top of earth...Grace, it makes no difference what happens. I will remain by your side until the end of our days.”

“And I by yours.” He was still hers. She knew her voice would quell his fire. Now her touch would spur his lust. She leaned over and slid her hand down his chest and further and kissed him long and full of passion. That night she was taken only once but it was fierce and long and hot.

Secret swordplay thrust on for months after. After supper, while Gazo trained his pupils in the dying dusk, Grace trained her Gracie. In the compactness of her daughter’s room they stretched and trained. It was all they had, but it was enough. She had wanted to teach her daughter with a sword, but such an item would be difficult to hide from her husband. So, they practiced with the dagger she had made in secret while Gazo had been warring—a small sword for a small room. She kept it in a wooden case and in the closet of their room, beneath other linens that Gazo would never check. But, it was hers and hers alone, one day to be passed to her daughter.

“Does it have a name like Father’s does?”

Grace hadn’t named it. She didn’t know one should. But, if her husband had done it, then so should she. She thought long and hard about the name, but she was no good at it. It was a man’s job apparently to name weapons. “What do you think it should be named, Gracie?”

“*Beauty.*”

It didn’t sound right. She knew what it would be when she heard it. “No. It needs to mean something. Like you, my Gracie. You are as elegant as me. As my daughter you’re an extension of my body and soul. That is why you are Gracie. Now what is this sword’s name?”

Her daughter was silent. She thought as hard as her father’s training. “How about *Prayer.*”

“*Prayer,*” Grace practiced the word herself. It sounded right. “*Prayer* it is little one. And these lessons answer both of ours.”

One day while Gazo went into the town of Stel to purchase more leather padding for his ever expanding training camp, Grace snuck to the shed where he kept the practice swords he lent to the boys who trained under him. She found a short one and stole back into the house with it. She wanted her daughter to learn more than what a little dagger could teach her.

During their lessons Grace taught her daughter the four S’s: stroke, swing, step and supplication. In the months after Gracie’s mastery of step, she learned her strokes and swings. And ever since the forbidden promise, Gracie supplicated daily and that was the most important. Grace told her it would give her power unlike any sorcerer or warrior. That the Ancients would give them strength of body and mind and keep them lithe if prayer was given.

“Keep your feet light and thrust forward,” Grace explained. “Sword always up.” She tapped her daughter at her exposed spot with the flat side of her blade. “Scan for openings and then thrust.”

She watched her daughter’s movements in the restricted confines and guided her daughter’s efforts, and Gracie’s skill grew, her speed increased, and soon she was as lithe as Grace.

One night, while in the midst of their training, Grace did not hear her husband’s footsteps. She, who was always so quick-minded and observant, was too focused on her daughter’s combination. Her face and neck tensed at the intrusion just as much as her husband’s muscles flared when he caught them twirling their blades. He shuffled in and knocked the wooden sword from her daughter’s hand, letting it skate underneath the bed.

Grace saw the fury in his eyes then. But she was defenseless. Could her touch and voice calm him? She stood up and touched his forearm, calling his name as intimate as their love had been. When his slap hit her, the reality of her belief did as well. As did betrayal. And hate. And anger. And most of all, confusion and heartbreak. The slap was hard enough to send her body falling back as well. An instant eruption of tears bellowed from Gracie.

The dagger flew from Grace’s hand and was picked up by Gazo. “What is this? Is this a—”

“Please, Zo,” she interjected through sobs of confusion.

“Your place is in the home and bed. Weapons are for men.”

“Gracie, she needs to know how to defend—”

“Our daughter does not need to know. Our daughter will never have to see the horrendous side of war if we are lucky. And now you bring it into my home.”

“Please...please...don’t,” Grace backed up to the corner, biting her nails.

Gazo stalked over to her then, examining her like a lion a wounded animal.

She lost track of everything the instant the kicks and punches started bruising her. Her body would swim in a thousand ponds and she would drown in tears if she was lucky. At the end of it she could barely open her eyes, but she saw her husband still over her. With a squint, she spotted Gracie underneath her bed, clutching her wooden sword. Grace whimpered and looked back at her husband, *Prayer* in his hand. *Please answer mine*, she thought. He tossed it to the ground at her feet. She curled her fragile fingers over the purple hilt of the dagger and sobbed into her arms. For minutes or hours she wept. She didn’t know how long exactly. She cried until the water drained and became stale and salty on her swollen cheeks.

It was then that Gracie crawled out to her. “Mother, why did Father do that?”

“It’s...it’s okay honey...”

“He hit you.”

Her daughter’s words stung just as much. How could she even answer that? Her lips feigned a shaking ignorance. “Gazo’s upset, is all.”

“But why?”

“Be...because sweetie...” Her words caught. She couldn’t go on. She needed a change in subject. “Do you remember your prayers?”

“Yes...”

“Say them sweetie. Say them until you can’t say them anymore. Say them until you fall asleep. Here, let’s pray together first.”

In the corner, Grace prayed with her daughter. She hoped the Ancients heard her wish. She hoped they would grant her the strength for what would happen next. Soon, she left Gracie

by herself and went to her room, broken and crippled. Before the door she opened her night gown and slid *Prayer* into the stockings that covered her legs up to her knees. The gown came down to her shin, hiding her nearly broken body.

“Zo...” she pleaded as she entered.

“Don’t say a word to me, woman...You know how I feel about this...”

“She needs to be able to defend herself.” Was it her faint love that made her return? Was it her duty as a wife? Was it fear of further disobedience? She couldn’t say which, but Grace crawled onto the bed next to him. Her robe concealed his beating and her *Prayer*.

“I will defend her,” Gazo announced.

“You will not always be there.”

“Yes, I will.”

“How can you say that when you haven’t!” Grace cried.

“Then the son I shall give you tonight will protect her soon enough.”

Before she knew it, Gazo was on top of her. Grace struggled, but Gazo held her and forced his way inside. In his haste he didn’t bother to remove the robe. There was no passion, no love, only punishment for defiance. She cried but that only made him smile. She begged for him to stop and that only made him grunt. She sobbed for his forgiveness and he only shoved harder. And at the point she couldn’t take more, she reached down for her dagger, withdrew it and stabbed him. It was then he stopped. He smiled. And then he laughed.

He gave a look bred by the very devils in Abaddon themselves. Even his voice changed to one more dark and hollow. “At least you know where the pointy end goes. So do I.” And he shoved into her so hard she cried and yelled and he continued to do so until he finished in her, even as the red was dripping from his chest onto her.

Blood ran in streams down his body as much as her tears. And then his smile turned into a grim line of hatred. The same hatred she bore. She held onto her dagger and whimpered and thought of her death then. She didn't die. As he hurled her through the air, she still didn't die. His manhood fully exposed, he stalked toward her—the broken wife. The sad wife. The dead wife. She couldn't move. She couldn't fight back, he was too strong and there was a madness in him now. She just waited for his arms as thick as steel to grab her and break her more.

Whap! Whap! Her daughter plowed into Gazo's knees with her wooden sword. She reached out a hand for Gracie but she was knocked away by the angry brute. She lunged forward and stabbed his thigh with her dagger and then swept her feet under his legs, causing him to collapse. It bought her time and she knew what she knew what she must do then. Escape.

While holding onto *Prayer*, Grace scooped Gracie in her arms and hurried down the hall and out the house. She knew Gazo would be upon her soon enough. She ran with all her energy. She carried her daughter through days and nights. Even as all her energy was expended, she still ran never stopping to hear the hard footsteps behind her. She was nimble and swift and ran with the stars, always following to the east, running towards the suns that came up from the horizon every day. Through plains of rolling hills she ran, through forests with branches of trunks like thick arms and chests she ran, too, never slowing, never eating, and never sleeping. She ran down mountainsides and still he followed, never more than a league behind. Her husband's breath pounded heavy on the air. And after those mountainous plains lay sandy beaches, but still she ran.

She ran on the murky gray waters of Krine Sea just as easily as she ran on the greens of grass, the browns of forest and the white of mountains. For a time she hadn't even noticed her ability to walk on water but when she did she stopped and looked inland. Gazo came down the

cliffs and continued to chase her, fueled with rage and fury. He was gifted with swiftness and long strides but he was burdened with heavy muscle. He ran halfway to her position and started to sink. The water couldn't carry his weight.

As she saw her husband's arms flailing above water she drowned in memories of him. She tried to remember a good time. But, she couldn't. Perhaps that's why she let him drown, and with him, his ideals of a woman's place.

The Ancients had heard her prayer. She kissed her daughter on the forehead, exchanging smiles. "Do you know your prayers, sweetie?" The cool gray of water sloshed and slapped at her feet as she started to pick up her pace again. She was ready to run until she found a new land where she would make a new school, one for girls where she would teach them the four S's and keep them safe, just like she and her daughter.

"Yes Mother."

"Say it for me again and again until we get there."

"Get where?"

"Get there." Grace pointed to the expanse of gray ahead of her, murky from the streams of ink of octopi.

"And where's that?"

"Someplace new."

Grace did not know if she would find a place or not. Prayer had led her far, though, and it would certainly take her wherever she was destined to go. So as she ran, her daughter sat in her arms, saying her prayers all the way. "*Ancients. Creators of Gladonus, hear our prayer. . .*" She ran, listening to the song of supplication.

She hoped to make a new life—one of security and solace and only clinging on to the faint love of her husband in the form of the movements he showed her. She never stopped, listening to her daughter all the way. *“Never let the air we breathe grow stale, drench us in the flames we use, make solid the water which helps us stand, and liquefy the earth to produce our grains.”* The rest of their life would be up to them. So she ran faster into the gray horizon of change, chanting along with her daughter all along, never to be seen on Ka’Che lands again. *“Ancients, to this we pray.”*

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